REDISCOVERED COMPOSERS

KEY STAGE 3 LESSON PLAN
By Rachel Shapey

Short Piece for Orchestra
by
JULIA PERRY

Background information

Julia Perry (1924 – 1979) was born in Kentucky, USA and moved with her family to Akron, Ohio as a child. By the age of ten, she was attending a school for gifted children, and studying voice and violin. She studied at Westminster Choir College and did further studies at the Juilliard and Columbia. She studied composition with Luigi Dallapiccola at the Berkshire Music Center and later won a Guggenheim Fellowship to study with him in Florence. She won another Guggenheim in 1954 to study with Nadia Boulanger at Fountainebleau where she was awarded the Boulanger Grand Prix for her Viola Sonata.

Perry's *Short Piece for Orchestra* (1965) became the first work by a woman of colour to be performed by the New York Philharmonic, and only the third by any woman. When a stroke paralysed her right side, Perry was determined to continue composing and taught herself to write with the left hand - she composed the last of her 12 symphonies in hospital.

In 1949 Perry wrote:
"*Music is an all-embracing, universal language. Music has a unifying effect on the peoples of the world because they all understand and love it. In music they find common meeting ground. And when they find themselves enjoying and loving the same music, they find themselves loving one another… Music has a great role to play in establishing the brotherhood of man.*"

Short Piece for Orchestra or *Study for Orchestra* was composed in 1952 and is the earliest surviving orchestral work by Julia Perry. It was recorded in a live performance by the New York Philharmonic in 1965.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- **LISTEN** to *Short Piece for Orchestra* by Julia Perry and discuss the mood and atmosphere created.
- Use level-appropriate technical vocabulary to describe different aspects of the music.
- **PERFORM** the main motifs from Short Piece for Orchestra.
- Explore musical contrasts through the use of melody, harmony, articulation and instrumentation in a composing task.
- **COMPOSE** a 3 or 4-part instrumental track to evoke an anguished mood.
- Compose a tension motif using the same pitches as the main motif.

Key words

Dissonant
Disjunct
Tritone
Angular
Semitone
Accent
Syncopated
Antiphonal

LISTENING ACTIVITY

🔊 Listen to *Short Piece for Orchestra* up to about 00:48 on the BBC Philharmonic website

Word Bank		
Menacing	Angry	Tranquil
Tense	Tender	Eerie
Calm	Mournful	Unsettling

Ask pupils to:

   a) Choose adjectives from the word bank above to describe the mood and atmosphere created in this piece. Encourage pupils to add one of their own adjectives. Ask pupils to give a musical reason for their choices.
   b) Choose a colour that they feel represents the music and explain their choice.
   c) Write a short scenario of what might be happening if this music was accompanying a film.
   d) Ask pupils to state 'true' or 'false' in response to the following statements:

        - "All the instruments are playing all the time."
        - "A small orchestra is playing."
        - "There are some big leaps in the melody"
        - "The tune is easy to sing."

Now play from 00:48 - 02:26 and ask pupils to:

   a) Describe how the mood has changed.
   b) Identify what has happened to the tempo.
   c) Identify some instruments and discuss the playing techniques (e.g pizzicato)

Play from 02:26 - 02:53

Play this motif on the piano (or other instrument) for students and ask them to describe how Perry has used this idea in her composition at this point in the piece: (responses might include: imitation; repetition; passed between instruments)

PERFORMING AND COMPOSING: MUSICAL TENSION

   1. Ask pupils to draw an evil monster or provide a selection of images for pupils to choose from. This will be the stimulus for the composing task.
   2. Ask pupils to create a short scenario based around the monster. It should have a beginning, middle and end (or use the example below):

      The evil monster slowly awakes. As it realises it has been bound in chains, the monster starts to thrash about. Breaking free from the chains it begins to stomp down the corridor towards the laboratory where all the scientists are working…they freeze as it bursts into the room.

   3. Pupils will initially create three musical strands to accompany their scenarios: chords; ostinato; melody.
   4. This task can be completed using classroom instruments, a DAW (digital audio workstation), notation programme or a combination.

Tasks in detail:

Part 1 – Ostinato

Give pupils the set of pitches Perry used for one of the main motifs. First ask them to find and play the pitches on the keyboard.

This task can be used as a teaching point on sharps and flats, and semitones. Get pupils to highlight the notes a semitone apart and demonstrate how this interval brings musical tension (possible link to the 'Jaws' theme by John Williams).

Pitches derived from main motif

Composing the motif

Ask pupils to create a short, edgy motif using these pitches, for example:

Discuss how various musical features can add to the feeling of unease, for example: articulation; use of rests; repeated pitches; syncopation; disjunct melodic leaps.

The motif doesn't need to be written using staff notation; pupils can create it on instruments and record in any appropriate way (recording device / writing down letter names etc).

Creating the melodic ostinato

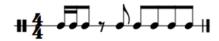Now this short idea can be repeated to create a melodic ostinato:

You could create a class composition with each pupil playing their motif twice before moving straight onto the next pupil. A pedal note could be added underneath with a simple backing track keeping everyone in time.

Encourage pupils to try the ostinato at different octaves using various instruments. If using a DAW ask them to add a bass line consisting of longer notes using the same pitch set. For example:

Part 2 – Rhythmic ostinato

To create momentum, compose a 1-bar rhythm to be repeated as an ostinato. Try using a cell from the melodic ostinato, for example:

Repeat the rhythm to create an ostinato:

Composition strands so far: melodic ostinato; rhythmic ostinato; bass line:

Part 3 – Chords

Perry created chords based on fourths and sixths (see example below). The G - C# creates a tritone, another musical means of bringing tension and instability.

Using the same set of pitches, demonstrate how to create chords and note clusters. Discuss the use of the tritone (G - C#) and how it gives a feeling of instability. Further listening links to Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* can be made, where the tritone interval features prominently.

Listen to *Short Piece for Orchestra* again highlighting the antiphonal effect whereby strings are playing the melodic motif answered by stabbing dissonant brass chords.

Example of ostinato, bass line and chords:

Extension task: Melody

Listen to *Short Piece for Orchestra* up to about 02:26, particularly to the contrast between the opening section and the point where the slower lyrical section begins (when the solo flute enters at 00:53).

Pupils can consider how to create a contrasting lyrical section for their composition.

Choose a solo melodic instrument to write a lyrical theme for. Pupils could use the same set of pitches as for Part 1 or use the same pitches as the flute melody below.

Start by improvising on the chosen pitches, keeping the pulse flexible and exploring wide intervals and different note values.

When composing pupils could try using techniques such as: retrograde, inversion and rhythmic augmentation to create a new theme.

Flute melody from *Short Piece for Orchestra*:

Longer extension task

Pupils can create a longer monster scenario and compose a 1-1.5 minute piece with contrasting sections. Each section could include a main theme to be extended and developed. Explore orchestral textures, tempo changes, time signature changes and instrumental techniques.