Level 5 The Arts - Program Music

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
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Problem:

Students often are reluctant to study the theoretical aspects of a subject like music and don't realise they have the ability to develop analytical skills.

Response:

At the end of the first semester I wanted my Year 8 students to have studied Program music and for them to develop the ability to imagine scenes, pictures and situations as they listen to art music (classical music). I wanted them to be able to assess the suitability of music in particular situations and to be able to realise how much subtle or unsubtle background music affects their feelings and perceptions of situations.

My father said to me when I first started teaching to walk into a class very purposefully with my shoes off, and while I had their attention, teach them something. A wonderful lecturer at university impressed upon us to always start a lesson or topic from things that are familiar to the children.

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION

I taped the beginning of ROSEANNE, a U.S. situation comedy about the Connor family. The opening credits has a Bluegrass instrumental playing as the Connor family is seen around a table shouting, eating and laughing. I asked the students who are experts in television matters to assess the background music for the opening credits. I played the sequence on the video with the sound off and over-dubbed six different pieces of music.

1. BACH Brandenburg Concerto No.2
2. M C FERRIN Don't Worry, Be Happy
3. HOLST Mars from THE PLANETS
4. THE PROCLAIMERS I'm on my Way
5. DEBUSSY Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune
6. STRAVINSKI Dance of the Adolescents from the THE RITE OF SPRING

They came up with some very funny, some extremely critical and intuitive comments. They then described Bluegrass music exactly and why it was the most suitable for this sequence.
LESSON 2

A video again, this time of Jaws I. Towards the end of the movie, a diver is placed in a cage and lowered into the sea. Jaws swims by but only gives the diver a fright and swims away. Jaws then attacks suddenly, from behind, destroys the cage and the diver manages to swim away and hide under a rock. Jaws then bites the end off the boat “Orca” and eats the shark catcher.

The students watched this sequence petrified. They said the shark was very scary especially how vicious the shark is. They all seemed to know the Jaws theme but when asked about the backing music they all said there wasn’t any. At this point I asked the class if they thought it would be scary with the sound off and many chorused "Of course!". We watched the sequence again, this time without sound. They not only laughed all the way through it (most coming to tears) but they also observed that Jaws was definitely mechanical and that when he was eating the shark catcher, it was the actor not the shark who was doing all the moving and thrashing about. They were very surprised and linked this experience to other situations - sad music that makes you cry at the movies, bad movie sound tracks that make a movie a flop etc. Lastly we played the sequence's sound track with the picture off to confirm that music plays a large part in influencing our opinions and perceptions.

I then began to teach them Program Music - music that is descriptive of an extra musical program or story. Although the music in the first two lessons were not actually pieces of Program Music they sparked student interest, they enhanced and developed the listening and analytical skills necessary for the study of Program Music.

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