

Let's Listen 9

The pieces for these lessons are taken from the collection *Classics for Children*, a set of 2 CDs, issued by Decca, Catalogue number 458 592-2, available from Virgin records. However, the pieces featured are also available on many other recordings, and may already be in your school.

Elephant from Carnival of the Animals

Composer: Camille Saint-Saens, 1835-1921

Background Information for the Teacher

Camille Saint-Saens was born in Paris. He was a child prodigy, who excelled in Latin, archaeology, botany, astronomy, as well as music. His greatest love, however, was music, and he excelled as a piano player and composer, creating his first composition at the age of three years, and giving his first public piano recital at the age of eight! In adult life he worked as a composer and performer, and travelled widely giving concerts and talks. His private life was not happy, and his marriage broke up shortly after his two young sons died within a few weeks of each other.

Saint-Saens wrote *Carnival of the Animals* while on holiday in Austria in 1886. He referred to it as a 'grand zoological fantasy.' It is a suite, or collection of musical pieces, each portraying a different animal. It includes *Elephant, Swan, Wild Asses, Tortoises, Kangaroos, Cuckoo in the Woods*, and *Aquarium*. Saint-Saens was afraid that the composition would affect his reputation as a serious composer, so he would not allow it to be publicly performed during his lifetime. Nowadays, it is Saint-Saens' most popular work.

When using *Carnival of the Animals* with children, it is best to use individual pieces from the suite, rather than expecting the children to concentrate on the entire suite.

Elephant is an excellent introductory piece for all classes in the primary school. The piece is played on Double Bass and piano. The Double Bass depicts the heavy movement of the elephant, while the piano plays an accompaniment.

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This article is one of a series that first appeared in INTO InTouch magazine in 2002-2003 written by Mary Ryng

Possible presentation for Junior Classes

- Teacher tells the class that they are going to listen to a piece of music, which is the tune or song of a certain animal. The animal may be a mouse, an elephant or a snake. The children must close their eyes, and try to 'see' what animal is going to come into the class. If they listen very carefully, the animal may even do a little dance for them.
- The recording is played - it is 1.24 long, so teacher may prefer to present an extract for the first playing.
- The children give their responses. If they have difficulty, the teacher gives hints.
- The music is played again, and the children are invited to wave an arm in imitation of the elephant's long trunk as he does his slow, lumbering dance.
- Discussion on the music heard – the teacher asks the class what instruments were playing in the piece. They may recognise the piano, but unless they have listened to the double bass before, it is unlikely that they will get this right. Teacher shows a picture of the double bass. S/he tells the class that the double bass is a very big instrument, with a low voice, and that it was specially chosen to play the elephant's tune in this piece. The double bass doesn't usually get such an important job to do, but the man who composed this music thought that the double bass was an excellent instrument to play a pretend elephant. The piano is just used to accompany the elephant, and is not as important at all in this music.
- The music is played again, and the teacher could lead the children to mime playing the double bass with a bow.

- The recording should be played often in the following days/weeks. Children could be asked to respond in different ways, eg, doing an elephant dance at PE, painting the elephant at art, talking about the elephant and the double bass at language time. A visual, such as the accompanying drawing, may help to stimulate this.
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Possible presentation for Middle and Senior classes

- The class teacher is the best person to modify above for his/her class.
- Middle and Senior classes are beginning to classify instruments into families, so this is a good piece to demonstrate the double bass. The double bass belongs to the string family. The other members of the string family are the violin, the viola and the cello. They all have four strings, and they are all played with a bow.
- **Swan** from **Carnival of the Animals** could be played to illustrate the sound of the cello.
- Children could contrast the pieces – focusing especially on the long graceful movements of the swan, and the bumpy dance of the elephant.

Integration Activities

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the age and interests of your class.

- Art – Make a large scale collage of the Elephant
- SESE / Geography – Find France and Paris on a map. How do you think Saint-Saens travelled to Austria for his holiday. Can you plot a route?
- Language – Find words to describe the bumpy lumbering dance of the elephant. Use these words to create a poem or descriptive paragraph. As a contrast, after listening to **Swan**, also from **Carnival of the Animals**, find words to describe the graceful motion of the swan. Use these words to write a poem or descriptive paragraph.
- Research skills – use the Internet to find out more about Saint-Saens and his music.
- Above all, enjoy the music.

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