

Mozart – Overture to Don Giovanni

Listening

Orchestra Performance ►

Musical Score Performance ►

Context

Mozart was an Austrian composer who lived between 1756-1791. Despite only being young when he died, he wrote a significant number of symphonies, operas and chamber works.

This piece lasts for around 6 minutes and is an overture (the opening introduction) to an opera. An opera is where actors are on stage presenting a story, but unlike in a play, they sing all their words. A musical (e.g. *Les Misérables* or *Six*) is similar to an opera, but usually has a mix of speaking and singing.

Don Giovanni is a nobleman who acts in a naughty way to those around him. He eventually gets his comeuppance at the end of the opera. The opera is full of comedy, melodrama and mystery.

This piece was played by the Philharmonia in their first ever concert in 1945.

Short 5-minute task: Listening and Responding

- Listen to the opening 30 seconds (from 0:40 – 1:10 in the Orchestra Performance Video above). Ask students to consider:
 - Is the music loud (forte) or quiet (piano) at the start? Does it change?
 - Is the tempo of the music fast or slow?
 - What instrument families are playing?
 - What kind of feeling does the music give you?
- Ask students to write their thoughts down – this could be a single words, longer sentences or even as a doodle or drawing.
- Discuss as a class.

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage full sentences with justification i.e. ask students to give a reason why to support their answers

Support and Scaffold

- Give options for pupils to select from – for example, list the four families of orchestral instruments (Strings, Woodwind, Brass, Percussion) or suggest a range of emotions (Happy, Sad, Scared, Excited...)

Medium 20-minute task: Footsteps Composition Challenge

- Listen to the music from 0:40-1:24 in the Orchestra Performance Video above
- The opening uses two long sustained chords lasting for 5 beats – this is a dramatic moment, perhaps as a door is pushed open to reveal the main character.
- From 0:59 the music uses a dotted rhythm in the strings – long/short, long/short – and evokes a sense of nervous excitement, almost as if the main character Don Giovanni is creeping around the room having made a dramatic entrance
- Clap, tap or sing these two contrasting rhythms
 - Sustained chord – start the clap on 1 and hold the clap for 5 beats
 - Dotted rhythm – clap on 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and
- In pairs or as a group, try to create your own short rhythm pattern using long notes and dotted rhythms to represent Don Giovanni's footsteps. Ask students to consider the effect they are going for – is the character sneaky, powerful, scary?
- Perform the rhythms to the rest of the class and ask the class to name the effect the music had on them before the group reveals what effect they were aiming for. Do they match? Discuss it as a class.

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage students to add a second rhythm which could represent a second character, responding to Don Giovanni. How does their new rhythm represent this new character?

Support and Scaffold

- Introduce the sustained chord first, then introduce the dotted rhythm
- Clap each rhythm for students to copy

Longer 45-minute task: Composition – Who is Don Giovanni?

The overture gives clues about Don Giovanni's character. Mozart uses dramatic changes in dynamics (loud/quiet) and changes in tempo (slow/fast) throughout. Listen to the whole piece as a class, and then consider:

1. Listen and Discuss (10 minutes)

- a. Based on the overture, what do you think Don Giovanni is like as a person?
- b. What kind of story might the opera be about? Is the opera likely to be a comedy, a love story, or full of drama?

2. Compose your scene (25 minutes)

- a. Set out 3 moments in your story – for example:
 - i. Don Giovanni enters
 - ii. He causes trouble
 - iii. He leaves the scene
- b. Using classroom instruments (if available) or body percussion/voices, compose music for each of the 3 moments. Consider:
 - i. Tempo (fast/slow)
 - ii. Dynamics (loud/quiet)
 - iii. Pitch (high/low)
 - iv. Texture (how many different kinds of sounds at the same time)

3. Perform and reflect (10 minutes)

- a. Ask each group to perform to the rest of the class
- b. Ask the class to describe what they have heard regarding tempo, dynamics, pitch and texture

Stretch and Challenge

- Consider if the group needs a conductor to keep everyone in time – if so, could the conductor change the performance with their actions?
- Ask pupils to justify their musical decisions – ask 'why'?

Support and Scaffold

- Reduce the 3 moments of the story to two contrasting moments and introduce the elements of music (Tempo, Dynamics, Pitch and Texture) gradually, one by one, to develop confidence.

Listening Guide

Timings based on the video link at the top of this section for the Musical Score Performance to enable pupils to see the music on the page.

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
0:00-0:15	Loud sustained chords from full orchestra (Strings, Woodwind, Brass and Timpani Percussion). This uses a chord of D minor (DFA) and then A major (AC#E). The tempo is Andante – moderately slow. The music is in the key of D minor – a dark, scary key.
0:15-1:12	Quiet dotted rhythm in strings with a creepy syncopated (off beat) violin melody. Strong contrast between loud and quiet.
1:13-1:39	Melody now has a rising and descending scale in the flutes and violins alternating between loud and quiet
1:40-4:06	The tempo changes suddenly to being very fast (Molto Allegro). We are now in D major – a brighter and happier key. The woodwind, brass and timpani percussion sound triumphant, interrupting the strings. There are strong dynamic contrasts between loud and soft. The music is exciting and makes the audience excited for what is coming next!
4:07-5:41	The music from 1:40 repeats with some small changes to keep the audience on their toes! The piece ends in a different key (F major) – remember this is an overture to a bigger musical piece, so while this would be unusual if the piece was on its own, it is very normal in an opera to keep the audience excited for what is happening next.

Links to other subjects

This piece can link well to these other areas of the school curriculum:

Subject	Links
PSHE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The subject matter of Don Giovanni can be linked to the PSHE programme especially regarding respectful relationships (for example, respecting others even when they are very different from us e.g. physically, in character, personality or background). This can also be expanded to discussions around self-respect and happiness.
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This piece was first performed by the Philharmonia in their first ever concert in October 1945. You can read more about the history of the Philharmonia here ► What else was happening in 1945? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> World War 2 ended in May 1945 (Europe) and August/September 1945 (Pacific) The United Nations (UN) was formed and still exists in 2025