

Alberga – 'Sailing on Tethys'

Listening

This movement can be heard on the recording below:

[Listen here ►](#)

Context

About the composer: Eleanor Alberga (born 1949)

Eleanor Alberga is a Jamaican-born British composer, pianist and musical educator. Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1949, she later moved to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music. Her music often combines vivid storytelling, exciting rhythms and colourful orchestral sounds. She is one of the most significant living British composers.

About the piece: Sailing on Tethys from Symphony No. 1 'Strata' (2022)

Sailing on Tethys is the fifth movement from Alberga's Symphony No. 1, Strata (2022). The symphony explores different layers of planet Earth and was inspired by geology and sailing. Sailing on Tethys imagines a journey across the ancient Tethys Ocean, a vast prehistoric ocean that disappeared millions of years ago. Alberga combines graceful, dance-like fragments with dramatic orchestral effects that suggest shifting tectonic plates and changing landscapes.

Listening Guide

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
0.00-0:56	Very quiet, string and wood wind sounds – sustained chords with bird-like melodies. A few pizzicato strings punctuate the texture. This creates a calm mood of gentle seas
0:57-2:00	A glissando is heard in the melody before the melody heads to the woodwind section. Notice the percussion at 1:29 giving a sparking effect
2:01-2:34	The music picks up pace and has more rhythmic drive, before going back to similar ideas to the start
2:35-3:05	A sense of climax with cymbals crashing, louder dynamics and increased use of brass instruments and timpani rolls, suggesting a more violent sea
3:06	Solo violin returns the music to a calmer tempo, with a sudden glissando and climax towards the end as the music rushes downwards

Key musical features

Flowing, wave-like melodies

- Changes in dynamics
- Contrasting moods
- Orchestral colour and texture
- Glissandos (sliding sounds)
- Music that feels like movement or travel
- Dance-like rhythms – like the sea moving
- Fragmented melodic ideas that appear, then vanish under the water

Short 5-minute task: Matching Moods

This is a short performance task to get your class thinking about the sounds linked to the ocean. Giving them only a very short time (2 minutes is perfect) ask your class to create sounds linked to the ocean. This could be using their voices, body percussion or classroom instruments depending on your setting. If you have time, you may want selected groups to perform to the class, or you might want to encourage class discussion. Some aspects that might help this discussion:

- Setting – deep ocean, by the shore, is land visible?
- Weather – calm or in a storm?
- Time – is it day or night?

Stretch and Challenge

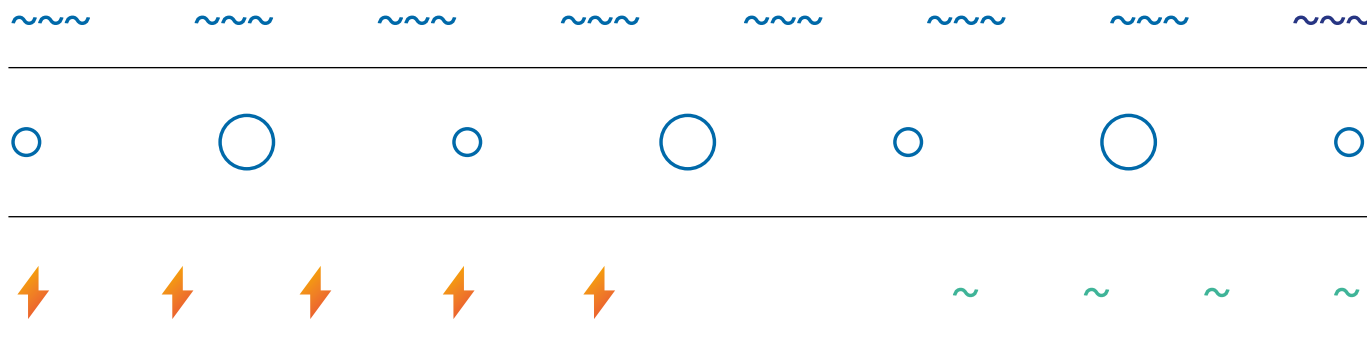
- Give a more challenging scene to represent – e.g. a calm ocean with flat seas, encouraging pupils to create a sound world similar to that of this piece

Support and Scaffold

- Give the scene to represent e.g. ‘a storm at sea’ and support with other vocabulary e.g. ‘big waves’, ‘howling winds’, ‘waves crashing on the shore’, ‘thunder’

If you would like to take a more structured approach to this task, students can use the graphic score below for their performances.

Ocean Task: Graphic score



Waves = swishing sounds

Lightning = storm sounds

Bubbles = pops / clicks

Final waves = calm sea

Medium 20-minute task: Musical Fossils

Instead of asking pupils simply what the music makes them imagine, this task encourages pupils to behave like sound archaeologists. They listen as if the music is a fossil dug up from a lost ocean world. Their job is to identify what clues have been preserved inside it.

Play a short extract of the music. Ask pupils to imagine that this music has been discovered inside a rock from the ancient Tethys Ocean.

Pupils complete this sentence based on their listening:

“This musical fossil contains evidence of...”

They choose three from the list, or create their own:

- a vanished ocean
- moving rocks
- a creature no one has seen before
- a ship from another time
- a warning from the Earth
- a dance from a lost civilisation
- a storm under the sea
- a secret map
- a message from the deep past

Then ask pupils to add one musical reason to justify their answer:

“I think this because I heard...”

Examples:

- “I think this because I heard sliding sounds (glissando).”
- “I think this because the music gradually became louder (crescendo).”
- “I think this because the melody sounded like it was floating.”

Then ask pupils to focus on one of their musical reasons and ask them to compose a short piece of music to represent this area – e.g. using a glissando, a crescendo and so on. If you have time, perform these to the class alongside the musical justification to help develop musical confidence and vocabulary.

Stretch and Challenge

- Ask pupils to include a musical word in their explanation:
 - dynamics
 - texture
 - pitch
 - rhythm
 - melody
 - silence
 - contrast
 - glissando

Challenge sentence example:

“The music suggests a lost ocean because the sliding glissando sounds make it feel as if the Earth itself is moving”

Support and Scaffold

- Give pupils sentence starters:
 - “The music sounds like...”
 - “I heard...”
 - “It made me think of...”
 - “The mood was...”
- Provide picture cards: fossil, ocean, volcano, map, creature, storm, island
- Allow pupils to point to a picture rather than write
- Give a smaller choice of words: calm, spooky, loud, smooth, sudden, floating

Longer 45-minute task: The Tethys Transmission – Decode the Message

Pupils imagine that Sailing on Tethys is not music at all, but a mysterious radio transmission from an ancient ocean planet. They must decode it and turn it into a short spoken, visual and musical response. Pupil are encouraged to explore how music can communicate information, atmosphere and narrative without words.

It is useful if pupils have classroom instruments, paper (their pupil workbook) or mini whiteboards and pens.

Part 1: Listen Like Scientists

Tell pupils:

“Scientists have received a strange transmission. It seems to come from the lost Tethys Ocean. It may be a warning, a map, a memory or a message.”

Play an extract of the music.

Ask pupils to listen for changes. Each time they hear a change, they make a small mark on their paper in their workbooks.

Marks might include:

- a zigzag for sudden movement
- a spiral for swirling sounds
- a dot for quiet or mysterious moments
- a wave line for smooth, flowing sounds
- an explosion shape for loud or dramatic moments

This creates a quick **graphic score**.

Part 2: Decode the Transmission

In pairs or small groups, pupils choose what their marks mean.

For example:

Musical Sound	Musical Name	Possible Meaning
Sliding sound	Glissando	Tectonic plates moving
Few layers	Thin texture	Something hidden below the ocean
Sudden loud sound	Accent	A warning signal
Repeated rhythm	Ostinato	A machine, heartbeat or rowing pattern
High sound	High pitch	Light from another world
Low sound	Low pitch	Deep ocean or Earth's core

There is space in their workbooks to work on this. Groups should then complete this phrase:

“The message from Tethys says...”

Examples:

- “The ocean is disappearing.”
- “The islands are moving.”
- “Something is waking beneath the sea.”
- “Follow the currents before the plates collide.”
- “This world is beautiful, but unstable.”

Part 3: Perform the Transmission

Groups create a 20–30 second “transmission” using:

- voices
- whispering
- body percussion
- classroom percussion
- repeated words (ostinato)
- sliding vocal sounds (glissando)
- quiet and loud contrasts (crescendo and diminuendo)

They should include:

1. A mysterious opening
2. A coded repeated pattern (ostinato)
3. A sudden warning sound
4. A fading ending (diminuendo)

A possible example structure:

- Whisper: “Tethys... Tethys...”
- Tap a repeated pulse
- Slide voices upwards or downwards using glissando and ostinato
- Sudden drum hit or clap
- Fade to silence

Stretch and Challenge

- Ask pupils to create a more detailed graphic score using at least five symbols
- Include a clear change in texture, such as solo to group or sparse to busy
- Use a repeated rhythmic pattern as a “code”
- Add a spoken line using ambitious vocabulary, such as:
 - submerge
 - unstable
 - ancient
 - collision
 - drifting
 - vanishing
 - transmission
- Challenge pupils to explain how their performance links to Alberg’s music

Example:

“We used sliding voices because Alberg’s music includes sounds that feel as if the Earth is shifting”

Support and Scaffold

- Provide ready-made symbols pupils can copy:
 - wave line
 - dot
 - spiral
 - zigzag
 - triangle
 - explosion shape
- Give pupils a simple performance template:
 - Quiet sound
 - Repeated sound
 - Loud sound
 - Quiet sound
- Let pupils use body percussion only
- Give word prompts:
 - lost
 - deep
 - warning
 - moving
 - hidden
 - ancient

Links to other subjects

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

Subject	Links
Science	Signals and waves, Earth science, tectonic plates, oceans
Geography	Plates, oceans
English	Interpreting meaning, creating concise messages, speaking and listening skills
Art	Symbol design and implementation, visual communication and abstract representation of sound through drawing
Computing	How data can be represented, sequences, patterns and codes

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Crescendo	A dynamic marking meaning getting louder
Diminuendo	A dynamic marking meaning getting quieter
Rallentando	A tempo instruction to get slower
Ostinato	A repeated rhythm, melody or pattern
Pizzicato	Plucking the string on a string instrument
Glissando	Sliding between two notes
Graphic Score	Notating sounds using symbols and drawings
Accent	A note that is played louder to make it stand out

Sensory activities for all

Eleanor Alberga – Symphony No. 1, movement 5, Sailing on Tethys

Short task: Floating Boats

Sensory focus: Vestibular awareness, imagination

Resources:

- Beanbags or floor mats
- Small toy boats (optional)

Activity: Ask pupils to imagine they are floating on Tethys' water. Encourage gentle swaying, rocking or supported movement in time with the music, changing the size of the movements as the musical "currents" change.

Musical link: Encourages awareness of pulse.

Medium task: Ocean Waves

Sensory focus: Movement, visual tracking

Resources:

- Blue chiffon scarves
- Large blue fabric or parachute
- Small boat (optional)

Activity: Invite pupils to create waves that match the music. As the music becomes more energetic, make larger rolling waves. During calmer sections, create slow ripples, encouraging pupils to notice how the "water" changes throughout the piece.

Musical link: Responding to changes in musical mood.

Medium task: Wind in the Sails

Sensory focus: Air movement

Resources:

- Hand fans
- Feather fans
- Lightweight fabric

Activity: Adults or pupils gently create "wind" using fans as the music grows. Vary the strength of the breeze to reflect changing musical dynamics, helping pupils connect what they hear with what they feel.

Musical link: Develops understanding of dynamics.

Longer task: Ocean Sound Orchestra

Sensory focus: Listening and cause-and-effect

Resources:

- Ocean drum
- Thunder drum
- Rainstick
- Shakers
- Wind chimes

Activity: Pause after listening to short sections and invite pupils to choose an instrument that best matches the sounds they heard. Explore how different instruments can recreate flowing water, gentle rain or rolling waves. This can develop into a composition.

Musical link: Develops knowledge of timbre (unique sound of an instrument) and composing skills.