

Montgomery – Starburst

Listening

Philharmonia performance ►

Context

About the composer: Jessie Montgomery (born 1981)

Jessie Montgomery is an American composer, violinist and music educator from New York City. Growing up in a creative and culturally diverse environment, she was surrounded by many different styles of music, including classical music, jazz, folk traditions and music from African-American culture. These influences can be heard throughout her compositions. Montgomery is known for writing energetic, imaginative music that often explores storytelling, community and identity. She studied at the Juilliard School and New York University and is one of the most frequently performed contemporary composers today.

About the piece: Starburst (2012)

Starburst is a short, one-movement work for string orchestra written in 2012 and commissioned by the Sphinx Organization, which supports young Black and Latino musicians. Montgomery describes the piece as a musical representation of rapidly changing colours and textures. Fast, explosive musical gestures are mixed with gentler, fleeting melodies to create an exciting and vivid soundscape. The title comes from the astronomical term “starburst”, meaning the rapid formation of many new stars within a galaxy. Montgomery also used the image of talented young musicians shining like new stars as inspiration for the piece.

Listening Guide

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
0:00-0:54	• Tempo: Lively and fast • Time Signature: 4/4 • Tonality: ambiguous and unclear, but the note A is important The lower strings start with an upward-rising pattern in fast semiquavers, passing this up to the viola, then the violins. The upper strings then play a staccato chord in quavers which is dissonant – i.e. it sounds a bit clashy. Underneath this, the lower strings have chord stabs and melodic fragments From 0:11, the lower strings use pizzicato – they pluck the string to give a different effect. The other strings play with the bow – this is called arco There are lots of changes in musical colours, some only lasting a few seconds, to create rapid contrasts. There are some particularly striking changes in dynamics too!
0:54-2:17	The music energy changes at 0:54 to give a short moment of rest, before launching again. There are some use of harmonics in this section, giving a space-like feeling to the music. There are some ostinato (repeated) rhythms in the violas and second violins to accompany this section
2:17-3:00	A return to the opening ideas, with new musical contrasts to keep the listener engaged
3:00-end	The lower strings start a new idea, acting as a coda (or ending section). There is lots of call and copy between the different instruments before they all settle on a chord to end the piece

Key musical features

- Rhythm and Tempo: fast, energetic opening ideas that seem to burst into life
- Dynamics: sudden changes in dynamics (loud and quiet)
- Melody: short musical ideas passed between different sections of the strings
- Texture: contrasting textures, from busy and exciting to calm and delicate

Short 5-minute task: Opposites Game

The aim of this game is for each student to create three musical words and to write them down. They then need to say their word to another member of the class, who tells them what the opposite to their word is. If the opposite is not known they can ask the student to reveal the answer.

Some examples:

- Major/Minor
- Staccato/Legato (short/smooth)
- High/Low (in pitch)
- Fast/Slow (in tempo or rhythm)
- Notes/Rests
- Forte/Piano (loud/soft)
- Crescendo/Diminuendo (get louder/get quieter)

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage more challenging vocabulary use, and ask pupils to define the terms when discussing

Support and Scaffold

- Give some of the options above for pupils to select from to enable them to engage

Medium 20-minute task: Creative Task

This piece is all about rapidly changing musical colours, linked to the idea of a starburst – where lots of new stars are born very quickly, and often in an explosive manner! As such the music changes quickly in its use of the musical elements, creating an interesting and complex piece of music.

This task asks pupils to listen to the music as a full piece and to respond to it in a creative way. This might be by drawing something based on the title and the music they hear, or a piece of creative writing, creating a dance or a dramatic short, or something else entirely, perhaps linked to the theme of ‘out of this world’.

The main focus is to ensure students understand contrasts and changes, and how these can occur in many different situations.

You might want to use the words below to help pupils with their creative process:

*High in the sky, a starburst grows,
Spreading its sparkle wherever it goes.
Twinkling and dancing, bright in the night,
Painting the darkness with magical light.
Shining like fireworks, bursting with cheer,
Sending its starlight far and near.
A glittering treasure, bold and bright,
A starburst sparkles all through the night.*

It would be useful to play the track for the class as they get to work, so they can become familiar with the music and the sudden changes.

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage pupils to extend their written skills – for example by writing a haiku or combining an artistic response alongside a written text response
- Encourage pupils to respond in a medium in which they are less familiar – for example exploring dance, drama, English to extend their skill set

Support and Scaffold

- Give pupils a specific task – e.g. using the poem above and trying to add a third stanza where each pair of lines rhymes (consider trying to end each line with the words ‘gold, told, see, glee’)
- Respond in a medium in which they are more confident initially, then move to a medium which might need more support – for example start by drawing, then add words to accompany the drawing

Longer 45-minute task: Composing and Performing

Having completed the tasks above, pupils should have a good idea of how contrast can be achieved in music.

This longer task asks students to compose and perform a piece of music they have created which demonstrates musical contrasts.

To do this, they should imagine they are writing 30 seconds of music, divided into three different sections, each lasting around 10 seconds. Each of the three sections should demonstrate different opposites, which the rest of the class need to guess.

For example:

- 0-10 seconds: high and low pitch
- 10-20 seconds: slow and fast tempo
- 20-30 seconds: piano (quiet) and forte (loud) dynamics

Students should have lots of ideas if they have played the short opposites game at the start of the lesson.

Students could use classroom instruments if available, or they could use their voices – any mix of instruments and voices will work in this challenge.

Stretch and Challenge

- More able groups could combine elements, so for example 0-10 seconds involves high and low pitch and getting louder/getting softer dynamics
- Extend more able groups by asking them to compose a fourth or fifth contrasting section

Support and Scaffold

- Start with one contrast first, then add another if there is time

Links to other subjects

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

Subject	Links
English	The music is highly descriptive and encourages imaginative responses, for example by using extended vocabulary linked to space and movement (for example, exploding, glimmering, shimmering, swirling), telling the story of a galaxy and being 'out of this world'
Science	The idea of a 'starburst' is the rapid formation of new stars in a galaxy, and this is a great time to explore space in more detail, learning about stars, galaxies and the solar system
Maths	The use of repeated melodic ideas (motif) can link to repeated patterns in maths
PE/Dance	Performing and expressing mood through movement, for example representing stars forming and exploding with fast and slow movements to picture changes in tempo and dynamics
Art	This piece shows rapidly changing colours and textures, and could be a good inspiration for pupils to create their own art work using pastel, paint or mixed-media whilst listening to the piece, showing the contrasts linked to the music
Geography	Use this piece to investigate where Earth sits with in the solar system, making comparisons between Earth and other planets

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Motif	A short musical idea that is often repeated and changed, developing it
Staccato	An articulation marking meaning 'playing the note shortly' to make it sound detached
Dissonant	A harmony word where the notes played together are clashing
Pizzicato	Plucking the string rather than playing with a bow. Playing with a bow is called arco
Harmonics	A glassy effect on a string instrument achieved by not fully pressing the string to the fingerboard – it makes the music sound 'out of this world'
Ostinato	A repeated pattern, similar to a riff in pop music
Coda	An ending section of a piece of music, similar to a conclusion in writing

Sensory activities for all

Jessie Montgomery – Starburst

Short task: Build a Constellation

Sensory focus: Fine motor skills and collaboration

Resources:

- Glow-in-the-dark stars

or

- Velcro stars
- Black backing paper

Activity: Each time pupils hear a new musical idea, they add another star to a shared constellation. By the end of the piece, the class has created their own “Starburst” inspired night sky, showing how many different musical ideas they heard.

Musical link: Recognise how musical ideas are used to structure a piece of music.

Medium task: Space Pebbles

Sensory focus: Tactile exploration

Resources:

A tray containing:

- Smooth pebbles
- Glitter balls
- Metallic fabric
- Sequins
- Soft pom-poms
- Crinkly foil

Activity:

Ask pupils to explore the tray while listening and choose the object that best matches each musical section. The constantly changing orchestral colours encourage pupils to notice different textures in both the music and the objects.

Musical link: Understanding music has contrasting sections and textures.

Medium/longer task: Twinkling Lights

Sensory focus: Visual stimulation

Resources

- Battery-operated tea lights
- Fibre optic lights

Activity: Invite pupils to switch lights on whenever they hear a sudden musical “spark” or accent. As the music becomes calmer, encourage them to gently dim, cover or lower the lights before the next burst appears.

Development ideas:

- Move onto instruments

Resources:

Small percussion instruments
(bells, chime bars, finger cymbals)

Activity: Listen for the orchestra’s sudden “spark” moments. Encourage pupils to respond with one gentle bell ring or chime whenever they hear an explosive musical accent, helping them anticipate and react to changes in the music.

- Composing

Sensory focus: Choice making and improvisation

Resources:

Selection of sensory instruments (bells, shakers, ocean drum, rainstick, finger cymbals)

Activity: After listening, invite pupils to create their own short “starburst.” Encourage them to begin with silence, add one sudden burst of sound, then finish quietly—just as Jessie Montgomery uses contrast to create excitement throughout the piece.

Musical link: Recognise changes in dynamics and articulation (the way notes are played e.g. accents)