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Designed for: High School, Middle School
Topics Covered: Music, Sound, Storytelling, Art
Estimated Time: 45 Minutes

Lesson Title:

How does Music Make a Character?

Learning Objectives:

Free Thought– Participants should try to vocalize what goes on in their heads when they're listening to music; sharing what they feel, what images they conjure in their minds, and where their imagination takes them.

Text:

Have you ever dedicated the time to sit through a piece of music and simply listen to it? No distractions, no multitasking, just you and the music. Whether we're aware of it or not, music is constantly around us, but quite often we don't take the time to sit and listen. All music tells a story, but songs without words leave us to our own devices: our imagination. Let's explore a piece of music that sets the tone of a story, but we have to fill in the words.

The piece *Mars: The Bringer of War* from Gustav Holst's *The Planets* (~ 8 minutes long) is a great piece to focus on character creation. Avoid telling students the name of the piece so that they aren't influenced by the title, but if they need a jumping off point, you may tell them it's from a musical collection called *The Planets*.

Play the piece for the students, and encourage them to take the time to just listen to the music. On a piece of paper, they may write down any and all thoughts they have while listening. They can draw whatever comes to mind as well. Ask them to try to focus on what the main character of the story would look like. At the end of the piece, bring everyone together and brainstorm the story that this piece tells using people's interpretations of the music.

After you are content with the participation and story students have imagined, reveal the name of the piece, gauge their reactions, and proceed with some discussion questions.

If students are interested in some context behind this piece, feel free to share some of the information below:

Written between 1914-1916 by British composer Gustav Holst 'The Planets' represents all the known planets of the Solar System and their corresponding astrological character. Each of the planets has a different style of orchestration and that's why it stays interesting all the time for the ear. His inspiration came from the personalities of the planets, and he gave each of them little

epithets like "Mars: The Bringer of War," where we begin our planetary trek, or "Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity."

Angry and ominous, Holst's first movement represents the Roman god of war, Mars. The craggy rhythms and pulsing drum beats give the music a *military* feel. Mars has been used as the inspiration for the "Imperial March" from *Star Wars*, and film composer Hans Zimmer was even sued by the Holst Foundation for writing *Gladiator*'s film score an awful lot like Mars.

As an example, listen to this podcast where I use the same piece with one guest:

<https://anchor.fm/riley-nichols/episodes/Mental-Movements-with-Music-Ep--5-emd76m>

Discussion Questions:

What were your initial thoughts after the piece ended? What emotions did this piece invoke?

What elements of the song caught your attention? Why do you think these elements stood out?

Would the song have conveyed the same feeling if it was just that instrument/part playing?

Did any part of this sound familiar to you? Something you might've heard before?

Did listening to it make you picture anything? What and why? How did this picture form?

This movement is supposed to represent Mars, the Roman God of War. Does this piece do him justice? Why or why not?

In Roman mythology, the Romans saw their god Jupiter as king of all the gods while Mars was considered his second. Why put Mars, the second most important deity, first?

From this piece, what can you tell me about Mars? Either the planet or the deity?

Is there any comparison between Mars the planet and Mars the god?

How would you write music that is supposed to represent the stars and celestial phenomenon?

How would you write a song about earth? What emotions would encapsulate our planet?

How can music depict life experiences like that of Mars?

As the listener, do we get to decide what the piece is about if it evokes something different? Or is it up to the composer what the piece should represent?

Further Resources:

Podcast Episode:

<https://anchor.fm/riley-nichols/episodes/Mental-Movements-with-Music-Ep--5-emd76m>

Model conversation about this piece.

More about Holst's *The Planets*:

<http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics6/planets.html>

A large article for context on *The Planets* regarding Holst's influence, his creative process, cultural influence, and other resources.

<http://www.globalorchestra.com/mars>

Brief overview of *Mars* with a deeper exploration of the motifs occurring throughout the song.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/09/28/652700640/the-planets-at-100-a-listener-s-guide-to-holst-s-solar-system>

A "Listener's guide" to all the movements in Holst's composition with a professional conductor and astronomer in conversation about the pieces. Feel free to select a different planet to listen to!

Philosophy of Music:

<https://iep.utm.edu/music-an/>

A great, substantive article that discusses the questions based around the nature and value of music practices.

Intention & Interpretation:

Intention and Interpretation by Gary Iseminger (1995).

While this book focuses on the intention vs interpretation of literature, broader concepts explained can be applied to music as well.