



RACHMANINOV

Symphonic Dances

Ready, Set, Listen! *Symphonic Dances*

Sergei Rachmaninov

Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 – Teaching Resource

Sydney Symphony Orchestra

Acknowledgements

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Background

The purpose of this resource

This Teaching and Learning Kit has been designed by Sydney Symphony Orchestra, in collaboration with registered educators, to assist you in building meaningful learning experiences around your concert attendance. This kit has specifically been designed for post-concert learning, to expand on what students experienced in the concert.

You may choose to use the existing lesson plans as they appear, or - using our handy differentiation hints - adapt them to align with the needs and interests of a particular group of students. Alternatively, go above and beyond and use the Resource Library to extend the students who really love to deep-dive into the world of orchestral music.

How will you use these flexible and adaptable resources? The choice is yours!

As always, we welcome all feedback and suggestions regarding the nature of our Teaching and Learning Kits. Please feel free to be in touch with our friendly Learning & Engagement team at schools@sydneyssymphony.com.

How curriculum is referenced in this resource

This resource is mapped to the NSW Curriculum.

Each Lesson includes learning activities for students Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 aligned to the outcomes of the new Creative Arts K – 6 Syllabus (2024).

Each lesson focuses upon a work from Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances which was featured in the Ready, Set, Listen! Concert. This Teacher Resource Kit includes several activities in performing, organising sounds, responding and listening. Each of the learning experiences is integrated into the lesson.

Each activity suggests an indicative age group, however teachers should use their knowledge of their class to select activities relevant to their stages of development and music learning.

Resource Library

Below is a curated selection of additional third-party resources you might choose to use in supporting your students to engage in concert preparation. The lesson plans in this resource will suggest you select from these in order to plan/undertake your lessons - alternatively, these resources may also be used for differentiation and extension.

Things to listen to

Discover this Spotify playlist featuring concert repertoire audio recordings where available.

[Spotify Playlist](#)

Things to watch

Berlin Philharmonic: Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances – Movement 1

[Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances / Petrenko · Berliner Philharmoniker](#)

Things to explore

- [The Layout of The Orchestra](#)
- [Learn & Listen by Instrument](#)
- [Inside the Orchestra](#)
- [How to create a graphic score](#)

Introduction to the concert theme

Ready, Set, Listen! has been designed specifically for our youngest audiences to provide engaging and meaningful first experiences with orchestral music. The concert introduces young children to orchestral instruments and key classical repertoire in an accessible and age-appropriate way, supporting curiosity, listening and imagination. The music featured in these concerts has been carefully arranged by Tim Hansen, with an engaging script written by Emily Who, ensuring that musical ideas are presented clearly and playfully for early learners.

This Teacher Resource Kit has been developed to build on the Ready, Set, Listen! concert experience. The lessons extend the musical ideas introduced in the performance and support students to revisit, explore and deepen their understanding through scaffolded and sequential learning experiences. Through listening, movement, discussion and creative response, the resource supports students to consolidate their learning and make meaningful connections between live performance and classroom music learning.

Introduction to the composer and repertoire

Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances

Sergei Rachmaninov was a composer and pianist who lived over 100 years ago. He was born in Russia and showed a strong love for music from a very young age.

Rachmaninov grew up listening to music from his country and learning how to play the piano, which later helped him become a very famous performer. He liked to write music that shows big feelings and strong moods, using lots of different instruments in the orchestra. Rachmaninov believed that music could tell stories and help people imagine places, feelings and ideas, even when there are no words. His music often makes listeners feel as though they are going on a journey.

Symphonic Dances is a piece of music written for a full orchestra and was one of the last works Rachmaninov ever created. In this music, he uses sound to show different times of the day, such as morning, daytime and night. Each section sounds very different and has its own mood. Some parts feel light and calm, while others sound busy, energetic or mysterious. Rachmaninov uses changes in instruments, volume and speed to help us imagine what might be happening in the music. When we listen to *Symphonic Dances*, we can use our imagination to picture scenes, movements or stories in our minds. This is the same music students heard at the Ready, Set, Listen! concert.

Lesson 1: Recap and Responding

Focus: Listening and movement

Learning intention

Students reflect on the performance they attended

Students respond to music by moving and describing what they hear.

Curriculum Alignment

Early Stage 1 CAE-MUS-01

Listening: Music can be listened to, experienced and described

- Identify contexts where music can be listened to or experienced
- Use listening skills to identify ways that beat, rhythm, pitch, performing media, timbre and dynamics are used in music, using Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary
- Use listening skills and express ideas or feelings in response to music

Stage 1 CA1-MUS-01

Listening: Musical ideas are conveyed through sound

- Use listening skills and describe duration, pitch, performing media, timbre, dynamics, expression and structure in music, using Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary
- Use listening skills and reflect on personal experiences, discussing ideas, feelings or opinions in response to music

Materials

- Class set of scarves or ribbons (not essential)
- [Spotify Playlist:](#)
 - **Excerpt 1:** Movement 1 - 0:20" – 1:26"
 - **Excerpt 2:** Movement 2 - 0:32" – 1:08"
 - **Excerpt 3:** Movement 3 - 11':45" – 12:31"
- YouTube video [Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances / Petrenko · Berliner Philharmoniker](#)

Teaching Sequence:

Introduction

Gather students in a circle. Prompt them to recall the Ready Set Listen concert.

Ask students:

- What they remember about the music?
- What did they see?
- The names of the instruments they heard.
- What was one thing they learned from the concert?
- How the music made them feel?

If students don't recall the name of the composer or the name of the work, remind them that the piece of music they heard at the concert was called *Symphonic Dances* by Rachmaninov, the composer, the person who writes the music.

Main Lesson

1. Tell the students they are going to hear the same music from the concert but there is something a little bit different about it.
2. Play **Excerpt 1: Movement 1 - 0:20" – 1:26"** from Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*.
3. After this playing ask the students what was different between what they hear on the recording and what they heard at the Opera House?
 - a. Students should note that there are more instruments in the recording than were at the Opera House – a *bigger* sound
 - b. Explain to the students that what they heard at the concert was an arrangement. This means that Tim Hansen, the arranger took the big orchestral piece of music, that was written for 100 musicians, found the main parts of the music and shrunk it down for 14 musicians so it still makes sense. It is sort of like taking a big, long, tricky story and shortening and making it easier to understand for little people!
4. Now watch a YouTube recording of the same section of the work [Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances / Petrenko · Berliner Philharmoniker](#) from the beginning to 1:02"
5. Ask the students what is the same and what is different to what they saw at the concert. Can students identify some of the instruments playing in the video?
6. Listen again and this time move around the classroom either with scarves or ribbons if you have them or just body movements. Model movements for the students, smooth, bouncy, tall, small, floaty, heavy etc. Have students demonstrate what they hear in the music with the movements of their bodies.

You could ask students to share a movement and have the whole class copy them if some students are having difficulty.

- On the board, divide the board into three sections using the table below as a guide to create a bank of words that describe the music, using simple words.

One – How the music moves	Two – How the music feels	Three – What the music makes us imagine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast • Slow • Bouncy • Loud • Heavy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smooth • Scary • Fluttery • Twirly • Dance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marching • Up and down • Space

- Do the same exercises above with **Excerpt 2: Movement 2 – 0:32”- 1:08”**
- After listening to **Excerpt 2**, ask students if they can remember the musical word that Emily Who introduced when the string instruments pluck the strings on their instruments – *Pizzicato*. There was another word that Emily Who used when the instruments play very smoothly. Can students remember the musical word – *Legato*. Add this word to the word bank.

TEACHING NOTES:

You could also create a poster of the words to laminate to display on the wall in your classroom with the definitions as a reminder for your students.

Accept descriptive language or movement responses where terminology is not yet secure (Early Stage 1).

Encourage emerging use of musical vocabulary (Stage 1).

- Add other words to column two of the word bank that describe the music from this section.
- Have students find their own space in the room that they can sit or lay and invite students to close their eyes. Tell students you are going to play another section of the music and ask them to turn on their listening ears very carefully. Play **Excerpt 3: Movement 3 – 11’:45” – 12:31”**

12. After listening to the excerpt ask the students:
 - a. How it made them feel?
 - b. What did they imagine?
 - c. Was the music happy/sad and why did they think that?
 - d. Add some of the words to column three of the word bank table above.

Wrap Up

Have students return to a circle on the floor. Explain to the students the purpose of today's lesson i.e. Today we listened carefully to music we heard from the Ready, Set, Listen concert and used our bodies and words to show what we heard.

Ask students to share one movement they used and what it represented or share a feeling the music inspired in them or something that they imagined while the music was playing.

Assessment Ideas

1. Observe students during movement activities and note the following:
 - a. Do students' movements follow what is happening to the music? i.e. Big movements for loud sections, small movements for soft, short movements for *pizzicato* sounds and languid movements for *legato* sections.
 - b. Did students' movements change between the three different excerpts to show the different moods?
 - c. Could students use words that accurately reflect what was happening in the music?
 - d. Can students identify changes in dynamics or timbre through movement or words?
 - e. Can students explain a difference between excerpts using descriptive language?

Lesson 2: Music and Imagination – A Journey Through the Day

Focus: Listening and organising ideas

Learning intention

Students use imagination to connect music with ideas, images and times of day.

Curriculum Alignment

Early Stage 1:

Listening: Music can be listened to, experienced and described

- Identify contexts where music can be listened to or experienced
- Use listening skills to identify ways that beat, rhythm, pitch, performing media, timbre and dynamics are used in music, using Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary
- Use listening skills and express ideas or feelings in response to music

Stage 1:

Listening: Musical ideas are conveyed through sound

- Use listening skills and describe duration, pitch, performing media, timbre, dynamics, expression and structure in music, using Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary
- Use listening skills and reflect on personal experiences, discussing ideas, feelings or opinions in response to music

Materials

- Excerpts from:
 - Rachmaninov, Symphonic Dances (selected excerpts)
 - Edvard Grieg, Peer Gynt Suite No. 1 – Morning Mood
 - Optional contrast example representing night or evening, for example:
 - Mussorgsky, Night on Bald Mountain (short excerpt)
 - Scarves or ribbons (optional)

Teaching Sequence:

Introduction

1. Start the lesson in a circle.
2. Revisit the Ready, Set, Listen! Concert and ask students if they can remember what the three different sections of the music represented? Revisit the idea that each movement of the Symphonic Dances, Rachmaninov used music to show different times of day.
3. Play **Excerpt 1**, **Excerpt 2** and **Excerpt 3** in a random order and ask students to recall what time of day the music was representing. If appropriate, have students support their answer with reasoning.
4. Explain to students that music can tell a story, paint a picture, or show a mood without using any words. Today, students will listen carefully and use their imagination to work out what the music might be showing.
5. Reassure students that there are no right or wrong answers, but they need to be able to talk about what they hear.

Main Lesson

1. Teacher modelling: listening like a music detective

Explain that you will listen to some music together and think like music detectives.

Pose the following questions to the students:

- What picture or mood is the music trying to create?
- How is the composer (remember the composer is someone who writes the music) doing it?

Prompt students to listen for:

- Loud or soft
- Fast or slow
- Smooth or choppy
- High or low sounds
- Instrument families such as strings, winds, brass or percussion

Play **Excerpt 4**: Movement 1 - 5:48" - 6:36" from Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*.

After listening, model a response for students:

"The music sounds light, smooth and soft. I can hear the string section playing the melody. The instruments are high - so I think they are the violins. The music go up and down smoothly. The instruments all sound quite high and light."

After modelling a response, ask students which time of day the music represents and why.

2. Organising ideas as a class

Divide the board into three columns like the table below and add some descriptive words to the corresponding column that the music fits into. Explain that these words help us organise our listening ideas.

Morning	Daytime	Night
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Light• Calm• Smooth•		

3. Guided listening: responding to multiple excerpts

Building on from the example done as a class, students will now need to listen to a range of different excerpts and respond in the same way as the example.

Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances*:

Excerpt 5: Movement 2 – 4:36” – 4:59”

Excerpt 6: Movement 3 – 8:40” – 9:17”

Excerpt 7: Movement 1 – 8:30” – 9:12”

After each excerpt, guide discussion using these questions, especially for younger students:

- Was the music fast or slow?
- Quiet or loud?
- Light or heavy?
- Smooth (legato) or short (staccato)?
- High or low?
- Happy, sad, scary or funny?

Students decide which column the excerpt belongs in and contribute descriptive words.

Play each excerpt a second time and ask:

- Which time of day do you think this represents?

- What did you hear that helped you decide?

Depending on the class and how you structure this activity you can either do this as a think/pair/share activity, ask individual students to share or answer them as a class. Ask some groups to share their answers with the class.

Extension Activity: Expanding listening with other orchestral examples

Explain that many composers use music to show mornings, daytime, nights and other stories.

Introduce Grieg's *Morning Mood* (which you can find in the Spotify playlist) and tell students to listen silently the first time.

Play a short excerpt 0:07" – 0:46" of *Morning Mood*

As a class discuss:

- What time of day does this sound like?
- How is this similar or different to Rachmaninov's music?

Guide discussion towards softer dynamics, higher instruments and smooth, flowing sounds. Add new words to the Morning column.

4. Guess the time-of-day game

Explain that students will play a listening and movement game.

Assign different areas of the room:

- Left side: Morning
- Centre: Daytime
- Right side: Night

Students begin standing or sitting in the middle of the classroom. Play short excerpts (about 30 seconds) from the [Ready, Set, Listen Spotify Playlist](#). Have students listen carefully to the excerpt and give students a moment to decide in their head which time of day the music represents.

After each excerpt, students move silently to the area that represents the time of day they think the music shows.

Ask students:

- Why did you choose morning, daytime or night?
- What sounds helped you decide?

Name of the work	Composer	Time of day it represents
<i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45: I. Non allegro</i>	Sergei Rachmaninov	Morning (waking up, early movement)
<i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45: II. Andante con moto (tempo di valse)</i>	Sergei Rachmaninov	Afternoon / daytime (busy, social, dance-like)
<i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45: III. Lento assai – Allegro vivace</i>	Sergei Rachmaninov	Night (dreaming, imagination, contrasts)
<i>Peer Gynt Suite No. 1: I. Morning Mood</i>	Edvard Grieg	Morning (sunrise, gentle awakening)
<i>Daphnis et Chloé: Lever du jour (Daybreak)</i>	Maurice Ravel	Morning (light spreading, day beginning)
<i>Má vlast: Vltava (The Moldau)</i>	Bedřich Smetana	Morning → daytime (journey, movement through the day)
<i>Appalachian Spring</i>	Aaron Copland	Morning / daytime (open space, fresh start)
<i>L'Arlésienne Suite No. 1: Prélude</i>	Georges Bizet	Afternoon / daytime (travel, activity, energy)
<i>William Tell Overture (Finale)</i>	Gioachino Rossini	Afternoon / daytime (fast, energetic, action)
<i>Symphony No. 1 "Classical": I. Allegro</i>	Sergei Prokofiev	Afternoon / daytime (busy, playful energy)
<i>An American in Paris</i>	George Gershwin	Daytime (city life, movement, activity)
<i>The Sleeping Beauty Suite: Panorama</i>	Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky	Night (calm, drifting, settling to sleep)
<i>The Planets: Venus – The Bringer of Peace</i>	Gustav Holst	Night (peaceful, still, quiet)
<i>Pictures at an Exhibition (orch. Ravel): The Old Castle</i>	Modest Mussorgsky	Night (dark, still, mysterious)
<i>The Swan of Tuonela</i>	Jean Sibelius	Night (moonlit, mysterious, swan imagery)
<i>Peer Gynt Suite No. 1: II. The Death of Åse</i>	Edvard Grieg	Night (quiet, emotional, reflective)

5. Responding to music: cross-curricular activity (Music and Visual Arts)

Explain that students will now respond creatively to one piece of music.

Play one selected excerpt again.

Students respond by choosing one option:

- Drawing what the music makes them imagine, including the time of day
- Creating a movement sequence that matches what is happening in the music

Play the excerpt multiple times while students work.

Invite a few students to share their drawing or demonstrate their movement and explain their thinking.

Extension Idea: Students can write an accompanying sentence to describe their artwork/movements.

Invite a few students to share their drawing or demonstrate their movement and explain their thinking.

Reflection and Wrap Up

Bring students back to a circle.

As a group, discuss:

- How did the music help you imagine a time of day?
- Did different music make you imagine different pictures or feelings?
- What sounds helped you decide?

Assessment Ideas

The teacher listens for and observes:

- Students making connections between musical sound and ideas
- Use of descriptive language, movement or visual responses
- Understanding that music can change and contrast to show different ideas
- Uses movement or artwork to represent what they are hearing in the music

Evidence may be oral, physical or visual.

Lesson 3: Composing and Performing Our Own Music

Focus: Composing and performing

Learning intention

Students create and perform a short piece of music inspired by Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* and the Ready, Set Listen! Concert.

Curriculum Alignment

Early Stage 1

Listening and composing focus:

- Experiment with sound using classroom instruments.
- Organise sounds into a simple musical structure (beginning and ending).
- Use listening skills to play together and respond to others.

Stage 1

Listening, composing and performing focus:

- Compose and perform a short musical piece with an intended idea.
- Organise musical ideas using duration, dynamics and timbre.
- Reflect on and describe musical choices using simple musical vocabulary.

Materials

- Classroom percussion instruments (e.g. drums, shakers, tambourines, claves, triangles, sound blocks) or if you don't have access to these you can also use found sounds and/or body percussion (e.g. drums, shakers, tambourines, claves, triangles, sound blocks)
- Open floor space for rehearsal and performance

Teaching Sequence:

Introduction

1. Have students start the lesson in a circle.
2. Ask the students if they can remember back to the concert and the first lesson where they were introduced to Rachmaninov, the person who wrote the music. The person who writes the music has a special name, can students recall this word? If not, remind the students that it is a *composer*.
3. Explain that composers write music, but orchestras and musicians work together as a team to organise and perform it. Remind students that at the concert, musicians had to listen carefully to one another and practise so the music sounded good together. If time permits you can revisit the YouTube clip of the orchestra performing Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances [Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances / Petrenko · Berliner Philharmoniker](#)
4. Explain that students will now work like composers and musicians to create their own music inspired by the concert.
5. Revisit the idea from the previous lesson that music can show different ideas and moods without using words, and in Symphonic Dances, Rachmaninov showed different times of the day in the three movements.

Main Lesson

Teacher modelling: whole class composition

Before students create their own compositions, model the task as a class and create a class composition.

1. As a class:
 - a. Choose one time of day (e.g. morning).
 - b. Discuss what music that time of day might sound like.
2. If needed, help students with prompts such as:
 - a. Would it be fast or slow?
 - b. Loud or quiet?
 - c. Smooth or bouncy?
3. You can revisit the word list that the students came up with in Lesson 1 to help prompt their thinking eg. If creating a composition for the morning, the words that students might suggest could be slow, smooth, soft, twinkly, high.
4. Write the word that the students suggest on the board to help remind students of what the music should sound like.
5. Demonstrate the classroom percussion instruments available. Show the different sounds that students can make (loud, soft, different timbres). If you do not have access to classroom percussion instruments, demonstrate options for body percussion (stomping, clapping, clicking, rubbing hands together, tapping chest

- etc) or have students explore the classroom for objects that create different sounds or even the playground.
6. Ask students to select 3 instruments that they think represent the type of music they are trying to create. For older students, have them provide reasoning.
 7. Divide the class into three groups and assign an instrument to each group.
 8. Have students suggest ways of playing their instruments that can be used in the composition that reflect the time of day they are trying to represent. Settle on one idea from each group.
 9. Each group is going to do their section for 4 beats. You as the teacher, will be the conductor for this “orchestra” and will show each group when to start and stop. Before playing as a group have each group practice counting to 4 one after each other. This is how long the composition will be performed for.
 10. Demonstrate how to give a simple cue for starting or stopping, such as counting in or raising a hand.
 11. Now try with the students performing their instruments. This may take a few practices for students to feel confident.

TEACHING NOTES:

- Beats can be counted aloud, clapped or shown with hand signals rather than keeping a strict tempo.
- Depending on the age and ability of the students, older students may be able to have different sections join and stop as directed by the conductor.
- Students may be able to swap parts and try a different part of the composition
- Keep this short and simple. The goal is to show how sounds are organised, not to perfect the music.

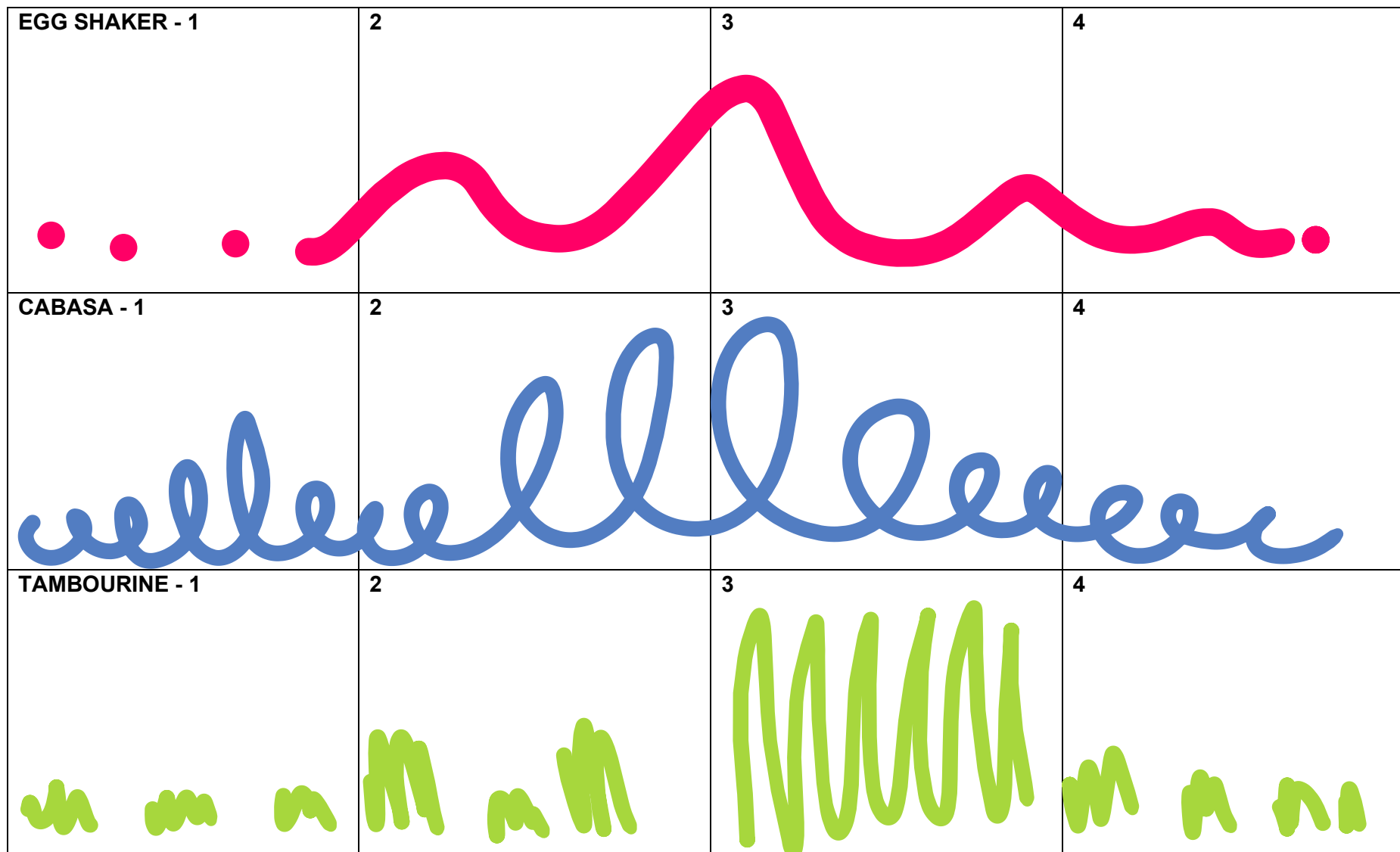
Extension Idea:

For more advanced students/ older students introduce a way of recording their composition using graphic notation. Create this on the board as a class.

Ask students what image or symbol could be used to represent their part. Using a different colour and symbol/line for each part/instrument and a shapes/lines to show how loud/soft/fast/slow.

Below is an example of a graphic score that demonstrates speed, dynamics and duration over 4 beats. You could have students interpret this example before creating your own as a class.

Example - Composition Graphic Notation



COMPOSITION – GRAPHIC SCORE

1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4

Extension Idea:

Small group composition

Divide students into small groups of 3.

Each group will:

- Chooses a time of day (morning, afternoon or night).
- Decide on three different classroom percussion instruments that appropriately represents the time of day that they have chosen.
- Discuss briefly what their music will sound like.
- Prompt groups with questions such as:
 - How will your music begin?
 - Will it be loud or soft?
 - Will it be fast or slow?
 - How long will it be?
 - How will it end?
- Each student in the ensemble will decide how to play their instrument. As a group they will need to decide on how loud or soft and how fast or slow their composition will be.

Rehearsal and refinement

- Give groups time to experiment and rehearse.
- Students will create a composition that fits into the same structure that the class composition was in – 4 beats

Whilst students are practising their composition encourage students to:

- Listen to each other
- Adjust volume so all sounds can be heard
- Does their composition capture the mood
- Practise starting and stopping together
- Decide who will give the signal for the ending

Students can use the template above to create a graphic score to notate their work

Performance

- Bring the class back together and have each group perform their composition for the class

Explain expectations:

- Performers play confidently
- Be respectful audience members
- Audience members watch and listen respectfully

- Each group performs their piece for the class

After each group performs, ask:

- What time of day did this music sound like?
- What sounds helped you decide?

Reflection

Have students return to the circle and discuss as a class:

- Did our music sound like morning? Why or why not?
- What sounds made it feel like morning? What could we change to make it sound like there was a big loud thunderstorm?
- What else could we add to our composition to make it sound more like the morning?
- Was it easy to follow the conductor and play our instruments?

Assessment Ideas

- Students' ability to organise sounds into a clear beginning and ending
- How well students listen to one another and perform together
- Students' ability to explain musical choices using words, movement or demonstration