

Soundtracks for... Visualising

by Mark McKergow

Do you like to use moments of quietness and reflection in your classes?
Do you like to tell stories while the pupils listen attentively?
Do you sometimes ask pupils to imagine themselves somewhere
and explore what's going on around them?

These kinds of reflective and imaginative activities can really benefit from a well-chosen musical accompaniment. The music adds to the learners' experience in several ways:

- it signals that an important activity is under way;
- asking pupils to listen to the music gives them something else to do rather than talk;
- slow-paced and calm music slows the learners' bodies and brains;
- the emotional qualities of the music help to draw listeners into the story/scene;
- the links in the brain's limbic system between positive emotions and memory help ensure that the session is easily recalled.

To accompany visualisation and stories I like to find music that is slow to medium-paced and has relatively simple melodies and harmonies. It also has to be long enough – if your story is ten minutes, you'll need a piece (or pieces) that give you enough time. It's possible to loop a track on your CD machine to extend the time. Remember that this music is a background, and so as long as it is well-chosen, the pupils are unlikely to notice the repeat.

The music you choose can also add the right emotional atmosphere to your story. If you are asking your learners to imagine a big and buzzy city coming to life, the accompaniment

will be different from a rural scene at dusk. Think like a film director and use the music to build on the scene you are creating, not interfere or distract. A few suggestions for soundtracks for concentrating:

- Greig, Morning from *Peer Gynt Suite* – wonderful sweeping music that can really bring to life the sun coming up over the countryside.
- Dvorak, *Symphony No 9* ('From the New World'), slow movement – famously echoing spirituals from the southern US, gentle and moving.

Both these are available on the bargain-priced 6 CD set 'Essential Classics' (£8.99, Deutsche Gramophon), which also includes many other memorable tunes.

- Vangelis, *Chariots of Fire* – a beautifully arranged persistent and catchy tune;
- Debussy – orchestral works like *Prelude A L'Après-Midi D'Un Faune* and *La Mer* bring wonderful textures and stimulating moments.

It is particularly important to preview the music you intend to use to accompany visualisations and stories. Is it long enough? Does the right mood continue all the way through? This last point is vital; Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, for example, starts off beautifully but after a few moments changes mood dramatically.

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Mark McKergow is a speaker, author and learning consultant. His website www.mckergow.com contains more information and research on music and learning, as well as links to CD, book and web sources.

