

Melody and Meaning

For 5th-8th grades



Lesson 2 — Musical Form: Tone Poem

Objective

Students will become familiar with a form of orchestral music called the tone poem. They will listen to Debussy's *La Mer* and understand how a composer's choice of musical elements (tempo, dynamics, timbres) can help express a feeling or an image for the listener. They will develop a vocabulary list to help label the feelings and expressions that are evoked in the music and use this vocabulary in a new context for writing a poem.

Suggested Materials

- Recording of Debussy's *La Mer* (audio links can be found at [youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic](https://www.youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic))
- Hokusai's woodcut "The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa" (provided)

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Cr2.1.5a	MU:Cr2.1.6a	MU:Cr2.1.7a	MU:Cr2.1.8a
MU:Re7.1.5a	MU:Re7.1.6a	MU:Re7.1.7a	MU:Re7.1.8a
MU:Re7.2.5a	MU:Re7.2.6a	MU:Re7.2.7a	MU:Re7.2.8a
MU:Re8.1.5a	MU:Re8.1.6a	MU:Re8.1.7a	MU:Re8.1.8a

New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Reading, Standard 7
Writing, Standard 3 & 4
Speaking & Listening, Standard 1, 2, 3 & 6
Language, Standard 1, 2, 5 & 6

Procedure

- 1) (*Do this introduction if you did not do Lesson 1*) Introduce the topic of musical form: One possible definition of music is "organized sound." In order to write music, a composer must choose the sounds that he or she would like to hear and then organize these sounds into a form. Discuss: What kinds of musical forms can the students name? (Ex: song, march, anthem, symphony, free form, etc.) Why would you choose one particular form over another? What is the difference between musical form and musical style?
- 2) Play a recording of the 3rd movement of Debussy's *La Mer* and share some information about it. This piece is a tone poem. A tone poem is a musical form that is a single piece of music with no breaks (unlike a symphony) that evokes a landscape, a painting, a story, or some other non-musical source. The composer Debussy was inspired by the ocean ("La Mer" means "The Sea" in French) and more specifically by art representing the ocean, such as Hokusai's "The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa." You can share this woodblock print with the students as they are listening.
- 3) After they have spent time actively listening, ask them to describe what they hear. Start making a list of their descriptive words. What does Debussy use to make the ocean come alive in the music? What instruments does he use? What types of sounds do the instruments make together? You can extend their word choices by also asking them how the music makes them feel.

Lesson 2 — Musical Form: Tone Poem *(continued)*

- 4) This movement is titled "Dialogue between the wind and the sea." Ask students to describe how they think Debussy created a dialogue between the wind and the sea in this piece. What parts of the music sound like waves on the ocean? What parts might represent the wind? What instruments are used for each?
- 5) Once you have a large list of words, tell students that they are going to write about this same theme – the ocean. Students can select words from the list that was generated from their observations of the music to write a free form poem. Just like Debussy's piece, their poems should evoke the ocean for the reader.
- 6) After the students have had a chance to write a poem, allow them to share their poems with the class. Compare: Do the poems create the same kinds of imagery for the listener as Debussy's music?



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