



Mini-Lesson: Humor in Music

OVERVIEW

Students will read about and listen to examples of humor in music.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will understand the history of humor in music and will be able to explain the humor in *A+: A "Precise" Prelude and An "Excellent" March*.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [Humor in Music](#) reading

Musical examples to illustrate the areas outlined in the reading. You may choose to play those mentioned in the readings or others of your choice. Specific pieces mentioned are:

- *A+: A "Precise" Prelude and An "Excellent" March*, Thomas C. Duffy
- *A Musical Joke*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
- *William Tell Overture*, Spike Jones'
- *Tortoise*, Camille Saint-Saens
- *1712 Overture*, P.D.Q. Bach

PROCESS

1. As a group, read [Humor in Music](#) out loud.
2. Share musical examples of each area outlined in the reading.
3. Either in small groups or as a class, ask students to brainstorm examples of the different areas outlined in the reading.
4. (Optional) Ask students to bring other examples of humorous music to share with the class.

Humor in Music

WHAT MAKES US LAUGH?

We laugh when we expect to see or hear one thing and instead are surprised by the unexpected. We laugh when things are bigger, smaller, faster, or slower than we anticipate. Most people make jokes with words and images, but musicians can make us chuckle by surprising us with unexpected sounds. Sometimes the music makes fun of itself and sometimes it makes fun of other music.

Let's explore some ways composers make us smile, giggle, chuckle, or laugh out loud...

PLAYING WRONG NOTES ON PURPOSE

By asking you to play wrong notes on the repeat of the march, Thomas Duffy is playing a musical joke. Those wrong notes sound especially funny when you know that the title is *A+: A "Precise" Prelude and An "Excellent" March*. So that your listeners get the joke, you must strive to play the march with utmost precision the first time through. You want them to know that you know how to play the piece correctly and that you're "pulling their leg" the second time around.

Mozart wanted to make fun of composers whose music was boring and not very well written. So, he wrote a composition called *A Musical Joke*. In the piece, Mozart surprises us with a rest when we expect a cadence and has the musicians play blatantly wrong notes at the end of the piece.

USING INSTRUMENTS IN UNUSUAL WAYS OR INCORPORATING SOUNDS WE DON'T EXPECT TO HEAR

Rossini's beautiful legato melody, which was played by a flute in the original version of the overture to the opera, *William Tell*, is performed by horns, cowbells, and gargling in Spike Jones' version of the overture.

PERFORMING AN EXISTING TUNE IN A VERY DIFFERENT WAY THAN INTENDED

In *Tortoise*, Camille Saint-Saens slows down the lively *Can-Can* from *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Offenbach to the speed of a turtle.

QUOTING MUSIC IN A HUMOROUS WAY

Composer Peter Schickel's alter-ego, P.D.Q. Bach, composes parodies of existing pieces. His *1712 Overture* is based on Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* but also references *Yankee Doodle*, *Pop Goes the Weasel* and more.

