

LESSON 4, ACT 4: PLOTTING, PLANNING, POTION

Key stage 2 National Curriculum Objectives featured:

Pupils will

- play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

- improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the inter-related dimensions of music

- develop an understanding of the history of music.

A lot happens in Act 4! Juliet is in despair, Friar Lawrence suggests the sleeping potion, Juliet's father is planning a wedding and Nurse is worried about Juliet. In opera, composers can show lots of different plots and opinions at the same time using a structure called an operatic ensemble. This is basically a song that is performed by more than one character at once with each character singing different text. All the text can be heard and understood because of the way it is set musically.

Here's a step-by-step guide to creating an operatic ensemble with your class:

1. Firstly, split your class into four groups and name them as follows:
 - Juliet (in despair)
 - Friar Lawrence (plotting)
 - Juliet's father (happy, busy)
 - Nurse (worried)

Four is the ideal number of characters and groups. Any more characters leads to smaller group size and therefore less confident singing, less characters means that the groups are too big.

2. **Lyrics:** Give each group a few minutes to discuss their character. How might s/he walk, talk? What's going on for them at this point in the play? How do they feel and what are they about to say? Ask each group to invent two lines that their character will say in this situation. It could be as simple as just their name and how they feel.

Check that each group has invented something different from the others. The ensemble will work best if the lines aren't all the same length and format. Also point out that the lines they don't have to rhyme, they should be easy to say and remember.

3. **Chant:** The next task is to fit the lyrics rhythmically to a pulse or beat. Clap or play a steady pulse on a drum and demonstrate how to fit some words on top. Your children may use repetition or stretch the words out but each group must be able to repeat their phrase round and around. Keep the pulse going as the class works on this or appoint a 'pulse-keeper' to do this important job for you
4. **Gestures:** Ask each group to share their ideas with the class and make sure the words are clearly spoken and can be heard above the drum beat. Also, fix the number of times the words repeat around. Next, ask your children to come up with actions or gestures and to turn their lines into a moving piece of rhythmic text.

5. **Melody:** Give out instruments to each group and making sure everyone has the same set of notes - chime bars or xylophones are perfect for this task and you only need one set for each group. Everyone must find the same notes - D, F, A.
Encourage your children to use their instrument and these three notes to help work out a short melody for their rhythmic text and to practise singing it out strongly. Encourage them to keep their rhythms and gestures as they were, and to sing the same tune every time.
6. Now ask each group to share their work with the class - melody and gestures. Ask the other members of the class to comment on each one. Can you hear the text? Is it loud enough? Try hearing two groups at the same time. Count four beats in and ask the rest of the class to watch and listen to the results. When this is achieved try all four groups together at the same time.
7. **Structure:** Ask the children how they want to order their ideas into a final piece. The best order is usually achieved by having each group in turn, with a count of four or eight in between, and then all groups together a few times round to finish.

To hear a really good example of an operatic ensemble watch this one from West Side Story. You'll hear the characters separately and then all together from 2'30:

[West Side Story Ensemble](#)