



FOSSILS

(from Carnival of the Animals)

Camille Saint-Saens (1886)



FOSSILS

from *Carnival of the Animals*
By Camille Saint-Saens (France)
Romantic (1886)

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Important Terms and Concepts

- **Musical Quotation:** short melodic segment borrowed from another work
- **Timbre:** the “color” or quality of sound
- **Suite:** a musical form consisting of a collection of short pieces

BEHIND THE MUSIC



Camille Saint-Saens (1835 - 1921), a French Romantic composer, wrote in almost every musical genre: operas, symphonies, concertos, songs, sacred and secular choral music, solo piano, and chamber music. He began piano lessons with his aunt at two-and-a-half years old and composed his first work at three. When he was ten, he gave a concert that included Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, Mozart's B-flat Concerto, as well as works by Bach, Handel, and Hummel. In his academic studies, he displayed the same genius, quickly learning languages and advanced mathematics with ease. Throughout his early years, he composed the 1853 Symphony in F, a Mass in 1855 and several

concertos. After the death of two children and a divorce, Saint-Saens produced

some of his most popular works, including *Danse Macabre* in 1875 and *Samson et Dalila* in 1878.

"Fossils" from the *Carnival of the Animals* was written as a bit of fun for friends. Saint-Saëns requested that the suite never be published or performed in his lifetime because he thought it would detract from his serious image.

"Fossils" uses musical themes from previous songs, such as his *Danse Macabre*. The xylophone and violin play much of the melody in this short movement, with interruptions by the piano and clarinet. Allusions to "Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman" (better known as Twinkle Twinkle Little Star), the French nursery rhymes "Au clair de la lune", and "J'ai du bon tabac", the popular anthem *Partant pour la Syrie*, as well as the aria *Una voce poco fa* from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* are heard in this piece. The musical humor in this movement, as Leonard Bernstein pointed out, is that the musical pieces quoted are the 'fossils' of Saint-Saëns's time.

ACTIVE LISTENING

1. Say to students, **"Today we are going to become musical paleontologists! Does anyone know what a paleontologist does?"**

Listen for student answers, then summarize: *"A paleontologist is someone who studies the history of earth by looking at fossils! Fossils are the remains of organisms that used to live on the earth; for example, dinosaur bones. A paleontologist has to work hard and dig in the earth to uncover and study fossils!"*

2. Hold up the "Fossils" poster (page 1) and explain, **"The French composer Camille Saint-Saens wrote a short piece called 'Fossils' that is part of a larger suite, the *Carnival of the Animals*. If you were the composer and you were writing a song about fossils, what kinds of instruments would you use? Why?"**
3. Listen to the first 20 seconds of "Fossils:"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTSkIG9IFvY>.

4. What instruments did you hear in this song? (*Strings, clarinet, pianos, xylophones*)

“The timbre, or tone color, of an instrument refers to the unique quality of sound that distinguishes it from other instruments. How might you describe the timbre of the xylophone in this song? (Some possible descriptions might include *hard, wooden, bright, rattling, incisive, penetrating, sharp, accentuated, precise, piercing, brittle, dry, bubbling, drop-like, shrill, hollow, ticking, transparent, clear*).

Do you think the xylophone was a good choice to represent the rattling of fossils/bones? Why or why not?

5. **“In fact, Saint-Saens had used a xylophone in an earlier song about a dancing skeleton. Let’s take a listen!”** Play from 1:32 – 2:00 in this recording of Saint-Saen’s *Danse Macabre*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71fZhMXIGT4>.

6. Now, play the opening 20 seconds of “Fossils” again. What did the two songs have in common?
7. Say: **“Many composers use a technique called musical quotations, in which they borrow a short section of melody from a different song. In the song Fossils, Saint-Saens borrowed part of the xylophone melody from Danse Macabre, and used it as a musical quotation.**

In fact, the song Fossils contains several musical quotations. Just as real fossils are buried deep in the ground, Saint-Saens “buried” other melodies within his song. As we listen to the entire song, see if you can uncover any other songs that you recognize!”

8. Play the entire recording:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTSkIG9IFvY>. Ask, “Which musical fossils did you hear?”

(Hopefully students will identify “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” If not, play that specific section for them again: 0:30 – 0:40).

9. OPTIONAL: Play another recording that includes Bernstein's narration as well as a snippet of all six musical quotations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-7KXm64WA>

GO DEEPER

OPTION 1. THE CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS

*Introduce students to the entire 14-movement **suite** from which this movement is taken. You may choose to focus on one movement per day over a long period of time, or briefly spend time on a few movements in conjunction with this lesson.*

- 1. Listen to a short excerpt from a selected movement. Have students guess which animal is being represented in the song. Then, reveal the name of the movement and listen to it with students. Encourage them to move around the room like the animal being depicted. Afterward, have them identify the elements of music (timbre, tempo, dynamics, etc.) that helped Saint-Saens to create the impression of that animal, and help them to identify any musical jokes.*
- 2. Have students create illustrations of the movements. Encourage them to find ways to depict not only the animals themselves but also any important musical characteristics of a given movement. Display the students' artwork on a bulletin board, or create books that include all the illustrations.*
- 3. Using whatever instruments are available in your classroom, divide students into groups to compose their own songs about animals. Have them present their short songs to the class, along with a brief explanation about why they chose their instruments/animals.*

OPTION 2. PERFORM

During this activity, pass out copies of the main xylophone rhythm (see Resources, page 6) and have students practice clapping the rhythm, first alone and then with the rhythm. If they are up for the challenge, they may even be able to play the melody on xylophones or other instruments! (see page 5 of Brian Chandler's arrangement of "Fossils:"

http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/4/45/IMSLP382525-PMLP06099-fossils_1P4h_xyl.pdf).

RESOURCES

YOUTUBE RECORDING:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TSkIG9IFvY>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-7KXm64WA> (Leonard Bernstein narration that includes excerpts of all six musical quotations)

SHEET MUSIC:

- Manuscript:
http://japanese.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/1/1b/IMSLP287469-PMLP06099-SS_Carnav_ed.pdf
- Arrangement for xylophone and two pianos:
http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/4/45/IMSLP382525-PMLP06099-fossils_1P4h_xyl.pdf

XYLOPHONE RHYTHM:



LESSON ACTIVITIES WERE ADAPTED FROM:

Dallas Symphony Orchestra's teacher guide:

<http://www.dsokids.com/media/8466/2005-Carnival-of-the-Animals.pdf>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Listening Guides/Coloring Sheets:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1MtD5fYCQ7NjkzOTczNWQtMDc3ZC00OTlmLWlzOWUzMGI4ZDk5YjY0ZGNi/view?ddrp=1&hl=en#>
- "Carnival of the Animals" interactive app (\$3.99):
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/saint-saens-carnival-animals/id475653515?mt=8&ign-mpt=uo%3D4>
- Baltimore Symphony Orchestra teacher guide (includes lesson ideas and a listening map for the entire suite):
<https://www.bsomusic.org/media/35552/13-14teachersguidecarnivaloftheanimals.pdf>