



Tansy Davies: Iris

In this activity the children will take aspects of Iris as a starting points for composing: distinctive rhythm/pitch patterns; creating variations using a short rising melody; and composing descriptive music for Iris, goddess of the rainbow.

Page 1 – Programme Note

In many cultures the bridge symbolises a transformation from one state to another, or change, or the desire for change. Iris, the winged goddess of the rainbow, was the bridge between the heavens and the earth, delivering messages. She would go from one end of the earth to the other, travelling at the speed of wind, to the bottom of the sea or to the depths of the underworld, leaving a rainbow in her wake.

Yet another figure linking worlds is the shaman, who travels between ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ realms of subconscious to perform his work. The saxophone soloist in ‘Iris’ is the shaman: ‘one who walks between the worlds’. The two most different ‘worlds’ in this piece are a mournful chorale and a spiky, obsessively rhythmic section. The saxophone builds bridges between the two and acts as an intermediary, taking material from one to the other. The saxophone is associated with the percussion, which is largely used to signal change. Percussion instruments (in particular the rattle) are used in shamanic practice to create a transition from one level of reality to another- a bridge between worlds.

Tansy Davies

Page 2 – Introduction

This activity will take aspects of Iris as starting points for composing. There are three different tasks and a final piece will be created by combining and assembling material created in each task.

- Learning rhythm/pitch patterns from Iris
- Creating variations using a short rising pitch sequence taken from Iris
- Creating descriptive music for Iris, goddess of the rainbow

Learning objectives

- To create a piece of music inspired by Iris by Tansy Davies and use some of her composing starting points, processes and musical material
- To develop a greater understanding of Iris and to support listening to it

- To be able to repeat rhythmic patterns by ear
- To learn how to create a melody from simple variations of a four note melody

Please listen to Iris and read the Music Maze Guidance before you begin.

Resources needed

- Photocopies of *Iris Rhythms Resource Sheet*
- Music whiteboards or photocopied small music paper
- Pitched percussion and musical instruments
- Wooden instruments (claves, woodblocks, log drums, xylophone/bars)
- Miscellaneous unpitched percussion

Page 3 – Activity One: Learning Rhythm and Pitch Patterns from *Iris*

In this task the whole group will learn four distinct gestures taken from Iris. Listen to Iris and see if the children can spot the rhythms on the *Iris Rhythms Resource Sheet*. It is not important that the children read music as they will learn the rhythms by ear. However it is useful to show the children the notation. Exact pitches are not important.

Play the children each rhythm one at a time on an instrument of your choice. Ask the children to repeat back the rhythms playing careful attentions to the dynamics and articulations as well as the pitch shapes. You could start by clapping or vocalising and then move onto instruments. Don't worry if not all the children can play all of the rhythms. As well as using their own instrument they could use a percussion instrument on which they can make long and short sounds.

Page 4 - Activity Two: Musical Messages and Chinese Whispers

In Iris there are many of the fragments of melody that rise in pitch – illustrating moving from the underworld to the heavens. Listen to the introduction and ask the children to notice these melodies and their characteristics.

Ask the children to find the notes A D F and *E_b* on their instruments (pitched) and play them in order until they are confident. Discuss with the children how they could change/vary this short melody without changing the basic shape of it. For some ideas of how to do this, look on the next page.



Page 5 – Activity Two continued

Ideas for varying and changing the melody:

- Changing the articulation: accented, staccato, legato, a crescendo on each note, plucked, bowed, trills, growls, tremolo, roll, etc.
- Changing dynamics: loud, quiet, getting louder, getting quieter, every note a different dynamic
- Keeping the same upward shape but using different notes
- Pizzicato
- Changing the speed
- Adding more notes to the end

Imagine the four notes are a musical message and the circle of children a rainbow. At one end is heaven and at the other earth. Starting with the simple version of the four notes go round the circle asking each child to make their own version by changing a little bit of it based on what the person before did (just like Chinese whispers) using ideas from above.

Page 6 – Activity Three: Creating a Melody from Different Variations

Ask the children, working in small groups, to find their own unique way of playing the melody. They need to make sure they can all play it together confidently.

Now ask the groups to create a longer melody by creating and joining together variations of the melody using ideas from the previous page. Remind the children of what Tansy said in her programme note about the shaman 'saxophone soloist' taking musical material from one world to the other. The two most different 'worlds' in this piece being a mournful chorale and a spiky, obsessively rhythmic section. Can their melodies go from spiky to chorale-like?

Listen back to the children's ideas. Encourage the rest of the group to notice what each group has done to the original four notes. Describe what you hear the group has done and what you think works well, less well and why.

Give the groups time to refine their idea.

Page 7 – Activity Four: Making a Rainbow

Now the children will create music for Iris travelling on the rainbow. Ask the children what kinds of instruments they might use to describe a rainbow and that would contrast with the other music they have created. A mix of different kinds of shakers and bells might work well here (remember the shakers symbolise the shaman in Iris). Ask the children how they might show that Iris is travelling from one end of the rainbow to the next.



One way of doing this might be to sit the children in an arc (the rainbow) and simply send a sound from one end of the rainbow to the other. Maybe start with shakers and then move to bells. How are you going to organise this? Maybe one child could conduct using their arms to show the movement of the sounds around the arc.

Page 8 – Putting it All Together

The group will now have three ingredients to make their complete piece.

- 4 whole group rhythm/pitch patterns from Iris
- A collection of small group melodies inspired by the rising melodies taken from Iris
- Whole group rainbow music

Additional material could include:

- A version of the four notes that everyone does together.
- An improvised solo line or linking passages based on the small group melodies performed by yourself, a visiting musician or visiting instrumental teacher.

Discuss with the children how they might create a piece from all these different ingredients. Create a visual map for the piece. Rehearse and perform.