

BALLET IDAHO
Study Guide for Peter and the Wolf

Story and Music by Sergei Prokofiev.

Choreographed by Wendy de la Harpe and Lana Kroth

Performance by Ballet Idaho Youth Ensemble

Background to the music and the story

PETER AND THE WOLF is the title of a piece of classical music written by the Russian composer, Sergei Prokofiev.

Prokofiev was born into a well-to-do family on April 23, 1891 in the Ukrainian village of Sontzovka. He first studied piano with his mother and at five began to make up little pieces. By age nine, he had completed his first opera and at thirteen, he was accepted into the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He immigrated to the United States in 1918. Although he was accepted as a player, as a composer he was regarded as a “barbarian, Bolshevik and a madman.” He eventually made his way to Paris where his modernism was understood. For ten years in Paris, he was associated with the Ballet Russe, part of a roster of legendary artists that included Stravinsky, Ravel, Debussy, Picasso and the dancer Nijinsky.

Missing his homeland, Prokofiev returned to Russia in 1934 where he remained for the rest of his life. In 1935, Natalie Staz, founder of The Moscow Theatre for Children asked Sergei Prokofiev to compose a work especially for children. Prokofiev agreed. He said, “of course we must start with something concrete; a wolf – a bird – and each character should have its leitmotif.” A leitmotif is a recognizable musical theme.

Staz asked a poet friend to write a story for the piece, but Prokofiev rejected it and decided to make up his own simple story which he called “Pety (little Peter) Fooled the Wolf.”

The tale is constructed on a continuous interweaving of short narration with episodes of symphonic music. Each character is represented by an instrument in the orchestra:

- a flute represents a bird.
- an oboe represents a duck.
- a clarinet represents the cat.
- a bassoon represents the Grandfather.
- three French horns represent the wolf.
- a string quartet (violin, viola, cello, and bass) represents Peter.
- kettle drum and bass drum represent the huntsmen.

Prokofiev said “Peter and the Wolf is a present for the children of Moscow”

It is also a present for us and for all children of the world.

Background to the ballet

Ballet Idaho presents the story as a ballet with recorded narration. The dancers will interpret the sound of the musical instruments by their own unique movements. As an ensemble, they will present the story silently communicating the meaning by the movements of their bodies, and facial expression.

The duck and the bird will be danced “en pointe,” a French term which means the art of dancing on the points (toes) of your feet. Ballet was invented by King Louis XIV of France 300 years ago, and today dancers all over the world use French words for ballet steps.

Story Synopsis

Peter (Strings) wanders into the meadow on a wonderful summer day and in turn he befriends a bird (flute), meets a swimming duck (oboe), and encounters a cat (clarinet) who is clearly interested in both the bird and the duck. After some playful moments, Peter’s grandfather (bassoon) comes to bring Peter back into the house, warning Peter that the meadow “is a very dangerous place.” “What if a wolf came along...what would you do?” Shortly thereafter, Pete can no longer resist the lure of the meadow and his new found friends, and slips back outside through a gate. As the narrator impishly states, “boys are not afraid of wolves.” Trouble soon ensues, when the wolf (three horns) makes his appearance, and trying to catch them, chases Peter and his friends into a tree and a roof. Peter quickly gets an idea and makes a noose at the end of a long length of rope. With the bird’s help distracting and worrying the wolf, Peter loops the noose around the wolf’s tail and hoists him up into the air, hanging from the tree branch.

Suddenly, the hunters arrive (kettle drums) and Peter warns them not to shoot and tells them that he has already captured the wolf by himself. His grandfather also arrives and is amazed, although still muttering that the meadow is a dangerous place. With the wolf safely tied upside down to a branch, the entire group then leads a triumphant parade to the zoo, where the wolf will live out his days.

Discussion Questions and Activities

- 1.) The story of Peter and the Wolf takes place by a country meadow in Russia with various animals. Find Russia on a map or a globe. Describe the land that the story takes place in and list the animals in the story. In writing, compare the land and animals in Russia to the land and animals in your own area.
- 2.) The story describes several features of the land and different animals that inhabit the areas inside and outside of Grandfather’s backyard. Draw a picture of a part in the story

that involves each of those features and animals. Write a paragraph representing your interpretation of this scene.

3.) The characters in the story are all represented by a different musical instrument. Pick one of the characters and describe why you think the instrument is a good representation of that character.

4.) Pick your favorite character from the story and describe the movements that this character performed (e.g, fast, slow, big, small, jerky, smooth, sustained, percussive, energetic, etc.)

4.) In the story, Peter is warned by his grandfather to stay behind the stone wall with the metal gate because of the danger. After seeing the story unfold explain how you feel about Peter's choice. Was he right to venture out into the dancers, or was his grandfather right for being careful? Explain your choice in writing,

5.) The ballet uses a combination of ballet steps and movements to interpret the story. What other ballets do you know? Make a list or research the names of other ballets.

6.) Verbs will be danced by the dancers in the performance. After the performance, make a list of all the verbs you observed.

Idaho Humanities Standards Dance addressed

Standard 1: Historical and Cultural Contexts

K-3 D.1.1.2, K-3 D1.1.1, K-8D 1.1.2

Standard 2: Critical thinking

K-3 D 2.1.1., K-3D 2.1.2 K-D 2.1.2 K-8D2.2.1. K-8D 2.2.3

Standard 3: Performance

K-3D 1.1.1, K-D3.1.2, K-3D3.3.4