

II. Les Fables de Lafontaine

A study of tempo and character

1. Context

Denis Gougeon loves stories. When asked to compose music to accompany certain *Fables of Lafontaine*, he immediately jumped at the chance! *The Fables* were written for a harpsichordist-narrator and string ensemble.

The *Fables of Lafontaine* can also be a good starting point for approaching character development. Use them to initiate reflection and discussion about interpersonal relationships, respect, good-will and inclusivity..

2. Appreciation / Critical analysis

Ontario specific expectations :
Grades 1, 2 and 3: C2.2

Classroom discussion : Choose one of the three fables and tell the story to your students. Listen to the audio excerpt (CD tracks 1,2,3). Ask the students what they think of Denis Gougeon's way of "telling" the fable through music (see RF5, RF6 and details below for each fable).

Preparatory game : tell the students they will play the characters of the story. You can, for example, divide the class in two : the hares and the tortoises. Each team will have to ove like their characters when they hear their musical themes.

• A) Quebec Program: 2nd cycle

The hare and the tortoise (CD track 1)

"Slow and steady wins the race".

Moral: If we are wise and far-sighted it makes no sense to rush. Everything takes time. It is necessary to dedicate as much time as needed for a task, and not underestimate and rush to complete it.

Between the harpsichordist and the string ensemble, ask your students which instruments take on the role of the "hare" and which take the role of the "tortoise". Use the musical vocabulary studied in class to justify your answer (see vocabulary sheet RF4).

Musical justifications:

- Hare: harpsichord with fast passages, which often suddenly break
- Tortoise: string ensemble with a slower but more constant tempo (the music does not stop)

B) Quebec Program: 3^e cycle

The Grasshopper and the Ant (CD track 2)

"You sang! I'm at ease; For 'tis plain at a glance; Now, ma'am, you must dance."

Moral: Work is fundamental and it is necessary to know how to make provisions. The ant is reasonable: instead

of spending time having fun and singing and dreaming like the grasshopper, it works and saves for the future. When winter comes the grasshopper finds itself with nothing, whereas the ant planned everything for the difficult days.

In Gougeon's video excerpt ask your students to identify the musical theme of the ant and that of the grasshopper. Use the musical vocabulary studied in class to justify your answer (see vocabulary sheet - [RF4](#)).

You can then discuss the instrumentation choice.

Musical justifications:

- Grasshopper: joyful, lively theme, dance rhythm, "carefree" feeling
- Ant: more serious theme, fast, metric rhythm "forthright", "busy" feeling

Other points of interest:

- The "North wind" is illustrated by the violinists blowing in their instruments, producing a sound which resembles the wind.
- The sounds of friction made by the violins genuinely sounds like the "grasshopper song" caused by the friction of their wings. See: RF.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicadidae#La_cymbalisation_ou_C2

C) Quebec Program: 3^e cycle



The Oak and the reed (CD track 3)

"The wildest wind that ever blew; Is safe to me compared with you. I bend, indeed, but never break".

Moral: At times it is better to demonstrate flexibility than to boast of being strong and solid ...

Ask your students to identify the musical elements which illustrate the story, always referring to the musical vocabulary ([RF4](#)).

Musical justifications:

- Oak (solid) : massive instrumentation (entire orchestra plays), strong nuance, more static and "ponderous" music
- Reed (flexible) : light instrumentation (solo viola), softer quality, agile musical line, which moves, twists in all directions

Other points of interest:

- Crackle of the oak when it breaks: sound crackle in violins
- Reed surviving the thunderstorm: at the end of the piece we hear the very beautiful musical line of the sole violist, representing the reed

3. Creation

A) Quebec Program: 1st cycle

Ontario specific expectations :

Grades 1 to 6 : C2.1



- **Preparation** : after a thorough study, have your students draw the characters of the Fables while listening to Denis Gougeon's music.
- **Character improvisations** : in a group, using percussion instruments, create an improvisation that musically illustrates each character in the fables, with respect to their "musical qualities".

Hare: fast tempo (*allegro*), running

Tortoise: slow tempo (*lento, adagio*)

Ant: serious music (*serioso*), with a regular rhythm

Grasshopper: joyful music (*allegretto*), with a dance rhythm

Oak: all instruments (*tutti*), strong nuances (*forte, mezzo forte*)

Reed: only one instrument (*solo*), soft nuances (*piano, mezzo piano*)

B) Quebec Program: 3^e cycle

Ontario specific expectations :

Grades 3 to 6 : C1.3



- Have your students compose a piece of music about one of the characters (eg: The Tortoise: the music will therefore have to be slow, characterizing the tortoise)
- Have your students compose their own piece of music illustrating the story of their fable of choice. They will need to use the studied music elements.

Reproducible Forms

Note: The Reproducible Forms are related to the Pedagogical Activities presented in the first part of this document.



Music vocabulary Level: Primary

3rd cycle

2nd cycle

1st cycle

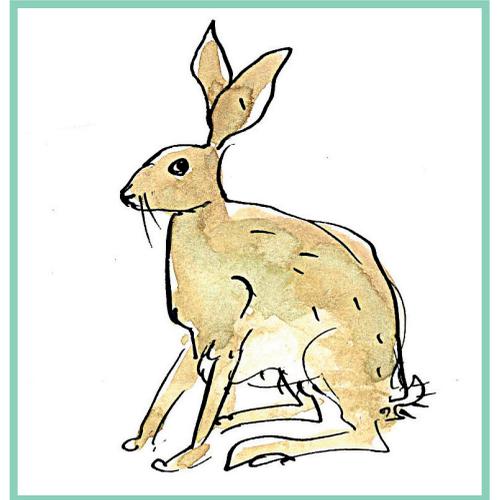
high-pitched	ascending	wood
short	half-note	canon
do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si	crescendo	singer
soft	descending	musical theater
loud	decrescendo	brass
strike (percussion instruments)	eighth notes	folklore
drawing a bow	A-B form	lento
low note	A-B-A form	moderato
pitch	forte	popular music
music instrument	glissando	presto
percussion instrument	rough	whole note
invent	scratch	rondo
slow	perform	
long	string instruments	
quick / fast	wind instruments	
resonant	smooth	
dry	moderate	
shake	medium (pitch)	
silence	quarter note	
blow	musical phrase	
very short	piano	
very long	rest	
singing voice	tempo	

Note: according to the Quebec Music program vocabulary

The Fables (1)

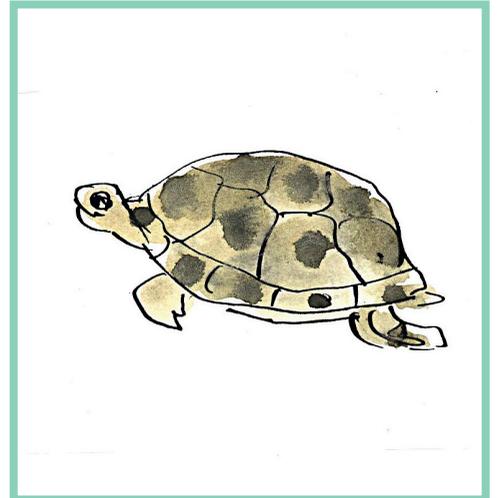
→ **The hare...**

Music vocabulary to describe this character :



→ **and the tortoise**

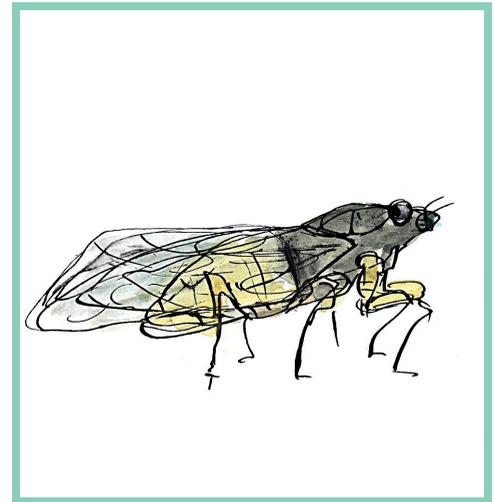
Music vocabulary to describe this character :



The Fables (2)

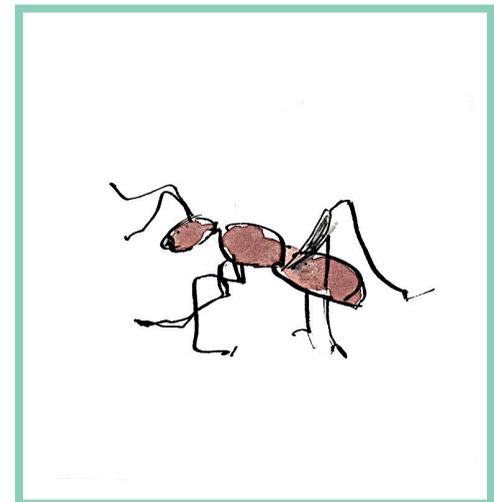
→ **The grasshopper...**

Music vocabulary to describe this character :



→ **and the ant**

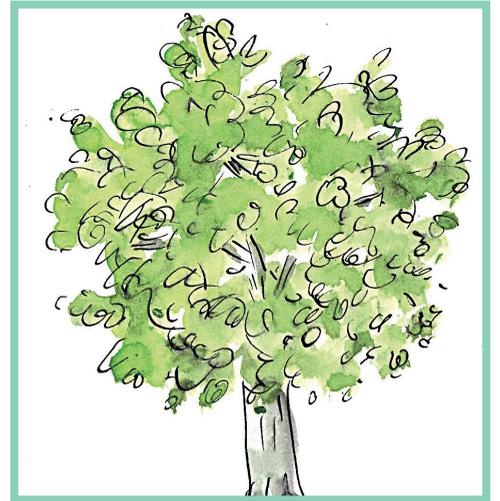
Music vocabulary to describe this character :



The Fables (3)

→ The oak...

Music vocabulary to describe this character :



→ And the reed

Music vocabulary to describe this character :



The Fables of Lafontaine

English translation by Elizur Wright

Source : http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/la_fontaine/jean_de/fables/complete.html#book1.1

→ The Hare and the Tortoise

To win a race, the swiftness of a dart
 Availeth not without a timely start.
 The hare and tortoise are my witnesses.
 Said tortoise to the swiftest thing that is,
 'I'll bet that you'll not reach, so soon as I
 The tree on yonder hill we spy.'
 'So soon! Why, madam, are you frantic?'
 Replied the creature, with an antic;
 'Pray take, your senses to restore,
 A grain or two of hellebore.'
 'Say,' said the tortoise, 'what you will;
 I dare you to the wager still.'
 'Twas done; the stakes were paid,
 And near the goal tree laid —
 Of what, is not a question for this place,
 Nor who it was that judged the race.
 Our hare had scarce five jumps to make,
 Of such as he is wont to take,
 When, starting just before their beaks
 He leaves the hounds at leisure,
 Thence till the kalends of the Greeks,
 The sterile heath to measure.
 Thus having time to browse and doze,
 And list which way the zephyr blows,
 He makes himself content to wait,
 And let the tortoise go her gait
 In solemn, senatorial state.
 She starts; she moils on, modestly and lowly,
 And with a prudent wisdom hastens slowly;
 But he, meanwhile, the victory despises,
 Thinks lightly of such prizes,
 Believes it for his honour
 To take late start and gain upon her.
 So, feeding, sitting at his ease,
 He meditates of what you please,
 Till his antagonist he sees
 Approach the goal; then starts,
 Away like lightning darts:

But vainly does he run;
 The race is by the tortoise won.
 Cries she, 'My senses do I lack?
 What boots your boasted swiftness now?
 You're beat! and yet, you must allow,
 I bore my house upon my back.'

→ The Grasshopper and the Ant

A Grasshopper gay
 Sang the summer away,
 And found herself poor
 By the winter's first roar.
 Of meat or of bread,
 Not a morsel she had!
 So a begging she went,
 To her neighbour the ant,
 For the loan of some wheat,
 Which would serve her to eat,
 Till the season came round.
 'I will pay you,' she saith,
 'On an animal's faith,
 Double weight in the pound
 Ere the harvest be bound.'
 The ant is a friend
 (And here she might mend)
 Little given to lend.
 'How spent you the summer?'
 Quoth she, looking shame
 At the borrowing dame.
 'Night and day to each comer
 I sang, if you please.'
 'You sang! I'm at ease;
 For 'tis plain at a glance,
 Now, ma'am, you must dance.'

→ The Oak and the Reed

The oak one day address'd the reed:—
 'To you ungenerous indeed
 Has nature been, my humble friend,
 With weakness aye obliged to bend.
 The smallest bird that flits in air
 Is quite too much for you to bear;
 The slightest wind that wreathes the lake
 Your ever-trembling head doth shake.
 The while, my towering form
 Dares with the mountain top
 The solar blaze to stop,
 And wrestle with the storm.
 What seems to you the blast of death,
 To me is but a zephyr's breath.
 Beneath my branches had you grown,
 That spread far round their friendly bower,
 Less suffering would your life have known,
 Defended from the tempest's power.
 Unhappily you oftenest show
 In open air your slender form,
 Along the marshes wet and low,
 That fringe the kingdom of the storm.
 To you, declare I must,
 Dame Nature seems unjust.'
 Then modestly replied the reed:
 'Your pity, sir, is kind indeed,
 But wholly needless for my sake.
 The wildest wind that ever blew
 Is safe to me compared with you.
 I bend, indeed, but never break.
 Thus far, I own, the hurricane
 Has beat your sturdy back in vain;
 But wait the end.' Just at the word,
 The tempest's hollow voice was heard.
 The North sent forth her fiercest child,
 Dark, jagged, pitiless, and wild.
 The oak, erect, endured the blow;
 The reed bow'd gracefully and low.

But, gathering up its strength once more,
 In greater fury than before,
 The savage blast
 O'erthrew, at last,
 That proud, old, sky-encircled head,
 Whose feet entwined the empire of the dead!