



# Smithsonian Folkways

## **Finding the Musical Clues within the Music of the Chinese New Year**

**A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson**

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### **Summary**

All songs tell a story. Songs with text make it easier to tell what the story is. What happens when the music is instrumental or the text is in another language that we do not understand? For example, what if the text is in Chinese? We can often find musical clues to help us figure out what story the music is telling us. The composer/musician will often give us these clues through tempo, dynamics, instrumentation, and expression. In this lesson we will examine some traditional Chinese New Year music and instruments and determine what stories are intertwined within the music.

**Suggested grade levels:** 3-5

**Country:** China

**Region:** East Asia

**Culture group:** Chinese

**Genre:** World

**Instruments:** Chinese Instruments: Pipa, Erhu

**Language:** Mandarin Chinese

**Co-curricular areas:** Social studies

**National Standards:** 4, 6, 9

**Prerequisites:** None

**Objectives:**

- Learn about Chinese Instruments.
- The students will listen to music and decode the music by describing the sounds they hear. The students will focus on instrumentation, mood, tempo, and dynamics.
- Students will write their own song about the way they celebrate the New Year and decide what clues they will use to tell their story.

**Materials:**

- Musical Clues worksheet
- From Smithsonian Folkways
  - Flowers Drum and other Chinese Folk songs.  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/stephen-chun-tao-cheng/dragon-in-the-sky/little-yellow-oriole-medley/world/music/track/smithsonian>
  - Ellie Mao: An Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs.  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/ellie-mao/festive-song-ho-tao-region-of-inner-mongolia/world/music/track/smithsonian>
  - West Meets East: Chinese and Balinese Music  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/northern-illinois-university-chinese-orchestra/in-a-mountain-path/world/music/track/smithsonian>

**Lesson Segments:**

- Chinese Instruments. (National Standard 6)
- What does music tell us? What is the story? (National Standard 6)
- What is the Chinese New Year story? (National Standard 6)
- Making up your own musical clues. (National Standard 4)

**Lesson 1: Chinese Instruments:**

- Explain the difference between the three Chinese string instruments
- Play *In a Mountain Path* as a listening example for the Erhu and the Yangqin  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/northern-illinois-university-chinese-orchestra/in-a-mountain-path/world/music/track/smithsonian>
  - Have students describe the sound of each instrument

- Play the introduction to *Dragon in the Sky* as a listening example for the Pipa.
  - <http://www.folkways.si.edu/stephen-chun-tao-cheng/dragon-in-the-sky/little-yellow-oriole-medley/world/music/track/smithsonian>
    - Have the students describe the sound of the Pipa.

Erhu	Yangqin	Pipa
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• String instrument</li> <li>• 2 strings</li> <li>• Played on the performer's lap</li> <li>• Tuned a 5<sup>th</sup> apart</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• String instrument</li> <li>• Hammered dulcimer</li> <li>• Played with bamboo beaters</li> <li>• Has up to 144 strings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• String instrument</li> <li>• 4 strings representing the 4 seasons</li> <li>• Plucked lute</li> </ul>

## Lesson 2: What does music tell us? What is the story?

- Play (Little Yellow Oriole) and have the students name the first thoughts they have about the song.
- Play the song again but before you do ask the students to listen and try to come up with a story about what they think is happening in the song. For example: there is a party taking place in a garden somewhere in China.
- Ask – What in the song told you what was happening?
  - Dynamics?
  - Tempo?
  - Mood?
  - Instruments Etc.
- Explain that all music whether it has words or not tell us a story. The story is told by the musicians and the way they play or sing the music. The musicians give us clues as to what the story is. The clues can come in many ways such as: tempo, dynamics, instrumentation, and mood/expression.
- Play the song one more time. Divide the class into 4 groups. Each group will listen for one of those clues mentioned above.

- What did the clues tell them about the music?
- Finally tell the class the title of the song and see if any of their ideas were close to what the song is about.

### Lesson 3: What is the Chinese Story?

- Pass out the Musical clues worksheet.
- Instruct the students that they will now be listening to a song that is about an event during the Chinese New Year. The singer will be singing in Mandarin Chinese and therefore, unless the students have an English translation, they will not know what the song is about. The students will have to listen for their musical clues as a guide in understanding the story being told.
  - Dragon in the Sky
    - Play the song
      - The first time the song is played have the students just listen to the music.
      - Play the song again. This time the students can start filling in the worksheet by describing each musical clue they hear.
      - Play the song a third and last time. This time the students will draw a picture in the last box of the worksheet, describing what they hear.
      - Finally read the English translation for the students and compare their responses with what the song is about. Then tell them what the song is about and why the song is reflective of the Chinese New Year.
        - During the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, people will often perform dragon dances all around the country. The reason for this dragon dance other than asking for good luck is that it is thought that the dragons govern the rain in China. China is a country who is very dependent on agriculture and therefore the rain is very important for their crops. In this song a little girl is waiting for the dragon to wake up and bring the rain.
- **Assessment:** The students should be able to analyze the music and determine what tempo, dynamics, and instruments are in the song as well as describe what mood the song puts them in.

#### **Lesson 4: Making up your own musical clues.**

In Dragon in the sky they use two instruments, the Erhu and the Pipa to help tell the story. Next the students will write their own songs by filling in the blanks on the activity sheet. The students will also figure out what musical clues they would like to give their audience.

- Pass out song writing worksheets.
- Have students fill in the blanks to their New Year's song. Try one together as an example.
- Once they have filled out their song, they have to make some decisions about what musical clues they want for their song.
  - Tempo
  - Dynamics
  - Instruments
  - Mood
- Guide the students in writing the song and deciding on their musical clues. For example: "If you wrote about fireworks, what instrument would you choose? The response might be drums"
- **Assessment:** The students use their own original answers in their fill in the blank song as well as decide what tempo, dynamic, and instruments they would choose if someone were to play their song.

# Musical

## Musical Clues

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>Tempo</b> (Speed of the song)</p>	<p><b>Dynamics</b> (Volume of the song)</p>
<p><b>Instrumentation</b> (What instruments do you hear?)</p>	<p><b>Mood</b> (How does the song make you feel?)</p>

In the box below draw a picture describing what the music looks like to you.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

**Fill in the blanks to make your song.**

It's the end of the year and a new one is near

My family gets ready for the New Year by \_\_\_\_\_.

There will be some \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ &  
\_\_\_\_\_ too!

We always have so much fun.

Before midnight I usually \_\_\_\_\_ with my family.

Time goes by and midnight is here.

We \_\_\_\_\_ and now it's time to cheer.

Now that the New Year is here I'll \_\_\_\_\_.

**My Musical Clues**

<b>What is the tempo of your song?</b>	<b>What dynamics will you choose for your song?</b>	<b>What is the mood of your song going to be?</b>

**If you had musicians playing along to your song what instrument(s) would you choose?  
Circle as many as you would like.**

Chinese instruments: Erhu      pipa      yangqin  
Piano      violin      viola      cello      bass      guitar      saxophone      clarinet  
Flute      trumpet      trombone      tuba      harp      ukulele      drums      xylophone  
Oboe      shakers      tambourine      cymbal      boomwhackers      body percussion

Voice other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_