

Teacher Guide for the WSO Children's Concert 2026

Music Tells a Story

This Children's Concert is designed to introduce students to the orchestra as a powerful storytelling tool, showing how composers use melody, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and instrumental color to bring characters, emotions, and events to life, whether through spoken narration or through music alone.

Through two contrasting works, students will experience how music can tell a story in different ways. *L'Histoire de Babar* by Francis Poulenc combines narration and orchestra to bring a beloved children's story to life, while the overture to *The Barber of Seville* by Gioachino Rossini tells a story entirely through sound, using fast-paced rhythms, repeated melodies, and dramatic contrasts to suggest action, humor, and personality. Together, these works invite students to listen actively, imagine freely, and discover how music communicates meaning beyond words.

Objectives

Possible objectives for lessons and activities of this concert experience are drawn from the Minnesota Department of Education Academic Arts Standards.

- Students will identify characteristics of orchestral music and recognize how composers use sound to tell stories
- Students will describe how music communicates meaning and emotion
- Students will justify personal interpretations and reactions to musical performances

Concert Program

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) – *L'Histoire de Babar, le petit éléphant* (1940s)

Poulenc was in his early forties when he composed *L'Histoire de Babar*. By that time, he was already a well-known French composer, admired for music that could be playful, light, and full of feeling. He enjoyed writing music for children, often including surprising sounds and little musical jokes to make listeners smile.

L'Histoire de Babar is based on the beloved children's book by Jean de Brunhoff. The piece began in an informal and playful way while Poulenc was on holiday with friends. One afternoon, children asked him to play something on the piano while the story of Babar was read aloud. Poulenc improvised music to match the story, creating different sounds and moods for each scene. What started as a spontaneous game soon became a fully composed work for narrator and orchestra.

The story follows Babar, a young elephant who lives happily in the forest until tragedy strikes and he must flee after his mother is killed. While lost and alone, Babar is taken in by a kind lady who introduces him to a completely new world. She teaches him human customs, manners, and how to navigate city life. Eventually, Babar returns to the forest, where he is chosen to become king of the elephants. Throughout the piece, the orchestra helps tell the story by changing tempo, volume, and color to reflect Babar's emotions and experiences, from fear and curiosity to joy and celebration.

Fun Fact: In *Babar*, Poulenc included sections that sound like particular scenes — a calm lullaby, a playful dance, or a dreamy night sound — so students can hear characters and events even before the narration begins.

Musical Clip:

[The Story of Babar the little Elephant](#)

Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) – Overture to The Barber of Seville (1816)

Rossini was just 24 years old when he wrote the overture to The Barber of Seville. Even at a young age, he had a reputation as a musical prodigy and was known for composing very quickly. He loved writing music that was funny, energetic, and full of surprises, which is why his overtures remain so popular in cartoons and movies today.

The overture opens one of the most famous comic operas ever written. Unlike Babar, this piece tells its story without words. Rossini uses lively rhythms, sudden dynamic changes, and repeating melodies to suggest excitement, mischief, and fast-moving action.

The opera centers on clever plans, disguises, and humorous situations involving the barber Figaro, who helps others solve problems through quick thinking and charm. The overture reflects this playful spirit. Quiet moments may feel sneaky or suspenseful, while loud, energetic sections suggest laughter, chaos, or dramatic reveals. Even without knowing the opera's plot, students can imagine characters running, hiding, whispering, or celebrating as the music unfolds.

Many students may recognize this music from popular culture, especially classic cartoons, which makes it an excellent way to discuss how orchestral music can enhance storytelling in film and animation.

Fun Fact: Rossini composed the overture to The Barber of Seville in just one week, and its lively energy has made it a favorite in cartoons, movies, and commercials for over two hundred years.

Musical Clip (overture):

[Gioachino Rossini - The Barber of Seville - Overture](#)

Additional Listening:

Students might enjoy comparing the overture to clips from classic Bugs Bunny cartoons, which often use this music to create excitement and humor. For example: [Rabbit of Seville 1/3](#) [Rabbit of Seville 2/3](#) [Rabbit of Seville 3/3](#)

Orchestra Instrument Families

The orchestra is made up of four main instrument families:

The woodwind family

- flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

The brass family

- horns and trumpets

The percussion family

- drums and other rhythm and sound-effect instruments

The string family

- violins, violas, cellos, and basses

Encourage students to listen for which instrument families are featured at different moments and how those sounds help create mood or action.

Suggested Activities Before the Concert

Teachers are encouraged to prepare students by introducing the idea that music can tell stories in different ways.

- Students may listen to short excerpts from *L'Histoire de Babar* and *The Barber of Seville* overture and discuss what they imagine is happening in the music. Play the full *Babar* and overture links above and ask students to focus on how the music makes them feel or what action they imagine.
- Students may read a Babar storybook or summary and talk about how music might match different scenes.
- Students may review the orchestra instrument families and discuss how different sounds can represent characters or emotions.

Music Tells the Story Game

Explain to students that they will hear short clips of music and imagine what is happening, just like creating a story in their minds.

Play a short section of *L'Histoire de Babar* and ask students to describe how the character might be feeling. Are they happy, scared, excited, or calm? What in the music gives them that idea?

Play a short section from *The Barber of Seville* overture and ask students to imagine what kind of action might be happening. Is someone sneaking, running, planning, or celebrating?

To help students connect orchestral music to storytelling they already know, share a short clip from **Bugs Bunny's *Rabbit of Seville***, which uses Rossini's music to create comedy and action:

 [Rabbit of Seville 1/3](#) [Rabbit of Seville 2/3](#) [Rabbit of Seville 3/3](#)

After watching, discuss how the same music can tell a story even without words, and how tempo, volume, and repetition help create humor and excitement.

Suggested Activities During the Concert

- Encourage students to watch how the conductor and musicians communicate through movement and sound.
- Invite students to notice when the music changes mood and think about what might be happening in the story at that moment.
- Ask students to listen for repeating melodies and how they return throughout the music.

Suggested Activities After the Concert

- Students may draw or write about a moment in the concert where the music helped them imagine a story or scene.
- Students may choose an emotion and describe what instruments they would use to represent it.
- Students may compare how *Babar* tells a story with words and music versus how *The Barber of Seville* tells a story using music alone.
- Students may create their own short story and choose sounds or instruments that would help tell it.