Ra!
By
David Dzubay (b. 1964)
Lesson plan by Stephen Bloom and Kate Ferris Richardson

Click here to watch the BSO perform this piece.

Vocabulary
- **Fanfare**: A short musical piece often played by brass and percussion instruments, a fanfare typically introduces someone or something important.
- **Triplet**: A triplet is a musical figure with a rhythm of three equal notes.
- **Ra**: In ancient Egypt, Ra was the god of the sun. He was often depicted as a man with the head of a falcon.
- **Apep**: The ancient Egyptian god of chaos and the archenemy of Ra. He is depicted as a giant serpent.

About the Composer
David Dzubay was born in 1964 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and raised in Portland, Oregon. He earned his Doctorate of Music in composition at Indiana University and also studied in Massachusetts as a Koussevitzky Fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center. He is now a professor at Indiana University, where he serves as chair of the Composition Department as well as director of the New Music Ensemble. Professor Dzubay’s music has been performed throughout the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Europe, and Asia.

What is **Ra**!?
*Ra!* was completed in 1997. The piece was premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland in 1999. *Ra!* is part of a larger orchestral work called *sun moon stars rain*.

A wind ensemble version of *Ra!*, played by only brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments, was completed in 2002. The Indiana University Wind Ensemble premiered this version in 2003.
Notes by the Composer
“The sun god Ra was the most important god of the ancient Egyptians. Born anew each day, Ra journeyed across the sky in a boat crewed by many other gods. During the day Ra would do battle with his chief enemy, a serpent named Apep, usually emerging victorious, though on stormy days or during an eclipse, the Egyptians believed that Apep had won and swallowed the sun.”

An ancient depiction of Apep and Ra

“Ra! is a rather aggressive depiction of an imagined ritual of sun worship, perhaps celebrating the daily battles of Ra and Apep. There are four ideas presented in the movement: 1) a "skin dance" featuring the timpani and other percussion, 2) a declarative, unison melodic line, 3) a layered texture of pulses, and 4) sun bursts and shines. The movement alternates abruptly between these ideas, as if following the precise dictates of a grand ceremony.”

What to listen for?
Professor Dzubay has stated that Ra! was built on four main musical ideas:

1. “Skin Dance.” Named for the skins found on percussion instruments like tom-toms and timpani. It represents a dance of many people out in the sun and is written in triplets, dividing each beat into three equal sounds.
2. A unison fanfare. The orchestra plays the same melody together.
3. “Layered Pulses.” The orchestra plays duple rhythms (divided into two sounds) at different speeds at once. This is meant to be a contrast to the first section with the triplet rhythms.
4. “Sunbursts and shines.” Outbursts from the different sections of the orchestra (woodwinds, brass, strings and percussion). Colorful flurried and chords with extreme changes in dynamics (volume).

After each idea is introduced, the four ideas come back later in the piece at different lengths of time.

Teaching Ideas

Music
- Discuss how this music differs in style, mood, and theme from works like Rossini’s William Tell Overture, Elgar’s Nimrod, and Respighi’s Pines of Rome.
- Students can write an original story or create original artwork that depicts a battle between the sun god, Ra, and the serpent, Apep, while using the music as inspiration.
Music Continued

- Divide the class into four sections, with each section representing one of the musical ideas above. Have students raise their hands when their musical idea is heard in the piece.
- Explore Dzubay’s website with your class, where you can listen to Ra! on SoundCloud while viewing a perusal score of the piece.
- Create a WebQuest for your students to independently explore Dzubay’s website and program notes for Ra!.
- Compose or improvise a 4-statement piece with your class, using compositional devices similar to those found in Ra!. Refer to Dzyubay’s program notes on Ra! for inspiration: http://pronovamusic.com/notes/Ra.html
- Have students, independently or in small groups, read about other Egyptian gods and compose a short piece of music reflecting that god’s character traits.
- Have students choose a poem and compose a song that is inspired by the poem.

ELA

- Develop a lesson plan or unit of study about poetry, or incorporate Ra! into a poetry unit you already may be teaching.
  - Interdisciplinary projects could include the inspiration of poetry in art and music.
- Collaborate with your school, town, or city children’s librarian regarding contemporary poetry for children.

Math

- Ra! utilizes many meters. Meter is how musicians measure or count the length of sounds. Explore the concept of meter in music, finding and discussing how meter relates to fractions, ratios, and proportions.

Social Studies

- Explore what we have discovered about Ancient Egyptian life, including some of the other major ancient Egyptian gods and what they represented to the people of Ancient Egypt.

Science

- Some of the first sounds in Ra! come from the percussion section. Watch the BBC2 “Drums and Percussion” clip from House of Sound. Recreate one or more of the short hands-on experiments to explore the scientific terms of volume, tension, and vibration and how they relate to making music.
Additional Resources

- Recording of Ra' by the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU8F4mDSRqQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU8F4mDSRqQ)

- Live performance of Ra' by ARMAB (Associação Recreativa e Musical Amigos da Branca), a Portuguese wind ensemble: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZgXhbqZkRA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZgXhbqZkRA)

- A detailed Prezi presentation by the composer with compositional sketches and sheet music: [https://prezi.com/fbonqyh5o-zy/ra/](https://prezi.com/fbonqyh5o-zy/ra/)


- Ra' Program Notes: [http://pronovamusic.com/notes/Ra.html](http://pronovamusic.com/notes/Ra.html)

- “anyone lived in a pretty how town” by e.e. Cummings from PoetryFoundation.org: [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/22653/anyone-lived-in-a-pretty-how-town](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/22653/anyone-lived-in-a-pretty-how-town)
  
  *Special Note: unsupervised web-based research of e.e. cummings is not recommended for young students.*


- Ancient Egypt Learning Activities: Children’s University of Manchester website: [http://www.childrensuniversity.manchester.ac.uk/learning-activities/history/ancient-egypt/introduction/](http://www.childrensuniversity.manchester.ac.uk/learning-activities/history/ancient-egypt/introduction/)

- “Drums and Percussion” clip from BBC2’s House of Sound: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02gd746](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02gd746)