Grand Canyon Suite
By
Ferde Grofé (1892-1972)

Click here to watch the BSO perform this piece.

Lesson plan by Blake Siskavich

Background Info
The Grand Canyon Suite, composed by Ferde Grofé between 1929 and 1931, was first performed publicly by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra at the Studebaker Theater in Chicago on November 22, 1931. The suite, originally titled Five Pictures of the Grand Canyon, contains five movements, each depicting an individual scene of the Grand Canyon.

About the Composer
Ferde Grofé (March 27, 1892–April 3, 1972) was an American composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist. Born Ferdinand Rudolph von Grofé in New York City, he grew up in a family with four generations of classical musicians. After his father passed away, Ferde moved to Leipzig, Germany, with his mother to study piano, viola, and composition. Ferde became proficient on a wide range of instruments, including piano (his preferred instrument), violin, viola, baritone horn, alto horn, and cornet. His ability to play many musical instruments gave him the foundation to become both an arranger of other composers’ music and a composer himself.

Beginning in 1920 he played jazz piano with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. He served as Whiteman’s chief arranger from 1920 to 1932, arranging hundreds of popular songs and Broadway tunes. Grofé is best known for composing the Grand Canyon Suite. The NBC Symphony recorded it for RCA Victor, and in 1958 Disney made a short film featuring a pictorial representation of the piece.

Ideas for Lessons:
- Show several different nature pictures (one of them being a sunrise) while students are listening to “Sunrise.” Without telling them the name of the piece, ask them to choose which picture embodies the piece and to explain why they chose it. Have a class discussion.
- For older students: What elements of music do they hear that make the piece sound like a sunrise? (flutes sound like floating, etc.)
- Show the “Sunrise” part of the 1958 Disney short film Grand Canyon. You can find it through the following link on YouTube: https://youtu.be/Tp6voHf5kvE
- Students move with scarves to the music.
- Without telling the students the name of the piece, play for your students a recording of the Grand Canyon Suite and have them imagine and draw a picture of what they hear.