

# Musical stories

**Andy Pierson**

## Introduction

Story telling is not just a question of words. The use of movement and music has always been used to tell stories as well as to accompany the story teller.

Perhaps the oldest form of musical story telling is the song. Often the great achievements of warrior or hunter would be told in song along with stories of domestic life, both happy and sad. The storyteller might be a musical member of the family with a simple percussion instrument, or early stringed or wind instrument. Sometimes it might be a travelling minstrel with stories to tell from other lands and cultures.

Singing a song, like story telling, can be done with just the voice. To add more interest to the performance the singers might also accompany themselves on a percussion or stringed instrument. In this way, many folk songs have been passed down from generation to generation. These original folk songs are often used by performers such as Morris men, clog dancers and for Ceilidh dances. There are now many collections of folk songs which have been written down. An example of a website with a vast collection of different English folk songs can be found at <http://www.cs.nott.ac.uk/Staff/ef/>

Of course, musical stories do not always need words. There are many examples of music that has been composed to tell a story without the use of words or singing. Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave* as part of his *Scottish Symphony* is sometimes known as 'programme music' and describes the sea off the coast of Scotland. The composer, Liszt, wrote a number of what he described as 'symphonic poems' and similar music is sometimes referred to as a 'tone poem'. Other examples include Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The drama of an event or series of events can be powerfully represented in musical sounds and structures. Of course the precise meaning of the music may not be as clear as with written words and, as with all artistic forms the interpretation of the sounds may be different for different people. Also, unlike still art, the effect of the music may be different each time the music is played depending on by whom and with what emphasis the music is actually played.

Some musical story telling might be accompanied by a narration such as *Peter and the Wolf* by Prokofiev. This piece, as well as supplying drama through music, also uses musical motifs played by specific instruments to represent different characters in the story, so you always know which character is taking part in different stages of the story by the particular tune being played and the instrument playing it.

Further enhancement of the musical story is to use mime, movement and dance in performances such as classical Ballet. Many ballets have been written to tell stories from legends and mythology, but there are also ballets that tell everyday stories or political and historical events.

A combination of story telling techniques is found in opera, operettas and musicals. Richard Baker, in his book *Richard Baker's Companion to Music*, describes operas as 'where the language of words is no longer enough'. In these musical forms much (and sometimes all) of the story line is told by singing.

More recent forms of musical story telling are found in music used for films. Early films were silent and so to add to the performance (and to hide the noise of the projector) a pianist or small orchestra was often employed to play along to the movie with suitable dramatic music to link with the story line. As sound became part of the film production, music and sound effects were regularly added to the movies. In the case of many movies and cartoons the songs used in the film often become popular in their own right. Combinations of film and sound such as Disney's *Fantasia* also show how music can be interpreted to tell a specific story.

Musical story telling, using all of these different techniques, can form an important part of story telling in the classroom. The following activities provide some examples of how this can take place and how ICT can help to support both pupil and teacher with the musical composition, production and performance.

Many of the following activities make use of the *Compose World* family of programmes as these lend themselves well to the sequential nature of story telling. However, other musical sequencers can also be used to achieve similar ends.

The MAPE *Story Teller* CD-ROM that accompanies this booklet contains musical and sound clips as well as some new *Compose World* files that can be used with the following activities.

### Writing a sound story

A sound story can be produced as a series of sound or tunes that are placed in order to illustrate a sequence of events. The story does not need to have anything more than sounds but the meaning of the music can be made more explicit by adding visual or verbal stimulus. For example, simple word sequences can be said as a form of narration, or dance or mime added to illustrate the different stages in the story.

The following example uses *Compose World* as a tool for producing a sound story. The files provided with *Compose World* contain sets of musical phrases which can be sequenced in any order or combination to make a longer composition. Using one of these files, a sound story can be constructed, played and accompanied.

Some of the *Compose World* files that lend themselves well to sound stories are 'Space', 'Rocket', 'Travel', 'Weather' 'PopUps' and 'Midnight'.

'Midnight' is a set of phrases designed to suggest night time sounds and events. There is a clock ticking in the set as well and this can be used to break up the story into distinct sections. The following composition uses this set to produce a sound story with words that are whispered when the clock is playing:

Words that could be used include:

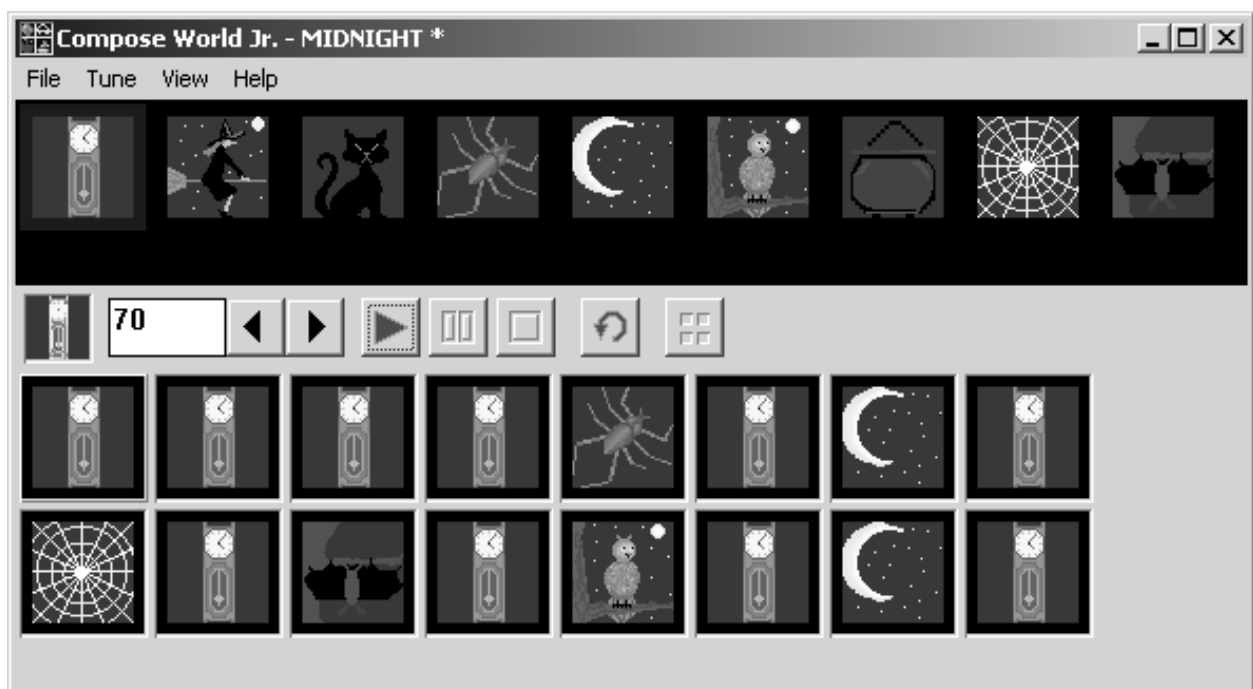
Midnight  
Night time  
Spiders  
Moonlight  
Starry sky  
Cold – dark

Other sound effects could be added such as the owl hooting, wind blowing etc.

There are many story ideas that work well with music and which also link to other areas of the curriculum. A story that links well with historical themes, for example, might be the story of a Viking battle. Myths and legends also provide many opportunities for sound stories to be created. The choice of *Compose World* tune file to use for a specific story will depend on the type of mood required for the story. The task of finding suitable file sets involves careful listening and description of the phrases and this is an important musical activity in itself.

### Writing a song

Writing a song requires two essential elements: the words and the music. Which of these comes first depends on the particular preferences of the composer and on the curriculum focus of the activity. As a song typically has a number of verses all of which use the same tune it is often the tune that comes first. It is also often easier to fit words to music than to invent music to go with the words.



There are many tune sets provided with *Compose* that have one line melodies and which are ideal for writing songs to. Which one you choose for this activity will depend on the skills of the children and the style or mood required for the story-song.

One idea might be to write a story about a particular week – perhaps a week in the holidays or as a record of things that happen on a regular basis each week. So the first phrase of the song could be the day of the week. This needs a two note phrase for all except Wednesday and Saturday. These can use the same phrase but singing two syllables on the first note of the phrase.

If the activity is with a Reception class then the song story could simply use two phrases such as:

Apple	House
Monday	Washing
Tuesday	Shopping
Wednesday	Swimming
Thursday	To the park
Friday	TV
Saturday	Late night
Sunday	Big tea

With older pupils the structure of the song can be developed to have four phrases, including a good middle and ending. The verses of the song could be written by different groups, telling different aspects of the same story.

Using the computer to provide a framework for the composition can help to focus the attention on listening and composing rather than on the complex area of musical performance. However, once the song is written the song can be enhanced or performed using other classroom instruments. Dance, movement and narration can all be added to further enhance the musical story.

### Accompanying a spoken story

The narration of a story can be enhanced in many different ways by the use of music and sound. For example, the idea used in *Peter and the Wolf* can be used where a particular phrase, possibly played on a particular instrument, represents a character in the story. For example, if the story includes a giant and a mouse the giant phrase could be ‘heavy’ sounds using long low notes and the mouse could be ‘light’ sounds using short high notes.

To gather ideas for phrases and patterns for such story accompaniments the *Compose* program could be used to find suitable phrases.

By using different instrumental sounds and changing the tempo, the phrases can be modified to suit the story. The same phrase played using a different instrument or played much slower or faster can produce a completely different effect. In *Compose World 2* the phrases can also be transposed into higher and lower keys for additional effect.

Many electronic keyboards have a wide range of sounds effects and some have the possibility of creating new sounds. These can provide lots of exciting possibilities for accompanying a story.

Using a program like *RhythmMaker* or using the rhythm patterns in *Compose World 2*, a rhythm accompaniment can be invented to accompany a story. A repeated rhythm pattern can provide an interesting basis for a story line.

Using the rhythm pattern of the snare drum above we can add a spoken rap with lines like:

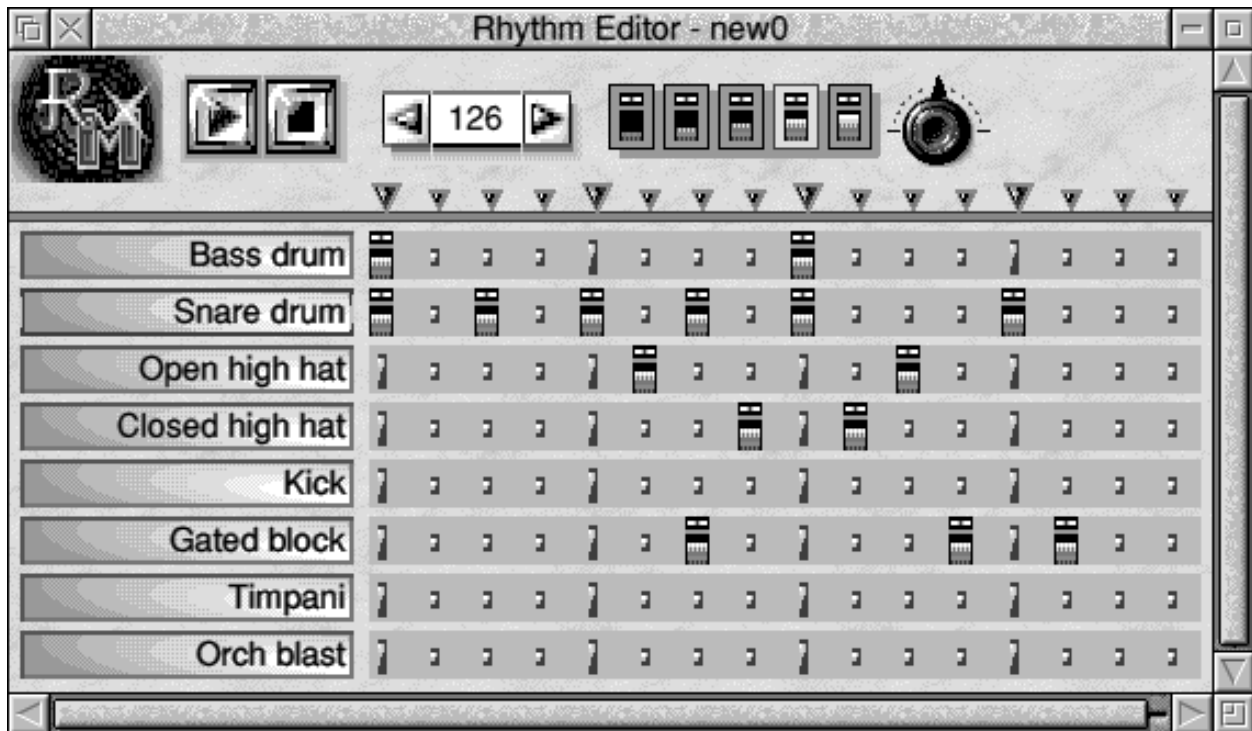
Jumping over ditches  
Running through the woods  
Hurry or we’ll be late  
The party’s nearly started

Recorded sound effects can be collected using a tape recorder to find sounds like cheering, screaming, doors opening or shutting, birds singing, water running, etc. Many of the sound effects required for a particular story can also be made live when the story is told and using classroom instruments. It is important that the technology is used to enhance this activity and used to add something rather than doing something badly that could be done better using other resources. The advantage of ICT in this context is to provide sounds that cannot be made easily in the classroom using other techniques. This might be sounds that have been recorded elsewhere such as a car horn or an aeroplane passing overhead. Also playing back recorded sounds through amplification and sound effects boxes can provide different dynamics to the sounds.

Typically the different sounds required to enhance a story will be played on different resources and different groups of pupils will be responsible for adding their sound effect at the right time.

### Making a multimedia story

There are many applications that can mix sounds and text as well as pictures, video and animation. They range in the type of facilities they offer and the complexity of the controls. There is always a danger that in trying to build



multimedia pages that the technology becomes the driving force and the activity becomes lost in the time taken to put together all of the different components. Care needs to be taken when setting such an activity to ensure that the focus is on a the learning activity and that the range of technology used is within the skills of the pupils (and teachers) using it.

As with clip art and multimedia there is a wide range of musical clips and sound effects that can be used with multimedia packages. Typically the musical clips will be stored as a MIDI file and the sound effects and sound recordings as digital samples. Digital samples are available in a variety of forms. For short clips WAV files are common. For extended recordings MPEG files may be used. You need to check first that the multimedia program that you are going to use supports the sound file types that you have available. There are CD-ROMs of sound and musical clips and plenty of files available from the internet. It is also possible to create your own either by sampling clips from

Audio CDs or by recording from a microphone connected to the computer.

Most music composition programs such as *Compose World* allow the user to save the composition in a format such as MIDI. This means that these compositions can then be used with the multimedia presentation. Various files and sound clips that can be used for story telling are on the accompanying *Story Teller* CD-ROM along with clip art that has been produced for the project.



Click on the  
Travelling Minstrel to  
hear a story of  
bravery and  
courage...

Can you finish the  
story?