

Teacher’s Guide for “Peter and the Wolf”

Introduction

On March 6, 1936, Serge Prokofiev attended the opening of the Moscow Children’s Theatre Centre. The famous composer was asked to write something for the Centre, so he set to work on a piece based upon a simple folk tale that he wrote himself. It is spoken by a narrator while the orchestra paints a musical picture of the characters and action. Writer Paul Griffiths noted “Cunningly, the music not only entertains, but also instructs, by featuring a different instrument or section (of the orchestra) for each of the characters, each of whom also has a characteristic theme.” Peter is represented by the strings, the bird by the flute, the duck by the oboe, the cat by the clarinet, Grandfather by the bassoon, and the wolf by the french horns.

“Peter and the Wolf” was first performed just two months later on May 2, 1936 with the composer himself conducting. It went on to become a children’s concert favorite the world over, inspiring books, movies, and stage performances with its picturesque and dramatic music. Many performances featuring puppets have been presented by orchestras all over the world.

About the Performance

Puppeteers of all kinds have been inspired by the words and music of “Peter and the Wolf”. Our production also includes other musical compositions by Prokofiev. His “March in B Flat Major,” as well as portions of his “Classical Symphony,” serve as a musical background as the puppeteers set up the scenery, put the puppets in their places, and get ready to perform. The puppets themselves are operated in full view of the audience with a simple set of controls made of rods and strings.

A Synopsis of the Show

Two puppeteers, dressed as workmen, arrive to set up a performance. When they see that the audience is in place and that the set and puppets lie in a heap on the stage floor, they realize that they are late. Quickly and comically they begin to assemble the show and to recruit volunteers to be puppeteers for the finalé. The puppeteers struggle to get everything done before the “Overture” ends. Miraculously they finish just in time to “change” into formal clothes for the story portion of the program. The text is as follows:

Early one morning Peter opened the gate and went out into the big green meadow. On a branch of a big tree sat Peter’s friend, a little bird. “All’s quiet,” chirped the bird, gaily.

Just then a duck came waddling out. She was glad that Peter hadn’t closed the gate, and decided to go for a swim in the deep pond in the meadow. Seeing the duck, the little bird flew down on the grass, settling next to the duck, and shrugged his shoulders.

“What sort of bird are you if you can’t fly?” said he. To this the duck replied “What sort of bird are you if you can’t swim?” and dived into the pond. They argued and argued, the duck swimming in the pond and the bird hopping along the shore.

Suddenly, something caught Peter’s attention. He notice a cat crawling through the grass. The cat thought, “Hmm, that bird is busy arguing, I’ll just grab him.” Stealthily the cat crept toward him on her velvet paws.

“Look out!” shouted Peter, and the bird immediately flew into a tree. The duck quacked angrily at the cat, from the middle of the pond.

The cat walked around the tree and thought “Is it worth it to climb so high? When I get there the bird will have flown away.”

Grandfather came out. He was angry because Peter had gone to the meadow. “It’s a dangerous place. Suppose a wolf had come out of the forest? What would you do then?”

But Peter paid no attention to his Grandfather’s words. Boys like Peter are not afraid of wolves. But Grandfather took Peter by the hand, led him home and locked the gate.

No sooner had Peter gone than a big gray wolf did come out of the forest. Like lightning the cat shot up the tree.

The duck quacked, and in her excitement, foolishly jumped out of the pond. But no matter how hard the duck tried to run, she just couldn’t escape the wolf. He got nearer, and nearer, caught up to her, and with one gulp, swallowed her!

And now this is how it stood: the cat was sitting on one branch, the bird on another, not too close to the cat. And the wolf walked ‘round and ‘round the tree looking up at them with greedy eyes.

In the meantime, Peter, without the slightest fear, stood behind the locked gate watching what was going on. He ran home, got a strong rope and climbed up the high stone wall. One of the branches of the tree around which the wolf was walking stretched out over the wall. Grabbing hold of the branch, Peter lightly climbed over onto the tree.

Peter said to the bird, “Fly down and circle around the wolf’s head. Only take care that the wolf doesn’t catch you.”

The bird flew down, ‘round and ‘round the wolf’s head almost touching it with his wings, while the wolf snapped angrily. How the bird worried the wolf and how the wolf wanted to catch him! But the bird was cleverer and the wolf simply couldn’t do anything about it.

Meanwhile, Peter made a lasso and, carefully letting it down, caught the wolf by the tail and then, with all his might, pulled it tight. Feeling himself caught, the wolf began to jump wildly, trying to get loose. But Peter tied the other end to the tree. And the wolf’s jumping only made the rope around his tail tighter.

But now, the hunters came out of the woods, following the wolf’s trail and shooting as they came.

Peter shouted “Don’t shoot! Birdy and I have already caught the wolf. Now you should help us take him to the zoo.”

And now imagine the triumphant procession, Peter at the front. After him came the hunters, leading the wolf. And at the end of the procession came Grandfather and the cat. Grandfather shook his head discontentedly. “Well, what would have happened if Peter hadn’t caught the wolf? What then, eh?”

Over them flew the little bird, chirping merrily, “My, look what brave fellows we are, Peter and I! Look what we’ve caught.”

And if you listen very carefully, you can hear the duck quacking inside of the wolf, for in his hurry, the wolf had swallowed her alive.”

Before the Show

1. Read the story of "Peter and the Wolf" to the children. Explain that, along with words, they will hear music that describes the characters and expresses emotion. Have them all clap their hands together once to make the sounds of the hunters' guns firing. Have a few of them rhythmically "patter" their hands on their thighs very quickly and softly to make the sounds of a bird's wings. Try it again with the entire class to make the sound of a flock of birds.
2. The puppets in the show often synchronize their movements to the music. Ask the children to listen for fast or slow rhythms in the music and notice how each character matches its movements to the tempo.
3. Talk about how people behave at a play. Emphasize the "do's" rather than the "don'ts". For example:
 - The best way to enjoy a play is to listen. If you talk or play with your friends, you might miss something and won't have much fun.
 - Clap to show you enjoy the show, laugh when it is funny, listen when it's not.
 - Stay seated so that everyone behind you can see!

After the Show

1. In "Peter and the Wolf" the animals acted in an animal-like way. For example the duck left the safety of the yard because she loved to swim. Did the wolf behave like a wolf? How did the cat behave like a cat? Give examples. Why do you suppose the wolf came out of the forest?
2. Although the narrator told the audience what the characters were saying, did any of the characters actually speak? Who spoke for the characters? Narrative music is often heard in movies and television. Make up some narrative music to help describe the following sentence: "Slowly I turned, as step by step, the monster moved closer and closer...."
3. Although the puppeteers were visible, they were not characters in the story part of the show. Did you pay much attention to them after the puppets came out? Why do you suppose they dressed in white?

Books and Resources for "Peter and The Wolf"

The Wit and Wisdom of Polyfoam Puppet Construction Grey Seal Productions
Puppet Studio, 225 W. 4th St., Charlotte, NC 28202
Marionettes: How to Make and Work Them Fling, Helen, Dover Publications, NY
Peter and The Wolf cassette, record, or CD, available in book and record stores, narrated by various artists and performed by various orchestras
Peter and The Wolf, animated video short by Walt Disney Studios and/or others, available at many video rental stores.

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