

Of music and molluscs



Take Matisse's colourful gastropod as your muse when encouraging children to sing and dance, says **Sue Nicholls...**

The *Snail* is a fascinating picture, created in 1953, the year before Matisse died. He was 84 and confined to his bed or a wheelchair, which makes the existence of this vibrant, lively composition all the more remarkable. It's a big piece, nearly three square-metres, so to give your class a true idea of its scale, find a large image or project one onto your whiteboard. Matisse created *The Snail* by cutting shapes from sheets of paper pre-painted in a range of bright colours, with the snail's shell suggested by the subtle spiral within the pattern of paper fragments. The picture offers a marvellous balance of shape and colour, and in the artist's alternative title, *Chromatic Composition*, we're given a hint of an underlying musical connection.

Here is a collection of four KS1 activities for class music-making based on this famous picture. The songs and composing ideas are suitable for non-specialist practitioners and would enhance work on topics such as 'Minibeasts', 'Colour' or 'Shape'.

Introductory work

Collect some garden snails and keep them in a prepared vivarium for a few days. Encourage the children to take responsibility for monitoring the right food supply and making regular observations and notes. Take digital photographs of the snail shells, enlarge the images and project them onto the whiteboard to compare with photographs of snail shells from other parts of the world.

Explore Matisse's picture and invite comments from the class about the colours, shapes and the spiral image. The Tate Gallery's website – www.tate.org.uk/imap/pages/animated/cutout/matisse/snail.htm – offers masses of information, plus an animated version, showing how the collage was constructed. Use *The Snail* to springboard children's work in this medium, based on other minibeasts.

Activity 1: Sing and dance a spiral

This simple melody, entitled *Snail, snail*, is in four time and sung on three notes:

G E G E
Snail, snail, snail, snail,
G G A A G G E

Go a-round, a-round, a-round

Stand in a circle holding hands. The leader breaks hand with her right-hand neighbour and walks as she sings, forming a gentle spiral. As the children join in with the repeated song, they encounter an ever-changing soundscape of voices as they wind tighter and tighter. When the spiral is made, the leader turns to the right, to unwind the spiral. However, once the circle has reformed, everyone is facing outwards!

This is a magic moment which delights young children. Repeat the song/

dance from the outward-facing position to make the original circle once again.

Activity 2: Compose a 'snail trail'

Talk with the children about all the different surfaces that a snail would encounter, e.g. smooth (paving slabs), rough (brick walls), spiky (plants), cold (glass panes), sticky (wet earth), bumpy (pebbles) etc.

Gather a large collection of percussion instruments and encourage the children to make the sounds of a snail crossing different terrains, e.g. a guiro or scraper for a rough wall. Draw simple symbols to represent each sound and sketch these on small (A6) cards. Make a score by drawing a large spiral on A2 paper, then plan a musical journey for the snail by placing the sound symbol cards at different points along the curling pathway. Appoint small groups of players for each 'surface' and choose a 'conductor' to set the pace by tracing along the spiral with a pointer to guide the players. You can reorder the sounds until everyone is satisfied, then stick down the score cards to make a permanent score. Encourage pairs to make up their own 'snail trail' music on smaller sheets and ask three pairs to perform their work at the same time, creating an interesting musical texture.

Activity 3: Spiral melodies

Create a large class spiral collage using only rainbow-coloured paper fragments, but don't glue the pieces down permanently – just fix them with blue or white 'tack' so that changes can be made as the piece develops.

This collage now becomes a score so that players can translate the coloured shapes into a

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sequence of pitched sounds – in other words, a tune! Next, find your school set of 'Boomwhackers' (these are often relegated to a dusty shelf in the music cupboard!). Boomwhackers are plastic tubes of varying lengths: each one is a rainbow colour and produces a different note. They are played by gripping one end of the tube and tapping the other end on a hard surface, such as your head, shoulder, hip, shoe, or the ground. Needless to say, children love playing them! A conductor sets the tempo (pace) of the music, by moving a pointer round the spiral pathway over the coloured paper fragments, showing performers when to play the matching Boomwhacker. Encourage the children to talk about the resulting melody, and to make changes. Boomwhackers are sold by many suppliers – mine came from Music Education Supplies at mesdirect.com

Activity 4: The snail and spider duet

Partner songs fit harmonically and so the two can be sung together. Here, the first song has words set to the traditional tune *A ram, sam, sam*, better known as *A Pizza Hut*. This melody has lots of quick, busy notes, so it's ideally suited to the fast-moving spider:

*I've eight long legs, I've eight long legs,
I move like lightening when I build my web!
You'll never outrun me,
I move like lightening when I build my web!*

The second tune is *Pease Pudding Hot* – a slower, more pedestrian tune which really suits the snail:

*I am a snail
I am slow
Started to cross this brick
One hour ago*

Be aware that the 'spider' verse starts on an upbeat, with the first word, 'I've', sung before the 'snail' song begins. The lines of the two songs fill the same amount of musical time, so the 'spider' song needs to move along quite quickly against the slower 'snail' verse. Here's the opening of the two songs to show the comparative pace:

*I've eight long legs, I've eight long legs
I am a snail.....*

