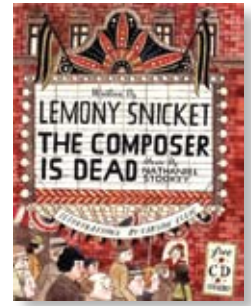


The Composer Is Dead

By Lemony Snicket, Music by Nathaniel Stookey,
Illustrations by Carson Ellis

Harper Collins, 2009



A terrible crime has been committed against classical music. The composer is dead and is slumped over his desk decomposing: “The Composer’s death was very suspicious, and so the Inspector was called in to find the murderer... Like all people in his line of work, this Composer had many enemies lurking in the orchestra.” The inspector is determined to find the guilty party.

This whodunit is a clever introduction to the instruments of the orchestra. The inspector questions the string, woodwind, brass, and percussion sections. During his interrogations, he discovers the inner workings of the orchestra and gets to know the personalities of each instrument. He meets the egotistical concertmaster, the wimpy flutes, and the often forgotten violas. The inspector learns that every instrument has an alibi and wonders which one butchered the composer.

Daniel Handler, writing under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket, has filled *The Composer is Dead* with suspense and humor by using rich alliteration and clever plays on words. His prose keeps children engaged and adults chuckling. When the inspector asks the percussion section for an alibi, the percussionists

respond, “We conquered the concert, battered the band, agitated the audience, rattled the roof... By then we were beat-too exhausted to commit murder.”

Carson Ellis illustrates the book. The musical suspects are depicted in silhouette, while their alibis come to life in watercolors. Lines of musical notation are threaded throughout the images of waltzing couples, parading patriots, and swinging sailors.

The book’s unique feature is the companion CD. *The Composer is Dead* dramatically comes to life with the scintillating performance by the San Francisco Symphony that accompanies the text. Composed by Nathaniel Stookey, the melodramatic score sets the scene. The foreboding opening chords are repeated every time the narrator speaks the word, “dead.” When the inspector vows to find the enemies of the composer, the trumpets proclaim him the hero. Stookey introduces each character/instrument with a leitmotif. As the plot unfolds, one can recognize the violins by their graceful waltz, the violas by their lamenting counter melody, while a steady one-two-three accompaniment announces the celli and basses. Perhaps the most endearing theme is that of the tuba and the harp. The unlikely two

are introduced as a pair, the confirmed bachelor and his landlady, in a delightful duet. Despite its low range, the tuba melody soars above the delicate arpeggios of the harp.

The true genius of Stookey’s piece is apparent in the finale. While the narrator is listing famous dead composers, Stookey is quoting their works. These excerpts are layered and interwoven in a way that creates a captivating composition. The funeral bells and *Dies Irae* of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* lead the piece to a thundering climax.

Students in the Orff classroom will be enthralled with the book and CD. During the sections of instrumental music, students will be eager to improvise movement. They can waltz with the strings, create a parade with the trumpets, and swing with the low brass and percussion.

Along with Britten’s *Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* and Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*, *The Composer is Dead* is sure to become a classic in the young listener’s repertoire. ■

Linda O’Donnell teaches elementary general music at the South School in Andover, Massachusetts, where she also conducts the South Side Singers.

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