

# Teaching notes: Storytelling (part 2)

Part one of this three-part series introduced storytelling and how to use it in your teaching and learning. In this second part, **Richard Steggall** explores different kinds of stories and how they can help us with more advanced pieces.

## Finding themes and characters

Part one showed us how to find clues on the page – we can now start looking at the music. Introducing the idea of “themes” allows us to find the characters in our stories as we start exploring the notes on the page. The shapes of the phrases give us a feel for each character in our story, but these characters may change as the pupil gets more proficient at playing each theme. We can identify where themes return – are they repeated exactly as they were at the start or are they changed? This is a great way to start learning about musical form.

The music will suggest the characters in our story. A rollicking 6/8 piece might be about pirates; a march, about soldiers and battle. The music might suggest an action: a person waking up in the morning, skipping down the street or climbing a mountain. Experiment with playing themes in different styles to change the characters in the story.

## Different types of story

We combine the clues that we’ve found with the sounds that we’re discovering as we engage our creativity to produce an overall story arc for the whole piece. It’s important that the pupil is fully engaged in this process, leading it if possible – it has to be their story.

### Single-character story

Pieces for beginners are often very short with little time to develop much story, but there’s usually enough character in the music to find ideas with your pupil. For example, a piece might be called “The Clown”. Imagine how the clown acts, maybe there’s a bit in the music where they fall over if the music goes down or juggle if the music goes up.

### Character – Development – Resolution

This is probably the most common story arc. You start with a character, who then has a certain experience and then reacts to that experience. As musicians, we know this as ABA form, but to a child they will understand the form from stories. Often a character has an encounter that puts them in danger, but then emerges victorious and stronger for it. As the character moves through the story their emotions change with the music.

### Voyage and Return

This also works with an ABA form. It’s about a character going on a journey and then returning either slightly changed or exactly how they left. Voyages and journeys are excellent because you can pass through different scenery. Scenery can be very expressive: barren deserts, rough seas or lush jungles. The motion of a journey keeps the momentum through these scenes rather than being a static description.

### A Quest

Think *Lord of the Rings*, a lost animal looking for a parent or even someone on a trip to the shops. This works well for many forms of music as you can explore emotions and changes of character, with potential for an exciting grand finale. This works particularly well for a theme and variations.

## An example of a quest: “Rondo” from Mozart *Horn Concerto No. 4*

The only real clue on the page is the word “Rondo”, so we know we’re dealing with a recurring theme. Looking at the jaunty, *Allegro vivace* 6/8 thematic material might suggest someone riding a horse. A “quest” story might suit this well.

Working with the student, we could start by finding every version of the main theme.

This theme might represent our character (let’s call them “The Rider”) traveling around trying to find something or someone. The material between each version of our main theme might be the rider meeting other people that help or hinder their quest. There may be dialogue, and after each encounter the rider moves off on the quest again, but how has the encounter changed or affected their mood?

In my personal version of the story, the rider actually realises that their quest is not as urgent as they first thought and ends up going to the pub. In the lyrics that Flanders and Swann added, you may remember the protagonist losing his horn and taking up the tuba instead! Your pupil can find a story more suited to them. Again, add as much detail as possible: what is the quest about exactly, who do they meet and what do they find out? How do they feel as they ride off again after each encounter?

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The first staff is marked 'Solo' and 'p' (piano). It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff is marked 'Tutti' and 'f' (forte). It features a more rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a 'Solo' marking and 'mf' (mezzo-forte).

## Using story to overcome technical challenges – 633 Squadron

Many brass players play the theme to *633 Squadron* by Ron Goodwin for their Grade 4. It has technical challenges, but we can use story to motivate us to work through these problems. We can find out from the title that it's a theme from a film and a quick Google tells us: *The plot involves the exploits of a fictional World War II British fighter-bomber squadron.* That's enough information for our imagination to take over.

We are flying a plane which is immediately engaged in battle.



It's firing its guns and soaring through the sky and we can separate the main theme into these two elements.



We could then extend both phrases to make two short exercises.

For the “machine gun” we need the constant accents to sound like rapid fire. The quavers need to be metronomic and there must never be a decrease in volume as the exercise progresses – that would mean the gun isn't firing properly.

For the aircraft motion, we need to focus on airflow to allow the plane to soar. If you lose concentration allowing the airflow to decrease, you will fall off the note, or it will get quieter or cut out; in your story the aircraft will crash.

Technical work is all done within the framework of the story by focusing on the sound that's needed to express the story. **RS**

To watch a video demonstration with further thoughts on learning *633 Squadron* using storytelling, go to [www.british-horn.org](http://www.british-horn.org) > members > videos

Part three of this series will look at how to improve technique using story.