

OUTDOOR MUSIC ACTIVITIES for Elementary K-5

Amy Stephen

<https://www.msstephenmusic.com>

- **RECORDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD:** take kids for a walk around the school grounds, listening for specific sounds. Also take your phone, and record anything you find as a group to be interesting enough to record. Could be a car going by, birds singing, people talking, feet on gravel, feet on pavement, knocking on metal (in the playground), etc. Then bring the kids back and re-play the sounds over the speaker, and see if they remember what the sound is. If you're tech-savvy and have the time, you could then go and create an audio collage of the sounds for use as a soundscape to some movement, or as a soundtrack for a story that the class creates together while listening. So many ways to use sound!
- **PLAYGROUND ORCHESTRA:** using the playground, each student finds a part of the playground to 'play' as an instrument. They could use their hands, or, if you have sticks lying around the ground, could use a stick. Divide them into sections, like in an orchestra, and instruct them to play only when you point at their section. You can also have an arm motion that means that ALL of them play together. Also make sure you have a STOP playing motion. You can incorporate echo rhythms, or a chorus (depending on how long your lesson is!) And improvised sections, or even solos. They should be facing you the whole time so they can see you conduct the orchestra! Practice, and perform for the Principal, or for another class who is also outside.
- **ADVANCED PLAYGROUND ORCHESTRA:** for older kids, you can take a pitch pipe out, or use an app to play pitch, and find different pitches on different parts of the playground. Then, knowing what pitches you have, play with those and create improvised melodies! Or, again, you can conduct the different notes. Get a student to conduct!
- **NATURE ORCHESTRA:** same as Playground Orchestra, only on natural elements, if you have them around. Logs, boulders, tree trunks, etc. (But be careful with the trees). Or combine them of course - logs AND playground metal/plastic AND large rocks nearby.
- **PLANT POEMS:** a combination of poetry and music, about rhythm. Go around the grounds - or to the garden (if you have one) - and notice things about the plants you see. Teacher writes down words the kids say about each plant. 'Green' 'Brown' 'Tall' 'Spiky' etc. Then, back at the classroom, with the class, create rhythm sentences using the words the kids came up with. Keep them! These could be used later in ostinatos to create class songs or soundscapes. This can also be done in collaboration with a classroom teacher, if they would like to do the word part, and then music class could do the rhythms, and repeat them as ostinatos as the kids are standing by those plants. Or maybe it could even be a guessing game, if there's another class involved! Oh the possibilities . . .
- **CHALK RHYTHMS:** just like it sounds. Take sidewalk chalk out to some concrete, and have the kids make up rhythms on the concrete. Then, after demonstrating their own rhythms, they can walk around and clap each others' rhythms as well.
- **CHALK SOLFEGE HOPSCOTCH:** just like it sounds. With sidewalk chalk, create a hopscotch pattern from Do up to Do, and have the kids jump to whichever syllables you are singing. Take turns and have fun! Maybe more than one hopscotch pattern would be better - depending on how many kids you have.

- **CHALK STAFF LINES & SPACES:** just like it sounds. With sidewalk chalk, create a long 5-line staff, and have the kids review the names of the lines. Then get them to jump to the correct line or space. Speed up the calls, see if they can jump faster! You can make it into a fun elimination game, where there are 3 kids at a time, and if any of them jump to the wrong line or space they have to go off and wait. This goes fast, so all the kids get lots of turns even if they jump to the wrong ones. Consider doing the game based ONLY on lines, or ONLY on spaces. Having both is quite advanced and would depend on how familiar your kids are already with the staff.

- **ACOUSTIC WALK:** Prep ahead for this by walking around your school - discover if your school has any interesting acoustic spaces you can take the kids to to explore echoes or differences in sound. If you have instruments that the kids have in their own little instrument bag (so that they don't share), especially rhythm sticks, take them on a walk to these interesting spaces and have the kids play rhythms into those spaces. Have them notice the difference between the same sounds when played in different acoustics. If its okay with classroom teachers (again, ahead of time) you might be able to go into a stairwell to experiment for a few minutes there, or a large foyer. This might be fun to take your Principal or VP on in a second class, so the kids can recall the sounds, and demonstrate to someone else the difference in the sounds.

- **COLOURING OR DRAWING TO MUSIC - OUTSIDE!!** : Okay, this might seem like a cop-out, but honestly, on a nice day, this is also a nice way to connect with music and the outdoors. Even teenagers and adults love this activity. Paper, crayons, different textures on concrete or benches or logs . . . a layered, focused activity outside. Could be colouring pre-drawn pictures, or could be free-form, to go with the flow of the music. Or both!

- **THE SOUND OF ROCKS & RHYTHM:** Focus specifically on rocks, if you trust the kids not to throw them, and if you have rocks nearby. Even large gravel would work - tapping rhythms against each other. Have partners tap call and response rhythms to each other, then show you how they can do it. If you have smaller gravel, you could experiment with the sound of dropping one vs. dropping a handful. Dropping a handful slowly vs. dropping handful quickly. Or discover the sound of making rhythmic patterns with your feet turning on the gravel. This might be a stretch, but hey its outside!

- **WATER FEATURE:** (Big prep of course). Normally you would never have water in your music classroom (at least I'm assuming that's the case). You may not even have a sink. But if you prep to have metal mixing bowls and water, you can create very cool sound play out on the concrete, or on picnic tables or wherever you have to set the bowls. So this is something music teachers can ONLY do outside, and its so cool. Tapping the bowls when there is water inside them will create different sounds, different notes, and if you move them while tapping on them, the sound will become even cooler to listen to. Try different sizes of bowls. ALSO add glasses, of course, and fill them up to different levels to create a scale, and play them with sticks or spoons or whatever you're allowed to use. You could connect this to a unit on measurement for a primary classroom, or on the physics of sound with an intermediate classroom, or the difference between liquids and solids. Talk to your classroom teacher colleagues and see how it can match up with what they are doing!

- **STORY IN A LINE:** Read the kids a short kids' story with sequential events in it, then have the kids create movements to go with certain characters in the story (or events). Then, the group re-creates the story though movement only, with the kids in a line (spaced out), and different kids responsible for different actions. Or they could all do actions for the story, or you could assign individuals or groups of kids to do certain actions for different mentions in the story. Its cool if the story goes from one end of the line to the other, and after doing it a

couple of times with telling the story, the line can do the whole story without the story being told, it just happens through movement. This movement memory integrates beautifully with musical form, and program music. Think ABACADA, or ABCADEA etc. as characters keep coming back. Make sure you relate the movement to musical form, and even listen, then, to a piece, or to a song with a chorus and bridge, that is similar in form to the story.

- **PARADE!!** Never forget the awesomeness of a parade, especially if the kids have made instruments themselves - either with you or with a classroom teacher. What a nice way to collaborate! And you could invite the neighbourhood. I know I would die of cuteness if I was invited out on my porch to watch a parade of littles playing paper plate tambourines.

Of course, being outdoors lends itself to playing **Freeze Dance**, or having the kids **act out animals** or **improvise different motions** or movements as music is playing. Any music game you played indoors can be played outdoors as long as you have a portable speaker, but I figured this is obvious so won't go into those games.

Oh, and just a note: you might want to teach them "Singing in the Rain"!