

# THE COMPOSER IS DEAD

Written by Lemony Snicket

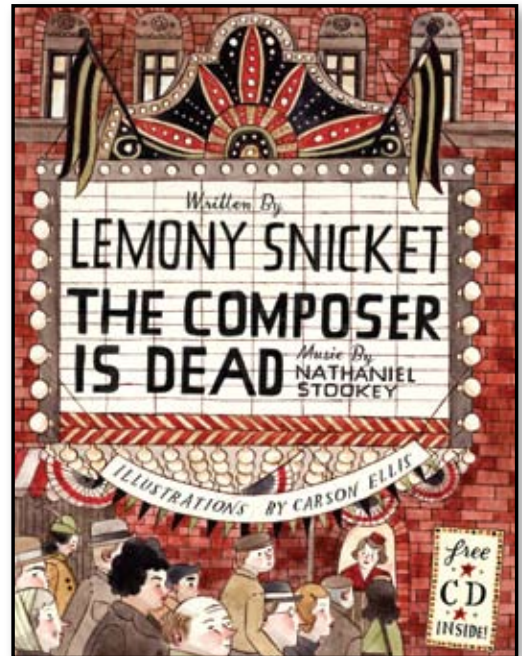
Illustrations by Carson Ellis • Music by Nathaniel Stookey

Teaching  
Guide

## Overture

If you have ever heard an orchestra play, then you know that musicians are most certainly guilty of something. Where exactly were the violins on the night in question? Did anyone see the harp? Is the trumpet protesting a bit too boisterously? In this perplexing murder mystery, everyone seems to have a motive, everyone has an alibi, and nearly everyone is a musical instrument. But the composer is still dead.

Perhaps you and your students can solve the crime! Join the Inspector as he interrogates all the unusual suspects. Then listen to the accompanying audio recording featuring Lemony Snicket and the music of Nathaniel Stookey performed by the San Francisco Symphony. Hear for yourself exactly what took place on that fateful, well-orchestrated evening.



Dear Noble Educator,

If you are looking for something highly educational about the joys of classical music, I'm sorry to tell you that you have chosen the wrong experience entirely.

The book and music for *The Composer Is Dead* features suspicious instruments, several accusations, and murder. And that is just in the first few moments.



For the past several years, it has been my solemn duty to travel the world with the acclaimed composer Nathaniel Stookey, performing our dismal collaboration with various fine orchestras. We have subjected countless young audiences to the shady inner workings of classical music for the first time, and many have been reduced to hysterics. You, on the other hand, may wish to subject your classroom to something less alarming, such as a math quiz.

With all due respect,  
*Lemony Snicket*

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## Comprehension Questions

- ♪ What does a composer do?
- ♪ What does an inspector do?
- ♪ What are the four sections of the orchestra?  
Place the following instruments within their correct sections: bass, bassoon, cello, clarinet, cymbals, drum, flute, French horn, harp, oboe, trombone, trumpet, tuba, viola, violin, and xylophone.
- ♪ What is the difference between first violins and second violins?
- ♪ Which instrument is larger, the cello or the bass?
- ♪ Who is the concertmaster?
- ♪ Which instrument tunes up the orchestra?  
What note does that instrument play for the tuning?
- ♪ What three reed instruments are mentioned in the story?
- ♪ Which brass instrument is often used to announce the arrival of kings and presidents?
- ♪ What is an alibi?
- ♪ What does a conductor do?
- ♪ Who killed the composer? Who keeps composers alive?



## Vocabulary

Using the word list below, expand students' vocabularies by having them learn the definitions, spellings, and pronunciations of at least twenty words from the story. Then have students write an imagined newspaper review of a concert performance by the orchestra featured in *The Composer Is Dead*. The review should incorporate a minimum of eight new vocabulary words in such a way as to demonstrate meaning through contextual clues.



accompaniment	exhausted	nauseous
admire	expensive	nostalgic
agitate	flamboyant	official
arrogant	flattering	opportunity
bachelor	foreigner	patriotic
baffled	honor	ridiculous
boisterous	humanity	ruckus
cadenza	imitation	shenanigans
conquer	incomprehensible	suspect
contrary	injustice	suspicious
crucial	interrogate	treachery
decompose	interview	unison
distasteful	lurk	various
dramatic	melody	violent
ecstatic	mourn	waltz
enormous	murmur	wearry

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## Engaging Students

### Instrumental Identities

As a class, brainstorm several adjectives to describe each instrument's personality based on the way it is described in the story and how it sounds on the recording. Is each instrument's identity entirely unique? Or do instruments within a given orchestral section tend to share personality traits? Are there any instruments in different sections that share the same characteristics?

### Without Words

After spending some time with both the book and Lemony Snicket's narration, play the recording without narration, pausing at various times to have students describe what is happening in the story and identify the instruments being played. Ask students to think about what sorts of musical clues help them discern what is going on and how music is able to tell a story even when it's not accompanied by words.

### The Play's the Thing

Stage a class play or puppet show to accompany the music for *The Composer Is Dead*. Assign the following parts to individual students: the Inspector, the Violins, the Cellos and Basses, the Violas, the Concertmaster, the Flutes, the Clarinets, the Bassoons, the Oboes/First Oboe, the Trumpets, the Trombones, the percussion instruments, and the Tuba. Then divide the narrator's lines among the rest of the students. Each student with an assigned character should be responsible for his or her own costume or puppet as well as any necessary props. The students who are sharing the role of the narrator should take care of set decoration, additional props, and costumes or puppets for the characters without speaking parts, including the Composer, the French Horns, the Harp, and the Conductor. Invite another class to come to your students' performance and have your audience attempt to solve the mystery.

### Musical Improvisation

Assign each student to play the role of one of the instruments from the story. Then propose various hypothetical situations and ask students to interact with each other in character. For instance, how might the instruments interact if they were all playing on a sinking ship? At a birthday party where there's not enough cake? Preparing for the arrival of the Queen?

### Unusual Suspects

Ask small groups of students to create "Wanted" posters for the various instruments that are suspected of the Composer's murder. Each poster should include a drawing of the instrument and a description of its appearance, its role in the orchestra, and its sound.



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## Extension Activities

### ♪ Key Signatures

Select five composers from the more than forty named by the Inspector in *The Composer Is Dead*. Introduce students to the music of these composers by playing recordings of their more famous works and by helping students identify each composer's unique sound and personality. Just as the Inspector describes Chopin as romantic, Tchaikovsky as dramatic, and Stravinsky as ecstatic, ask students to come up with a single adjective or short phrase to represent each composer's signature style.

### ♪ Maestros and Virtuosos

Have pairs of students research a composer from the story and create an informational poster about him. Each poster should include a picture of the composer as well as his birth and death years, country of origin, career highlights, major works, contributions to the field of music, and any other interesting facts. After completing their posters, students should present their research findings to the rest of the class while also playing a sample recording of their composer's music.

### ♪ Double Time

Have students compare and contrast *The Composer Is Dead* with another piece of orchestral music that tells a story or uses instruments to represent specific characters, such as Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals*, or Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. How are the two compositions similar and how are they different?

### ♪ Music to My Ears (and Eyes!)

Arrange for a music teacher or musician to visit your school or library. Ask your guest presenter to bring along several musical instruments for students to handle up close and also to listen to and watch being played. Before the visit, reread *The Composer Is Dead* with your class and have students prepare questions for your guest about specific instruments or music in general.

### ♪ Face the Music

Organize a class trip to the symphony or other orchestral performance. While at the concert, have students identify the various instruments and sections of the orchestra. Which person is the conductor and which one is the concertmaster? Also ask students to keep track of any instruments that they see or hear but do not recognize from *The Composer Is Dead*. Once back in the classroom, have volunteers describe these unfamiliar instruments and then work together as a group to identify and classify them.



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