Teaching kids to listen to classical music with listening maps

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A listening map breaks a famous piece into stops and says what to listen for. How to use one at home or in class, and eight free maps from Grieg to Joplin.

Most children don't dislike classical music. They just don't know what they are supposed to be listening for, so a four-minute piece is four minutes of waiting. A listening map fixes that by cutting the piece into a few parts and giving each one a picture and a thing to notice: the trolls are tiptoeing, now it's louder, the first tune is back. Once a child knows what is coming, they listen ahead, and that is the whole skill.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is a free learning site for children, free through the end of 2026, with stories in the library and a Music section. It has eight listening maps of famous pieces, played by Peabody's own band a stop at a time, and 22 composer cards. This post is about how to use them, and how to make the same idea work without a screen.

What a listening map is

Music teachers have drawn listening maps on whiteboards for a long time: a path for the tune, a big drum where it gets loud, a rabbit where it speeds up. The map is not notation. A child doesn't need to read music to follow one. It is closer to a picture book of the piece.

On Peabody, each part is a stop on the map. Tap Play the map, and as the band reaches each stop it lights up and Peabody says the cue aloud. Tap any stop to start from there. At the end there is one question with three big answers, made from the stops themselves: from the first stop to the last, did the music get faster, slower, or stay about the same speed?

Here is In the Hall of the Mountain King, which Edvard Grieg wrote in 1875 for a play called Peer Gynt:

1. The trolls tiptoe. Shh, the trolls are tiptoeing, low and soft.
2. A troll peeks out. Listen, a new tune, a little higher.
3. More trolls wake up. The first tune is back, and it's getting faster!
4. The trolls stomp. Now it's loud, and even faster!
5. The big chase. Faster and faster, then bang, it stops!

A six-year-old can follow that, and by the third stop is usually predicting the fourth.

The three things a map teaches you to hear

Every cue on every map is about one of three ideas, and they are the same three a music teacher would name:

- Tempo is how fast the music goes. The Mountain King gets faster at every stop.
- Dynamics is how loud or soft it is. The Stars and Stripes Forever marches in loud, goes soft and low for its quiet trio, then brings that quiet tune back high and loud.
- Form is how the parts are put together, like a tune that leaves and comes back. Für Elise is the clearest example: its famous little tune comes back three times, with a sunny part, a stormy part and a run of quick notes in between.

Peabody's band plays some stops on a different instrument, a music box for one, a marching band for the next, so a fourth idea comes along too: the same tune sounds different depending on who plays it.

The eight maps

- Map: In the Hall of the Mountain King · Composer and year: Grieg, 1875 · Listen for: It gets faster and louder all the way
- Map: Für Elise · Composer and year: Beethoven, about 1810 · Listen for: The first tune keeps coming back
- Map: The Stars and Stripes Forever · Composer and year: Sousa, 1896 · Listen for: Loud, then soft, then loud again
- Map: William Tell Overture (the gallop) · Composer and year: Rossini, 1829 · Listen for: Galloping horses, and a finish that stops, stops, stops
- Map: Can-Can · Composer and year: Offenbach, 1858 · Listen for: Stamping notes, then the famous tune gets faster
- Map: Eine kleine Nachtmusik · Composer and year: Mozart, 1787 · Listen for: A tune that zooms up, goes soft, then louder and louder
- Map: The Entertainer · Composer and year: Joplin, 1902 · Listen for: Ragtime's bouncy first tune, and when it comes back
- Map: Ode to Joy · Composer and year: Beethoven, 1824 · Listen for: One happy tune that grows as the band joins in

Each map has three to six stops and lasts between about 45 seconds and a minute and a half. Every piece is in the public domain, because it was written long ago. A grown-up should know what they are hearing: these are Peabody's own synthesizer versions, simplified to one tune line with chords and read from published scores, not recordings of an orchestra. They are a way in. Once a child knows the Mountain King's five stops, play them an orchestra's recording and watch them wait for the chase.

How to use one, before, during and after

Before. Read the stops aloud first, or let Peabody read them. "There are five parts. In the first one, the trolls are tiptoeing." Knowing what is coming is what turns hearing into listening.

During. Give the child a job with their body: tiptoe fingers on the table in the first stop, stomp in the fourth. Pointing at the stop as it lights up works for the youngest.

After. Answer the map's own question, then ask one of your own: which stop was your favourite, and why? There is no wrong answer to that one, and "because it was loud" is a real musical observation.

Then make your own. Give a child paper and play a short piece twice. Ask them to draw a picture for each part they hear change. Their map won't match anyone else's, and that is the point: they listened for the changes.

In a classroom, the US National Core Arts Standards for music name four artistic processes, and one of them is Responding: perceiving, analyzing and interpreting music. A listening map is one of the plainest ways to do it with children who can't yet read notes.

Meet the composers

Children remember music better when it has a person attached. The composer cards cover 22 composers, from Bach and Vivaldi to Scott Joplin and George Gershwin. Each card has three facts, each checked against two separate sources, the composer's most famous piece, the city where they did their best-known work (tap it to fly there on Peabody's globe), and one question with three answers. A few of the facts children like best:

- Grieg wrote music in a tiny hut by the water at his home near Bergen.
- Sousa was called the March King, and the sousaphone, a big tuba for marching bands, is named after him.
- Haydn's Surprise Symphony has a quiet, gentle part, then all of a sudden a big loud chord.
- Clara Schumann was one of the first pianists to play concerts from memory.
- Joplin's The Entertainer became famous all over again in a 1973 film, and he was given a special Pulitzer Prize in 1976.

The cards with a map link to it, so a child can go from the person to the piece. Mozart, Beethoven and Rossini all have one.

Where to go next

A map is listening to a whole piece. For practising one idea at a time, such as high and low, or loud getting softer, the listening games are short rounds of ten. For music to have on in the background, Peabody Radio has no words and no ads.

Questions parents ask

Do children need to read music to use a listening map?

No. The stops are pictures and short sentences, and Peabody reads each cue aloud. Knowing what to listen for is the skill, not reading notes.

What age is a listening map for?

The cues are written for a six-year-old to follow, and younger children can follow along by pointing. Older children get more from drawing their own maps afterwards.

Are these real orchestra recordings?

No. Peabody's band plays each piece on synthesizer voices, simplified to one tune line with chords. They are a good first step before a full recording.

Is it free?

Yes. Peabody is free for everyone through 31 December 2026, with no sign-up and no ads.

Sources

- National Core Arts Standards (2014), music: the four artistic processes, Creating, Performing, Responding and Connecting.
- Public Law 100-186 (1987) designates The Stars and Stripes Forever, composed in 1896, as the national march of the United States.
- The composer facts above are from Peabody's composer cards, each checked against two sources listed on the card, 31 October 2026.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/classical-music-listening-maps-for-kids