



# *The blind king*

*By Michael Wolters*

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was written for children from Severne Junior & Infant School in Acocks Green, Birmingham and members of Birmingham Contemporary Music Group as part of a project called Top Score and was given its world premiere in a concert at the CBSO Centre, Birmingham on April 20<sup>th</sup> 2005

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# The Blind King

Once upon a time there was a blind king who was told that he would be able to see again if he listened to the song of the phoenix. His eldest son set out to find the magical bird for his father and on his journey he reached a city which was full of happy song and dance. He became distracted from his mission especially when a pretty lady waved at him from a window and forgot all about his father and decided to stay in the city.

The blind king waited in vain for the return of his eldest son and eventually, the second son took the task of finding the bird upon himself. But when he got to the city he too was seduced by the jolly lifestyle and decided to stay. After a while it became clear that the second son would not return to his blind father's castle either and so, the third and youngest prince finally set out to find the magical bird with the healing powers. When he arrived at the city of jolly tunes and happy song he decided that it was far too noisy for him and escaped to a pub by the edge of the city. He paid for a substantial dinner and a room for the night. After he had eaten he went to his room, locked the door and went straight to bed. In the middle of the night someone knocked on his door.

"Come in," he shouted while smiling to himself because he had locked the door and no one could enter. There were another three knocks and the prince reacted in the same way. After three further knocks the prince became very scared because a strange man had entered the room without opening the door and spoke:

"I am a ghost - as I am sure you have noticed by now. I once slept in this room, but could not pay the landlord for it. So, he became very angry and pushed me down the stairs, which killed me. Since then I have led my life as a ghost. You can help me - if you re-pay my debt I will be redeemed."

"Sure," said the prince (who was quite rich as you can imagine.) "Thank you", replied the ghost, "I am sure that I will be able to help you one day". The next morning the prince paid the debt, took his horse and made his way into a dark forest. After a few miles a wolf suddenly crossed his way. The prince dismounted and killed his horse so the wolf might eat it instead of him. But the wolf just said: "Why did you do this, silly man?" The prince was surprised and relieved and told the wolf that he was looking for the phoenix. The wolf knew where the bird was kept and offered the prince a ride on his back. They rode across hills and valleys and finally arrived at a beautiful castle.

The wolf said: "Listen carefully, prince. In this castle you will find a room full of birdcages. All the birds are very, very beautiful, but somewhere at the back there is an old cage with a manky looking bird-type thing in it. You must take that one. Next to it there is a golden statue, which you mustn't even touch. This is very important."

So the prince went inside and found the room very quickly (you only had to follow the incredible noise coming from it). He also found the ugly bird that was supposed to be the right one, but he decided to take the beautiful golden statue next to it instead. As soon as he touched it all the birds in the room started to scream. Lots of men came instantly, captured him and brought him before the king of the castle. There, the prince told his story about why he needed the phoenix and the king replied: "I will give you the bird if you bring me the fastest horse in the world." The prince went back outside to meet the wolf and told him what happened. The wolf was very angry with him, but he also knew where they could find the fastest horse and off they went, the prince riding on the back of the wolf. After a day's journey they came to another castle where they stopped.

The wolf said: "Behind the castle there is a shed full of beautiful horses. At the very back you will find an old, weak horse. Take that one and no other." When the prince found the shed he saw lots of strong and beautiful horses and one old and weak one. The prince laughed at it and decided to take the strongest looking horse instead. As soon as he touched it all the horses started to make an incredible noise, so that lots of men appeared who captured the prince and brought him before the king.

The prince told his whole story again and the king said: "Well, I will give you any horse if you bring me the most beautiful princess in the world." The prince went to meet the wolf again, who was even angrier than the first time, but he also knew where to find the most beautiful princess. And again they went off to find the most beautiful princess. After another long journey they arrived at another castle and the wolf said: "This is your last chance. Go into the castle. On the top floor in the room at the back of the corridor you will find two sleeping princesses. One is very pretty, the other one is very ugly. Take the ugly one and under no circumstances the pretty one. If you don't do as I say this time I will not be able to help you anymore." The prince entered the castle and after he had climbed hundreds of stairs he found the room with the two sleeping princesses. He was very tempted to take the pretty one, but he remembered the wolf's words and he took the really very ugly one.

As soon as they stepped outside the castle the prince looked at her again and suddenly she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Convinced that he had made the right choice he lifted the princess onto the wolf's back and off they all went back to the castle of the fastest horse. When they arrived, the king was delighted to see such a beautiful woman. He asked the prince which horse he would like and the prince replied that he wanted the old and weak looking one. The king sent for the horse and as it approached the prince climbed on its back, fearing that it might die under his weight. But instead it turned into the most powerful looking horse the prince had ever seen. Quickly he pulled the beautiful princess up onto the horse's back in front of him and galloped out of the castle. When the prince, the most beautiful princess, the fastest horse and the wolf came to the castle of the phoenix, the king was already waiting outside with the manky bird in its cage and demanded the horse. The prince said: "I want to be sure that you are not playing tricks on me, so give me the bird first." As soon as the king handed over the bird it turned into the golden phoenix. The prince did not hesitate and rode off as fast as the wind.

When the group came to the forest where the prince had met the wolf for the first time they took a break and the wolf asked the prince if he now recognised him. The prince did not know what the wolf was talking about and the wolf said: "I am the ghost whose debt you paid for. I have kept my promise and helped you. Before I leave you now I give you one more piece of advice: when you get to the city of jolly tunes and happy song do NOT, under no circumstances help any criminals." The prince did not know what to make of this, but made the promise, said good-bye to the wolf and continued the journey.

As they arrived in the city there were no jolly tunes and happy song there, but instead they witnessed a court trial that was being held outside the town hall. Two men who had lost all their money and had found themselves in great debt were being accused of theft. The prince recognised these two men as his brothers and he instantly decided to buy them free. So, having paid their debts, the prince and his two brothers, the princess, the horse and the phoenix made their way home to the castle of the blind king. As the weather was warm they decided to spend the night by the edge of a forest. The two brothers had been talking about the embarrassment of returning home as criminals and came up with a plan. As soon as their younger brother was asleep they stabbed him and covered his body with a pile of leaves. The next morning they arrived at home and presented his relieved father with the phoenix, but the bird was losing its beauty again and did not sing.

Meanwhile, the wolf found the young prince under the pile of leaves and licked the stab wound. The young prince recovered immediately. He apologised for not having kept his promise and thanked the wolf for having rescued him again before he set off for home. As soon as he arrived back in his father's castle the phoenix regained his full beauty and started to sing his healing song. The blind king could suddenly see again and he realised that it was his youngest son who he should be truly grateful to.

So, the two older brothers were imprisoned, the youngest son married the most beautiful princess and the blind king was no longer blind.

# *Instrumentation*

Children:

10 chime bars  
feather pillow  
2 large glasses  
china plate  
metal knife & fork  
wooden chair  
lots and lots of sheets of newspaper 2  
large sheets of paper  
3 glass bottles  
2 steelpans  
suspended cymbal  
2 tambourines  
claves  
woodblock  
2 guiros  
ratchet  
2 hollow coconut halves  
7 bass bars (C to B)  
3 drums  
bed sheet  
2 knife sharpeners

Professional musicians:

harp

percussion: vibraphone  
woodblock  
large bottle (amplified)  
bamboo chimes  
5 temple blocks  
glockenspiel

# Structure

The succession of movements is as follows:

1. The castle of the blind king.  
*percussion interlude*
2. The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes.  
*percussion interlude*
1. The castle of the blind king  
*percussion interlude*
2. The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes  
*percussion interlude*
1. The castle of the blind king  
*percussion interlude*
2. The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes  
*percussion interlude*
3. Pub  
*percussion interlude*
4. Forest  
*percussion interlude*
5. Castle of the Phoenix  
*percussion interlude*
6. Castle of the fastest horse  
*percussion interlude*
7. Castle of the most beautiful princess  
*percussion interlude*

## **BREAK**

7. Castle of the most beautiful princess  
*percussion interlude*
6. Castle of the fastest horse  
*percussion interlude*
5. Castle of the Phoenix  
*percussion interlude*
4. Forest  
*percussion interlude*
2. The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes  
*percussion interlude*
8. Pile of leaves
1. The castle of the blind king
8. Pile of leaves
1. The castle of the blind king (+harp solo)

# Performance Notes

1. The performance stations (Castle of the blind king, Pub, Forest, castle of the Phoenix, Castle of the fastest horse, Castle of the most beautiful princess) are set up as shown on the layout sheet.
2. All performers sit in a straight line at the back.
3. When it is time for a group to perform they approach their performance station during the percussion interlude between the preceding station and their station.
4. The stations are performed as notated. The very last station (The castle of the blind king) starts with the harp solo. When the harp arrives at the last bar, which is repeated over and over, the chime bars start. Note that the low 'C' has to be replaced by the 'C#' for this last rendition only.
5. This piece is very flexible. Instruments can be replaced by other suitable ones if not available. The harp solo can become a piano solo (if a harp is absolutely nowhere to find). However, it is important that the music is performed as precisely as possible.

## **The BREAK**

There is a section right in the middle called the BREAK. This is a free section and can be treated in many ways. In the first performance by Severne Junior and Infant School, Birmingham, the children formed two groups. The front person of each group ran to the front of the stage and shouted in one sentence what his or her favourite bit of the fairy tale was while s/he showed a self-made drawing of that particular scene. Then the next person of the group would run and so on until everybody had told their favourite bits.

# Percussion

- 1 *The castle of the blind king.*  
vibraphone: random notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) →recognisable melody
  - 2 *The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes.* recognisable melody →random notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B)
  - 1 *The castle of the blind king*  
random notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) →recognisable melody
  - 2 *The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes* recognisable melody →random notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B)
  - 1 *The castle of the blind king*  
random notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) →recognisable melody
  - 2 *The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes*  
recognisable melody slowing down →fast irregular woodblock
  - 3 *Pub*  
fast irregular knocking on wood →blowing a large bottle (ideally amplified)
  - 4 *Forest*  
blowing a large bottle →high pitched bamboo chimes
  - 5 *Castle of the Phoenix*  
high pitched bamboo chimes →five temple blocks, irregular beats, fast
  - 6 *Castle of the fastest horse*  
five temple blocks, irregular beats, fast →fast glissandos up and down a glockenspiel (C, D, E, F, G, A, B)
  - 7 *Castle of the most beautiful princess*  
fast glissandos up and down a glockenspiel (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) →five temple blocks, irregular beats, fast
- BREAK
- 7 *Castle of the most beautiful princess*  
fast glissandos up and down a glockenspiel (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) →five temple blocks, irregular beats, fast
  - 6 *Castle of the fastest horse*  
five temple blocks, irregular beats, fast →high pitched bamboo chimes
  - 5 *Castle of the Phoenix*  
high pitched bamboo chimes →blowing a large bottle
  - 4 *Forest*  
blowing a large bottle →recognisable melody in minor on vibraphone
  - 2 *The city with lots of happy songs and jolly tunes*  
recognisable melody in minor slowing down
  - 8 *Pile of leaves*
  - 1 *The castle of the blind king*
  - 8 *Pile of leaves*
  - 1 *The castle of the blind king (+harp solo)*



# Stage set-up

City of happy songs and jolly tunes

all performers standing in a straight line

Pile of leaves

bed sheet,  
newspaper,  
2 knife sharpeners

percussion

vibraphone,  
woodblock,  
large bottle,  
bamboo  
chimes,  
5 temple  
blocks,  
glockenspiel

harp

Castle of the  
blind king

10 chime bars

Pub

pillow, 2 glasses,  
plate, knife+fork,  
chair

Forest

newspaper,  
2 large sheets of  
paper,  
3 glass bottles

Castle of the  
phoenix

2 steelpans,  
susp. cymbal,  
2 tambourines

Castle of the  
fastest horse

claves, woodblock,  
2 guiros, ratchet,  
2 hollow coconut  
halves

Castle of the  
most beautiful  
princess

7 bass tone bars,  
3 drums

# Castle of the blind king

9 chime bars

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
C			C					
B				B	B			
A	A						A	
G			G	G				
F	F							
E					E		E	
D	D		D	D				
C (C#)					C		C	
A					A		A	

## The City of happy songs and jolly tunes

All children sing their favourite songs.  
Loud and confident.

(The last City of happy songs and jolly tunes:

All children whisper to each other.  
Loud and secretive.)

Pub

knocking  
on wooden  
chair



(startled)

'huh'

rustling  
with  
pillow



(startled)

'huh'

clinking  
glasses



(startled)

'huh'

cutlery  
on  
china  
plate



(startled)

'huh'

# Forest

blowing

news-  
paper  
rustling



shaking  
paper



x 2

blowing  
into  
high  
glass bottle



blowing  
into  
medium  
glass bottle



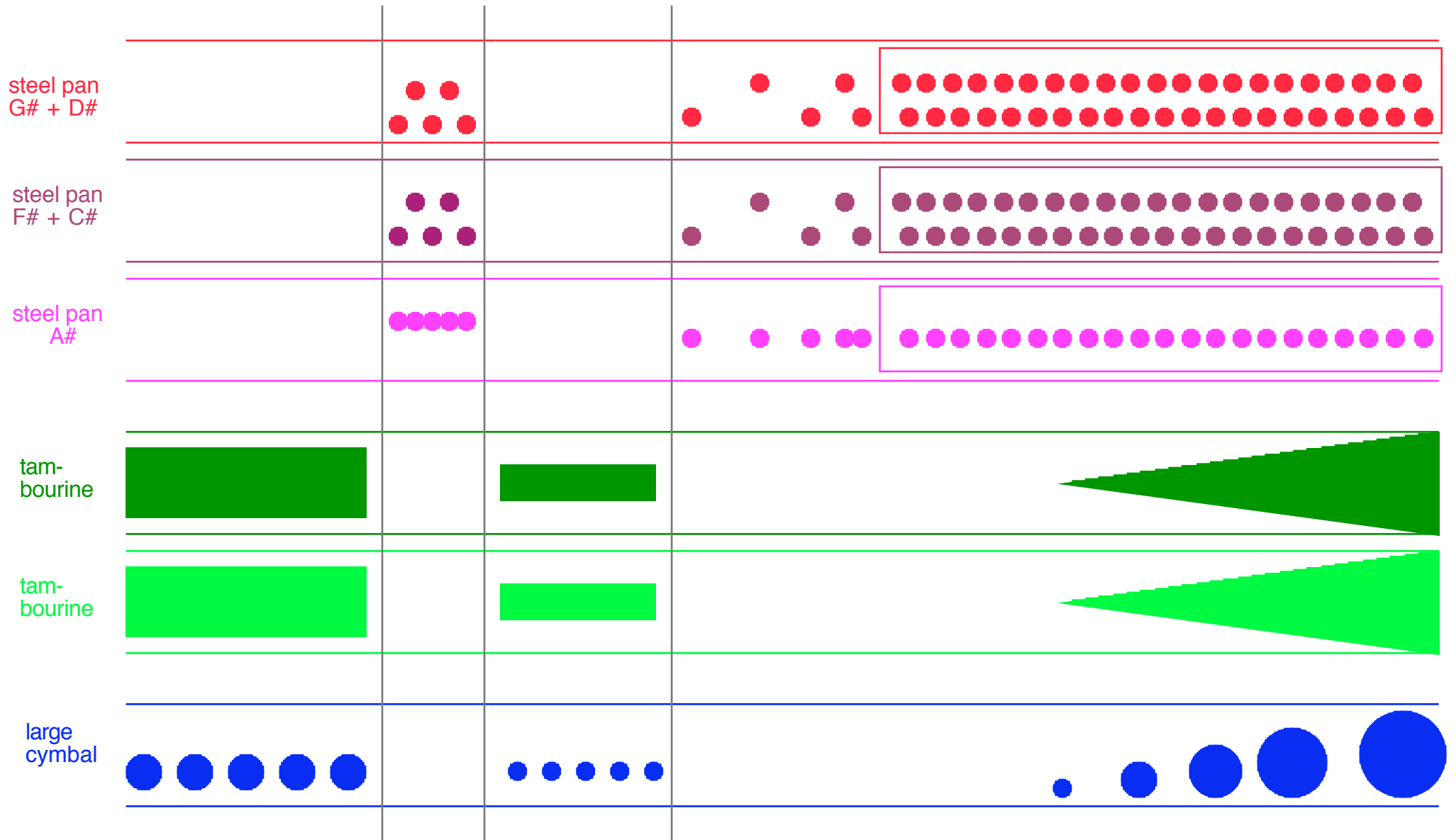
lots of short blows  
fast



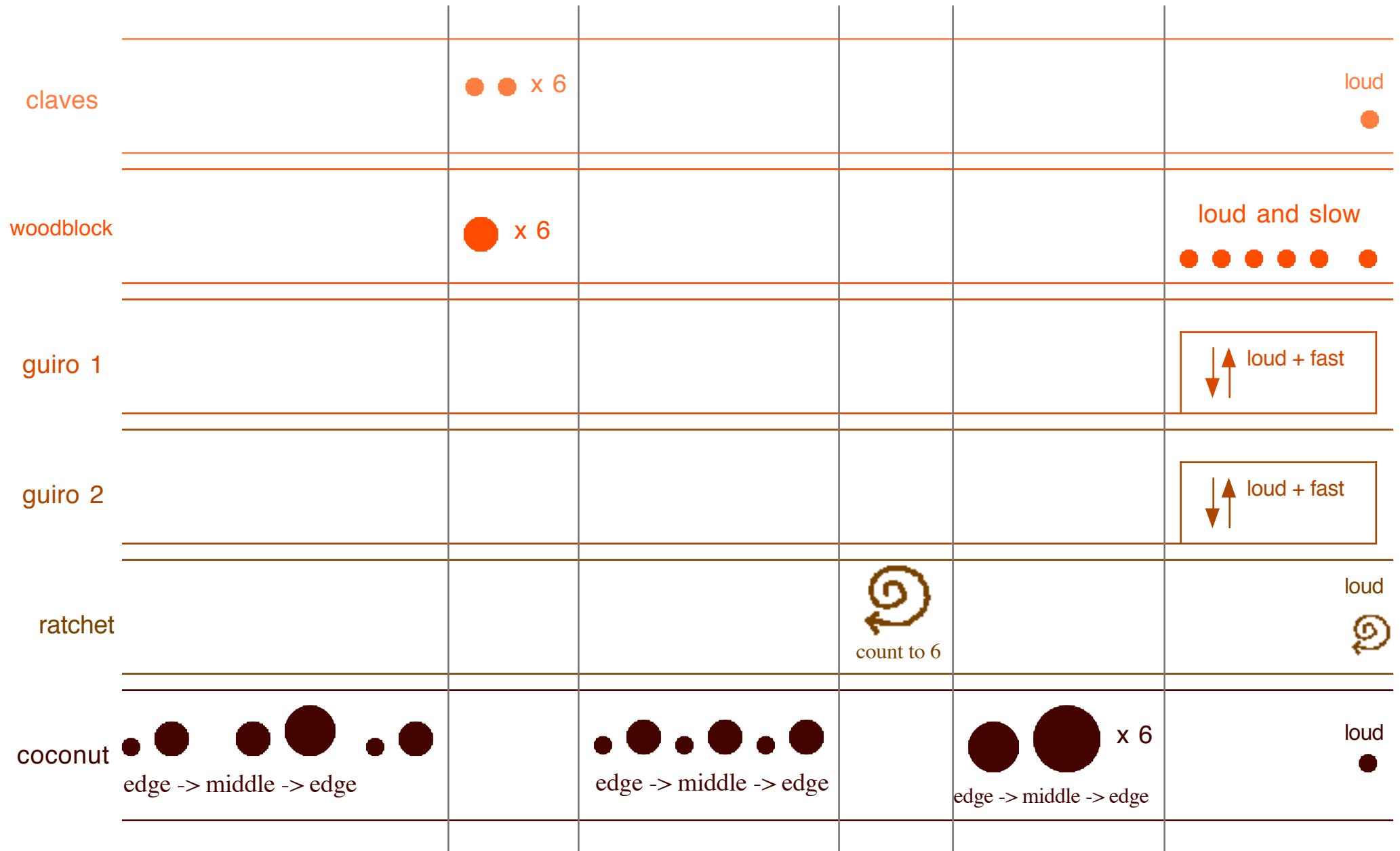
blowing  
into  
low  
glass bottle



# Castle of the Phoenix



# Castle of the fastest horse



# Castle of the most beautiful princess

Glocken-  
spiel or  
bass  
chimes

A

A  
C

A  
D

A  
E

A  
F

A  
G

A  
B

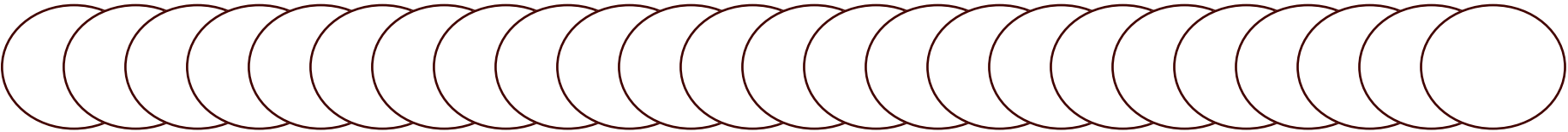
Drum 1



Drum 2



Drum 3  
circular  
stroking





## First pile of leaves

Four children spread out a bed sheet and put newspaper on it. Some of the newspaper should be crumpled into balls of various sizes, some of it should be straight sheets.

two knife  
sharpeners  
or iron bars



(Wait until sheet and  
paper are prepared  
and it is quiet again.)



## Second pile of leaves

Four children take the bed sheet. One at each corner. In one fast movement they lift it up high above their heads, so that all the newspaper flies into the air. The two children at the front quickly run towards the two children at the back with the sheet still in their hands, so that the newspaper can fall on the floor.