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Hello and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps you discover the music of composers, cultures, and traditions from all around the world. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're joining me today for a special holiday edition of What Was That Sound?

If you've listened to a What Was That Sound? episode before, you know how this works — I'll play short clips of sounds from different instruments, and your job is to guess which instrument you're hearing before I tell you the answer. There's even a free printable at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/165 in case you want to track your guesses and write down interesting facts you learn about each instrument in today's episode. Since this is the holiday edition of What Was That Sound, each instrument you'll hear today helps create that magical, festive sound we associate with Christmas music.

Ready to play? Let's get started!

For our first instrument, we're going to listen to a famous piece from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker...listen for the instrument that reminds you of twinkling stars or even sugarplum fairies dancing.

Any guesses as to what that magical sounding instrument was?

If you said celesta, you're correct! The celesta is a keyboard instrument, like the piano, but instead of hammers striking strings, they strike small metal bars — that's what gives it that shimmering, bell-like tone. Here's a fun story: when Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky first heard the celesta in Paris, he instantly fell in love with its magical sound. He quickly wrote to his publisher to purchase one for 1200 francs. The instrument was still very new at the time, so Tchaikovsky actually kept it a secret from other Russian composers until his ballet premiered, because he didn't want anyone to "borrow" the idea before he could use it!

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When audiences heard the celesta in “The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” for the very first time, they were enchanted by its sparkling, fairy-like sound – and today, that melody has become one of the most recognizable pieces of Christmas music in the world.

This next instrument sounds graceful and angelic. It’s often used when composers want to create a peaceful or heavenly mood. Listen to the instrument that plays the soft arpeggios in the music before the violin comes in with the familiar melody.

Did you guess the harp? That’s right! The harp has long strings that players pluck with their fingers. Even though I picked an arrangement to share with you of “O Holy Night” that features only the violin and harp, the harp often plays underneath orchestral arrangements of this hymn as well. Its sound adds warmth and sparkle to many Christmas carols and even appears in classic holiday film scores. In orchestras, the harp often plays glissandos – that sweeping, magical “whoosh” sound that can make a scene feel extra enchanting.

Now, the next instrument might be the easiest of all to guess. Listen to this clip and see if you can identify the instrument keeping the rhythm of the music in the background.

What instrument did you hear underneath the others that made the music feel like a sleigh ride?

Did you guess sleigh bells? These jingling bells are attached to leather straps and were originally used on horses pulling sleighs through the snow – not just for decoration, but as a safety feature so people could hear the sleigh coming before they saw it! Composers fell in love with that joyful, wintry sound. In the 1800s, sleigh bells began showing up in orchestral music to paint a snowy picture for listeners. One of the most famous examples is the piece you’re hearing now, Sleigh Ride by Leroy Anderson, where you can almost see the horses trotting and the snow sparkling. Even long before that, composers like Mozart used them in

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pieces to give a sense of outdoor festivity and cheer. Today, sleigh bells instantly make us think of winter fun, jingling reindeer, and cozy Christmas celebrations — proof that sometimes the simplest sounds can carry the most holiday spirit.

Here comes our final mystery sound — bold, bright, and full of energy! Listen for the instrument playing a solo improvisation during this jazzy rendition of the song Jingle Bells.

What instrument did you hear?

It's the trumpet! This brass instrument's brilliant tone makes it a favorite for announcing joy and celebration. You'll hear trumpets in plenty of festive holiday pieces like Handel's Hallelujah Chorus or in jazzy arrangements of Christmas songs like the one we're listening to now by Wynton Marsalis Jazz Big Band because it's one of the most versatile instruments in all of music. In classical music, the trumpet shines in joyful works like Bach's Christmas Oratorio or the Hallelujah Chorus. But this instrument isn't only about pomp and ceremony — it can also swing! In jazz, the trumpet takes on a completely different personality. It can sound playful, brassy, and full of sparkle — just like music you're hearing now.

Whether it's ringing out in a grand cathedral or trading solos in a jazz club, the trumpet brings excitement and cheer to Christmas music everywhere.

And there you have it — four special instruments that help make holiday music sound merry and bright: the celesta, harp, sleigh bells, and trumpet. If you're interested in taking a deeper dive to learn more about some of the instruments featured in today's episodes, I've done podcast episodes about three of the 4, and I'll link to those episodes in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/165. I'll also link to a playlist of the four holiday pieces you heard on the episode today in their entirety. Again, you can find all those fun bonuses along with a printable What Was That Sound? worksheet on busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/165.

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Thanks for listening, and from my family to yours – Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

I'll see you next time on Busy Kids Love Music!

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