

# Online listening activities

KS3/4

## Simon Rushby

### Introduction

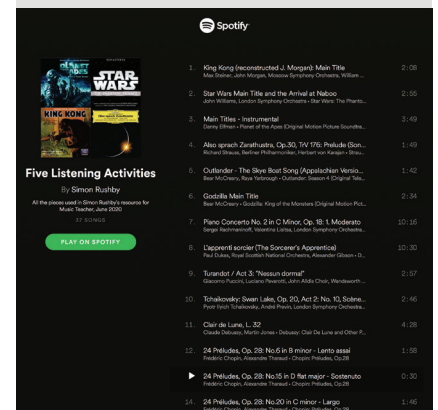
This resource brings together five listening activities for students to do at home, to widen their listening experience. They have been written to help students in years 8, 9 and 10 to improve their general wider listening experience and skills.

The hope is that, in the current challenging times, these activities can support teachers as off-the-shelf resources that can be sent straight out to students as needed. Each activity comes with a set of listening questions, a little context and some ideas further listening or composing activities. 'Mark it yourself' answers are provided at the end of the resource.

A Spotify playlist containing all the tracks, including further listening suggestions, can be found here (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/44GK4onoyw9GWx6qyzKosK?si=FwblJqmiRNy6fEap9UuKIQ>). I've also supplied YouTube links for those that prefer, though any references to timings apply to the Spotify versions.

The activities are each set out across two pages, so that they can be isolated and sent out or uploaded to students. The aim is that this resource provides something that teachers can immediately use in this busy, challenging time and provides useful activities for students that will help them improve their listening experience.

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## King Kong: main title – Max Steiner (reconstructed by John Morgan)

### Context

*King Kong* is a 1933 feature film that tells the story of a giant gorilla-like creature brought to New York from a distant island as a theatre attraction. Spooked by camera flashguns, Kong breaks free and runs rampage around the city, finally being brought down from the top of the Empire State Building by the gunfire from four planes. Fay Wray played Ann Darrow, the object of Kong's affection, whom he carries around New York while on his rampage.

With the movie genre still in its infancy, *King Kong* was groundbreaking in its use of stop-motion animation to bring the monster to life. It also had a music score by Max Steiner, one of the first composers to write for the movies, and seen by many as a pioneer of film music. Steiner went on to score films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*.

Listen to the track on the Spotify playlist, or here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTdOjpGhvPs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTdOjpGhvPs)).

### Listening activities

#### Instruments and sonority

- 1 Write down as many percussion instruments as you can hear in the opening 12 seconds of the track.
  
- 2 Describe the music played by the violins in the opening 28 seconds of the track.
  
- 3 In the opening section, which family of instruments would you say has most of the melodic parts?
  
- 4 In the section from 1:23 to 2:09, which family of instruments has the melodic parts?
  
- 5 Which instrument can be heard playing a moving, broken-chord accompaniment?

#### Atmosphere and mood

How does Steiner set the mood, through this music, for a film about a giant monster that appears to fall in love? Think about the contrast between tense, dramatic music and calm, reflective music, and write your ideas under the following headings.

#### Use of melody, harmony and tonality:

#### Use of rhythm and tempo:

#### Use of instruments and texture:



## Chopin: Prelude in B minor, Op. 28 No. 6

### Context

Polish composer Frédéric Chopin (1810-49) wrote almost exclusively for the piano, and many of his compositions were short pieces that defined the Romantic style. These pieces were often given names to describe them – Nocturne for emotive, reflective pieces; Étude for study pieces aimed at aspects of piano technique; Waltz or Mazurka for dance-like pieces, and Prelude for short pieces, perhaps intended for the beginning of a recital or to be played as a set.

Chopin's Op. 28 is a collection of 24 preludes, one in each major and minor key, which were written during the late 1830s, partly at his home in Paris and partly in Valldemossa, Majorca, where he spent the winter of 1838-9 to avoid the damp Parisian weather. Chopin suffered from bad health, which was sadly made worse by the draughty monastery he stayed in at Valldemossa.

The B minor Prelude, No. 6 in the collection, was performed on an organ at the composer's funeral. Most of its melodic material is played by the left hand.

Listen to the track on the Spotify playlist or here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_FiZ5zvAITs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FiZ5zvAITs)).

### Listening activities

#### Use of the piano

The YouTube video shows a top-down view of this piece being played on the piano. Watch it and write answers to the following questions:

- 1 The left hand carries most of the melodic material. How would you describe these left-hand melodies? Think about the way they rise and fall, whether they move in step or leap, and their rhythm.
- 2 How could you describe the material played by the right hand? Does it contrast much, or is it the same all the way through?
- 3 What could you say about the range of the piano keyboard used in this piece?

#### Structure

- 1 Listen to the melody played at the beginning of the piece. Where do you hear this melody repeated? How is it changed when it repeats?

#### Atmosphere and mood

- 1 This piece was played at Chopin's funeral. In addition to the minor key, what other musical characteristics give this piece a sad, melancholy mood? Think about aspects of rhythm and tempo, melodic rise and fall, dynamics and other aspects of musical expression.
- 2 How does the piece end? Do you think this ending is effective? Give reasons for your answer.

### Composing ideas

Compose a short piece called 'Prelude' for an instrument of your choice – it could be a piano, or maybe an unaccompanied instrument like violin or flute, or perhaps guitar.

Think about the mood you want to portray, and how you are going to do this. Perhaps you will concentrate on simple melodies, a repetitive rhythm or chords. Will you pick a major or minor key? How will you ensure your piece has a strong structure – maybe by repeating your ideas with just small contrasting sections?

Ideally, your piece needs to be only between one and two minutes in length.

### Suggestions for further listening

- ▶ Chopin: any of the other Preludes from Op. 28 – the best-known ones are Nos 4 in E minor, 7 in A major, 15 in D flat major (the 'Raindrop') and 20 in C minor. This last Prelude was the inspiration for the Barry Manilow and Take That hit song 'Could It Be Magic' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqXYIteAfNs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqXYIteAfNs)) (the individual preludes are indexed in the comments).
- ▶ Barry Manilow/Take That: 'Could It Be Magic' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXH6Gf6YhJQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXH6Gf6YhJQ)) (Manilow precedes the song with part of the Chopin C minor Prelude).
- ▶ Rachmaninov: Prelude in C sharp minor, Op.3 No.2 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCtixpIWBto](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCtixpIWBto)).

### Suggestions for follow-up work

'Could It Be Magic' is not the only pop song with a classical influence. There are many examples of songwriters and artists admitting to a little help from composers who went before them. Listen to any of these examples and see if you can hear the similarities – in each case, is it the melody, the rhythm or the harmony that is common to both pieces of music?

- ▶ Little Mix: 'Little Me' and Fauré: Pavane
- ▶ Billy Joel: 'This Night' and Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor Op.13 (second movement)
- ▶ Eric Carmen or Celine Dion: 'All By Myself' and Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor (second movement)
- ▶ Muse: 'Plug in Baby' and Bach: Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565
- ▶ Pet Shop Boys: 'Go West' and Pachelbel: Canon in D

## David Bowie: 'Life on Mars?'

### Context

Few musicians had more influence than David Bowie, who from his first hit, 'Space Oddity', in 1969 to the release of his final album, *Blackstar*, two days before his untimely death from cancer in 2016, continued to surprise with his innovative and original audio and visual presentation of his music. One of the best-selling solo artists of all time, Bowie constantly reinvented himself and his music, taking on numerous alter egos such as Ziggy Stardust and the Thin White Duke. He was also a prolific actor, making creative videos for his singles and appearing in a number of movies.

'Life on Mars?' first appeared on Bowie's 1971 album *Hunky Dory* and was released as a single two years later. Written partly as a parody to Frank Sinatra's famous song 'My Way', and also as a commentary on how we use entertainment to escape reality, the song features a memorable and complex piano part played by Rick Wakeman, the keyboard player from the band Yes, who had also played on Bowie's first hit, 'Space Oddity'. An iconic string arrangement was provided by Bowie's guitarist of the time, Mick Ronson.

Listen to the track on the Spotify playlist or here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZKcl4-tcuo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZKcl4-tcuo)).

### Listening activities

#### Using contrast to bring words to life

The lyrics to 'Life on Mars?' are cryptic and poetic, and finding meaning in them, as in many other David Bowie lyrics, requires some imagination. In fact, the legend goes that he would sometimes create lyrics by writing different sentences and phrases on strips of paper and then placing them in a random order. Bowie once described the lyrics to 'Life on Mars?' as 'A sensitive young girl's reaction to the media... I think she finds herself disappointed with reality... She's being told that there's a far greater life somewhere and she's disappointed that she doesn't have access to it.'

This listening activity focuses on the uses of contrasts of sonority (use of instruments, voices and sounds), pitch, rhythm, harmony and key to bring these strange words to life.

In the table below, describe how this is done by choosing a description from the box on the next page the table to fit each line of lyrics. We are focusing on the first verse, bridge and chorus, so you need to listen to the song from the beginning up to around 1:41.

Lyric	Description
It's a God-awful small affair to the girl with the mousy hair,	Solo piano accompanies with a descending bassline.
But her mummy is yelling 'no', and her daddy has told her to go.	
But her friend is nowhere to be seen, now she walks through her sunken dream	
To the seat with the clearest view, and she's hooked to the silver screen.	
But the film is a saddening bore, for she's lived it ten times or more.	
She could spit in the eyes of fools, as they ask her to focus on	
Sailors fighting in the dance hall, oh man, look at those cavemen go.	
It's the freakiest show.	
Take a look at the lawman beating up the wrong guy. Oh man, wonder if he'll ever know	
He's in the best-selling show,	
Is there life on Mars?	
Instrumental	

Choose from the following descriptions:

- ▶ Vocal harmonies at first, but the final words are sung by two voices in unison.
- ▶ Solo piano accompanies with a descending bassline.
- ▶ A second voice harmonises in 3rds below the lead vocal.
- ▶ The longest and highest note of Bowie's melody is sung on the last word of this line.
- ▶ The piano plays repeated chords and a high flourish.
- ▶ Cellos and double basses accentuate the bass notes.
- ▶ A guitar plays a solo comprising short phrases and complex harmony.
- ▶ Strings play low, sustained chords as the voice begins to rise in pitch.
- ▶ Drums enter and there is a key change. Violins play fast notes.
- ▶ The piano part is slightly more decorated and begins higher in pitch.
- ▶ Bowie changes the sound of his voice on the last word, becoming more 'pained'.
- ▶ The fast violin notes return and there is a continuing full texture.

### Suggestions for further listening

It wasn't just Bowie who used space analogies to help his listeners to escape from their 'boring lives' through the lyrics and production of his songs. Try any of these other songs from the era:

- ▶ David Bowie: 'Space Oddity' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYyRH4apXDo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYyRH4apXDo)), 'Starman' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl66hcugfls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl66hcugfls)).
- ▶ Elton John: 'Rocket Man' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtVBCG6ThDk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtVBCG6ThDk)).
- ▶ Chris de Burgh: 'A Spaceman Came Travelling' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=KODskj8gd74](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KODskj8gd74)).
- ▶ The Police: 'Walking On The Moon' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk4WRhPQuyo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk4WRhPQuyo)).

## Tchaikovsky, Ellington and Strayhorn

### Context

Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was a celebrated composer of ballets, among other masterpieces such as his last three symphonies and his First Piano Concerto. *The Nutcracker*, written the year before his sudden and untimely death, was adapted from ETA Hoffman's story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, and is now one of his most famous works, performed frequently by all the major ballet companies, especially at Christmas.

The full ballet was not successful at first, but Tchaikovsky made a 20-minute orchestral suite from it that became very popular in concerts. The March (sometimes called 'March of the Toy Soldiers') occurs early in the ballet, during a Christmas Eve party.

The great jazz bandleader Duke Ellington and his composing collaborator Billy Strayhorn reimagined Tchaikovsky's music in 1960 for a new album, released at Christmas. Rather than simply add jazz chords and beats to Tchaikovsky's score, Ellington and Strayhorn turned *The Nutcracker* into a big-band re-creation, which sounded both original and familiar. It is a hard piece for a band to play well, packed full as it is of syncopations and complex rhythms, but underpinning the March (re-named on the album 'Peanut Brittle Brigade') is an infectious, foot-tapping groove.

Listen to the tracks on the Spotify playlist or here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t-3wFA\\_uow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t-3wFA_uow) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB6PnBLQhho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB6PnBLQhho)).

### Listening activities

#### Comparing two arrangements

Ellington's version of Tchaikovsky's March is what we would loosely call an arrangement – essentially an adaptation of an existing piece for a new ensemble. If you play in an instrumental ensemble or sing in a choir, it's very likely you will have played or sung an arrangement made to suit the kind of ensemble you're in.

However, Duke Ellington has taken this much further than simply rewriting the music for different instruments. In creating a jazz version of this 19th-century ballet music, he has altered the harmonies and the rhythms significantly, while keeping the basic structure and melodic shape the same so that we still recognise Tchaikovsky's music.

Instruments		
Strings/violins/cellos and basses	Woodwind	Brass/trumpets
Specific percussion instruments	Rhythm section/drum kit/bass/piano	Slide
Reeds/Saxophones/Clarinet	Horns/Trumpets/Trombones	Muted
Pizzicato	Vibrato	Sound effects
Solo/improvisation		

Harmony/Tonality			
Major key	Minor key	Key change	Simple chords
Jazz chords	Discords	Chromatic	Cadence

Rhythm			
March tempo	4/4 time	Triplets	Dotted notes
Syncopation	Accents	Off-beats	Quick/slow rhythms
Faster/slower tempo			

Other useful words			
Quiet/loud	Grace notes	High/low	Octaves
Staccato/legato	Crescendo/diminuendo		



Compare the following sections of Tchaikovsky's March with the corresponding sections of Ellington's 'Peanut Brittle Brigade', using your own words and those in the boxes above (times are taken from the Spotify playlist).

▶ Tchaikovsky 0:00-0:29 with Ellington 0:00-1:50

▶ Tchaikovsky 0:29-0:42 with Ellington 1:51-2:09

▶ Tchaikovsky 1:11-1:26 with Ellington 2:47-3:06

### Suggestions for follow-up work

Look for other examples of arrangements of well-known songs or instrumental pieces for different instruments. Perhaps you could have a go at composing your own. Good examples can be found when bands do acoustic versions of their own hits or cover versions of other songs, such as in Radio 1's Live Lounge ([www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p01029mq/radio-1s-live-lounge](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p01029mq/radio-1s-live-lounge)).

## Bill Whelan: 'Andalucia' from Riverdance

### Context

*Riverdance* began life as an interval show in the Eurovision Song Contest, when it was held in Dublin in 1994. The display of mostly Irish music and dancing received a standing ovation from the audience and was broadcast to around 300 million viewers around the world.

Based on this success, and the instant appeal of lead dancers Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, a full-length show with music composed by Bill Whelan opened in Dublin and then London in 1995. It continues to be performed around the world to this day, and has inspired a number of similar music and dance shows.

Listen to the track on the Spotify playlist or here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e\\_gRF5suil](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e_gRF5suil)).

### Listening activities

Listen to the track from the beginning up to around 2:20 (where the sound of dancing feet begins) and circle the correct answer to each of the following questions.

- 1 Which of the following percussion instruments can be heard playing quick, even notes at the very start?
  - Maracas
  - Castanets
  - Guiro
  - Wood Block
  
- 2 Which two words from the following list best describe the singing that enters soon after the start?
  - Male singer
  - Female singer
  - Two singers
  - Choir
  - Rhythmic words
  - Acapella
  - Chanting
  - Vocalising
  
- 3 What else can be heard during this singing?
  - Repeating chords
  - Staccato chords
  - Sustained chords
  - Ostinato
  
- 4 What is the name of the instrument that enters with the melodic material at around 0:26?
  - Electric guitar
  - Classical guitar
  - Ukelele
  - Violin
  
- 5 Which European country is associated with the melody and percussion instruments heard so far?
  - France
  - Italy
  - Ireland
  - Spain
  
- 6 When the melody repeats at around 0:52, which one of the following instruments joins?
  - Bass guitar
  - Drums
  - Electric guitar
  - Piano

- 7 Which new percussion instrument enters at this point, and then more strongly at around 1:18?

**Cymbals**

**Drums**

**Tambourine**

**Bongos**

- 8 Which family of instruments join when the main melody is repeated at around 1:33?

**Strings**

**Woodwind**

**Brass**

**Percussion**

- 9 What does this family of instruments do at around 1:59?

**Stop playing**

**Double the melody**

**Play held chords**

### Composing ideas

Compose a short piece using mainly rhythms from a variety of percussion sounds. You could use things found around the house – boxes, spoons, saucepans, etc – and a multiple-part recording app like Acapella ([www.mixcord.co/pages/acapella](http://www.mixcord.co/pages/acapella)). Start with a simple, even beat and add different rhythms, some fast, some slow, with accents in interesting places. Listen again to the opening of ‘Andalucia’ for some inspiration.

### Suggestions for follow-up work

Though *Riverdance* is primarily a showcase of Irish music and dancing, numbers like ‘Andalucia’ demonstrate that it’s also a good example of fusion – where styles from different countries are merged to create new, exciting textures, harmonies and rhythms. Listen to any of these examples where genres from around the world are mixed with pop styles. Can you tell where these genres originate from?

- ▶ The Corrs: ‘Toss the Feathers’ (video includes Mick Fleetwood of Fleetwood Mac) ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlj3AZe3Sik](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlj3AZe3Sik)).
- ▶ Paul Simon: ‘You Can Call Me Al’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS-sEgxCb-g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS-sEgxCb-g)).
- ▶ Anoushka Shankar and Norah Jones: ‘Traces of You’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEJSWiftX98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEJSWiftX98)).

## ‘Mark it yourself’ answers

Here are suggested answers for the questions in the activities, which students can use to self-assess. Many of the questions are open-ended and there will be a variety of ‘correct’ responses – in these cases, as in exam mark schemes, I’ve provided as much indicative content as possible.

### King Kong: main title – Max Steiner (reconstructed by John Morgan)

- 1 Tam-tam (gong), timpani (kettledrum), clash cymbals
- 2 Fast rhythmic runs/flourishes, high in their range, they play the melody at the start. They have even faster decorative scalar runs covering a wide range and rising/falling when the brass has the melody.
- 3 Brass
- 4 Strings; harp
- 5 A big contrast in mood between the first half (frantic, terrifying) and the second (emotive, reflective).
  - ▶ Melody/harmony/tonality: first half has wide-ranging, often high melodies, with short repetitive phrases. Harmony is dissonant and tonality changes quickly.
  - ▶ Rhythm/tempo: quick and frantic in the first half with syncopation, slower with long note durations in the second half (but with a moving accompanying part).
  - ▶ Instruments/texture: more complex in the first half but both halves have full textures. Use of brass, wind and percussion in the first half, strings dominate in the second with their warmer sounds.

### Follow-up work

- ▶ Rachmaninov: in many movies but most famously *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *Hereafter* (2010)
- ▶ Dukas: *Fantasia* (1940)
- ▶ Puccini: *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* (2015)
- ▶ Tchaikovsky: *Black Swan* (2010)
- ▶ Debussy: *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001)

### Chopin: Prelude in B minor, Op. 28 No. 6

- 1 They begin with a rising arpeggio and fall with a mixture of step and leap. Semiquaver rhythms at the start and slower dotted rhythms and quavers at the end of each phrase.
- 2 Mostly repeating chords throughout, in steady quaver rhythm. There is a short melodic phrase in the right hand on occasion.
- 3 Quite a narrow range of the keyboard is used – slightly wider at ends of sections.
- 4 The shape of the melody is similar all the way through. The specific melody from the start returns at 0:34 and also right at the end, at 1:35.
- 5 Use of rubato (the tempo is flexible, slowing and speeding up to add expression), wide range of dynamics with loud passages in the central section, steady ascending and descending melodic lines, repeating quavers, use of the tonal range of the piano including the pedal.
- 6 The melody makes one last, short appearance and the repeating chords become sparse in texture and rhythm, giving the effect of fading away.

### Follow-up work

- ▶ The Little Mix and Fauré examples share a common harmonic structure, and the Fauré melody appears in the Little Mix song.
- ▶ Billy Joel uses Beethoven’s melody in the chorus of his song.
- ▶ ‘All By Myself’ quotes freely from Rachmaninov’s piece, particularly between verse and chorus. The chorus uses chord progressions from the Rachmaninov.
- ▶ In the Muse song, the guitar riffs are inspired by the melodic shape and rhythm of the Bach.
- ▶ The Pet Shop Boys song is one of many that use Pachelbel’s chord progression.

**David Bowie: 'Life on Mars?'**

Lyric	Description
It's a God-awful small affair to the girl with the mousy hair,	Solo piano accompanies with a descending bass line
But her mummy is yelling 'no', and her daddy has told her to go.	The piano part is slightly more decorated and begins higher in pitch.
But her friend is nowhere to be seen, now she walks through her sunken dream	A second voice harmonises in 3rds below the lead vocal.
To the seat with the clearest view, and she's hooked to the silver screen.	Vocal harmonies at first, but the final words are sung by two voices in unison.
But the film is a saddening bore, for she's lived it ten times or more.	Cellos and double basses accentuate the bass notes.
She could spit in the eyes of fools, as they ask her to focus on	Strings play low, sustained chords as the voice begins to rise in pitch.
Sailors fighting in the dance hall, oh man, look at those cavemen go.	Drums enter and there is a key change. Violins play fast notes.
It's the freakiest show.	The piano plays repeated chords and a high flourish.
Take a look at the lawman beating up the wrong guy. Oh man, wonder if he'll ever know	The fast violin notes return and there is a continuing full texture.
He's in the best-selling show,	Bowie changes the sound of his voice on the last word, becoming more 'pained'.
Is there life on Mars?	The longest and highest note of Bowie's melody is sung on the last word of this line.
Instrumental	A guitar plays a solo comprising short phrases and complex harmony.

**Tchaikovsky, Ellington and Strayhorn**

The words in the boxes give a lot of help and there is much to be said. The paragraph below is intended simply to give students an idea or starting point.

**Tchaikovsky 0:00-0:29 with Ellington 0:00-1:50**

Brass begin the Tchaikovsky in a major key with dotted chords and triplets, in the style of a fanfare. Strings respond with a light, staccato, dotted rhythm, while lower strings play pizzicato. Cymbals accent the chord at the end of each section. In the Ellington, trumpets play the opening fanfare but with different articulation and rhythm, and the rhythm section joins with an up-tempo groove. Saxophones take on the strings' idea, with more dotted rhythms. There is much development of this material, with rhythmic and instrumental changes and lots of high trumpet lines. A muted trumpet takes a solo while saxophones take over the fanfare idea, and later a clarinet has a solo. These solos are probably improvised.

**Bill Whelan: 'Andalucia' from Riverdance**

- 1 Castanets
- 2 Male singer; vocalising
- 3 Sustained chords
- 4 Classical guitar
- 5 Spain
- 6 Bass guitar
- 7 Tambourine
- 8 Strings
- 9 Double the melody