KS3

Hamilton

by Jane Werry

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INTRODUCTION: WHY *HAMILTON*?

Hamilton is the hottest ticket in London's West End and New York's Broadway at the moment – and probably the biggest musical theatre phenomenon for decades.

The mix of hip hop and Broadway, together with a storyline concerning America's founding fathers, has proved to be explosive. It's dripping with musical and cultural detail, and its devotees are positively evangelical. It provides a rich seam of great material for the KS3 classroom, and has the added attraction of being particularly appealing to students.

What value can you extract out of *Hamilton* for your KS3 classes? This resource shows you how to put together vocal and instrumental performances from the show, and use this as a springboard for exploring chords, rhythms, structures, American history, the conventions of musical theatre and hip hop, and creating raps and backing tracks.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through this project, students will learn:

- To perform the instrumental and vocal parts of the show's opening number, 'Alexander Hamilton'.
- Some background to the American Revolution, and the place of the founding fathers in American history.
- How a repeating chord sequence in the key of B minor forms the basis for two thirds of the song, but is played in different ways to provide variety and a build-up of texture.
- How particular compositional devices, such as an ascending bassline and rhythmic motifs, are used to provide drama.
- How textures are manipulated to allow for the optimum dramatic effect of the text.
- How to read chord symbols for an extended range of chord types (7th chords, sus chords, and slash chords, ie F#/A#).
- The importance of diction and good delivery in rapping and singing.
- How to rehearse.
- The traditions of musical theatre and hip hop, and how storytelling infuses both.
- Cadence, flow and rhyme in hip hop and in *Hamilton* in particular.
- How to go about composing and performing an effective rap.

That's quite a lot. To do it justice will take a good few lessons. I have found with my own KS3 classes that it takes four or five lessons to introduce the topic and put together a class performance of 'Alexander Hamilton'. An exploration of the conventions of rap, including a composing project, is likely to take another four lessons.

PERFORMING 'ALEXANDER HAMILTON'

First, it is necessary to establish students' prior knowledge. Have 'Alexander Hamilton' playing as students enter the room, and look for sparks of recognition – in my experience, most students instantly like it, but you will probably have a couple who know it already, and say, 'I love this song!'

Ask a student who knows it to identify it for the class, and establish who has heard of *Hamilton*, and if anyone has actually seen it on stage. Explain, if necessary, that *Hamilton* is a musical that has made waves in the

theatre world for combining traditional musical theatre, hip hop and a historical theme. Tickets on Broadway and in the West End are selling out months in advance, and the show has won a whole host of awards including 12 Tony awards, a Pulitzer Prize, a Grammy, and seven Olivier awards. Part of its uniqueness comes from its casting: composer Lin-Manuel Miranda set out to create a cast that reflects what America looks like today, so the all-white founding fathers are played by a multi-racial cast.

It would be wrong to assume that students already know that the West End is London's theatreland, and that Broadway is New York's equivalent: this information may not have permeated their general knowledge. Make this explicit through discussions, and perhaps add in how the Olivier Awards and Tonys are the West End's and Broadway's equivalents of Oscars.

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA AND HIS COMPOSING PROCESS

My students were surprised to discover that the composer of *Hamilton* is not dead, or even old, and seemed to assume that anything put on in a theatre must be something from centuries past.

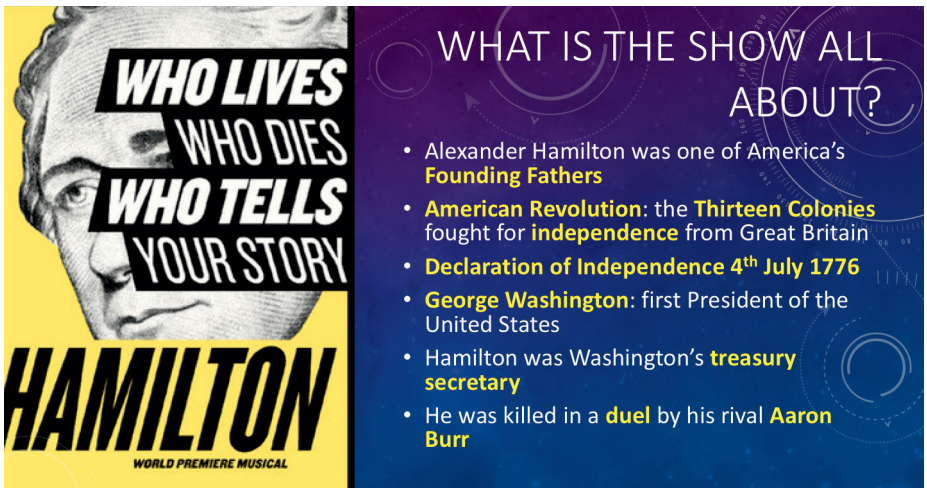
Lin-Manuel Miranda is the embodiment of a theatre scene that is alive and well, and very much living in the present. He is an accomplished freestyle rapper (as seen in this clip from *The Tonight Show*) and freely admits that he started writing musicals because of the scarcity of parts for Latino men – he wanted to be in shows, so he had to write the shows. In this, he has been hugely successful, starring in his first Broadway hit *In The Heights* in 2008 and then creating the role of Alexander Hamilton in *Hamilton* in 2015, having spent seven years writing the show.

The idea for a concept album about the founding fathers came to Miranda while he was reading Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton. He felt that hip hop was an appropriate medium for this, because Hamilton himself used his skill with words to escape his beginnings as a destitute orphan in the Caribbean and become a hero of the revolution and the new American government – just like hip hop artists must use their skill with words to be a success. He wrote the opening number for the album, and performed it in 2008 at the White House poetry jam at President Obama's request.

Miranda spends a long time writing lyrics, drafting and redrafting until he finds the best possible rhymes and layers of meaning. He gives much thought to internal rhyme, assonance, synonyms and homonyms. Chords and melodies come through playing them on the piano or using a sequencing program, and singing and rapping over the top, trying out many different versions. 'Alexander Hamilton' took a year to write, and 'My Shot' took another year. Demos of the songs are recorded by Miranda, and are then notated and arranged for the show's band by Miranda's musical director Alex Lacamoire.

You can view this performance on YouTube. It's notable for two reasons: firstly, just how nervous Miranda clearly is, and secondly, how the audience reacts to the line 'My name is Alexander Hamilton'. The nervous laughter of the audience is in stark contrast to what happens nightly on Broadway, where applause at this point stops the song. It goes to show how strange the idea of rapping about a founding father was to that first audience, but just how much people have taken it to their hearts since.

Students will need a little historical background to understand the show, and this is a good opportunity for some cross-curricular knowledge. Show students some information, such as this (these PowerPoint slides are bundled with this resource):



The first line of 'Alexander Hamilton' includes the words 'bastard' and 'whore' – you will need to decide whether you're happy about your students performing these words. The words can be the source of a further discussion, however – why does Aaron Burr describe Hamilton in such a derogatory way, right from the start? Having the antagonist as narrator is another point of interest: there is a direct link here to the role of Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

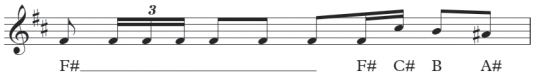
Ask students if they can explain any of the things shown in yellow. This usually uncovers some good pockets of knowledge that they can show off. Anything else, you can fill in. However, the story of Hamilton isn't just about politics: there is the love story of Hamilton and his wife Eliza – and her sister Angelica – and America's first sex scandal, when Hamilton has an affair with another woman.

Once all this has been discussed, it's good for students to see what the show actually looks like on the stage. You can see the London cast of *Hamilton* performing 'Alexander Hamilton' at the 2018 Olivier Awards here. To get a flavour of the whole show, this video consists of ten minutes of clips from the original Broadway production, but be aware that not all of the language is appropriate for classroom consumption: you will need to skip the 'Yorktown' section from 5:10 to 5:35.

Now that students have got the big picture about what the show is all about, it's time to start practising 'Alexander Hamilton'. Just having a go at rapping the opening verses along with the soundtrack audio will bring a few points to light:

- You need to know where there are pauses in the lyrics, and where the stresses go. This is cadence and flow in action. Working out where to breathe is an essential part of rap performance.
- There are rhymes not only at the end of lines, but plenty of internal ones as well. In the opening section, the line 'dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean, by providence impoverished' provides a few good examples of this, as does the second verse with father/farther/harder/smarter/charter.
- Assonance is important too. This is where vowels match but consonants don't. For example, 'guard up/part of/barter' in Thomas Jefferson's verse of the song.
- The accompaniment builds up from the start to give momentum to the song, but always thins out at moments where the words are particularly important. Examples of this are the sustained chords for Hamilton's entrance, and the stab chords for when Aaron Burr's rap gets much more rapid on the line 'There would have been nothin' left to do for someone less astute.'
- The song moves from rap to pitched singing subtly and gradually.

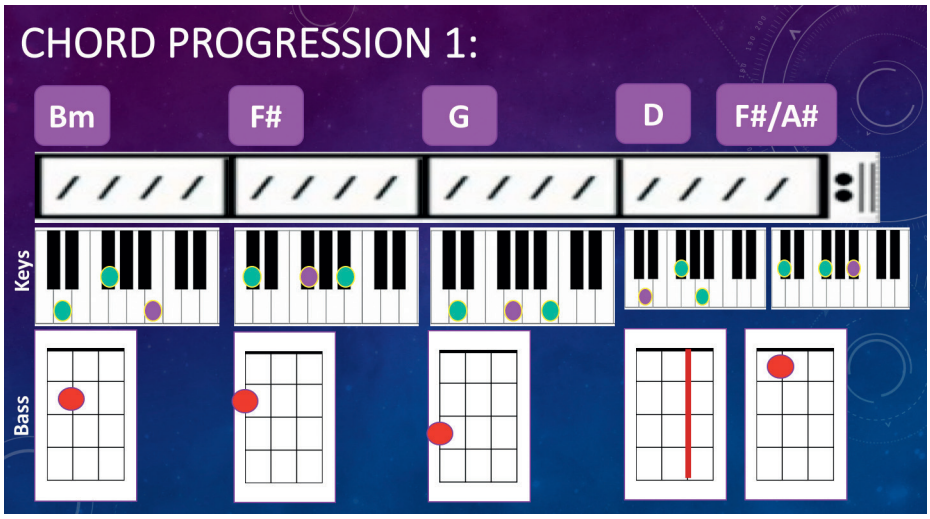
The song begins with an arresting one-bar introduction:



This recurs throughout the show, and is a musical signal that Aaron Burr, in his role as antagonist/narrator, is about to give the audience a chunk of exposition.

Play this bar repeatedly while students use instruments to find the starting note aurally. If they need a clue, you can tell them that it is one of the black notes on the keyboard. Any students who are quick on the uptake can work out the pitches for the next few notes as well.

After the introduction, the first two thirds of the song are built on this chord progression:



The purple notes on the keyboard diagrams show the bass notes of each chord. These are used on their own in the first two verses, and thereafter can be used for differentiation: students who need an easier part can just

play the bass notes, and students who can play with two hands can put the bass notes in with their left hand while they play chords with their right. In-between levels of differentiation can also be created.

Before trying this with a class for the first time, I considered changing the key to A minor to make the whole thing easier to play. However, I eventually decided to keep it in B minor, and was surprised by the ease with which my students picked up playing the chords.

Bass guitar works extremely well in a performance of this song, alongside keyboards. Melodic instruments could take individual chord notes. However, only the most experienced guitar and ukulele players will be able to cope with the range of chords.

It's helpful if students have good knowledge about the basics of how triads work. If they have not already covered this, it would be an excellent thing to do at this point. You will need to take them through the following:

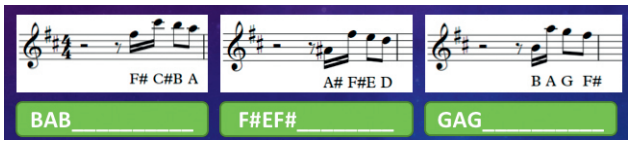
- Where to find the notes on the keyboard, and the naming of the black notes as sharps and flats.
- What a semitone is.
- That a chord is named after its root note, and that an 'm' in the chord name means minor (if there is no 'm', the chord is major).
- That major and minor refers to chords and keys, and that sharp/flat refers to notes *and* chords. B minor is not a note (this may seem too obvious to state, but I have experienced so many times when students have got confused about it, it makes sense to make it explicit).
- For a major chord, count four semitones from the root note, and then three semitones. For a minor chord, count three then four semitones. You can remember this by saying that a minor chord sounds sad – sad has three letters, and so you count three semitones first. For major, you remember the word 'glad' which has four letters, and so four semitones.

It's worth making sure that students get into good habits when actually playing chords. They should use their right hand (the left hand will be needed for playing basslines later – it's worth being uncompromising on this) and ensure that they use their right thumb for the lowest note of the chord in order to avoid a 'devil's claw' hand position.

Once that has been established, and students have done plenty of practice of making chords on any note, you can then explore inversions. Sometimes, students take a while to pick this up, but it's worth spending some time consolidating the concept that a chord is still the same chord if the order of the notes is flipped. Being able to play chords in inversion makes it possible for more flowing and musical performance, as well as actually making it easier to play more difficult progressions. Besides which, we will meet plenty of inverted chords in 'Alexander Hamilton'.

Explain – and reiterate every lesson – how the F#/A# chord symbol works. It is vital that students understand that this means an F# major chord with the A# in the bass. That it somehow means a choice between an F# major chord and an A# major chord is a fatal misconception. The shape of the bassline is often an important factor in a piece of music (as we will find out later in this song).

After a bit of solo practice time on this chord progression, model how the chords are actually played as the song unfolds. At the start, we go through the progression twice, playing bass notes only and clicking on beats 2 and 4. After this, the texture builds up very slightly with a melodic 'wiggle' on the bass note, plus a little response based on the second part of the intro:



In the last bar of the progression, play the bass notes, as before.

It's only the fifth time through that we get to playing full chords. This time (on the verse beginning 'Well the word got around…') the chords are played in repeated quavers:

However, after once through with this rhythm, the texture is thinned again, with sustained semibreve chords to let Alexander Hamilton's first entrance stand out. The sustained chords continue through Eliza's verse,

although note that during the last bar of the chord progression (on the line 'And Alex got better but his mother went quick') the band is tacet (marked 'N.C.' for 'no chord' in the score).

We return to quaver chords for George Washington's verse ('Moved in with a cousin…'), before the texture and mood change completely when Aaron Burr takes back over as narrator ('There would have been nothing left to do for someone less astute').

Here, the cadence and flow of the rap change completely, with a drastically increased rate of words per second. It is because of the rapping in *Hamilton* that Miranda can fit in so much historical detail – there are over 20,000 words in *Hamilton*, and most musicals have well under 10,000. At its fastest (during Lafayette's raps, such as 'Guns and Ships') the word rate is over 200 per minute. The sudden increase in lyrical pace here (although stress to students that the overall tempo does not change) consolidates Burr's role as principal narrator, giving a dramatic edge to his description of Hamilton's determination and rise out of poverty.

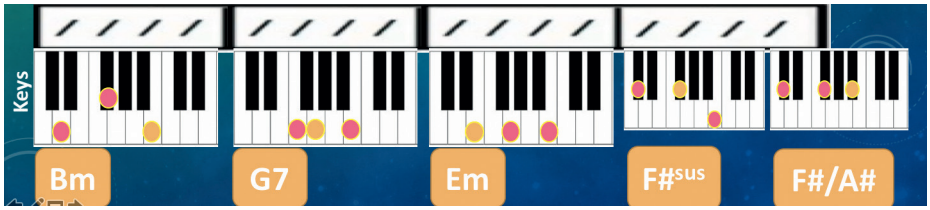
Once you get to the line 'In New York you can be a new man', the chord progression changes. It is better to get to grips with the song up to this point than to try and do the whole thing in one go. It will take quite a bit of rehearsal to get students completely on board with the changes in accompaniment in the first part of the song. Practising along with the soundtrack audio to begin with is a good idea (ask students to turn down their keyboards to about half volume so they don't drown out the backing).

When the instrumental backing is secure, you can add vocals back in. By this point, you are likely to have some students who are dying to play particular parts. Encourage anyone who wants to to have a go, in small groups rather than soloists if they feel more secure. If you teach in a mixed school, adopt a gender-blind approach to casting, otherwise opportunities for girls are limited in this song. Pretty much everyone feels like more of a star if they have a microphone to sing into (and sometimes you can get away with it not actually being plugged into anything).

The aim here is to recreate what happens in the actual show – some of the musicians are on the stage, performing with their voices, and others are in the orchestra pit, playing instruments. You can mix and match to fit the interests and abilities of the students in your class. You could, if time and space allow, put in blocking and choreography. Even if this is not possible, you can rehearse firstly along with the soundtrack recording, and then with one of the karaoke tracks that you can find on YouTube. The ultimate performance would be without any recorded backing at all – this will be considerably easier to pull off if you or one of your students can provide a solid drum beat.

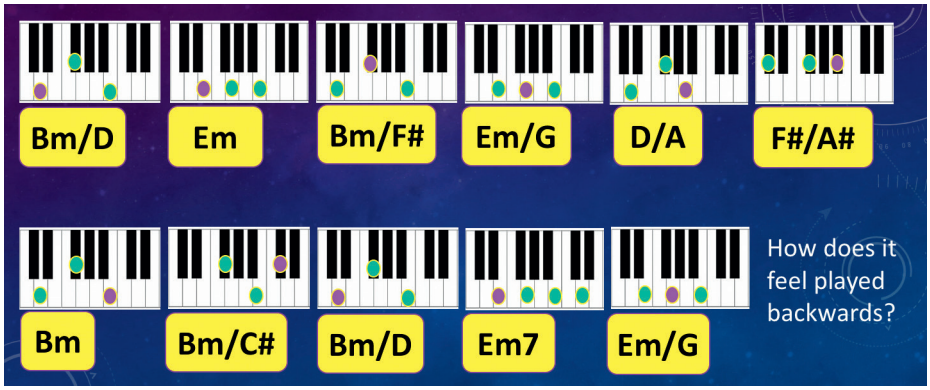
The rest of the song is a little more tricky, mostly because it changes frequently. It will be good for everyone to investigate what happens in this part of the song by playing it, so return singers to instruments for the time being.

In this part of the song there is a chord sequence heard two-and-a-half times:



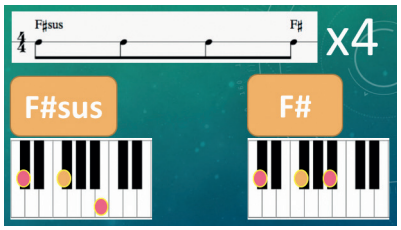
As before, we start on a Bm chord, and finish on F#/A#, so there is little new to learn except what F#sus means. You may have guitarists in your class who have come across suspended chords before, and can explain what 'sus' is short for, and perhaps what it involves. If you have to explain it yourself, say that it is short for 'suspended 4th': here, the 'sus' note is the B, which is four notes above F#, the root note. Most of the time, a sus4 chord is followed by the non-suspended version of the same chord, as it is here: this provides an effective heightening of tension.

The third time through this chord progression, the last bar of it changes, and we move into a part of the song where there is a huge build-up created by an inexorably rising bass line. The chords here are (from the line 'Do they know you rewrote your game?'):

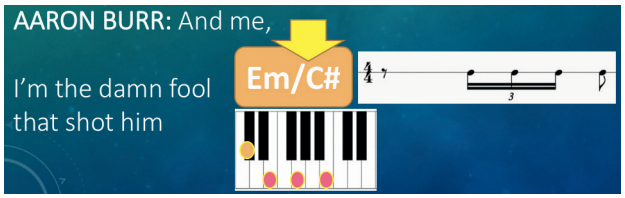


You can rehearse this by getting students to focus on the bass notes (this in itself consolidates their understanding of 'slash' chords). You can fill in the chord notes yourself, along with any students who feel confident to join in. Try playing the progression backwards – what is the difference in feel between the ascending and descending basslines?

Once the rising progression has been rehearsed, the end of the song needs its own attention. The climax of the whole song features the main players in Hamilton's life stating their relationship to him ('We fought with him') over a repeated pattern with prominent use of the F#sus4 chord:



The culmination of this, of course, is Aaron Burr stating his own crucial part in Hamilton's destiny:



Getting the timing of this right, including the quick change from the F# chord to the Em/C#, will take a little practice. You may well need to get students used to counting the four times through the F#sus4-F# progression, as they can get lulled into a false sense of security by its repetition, and just keep going through the next line.

The last few bars of the song feature a reiteration of the intro motif – point out this deliberate structural device to students. The placing of the last chord on the second half of the third beat will require specific rehearsal: my classes have mastered this by saying 'Alexander Hamilton, WAIT, chord!', although it has been difficult to stop them shouting 'wait!' in performance.

VOCAL HARMONIES

It's good to take a little time out from rehearsing the instrumental parts in order to work on some vocal harmonies with the whole class. The best place to start with these is the 'In New York you can be a new man' section, as the harmonies here build up naturally, starting with unison the first time the line is sung.

Using numbers to represent degrees of the B minor scale is very useful here. We are in B minor, so count B as 1 and sing up and down the natural minor scale to numbers 1-8, perhaps building up gradually using the pattern 1-121-12321 and so on. Establish the octave equivalence of numbers 1 and 8, in that they have the same note name.

You can play around with these patterns, creating chord shapes by simply singing 1, 3 and 5 together, or starting on 1, 3 and 5 and then singing up or down the numbers depending on the direction shown by you or a student leader. You can add in a little bit of theory by attaching the names tonic and dominant to numbers 1 and 5, and identify that it is note 3 that makes the difference between major and minor.

The first statement of 'In New York you can be a new man' starts on 1, and uses notes 1, 2 and 3. The second statement moves to two-part harmony, with the upper version using notes 3, 4 and 5 (note that this is a flat 5th, which lends a bluesy touch to the harmony). The third statement build to a three-part texture, with the top line using notes 5, 7 and 8. If anyone asks why note 6 is left out, you can explain that it is to keep the majority of the harmony on a B minor chord, that is, notes 1, 3, 5 and 8.

Notes 5, 7 and 8 also make up the 'Alexander Hamilton' motif heard many times in the song, in the order 8-7-8-7-8-7-5. Having done quite a lot of singing with the numbers, you could teach the motif aurally to the class using its lyrics, and ask them if they can identify which numbers are being used – this is a great way to develop their aural skills. Harmonies for this motif, in both the octave above and below, are on the numbers 1, 2 and 3.

Once the last chunks of the song have been rehearsed separately, you can run the last third of the song (from 'In New York you can be a new man') and then attempt the whole thing, either with the original track, or a karaoke backing, before trying it without any backing, and with all students now in their assigned roles as either a named character, company member or band. Make audio or video recordings of these rehearsals so that the class can listen or watch them back and offer feedback for improvement.

What next for your class if they're hooked?

If, by now, your students are confirmed Hamilfans, they may want more *Hamilton*-themed lessons. 'My Shot' is also suited to classroom performance (with one very minor alteration of the lyrics – 'meanwhile Britain keeps on spittin' on us endlessly' – to make it classroom-friendly), and is mostly based on a repeating chord progression, although the speed of the rapping makes it more demanding for the vocalists.

'My Shot' also includes many musical motifs that appear elsewhere in the show, and an exploration of this could form the basis for some really good lessons. There are many good explanations of motivic development in *Hamilton*, but the best ones I have found are this very rapid overview and this demonstration of how the chord progression from 'Alexander Hamilton' is used in the rest of the show.

A FURTHER EXPLORATION OF RAP

If you've been brought up in the classical tradition, you may feel inclined to write off rap as not being 'proper' music. However, there are plenty that would disagree, and if you look under the surface, you'll find plenty that you can use to scaffold good musical learning.

RAP TERMINOLOGY FOR TEACHERS... TO ENABLE YOU TO *DROP KNOWLEDGE*

- **Bars** = bars (usually with four beats). Surprisingly for a style that came from the US, 'bars' keep their UK English name in rap, rather than the US term 'measure'.
- **Cadence and flow** = the rhythm of the words against the beat.
- **Cypher or cipher** = an informal gathering of rappers and beatboxers, which sometimes includes rap battles.
- **Freestyling** = rap improvisation.
- **Rap battle** = where two rappers freestyle in competition to see who's the best. The Cabinet Battle scenes in *Hamilton* emulate this.
- **Spitting** = performing. 'Spitting bars' is a common phrase.

This video is an excellent introduction to the different styles of rap in *Hamilton*, linking specific parts of the show to tracks by Run DMC and Jay-Z among others, and explaining a little about the use of end rhymes and internal rhymes, and how the different characters establish themselves.

It's really important to understand cadence and flow in rap. There is an excellent explanation of this on the Little Kids Rock YouTube channel, which also gives ideas for how to get students going with coming up with their own rap rhythms in advance of adding real lyrics. In 'Alexander Hamilton', the cadence noticeably changes at 2:04 with Aaron Burr's verse ('There would have been nothing left to do'). Another very different cadence can be found in 'Guns and Ships' – this was made possible by the incredible speed at which Daveed Diggs (who played Lafayette in the original production) could rap clearly.

Indeed, speed is considered a very admirable skill for a rapper, but it's only good if the words are still clear. Students could try the Lafayette sections of 'Guns and Ships' and see how they fare. The next step for students on their journey towards becoming rappers could be to develop slogans – see the next instalment of tuition from Little Kids Rock. This can be followed by an introduction to freestyle rap, with a similar 'give me a word' technique being demonstrated by Lin-Manuel Miranda and President Obama here.

There are many cross-curricular links to English to be had here, with plenty of opportunity to incorporate end-rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, homonyms and double entendre into raps.

Once students have tried out some freestyle rapping and developed their slogans, they could compose verses to go over a backing that they have created themselves, or borrowed from *Hamilton*. Backing tracks from 'Guns and Ships' or the 'Cabinet Battles' could be used for this to start off with (these can be found on YouTube). Alternatively, students could come up with their own backing, perhaps using some of the chords they played in 'Alexander Hamilton', and performing these live, perhaps with beatboxing, or creating backings using technology. The more adventurous could experiment with different metres: there are some unusual metres used for rapping in *Hamilton*. This verse of 'Your Obedient Servant' is in three beats in a bar, and the opening of 'Meet Me Inside' is in 7/4.