Developing wider listening: the Baroque period

KS4/5

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Introduction

This is the first in a series of resources to help students develop their understanding and experience of music from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods, and from the 20th and 21st centuries.

Starting with this one on the Baroque period, each resource will examine the style and characteristics of the music of its time through listening and practical activities. As students prepare for and navigate through their GCSE or A level courses, it's essential that they gain a broad overview of the context and style of their set works so that they can approach wider listening questions – which expect them to have experienced a broader range of music – with confidence and understanding.

Additionally, I hope that students will enjoy developing their 'stylistic ear' through listening to a range of music that they might not otherwise encounter. A general understanding of what makes Baroque music different to Classical, or Classical different to Romantic, will take them a long way, not only in their GCSE or A level studies, but also in their general cultural knowledge.

This resource could be equally valuable to Year 8 or 9 students thinking of doing music for GCSE, and those learning instruments or singing who would like to develop a better understanding of the music they're performing and, perhaps, prepare for those 'style and period' questions in practical exam aural tests.

The Baroque Period

For the last century or so, the word 'Baroque' has been used to describe European music, painting, sculpture and architecture of the period between about 1600 and 1750. It comes from the Portuguese word *barroco* which refers to a pearl of irregular or bizarre shape.

The most obvious feature in all these disciplines is an ornate and elaborate style, often dramatic and showy. In music, textures were often polyphonic, as they had been in the Renaissance period before, but now they were underpinned by a solid harmonic plan.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw much economic growth and scientific advancement in Europe. European colonisation of other parts of the world – especially the Americas – brought wealth to the continent, and powerful leaders held much influence over the arts through their patronage and support of painters, writers, architects and composers.

The biggest patron was the church. Keen to be seen as progressive, it supported the desire among Baroque artists to be dramatic, decorative and showy, and to demonstrate affluence and opulence in all they created. It wasn't all for the church and the aristocracy though – as the 18th century progressed, the growing size and affluence of the middle classes led to the building of opera houses and concert halls for public entertainment.

▲ Inside the Palace of Versailles near Paris, an example of opulent Baroque decoration

There was an emerging sense of national pride, and three key countries – Italy, France and Germany – dominated the music of this time with their own very individual styles. There were a lot of new and diverse genres, and sacred and secular compositions were written in equal measure, as were vocal and instrumental music.

Composers became more aware of the emotional power that their music had on the listener, so dramatic genres such as opera grew quickly in the Baroque period. The growth in popularity of instrumental music and the technical advancements of instruments led to new genres such as the sonata and concerto becoming common, and more demanding music being written for gifted performers. Instruments also became more important within vocal music genres, such as operas and oratorios.

Baroque musical style

Before looking in more detail at some of the developing musical genres of this period, let's get an overview of Baroque style in general with some listening activities.

Comparison: two 'different' Baroque examples

Listen to the opening chorus from JS Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, which was written in 1734. This performance (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVewzMm1uts**) takes place in the Church of St Thomas, Leipzig, where Bach himself was in charge of the music when he wrote this oratorio (his monument outside the Church is pictured on page 1). This is a celebratory chorus, intended for performance on Christmas Day.

As you listen with your students, get them to consider the following questions and make notes for discussion afterwards:

- What instruments can be seen or heard in the orchestra? Describe the music played by:
  - the strings and woodwind
  - the trumpets and timpani
- How does what the orchestra plays relate to the music sung by the choir?
  - The opening word of this chorus translates as 'Rejoice'. In what ways does Bach communicate a mood of celebration in his music? Think about aspects of rhythm, harmony, pitch and texture as well as the use of dynamics.
  - In what ways might this music be described as 'showy'? How does it match the ornate surroundings of St Thomas's Church, as seen in the video?

Now let's listen to a secular (non-sacred) piece of instrumental music, also appropriate to the winter season. It's the first movement of 'Winter' from Vivaldi's famous *Four Seasons*, a set of four concertos for solo violin and orchestra published in 1725. They were probably written a few years earlier when Vivaldi was working either in Venice or Mantua, in the north of Italy. This (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ltQGDOCP9I**) is a recent performance with David Garrett as the soloist.

Points for discussion here could be:

- Which orchestral instruments do we see and hear in this piece? What is the harpsichord doing?
- The music is full of decoration: what examples of ornaments can you hear?
- How are dynamics used to give the piece a sense of drama? What about rhythm?
- The written music is marked (by Vivaldi) with phrases such as 'a horrid wind' and 'chattering teeth'. How does Vivaldi convey the coldness of winter in this music?

Having listened to both extracts a couple of times, get the students to write down (in the form of a list, word cloud or mind map, perhaps) any common musical features that might be characteristics of Baroque music. Once this has been done and discussed, an overview of their findings could be compared with this list of the clearest aspects of Baroque style:

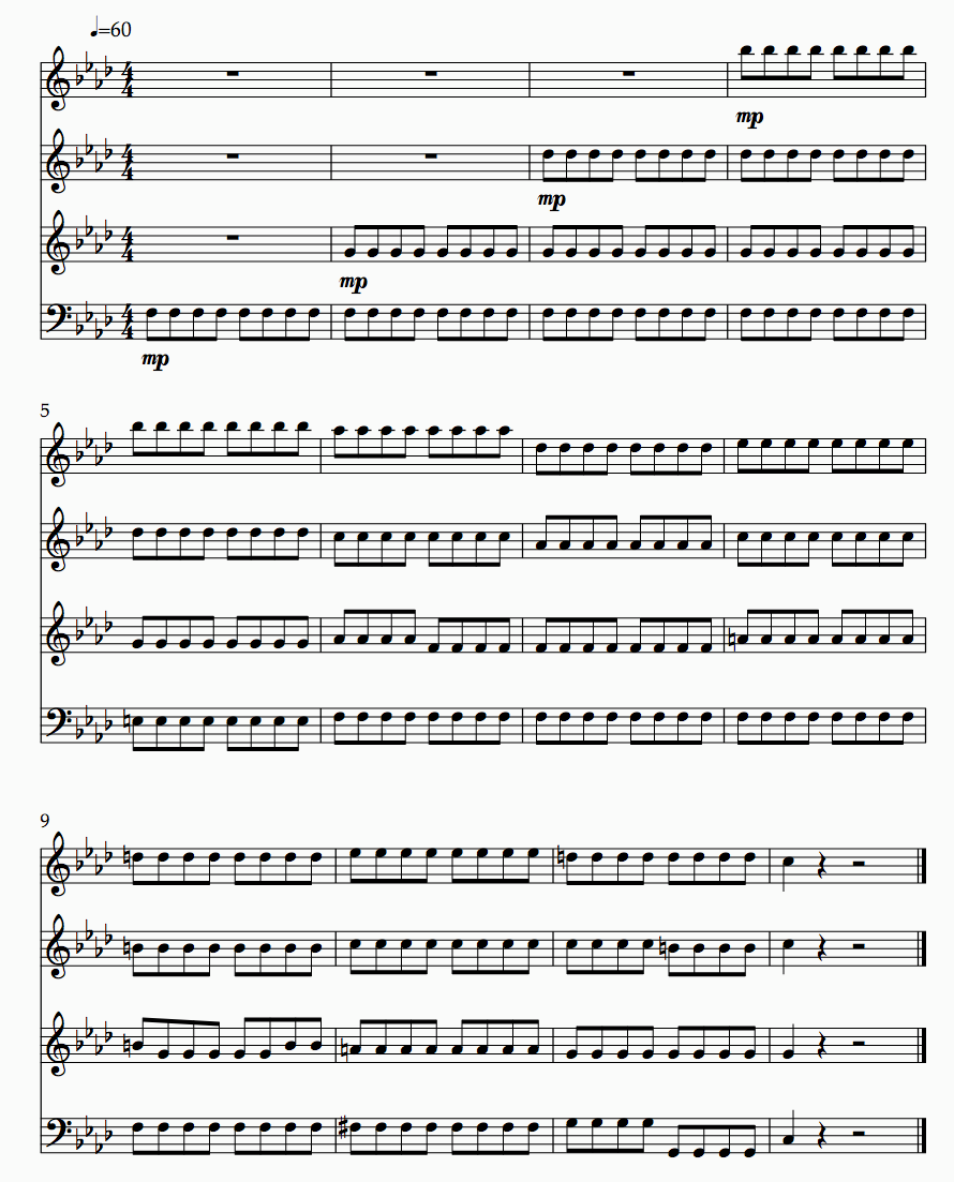
- Showy, dramatic music with vivid contrasts.
- Lyrical and highly decorated melodies (this was especially true in Italian music).
- Virtuosic music for solo instruments.
- Clear harmonic and tonal structures with cadences and modulations to related keys.
- Contrasts between dramatic homophonic and complex imitative textures.
- Focus on the words in vocal music.
- The use of the basso continuo, which gave rise to the importance of keyboard instruments like harpsichord and organ.

'Winter': further listening and score-following activity

This video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYNDAoMT4Qk**) provides excellent context for 'Winter' and gives students an opportunity to follow the printed score while the music plays – this will be very useful later in preparation for the next activity and for the section on texture below.

Playing activity

The score below of the opening of 'Winter' is easy to play as a class activity, using whatever instruments are available. Get the students to concentrate on separating the notes, making them short and spiky, and perhaps decorating them with very short trills as demonstrated in the Garrett video. As they play, ask them to listen for the way in which Vivaldi uses dissonance and resolution to intensify the coldness of winter.



Baroque style deconstructed

A sense of drama and spectacle underpins much Baroque music, but underneath the showy, exciting surface lie the melodic and harmonic 'blueprints' that influenced pretty much all Western classical and popular music in the 400 or so years that have followed. The music of JS Bach especially has been studied and imitated by students and composers the world over.

To understand the style better, let's focus now on specific elements through more listening and practical activities.

Texture

The word texture describes how many different lines of music can be heard, and how they interact with each other. Medieval chant, for example, started out being monophonic, meaning that there was a single melodic line. By the time of the Renaissance (around 1450-1600) many lines of music wove around each other in a complex polyphonic texture, using devices like imitation where one part cleverly follows another with the same or similar material.

By the peak of this period, counterpoint (the interweaving of maybe four or five imitative parts) was the order of the day, to such an extent that a body called the Council of Trent was set up by the church to reform sacred music and prevent it from overwhelming the meaning of the words with complicated contrapuntal textures.

As a result of this, composers started to think more vertically, and homophonic textures, where lines moved together making chordal progressions, started to become more common. You can hear this in Gabrieli's awe-inspiring sacred piece *In ecclesiis* here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3U47JuKxnw**): the opening couple of minutes alternate between winding polyphonic lines and rhythmically catchy homophony. As you listen, imagine the effect of its first performance inside the spellbinding St Mark's Basilica in Venice, where Gabrieli worked.

▲ St Mark's, Venice, with its two choir galleries allowing for a dramatic live 'stereo' effect

The opening of Vivaldi's 'Winter' (in the score above) shows his preference for homophony, and the opening from 'Spring' is a good example of the emerging taste for lyrical melody with homophonic accompaniment that made his music very popular. Here's a video with score of 'Spring' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPaUtnJTMn8**).

Composition activity

Ask your students to compose a short passage of music in a simple major key which focuses on a homophonic melody-with-accompaniment texture.

A good way to start this is to pick some straightforward primary chords and arrange an accompaniment figure (perhaps for piano, guitar or strings) that either repeats these chords in a rhythmic pattern (such as in 'Winter' above) or separates their notes out in a broken-chord style, such as in the second movement of 'Winter', which you can view at 4:10 in the video we looked at earlier (**https://youtu.be/bYNDAoMT4Qk?t=250**).

Then encourage them to write a slow-moving, high melody (perhaps for violin or flute) that uses just a few notes (perhaps the first five of the major scale) and projects clearly above this chordal accompaniment. If done well, the result should be a clear, lyrical texture typical of the Italian Baroque style.

Back in Germany, the style was equally dramatic but with a liking for busier textures. Melody was important, but it was often used as a starting point for clever and exciting imitation and counterpoint. Bach and his contemporaries laid down the blueprints for a good many forms and genres of music, not least the fugue.

A fugue (the word comes from the Latin meaning 'to flee') is a composition where three or more parts enter one after the other with the same melodic idea, in imitation, as if 'chasing' each other. Bach wrote his 48 Preludes and Fugues (also called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*) for keyboard, two in each key, but fugues also appeared in many larger works such as cantatas. Composers after Bach such as Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Britten all used fugues in their music – Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, for example, ends with a huge fugue where each instrumental part enters separately.

Analysis activity: Bach's Fugue in C minor

This fugue from Book 1 of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob93Bkdksek**) is a good one to look at as an introduction to a complex structure.

In the video above, it's presented not with a score, but with an animation that clearly shows the different 'voices', each entering after the one before with the same or similar melodic material. First the alto voice enters by itself (in turquoise), then the higher soprano voice (red) which starts a 5th higher. Later, we hear the bass voice (blue) starting on the tonic note.

Get your students to look at and discuss what the other voices do when the main melody (called the subject) is playing, and also ask them to spot the different entries of the subject.

Harmony and tonality

The relationship of chords to each other – what we call harmony – and their increasing sense of belonging to a key – what we call tonality – really took hold in the Baroque. Prior to this time, harmony had been largely a by-product of the movement of horizontal lines that tended to follow patterns known as modes – the same modes that several hundred years later became the mainstay of much jazz and pop music. Baroque composers slowly but steadily established a harmonic and tonal language that built up or relieved tension and helped the listener to understand the structure and direction of their music. We call this kind of harmonic and tonal writing functional because it had a structural and dramatic role in the music.

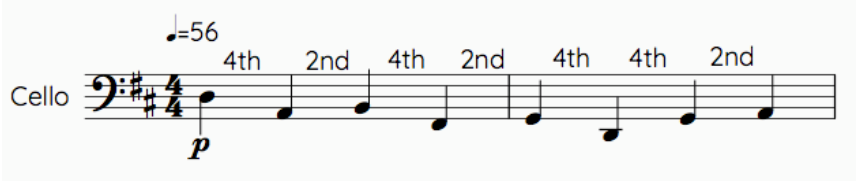
The system of major and minor keys and their relationships with each other was fully developed by the late part of the Baroque, and cemented by Bach in his 48 Preludes and Fugues. Additionally, it became normal for Baroque music to have a bassline and harmonic part, usually played by a keyboard instrument (often harpsichord for secular music and organ for sacred music) and supported by a cello or similar low-pitched instrument, that was called a basso continuo. This provided a secure and clearly signposted structure over which lyrical melodies could soar and textures could be varied. Rather like the architecture of the time, Baroque music was both ornate and strong in foundation.

▲ An ornately decorated harpsichord

It's no coincidence that Johann Pachelbel's famous Canon in D, probably written around 1700, has found huge popularity in popular culture over the last 50 years or so. Though not particularly well known until recently, the piece demonstrates Baroque harmonic, textural and melodic style very clearly. The following activity will help students to understand more about the harmonic language of the Baroque, and how it continues to influence us today.

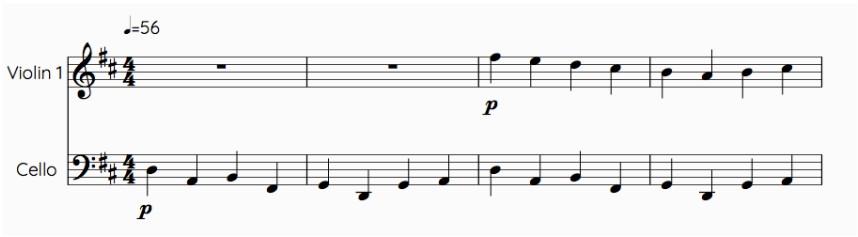
Analysis through performing: the harmonic language of Pachelbel's Canon

Students can start by playing (on any suitable instrument) or listening to the bassline of the Canon in D, most commonly played by a cello:



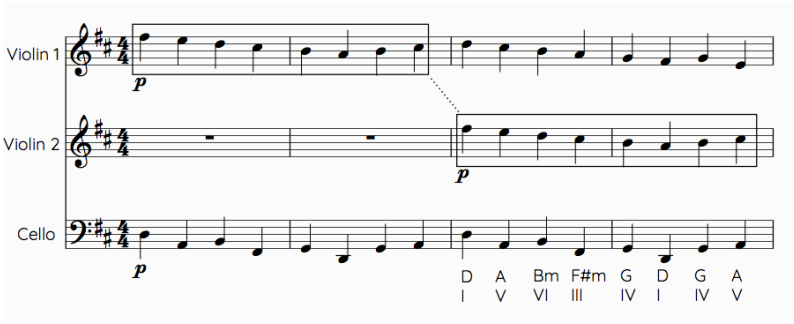
The notes alternate between falling 4ths and rising 2nds, before rising a 4th and a 2nd at the end of the pattern (and then another rising 4th back to the tonic).

Now get them to add the first violin part, as below:



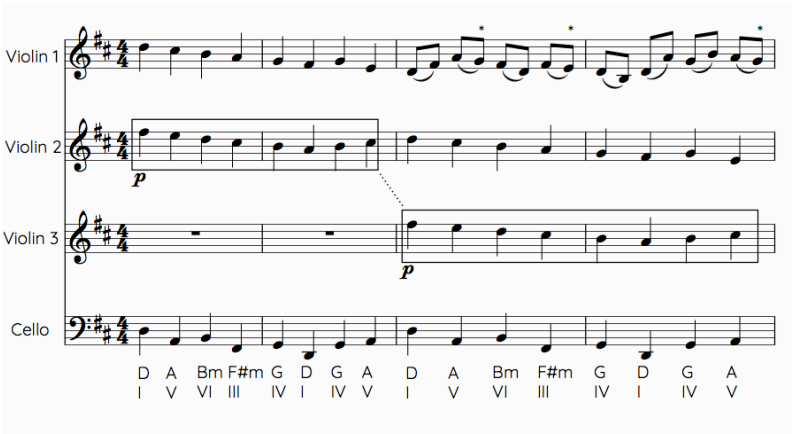
This part is more melodic than harmonic, moving in step downwards and rising at the end. However, if you take each cello note as a root, each of these melodic notes form the 3rd or 5th of the chord.

Next, the second violin takes the part just played by the first violin (shown by the boxes), and the first violin adds a new line:



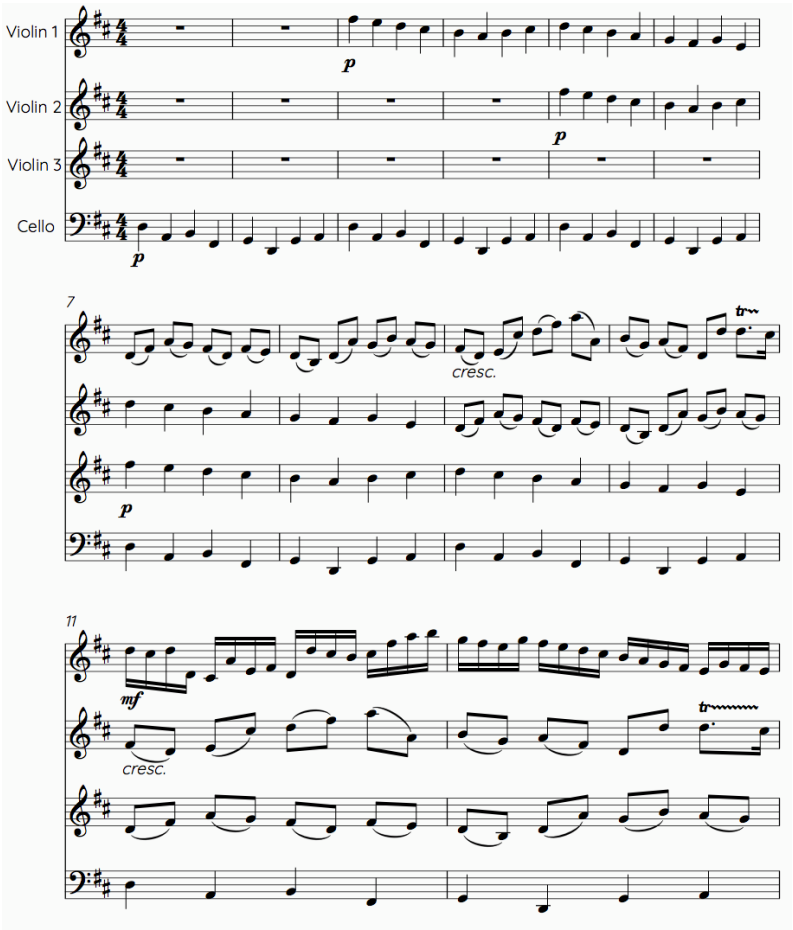
Now we have fully fledged chords, all in root position and all belonging to the key of D major, with no dissonant notes. Pachelbel has shown us in no uncertain terms that this piece belongs to the key of D, and has cleverly written the violin parts so that they repeat each other exactly – hence the title Canon in D.

Here's the third violin part:



Students will see here that the first violin is now playing quavers, adding in extra harmony notes and occasionally some non-harmony passing notes (marked *), which add a little colour to the harmony and interest to the ever expanding texture.

Here's the full score for the first 12 bars, showing how the harmony remains the same, providing a solid foundation. The violin parts get steadily more interesting in texture and rhythm, adding more non-harmony notes, but still remaining in strict canon.



This study provides a neat explanation of how Baroque composers viewed harmony – as a clear and solid structure against which they could continue to place their decorative and dramatic melodic lines.

There's a useful performance, with score, of Pachelbel's Canon in D here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm3JNk7pdzk**).

Melody, rhythm and instrumentation

There are a number of other characteristics typical of the Baroque style. Through some more wider listening, let's look some of them.

The list below gives a fairly broad cross-section of music from across the period and from a variety of sacred and secular genres. These examples are packed full of Baroque features, and I've included some targeted questions to help students focus on different elements.

- Handel: 'I Know that My Redeemer Liveth' (from *Messiah*) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtU1c5JZfok**)
- Corelli: Concerto grosso in D, Op. 6 No.4 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=3smZkpqXYHs**)
- Monteverdi: 'Pur ti miro, Pur ti godo' (from *L'incoronazione di Poppea*) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=_isLoE-4TsQ**)
- Albinoni: Adagio in G minor (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eLU5W1vc8Y**)
- JS Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdsyNwUoONo**)
- Rameau: Les cyclopes (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9jV4_tEtXQ**)
- Handel: Music for the Royal Fireworks (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNqJ8mED1VE**)
- Giovanni Gabrieli: Sonata pian e forte (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2yPh_v6Xwo**)

When focusing on melody, consider the following questions:

- What ornaments can you hear (trills, turns, mordents, grace notes)?
- Where there are words, what does the composer do to ensure that they are clear? Can you hear any examples of word painting, where the melody brings out the meaning of the words through its shape or use of decoration?
- Can you identify what makes these melodies lyrical (song-like, pleasing to listen to)?
- Can you hear repetition of phrases in these melodies? Are the phrases all the same length or do they differ?
- Can you hear any examples of dialogue – interaction between two instruments, two voices or between a voice and instruments?

When focusing on instrumentation, consider the following questions:

- It was in the Baroque period that instruments began to be given equal roles to voices, after years of vocal domination. What examples of instrumental 'equality' can you see or hear?
- Which examples above use a basso continuo, where a keyboard instrument and bass instrument (such as cello) provide a harmonic foundation?
- Look out for 'typical' Baroque instruments such as harpsichord, violin and theorbo (a kind of lute). How are they exploited? What examples can you find of virtuosic (showy) writing for violin or keyboard?
- Baroque instrumental music is very string-dominated. Where and how are woodwind, brass or percussion instruments used in the examples above? How do they compare to wind, brass and percussion instruments of today?

Finally, some questions about texture, harmony, tonality, rhythm and structure:

- Remind yourself about the importance of functional harmony and tonality in the Baroque – chords and keys that help to give structure to the music. What examples can you hear?
- Which pieces are in the major key, and which are in the minor? Can you hear any key changes?
- Can you hear any examples of dissonance, particularly used for dramatic or emotional effect?
- What examples of homophonic and polyphonic/contrpuntal texture can you spot? Can you find any antiphony – a texture where two instruments or groups of instruments repeat or 'echo' each other?
- What features in the music listed can be described as dramatic or emotionally intense?
- How is rhythm used to create drama and excitement?