'Carol of the Bells': a Christmas resource

Richard Barnard

Introduction

If you're looking for a good jumping-off point for Christmas season creative work and music making with your students, a good choice would be 'Carol of the Bells' ('Shchedryk'). The piece has a fascinating and engaging history that resonates with current political events. It combines accessible simplicity (it's built on one of the most potent earworms in music!) with complex musical ideas that can stimulate many areas of creativity for you and your students. This resource gives you ways of using the piece and its many interpretations to lead activities with your students. These activities include discussion, performance, listening, analysis, lyric-writing, arranging and composing.

A song for our troubled times

The background to the 'Carol of the Bells' can resonate with current events and issues that students may be concerned about. As a way of learning the melody and the historical and cultural resonance of the piece, teach the class the first Ukrainian lines to the original song. The words can be hard to get quickly, so begin by asking them to echo back one-bar phrases by ear, then use two-bar phrases and finally ask them to sing back the complete four bars.

One-bar call and response

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'Carol of the Bells' composer Mykola Leontovych
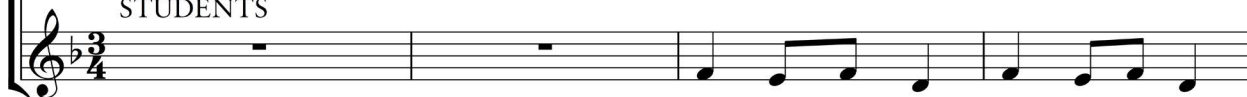
Two-bar call and response

▶ Original Ukrainian text: Ще́дрик, щедри́к, ще́дрівочка, При́летіла ла́стівочка…
▶ Transliteration of Ukrainian: 'Shchedryk, shchedryk, shchedrivochka, pryletila lastivochka…'
▶ English translation: 'Evening of plenty! A little swallow flew in…'

To hear how to pronounce the Ukrainian in preparation to teach your students, this YouTube video gives a clear and accurate performance (the complete Ukrainian lyrics are sung halfway through, from 1:00): **www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqeJ38DThVc**

You may want to kick off the session without giving students any background introduction, launching into the call-and-response activity to teach them the first lines of the piece phonetically in the original Ukrainian language. You could then ask the students: do you recognise the tune? What language do you think you're singing?

This can lead on to a discussion about Ukraine, traditional music and the background to this piece, and how it became part of Christmas and New Year traditions in different countries.

The Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych composed the song over a hundred years ago, using a four-note fragment of traditional Ukrainian folk music. He was interested in the folk music traditions of his culture and used these as inspiration for his own music. 'Shchedryk' was first performed as an unaccompanied choral work by students at Kyiv University in December 1916. Leontovych was heavily involved in the independence of Ukraine from Russia during a turbulent time in the nation's history. He was persecuted by Russian authorities and eventually assassinated in 1921. He's regarded as a martyr within the Eastern Orthodox Ukrainian Church, and he composed the first liturgy to use the modern Ukrainian language.

Leontovych's composition also shows how a piece of music can be transformed and adopted by other cultures. A song can mean different things to different people. It was originally a New Year song (in Ukraine, this is celebrated later than we do in the UK) and the lyrics were about the coming spring, with a swallow arriving and promising blessings of wealth and family. It was changed into a Christmas song in the 1930s in the USA, and its popularity spread throughout the world. Many people have recorded the song, from choirs to pop singers and film composers.

Performing

The piece is accessible and fun to perform. If you want to learn and perform the song vocally with your class, various versions of the choral piece with English words (still under copyright) are available. Alternatively, you could use a simple instrumental arrangement like the one below to get the whole class performing together with a range of instruments and abilities:
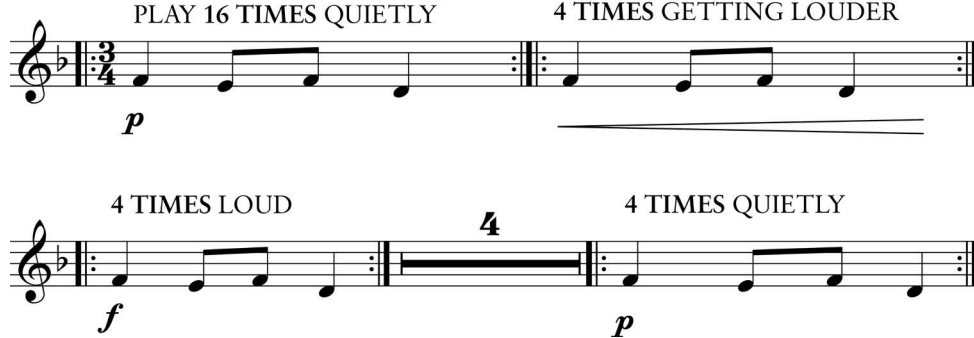
Simplified version for two parts

This would work on most instruments with a minimum of rehearsal, perhaps teaching by ear alongside notation reading or note names written under the pitches. The 'Melody' part (dividing into two parts briefly) could be performed by your more confident students, with the 'Bell' part played by less confident players who would benefit from a slow regular accompanying part within a small range of notes. You could also add an even more straightforward part learned by ear without rehearsal by looping the first bar throughout, stopping from bars 20 to 24 (with a conductor's cue). This could be good for less confident performers, or if you need to include an extra group of students quickly and easily.

Easy ostinato part

If you want to teach this quickly by ear, you could condense and simplify this further by teaching the ostinato through call and response and then presenting students these instructions to follow:

▶ Quiet x 16
▶ Crescendo x 4
▶ Loud x 4
▶ Silent! x4
▶ Quiet x4

Use this performance activity to identify the structure of the piece. Discuss the idea of a repeated ostinato and arch structure, with a continual, slow build to a climactic high note (bar 17) then back down to a quiet ending. Other examples of this ostinato structure are Ravel's *Boléro* and the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7. You may want to ask your students to identify what makes a successful ostinato: does it need to be simple enough to provide a solid base and fade into the background at times? Should it be musically attractive and catchy enough to bear repeating over and over? Will it fit easily with other ideas and layers to form an interesting piece?

Arranging

Take the version of the carol above and explore ways of arranging and orchestrating this piece with your group. You could use a call-and-response structure in the melody part (eg exchanging four bars between different instruments), bringing instruments in and out to accentuate dynamics. Which instruments would work best as the 'Bell' part and which as the 'Melody' part? Could you try adding different octaves lower or higher?

To illustrate the way harmony is used, you can point out the added 3rds above the melody from bar 13. Try your own version of this simple harmonising technique by adding 3rds above the Bell part in bars 9 to 12 (B flat, D, B flat, D).

Listening

This song is a useful example of the malleability and 'living' nature of songs, even in the classical and choral world where a lot of music is notated and published. Successful pieces that capture the imagination of listeners are often shared, reinterpreted and rearranged by different musicians. There have been hundreds of different versions of 'Carol of the Bells', often with varied and imaginative interpretations. Here are some versions to listen to and watch, showing the evolution of the song from its original choral version to a rich array of interpretations from musicians across the globe:

1 Choral: Bel Canto Choir Vilnius **www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUmvUy1LziE**
2 Vocal: Upper Voices – Cimorelli **www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSC05dZ42v8**
3 12 Cellos Arrangement – The Piano Guys **www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9GtPX6c_kg**

As you watch the videos, discuss with your students how versions 2 and 3 compare with version 1. Ask them to identify and describe what they recognise from the first version and what's different.
Here is an example of a comparison with the original choral version sung by Bel Canto Choir Vilnius:

	Cimorelli Version	12 Cellos Version
What's similar to the original full choir version:	▶ Voices only, no instruments. ▶ The main melodies, harmonies and bassline remain. ▶ The general structure of the arrangement is the same, building from a single ostinato. ▶ It's in the same key of G minor.	▶ The main ostinato melody appears throughout. ▶ Some harmony parts, basslines and chord sequences are the same. ▶ There's a similar sense of building layers and climactic moments.
What is different to the original full choir version:	▶ English words, not Ukrainian. ▶ Female voices only, without lower voices. ▶ Faster tempo. ▶ Close-mic studio vocal sound with very processed, 'clean' voices (unlike the natural acoustic sound of the choir). ▶ Additional vocal lines with more syncopated rhythms (eg at 1:00 in the video). ▶ Fewer dynamic contrasts, with less pronounced swells and crescendos. ▶ A different ending: slowing down and adding a vocal 'bell chimes' coda.	▶ No words. ▶ Cellos instead of voices. ▶ Faster tempo. ▶ Played in a different key of A minor. ▶ Shifts time signatures throughout (starts in slow 4/4 moves to fast 3/4 and changes to 4/4 again at 1:45) ▶ The main ostinato tune is introduced in a fragmented way over a new background ostinato and beat. ▶ A different, longer structure: the original tunes are played in a different order, repeated more times, and it combines with another Christmas song halfway through, 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman'.

Home Alone: analysing a film score

To demonstrate how the 'Carol of the Bells' can be adapted creatively and used in famous film scenes, show your students a clip of the classic Christmas favourite *Home Alone*, with a score by John Williams. In the scene in which Kevin leaves the church we hear the choir perform in the background, moving through various choral pieces and ending the scene with 'Carol of the Bells' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZxyTbSfTBc**).

The song moves from background 'diegetic' music (this is music that the characters are hearing themselves) to non-diegetic underscoring of the emotion of the scene. As the voices hit the high note of the melody, the music is interrupted by a deep chiming bell and faster drumbeat. It is then transformed into a more dynamic orchestral film score as Kevin runs out into the street. Notice how it subtly develops the familiar 'Carol of the Bells' ostinato tune: it is played by the high synth/strings a few times before shifting it into a new melody with more abrupt chord changes.

Lyric writing

As mentioned earlier, various people have written English words to this song, most famously Peter Wilhousky. Why not invite students to come up with their own words for the tune? Set a class task for students to work in six small groups, writing a verse each. They must set four lines of the song, and these will build up to the 'Merry Christmas' line at bar 21.

VERSE 1
VERSE 2
VERSE 3
VERSE 4
VERSE 5
VERSE 6
VERSE 7: Merry, merry, merry, merry Christmas!
Merry, merry, merry, merry Christmas!
VERSE 1 repeated

Students should make sure the syllable rhythm of every line is: LONG SHORT SHORT LONG (eg 'Snow on the ground'). Verse 6 can have extra syllable in lines 1 to 3 if students wish, or use a melisma to keep the same syllable structure if that's simpler. Rhyming is optional!

Analysing: bringing scales to life

Examining the original full-choir version, the piece is an excellent example of the melodic minor scale in the wild. There are clear examples of how the scale lowers the 6th and 7th notes (C natural and B flat) when descending and raises them (to C sharp and B natural) when ascending. But don't leave the analysis there. Dig deeper with your students into what musical and emotional effect this has and why the melody does this.

For example, the descending lower notes in the bells give a deeper emotional pull downwards, since the B flat to A is a smaller interval and the notes are closer together. This makes it feel more 'inevitable' and pleasing to the ear. It also creates a more consonant B flat major chord with the melody, rather than a harsher B diminished chord (play both chords to demonstrate). Conversely, the raised notes (melody bars 21-22) feel higher, brighter and more buoyant, suiting the words 'Merry, merry, merry, merry Christmas!' In the English version. It also outlines an A7 chord (notice the A-C sharp-E-G on the main beats of the tune) which creates a satisfying perfect cadence into the D minor in bar 25.

Composing

Now you've performed, arranged, analysed and compared various versions of the song, it's a great opportunity to do some composing work with your students. Set them a task to write a short Christmas piece inspired by 'Carol of the Bells'.

General ideas to help students begin their compositions

▶ Use an ostinato, either in the melody or accompaniment.
▶ Use a melodic minor scale.
▶ Add harmony by adding a part a 3rd above or below.
▶ Use an arch structure, and build to a particular moment in the piece and die away again.
▶ Include the sound of chiming bells: how can this be conveyed by voices or instruments that are not associated with bell sounds?
▶ Take the lyrics you wrote for your version of 'Carol of the Bells' and set them to a new melody.
▶ If you insist on a different time signature, tempo and key (perhaps also in a major key), this will make sure it is a fresh idea and not too influenced by the original.
▶ Take a one-bar fragment of a different folk song, or less well-known Christmas or winter song, and extend it into an original Christmas composition.
▶ Take the descending bassline of the 'Bell' part bars 5-8 and use this as your bassline ostinato.

A scaffolded composing task

A lot of students need guidance and help to move through the process of composing a piece. It can be easy for students to lose a sense of momentum, and for their confidence to ebb away. Consider giving a step-by-step scaffolded approach for them to follow, inspired by the 'Carol of the Bells'. This can work with individuals or a whole group, and it involves demonstrating the process in a quick, engaging collective way for students to learn from and apply to their own composing work. Using this ostinato build-up technique lends itself well to music technology (Garageband, Soundtrap, Logic, etc) where you can quickly set up loops and add layers.

▶ **Step 1:** compose a one-bar ostinato. Aim for something catchy, simple and easy to loop. You can use group improvisation to generate this (eg set up a pulse, give a starting note or scale if needed, then encourage students to try out melodic ideas until they have something they like). Here's an example of a one-bar ostinato:
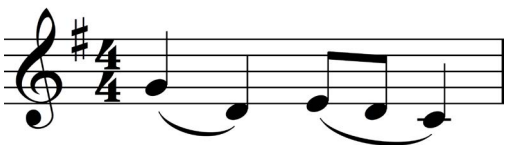
▶ **Step 2:** turn this into an ostinato by looping it four times, for example:

▶ **Step 3:** keep repeating the ostinato but develop each four-bar loop in some way to add a sense of building momentum. Use some of the following tools to do this:
  ▶ Add a drone.
  ▶ Add a slow bassline.
  ▶ Add a harmony to the ostinato (eg same melody up a 3rd).
  ▶ Add another harmony to create three-note chords (eg same melodic outline up a 5th or 6th trying out options until you find something you like).
  ▶ Add or change instruments.
  ▶ Add octaves above or below.
  ▶ Build dynamics.

Here's an example of developing the ostinato using the suggested tools:
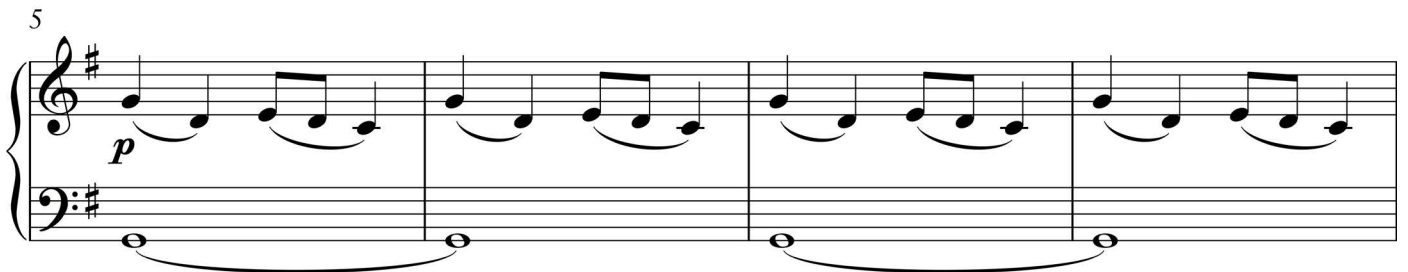
▶ **Step 4:** compose a climactic, loud section replacing the ostinato with a new musical idea. This could be a new version of the ostinato, crashing chords, rising or falling scales, or a fanfare-like melody.

▶ **Step 5:** bring the music back down to the quiet opening ostinato, repeating it a few times to finish. Find a satisfying (and extra Christmassy) way to end the piece!

sleigh bells

▶ **Step 6:** make sure you've notated, recorded or captured the musical details in some way.

▶ **Step 7:** share and evaluate the composition. Ask students to describe what they liked most in their composition and how it relates to 'Carol of the Bells'.