

Christmas projects for in-school and remote work

KS3/4

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Introduction

The sheer length of the autumn term can mean that there are a couple of weeks left in December when you might have finished your planned schemes of work, and are reluctant to begin a new meaty topic that would be better off with a clean January start. Something seasonal might be nice, but in 2020 you need flexibility for any combination of in-school and remote learning that you may be dealing with in any particular week.

This resource is a selection box of ideas that you can choose from and adapt to suit your own situation. Listening, researching, composing and tech are all included and given a Christmas slant that could be made into a mini-topic or something more substantial, depending on your requirements.

'I Wonder as I Wander': investigating some interesting festive music

The starting point here is listening to some contrasting arrangements of a haunting American Christmas classic, together with an exploration of its origins. This will provide a springboard for students' research into some other seasonal music, which may culminate in the creation of a playlist or a podcast.

The 20th century saw a surge of interest in folk music. Cecil Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams in England, Leoš Janáček in Moravia, Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók in Hungary – all are examples of musicians who sought to collect folk songs in order to preserve them, and to inform their own musical styles.

One of the leading folk revivalists in America was John Jacob Niles (1892-1980). 'I Wonder as I Wander' was composed by Niles after he heard a fragment of a song sung by a young girl called Annie Morgan at an evangelical meeting in rural North Carolina in 1933. In his diaries, he describes how she stepped to the front of the platform with her ragged clothes and untidy hair, and sang a few lines of a haunting melody. He paid her a quarter (25 cents) to repeat it for him while he wrote it down.

He later used the fragment as the starting point for a complete song, extending the melody to create a four-line verse and adding more verses. It is sometimes misattributed as a traditional song, whereas it is in fact Niles's composition, albeit based on a fragment of something older, and of unknown origin. Since its publication in 1934 it has become a firm favourite in the Christmas repertoire, both in the US and around the world.

Like many Christmas songs with great melodies, 'I Wonder as I Wander' has inspired a wide range of very different versions. Once students have learnt about the origins of the song, it would be great to get them to listen to a selection of these, perhaps doing some detailed listening to a couple of them, and ultimately justifying their choice of favourite. Here are some very different ones to get you started:

- ▶ Steve Pilkington's choral arrangement (www.youtube.com/watch?v=aw_bNM2InDw) is one that is very often sung at Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols. It creates a lush variety of different choral textures and harmonies, bookended by verses sung by a solo mezzo-soprano.
- ▶ Barbra Streisand released a version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR61trVDbyQ) on her 1967 Christmas album. One of the slowest versions around, it has an orchestral accompaniment with musical theatre touches.
- ▶ This version by La harpe de melodie (www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQWqkOir75k) is a soprano

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duet with harp accompaniment. It is more direct and has a faster tempo, but the two voices still create some intriguing harmonies.

- ▶ Benjamin Britten's arrangements can always be relied upon to bring something different to a song, and his version of 'I Wonder as I Wander' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zesQoJYqILY) is no exception. Large sections are left unaccompanied, with the piano adding improvisatory interludes between each verse.
- ▶ Perhaps one of the quirkiest arrangements is the one written by Luciano Berio for his wife Cathy Berberian to sing (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eEyhnOBgA8), from his larger song cycle *Folk Songs*. The tempo is noticeably faster than many other versions. The voice is accompanied by flute, clarinet, viola, cello and harp, and there is a duet for the flute and clarinet that leads into the next song in the cycle.
- ▶ YouTube star Lindsey Stirling released this version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rR8jc6EPQM) on her 2017 Christmas album. It combines folk-tinged violin with a new-age electronica vibe and autotuned vocals: students may well enjoy this one!

Some focused listening based on the elements of music can give structure to activities both in school or as remote learning, and can help to reinforce students' understanding of musical terminology. The terms that you use here will depend on what your students have learnt previously. For example, thinking about texture for a Year 7 student might focus on how many different things they can hear going on in the music, with language such as 'thick and thin', while at GCSE you may well expect them to use terms such as melody-and-accompaniment, polyphonic, imitation and so on. Likewise, the amount of scaffolding that you provide depends on your knowledge of the class. If they are already used to using musical terminology under elements headings, you may want to use this as an opportunity for students to recall terms themselves. If they are less used to this, they may need a list of terms to choose from, or even a fill-the-gaps kind of exercise.

Here is a structured comparison of the Steve Pilkington arrangement and the Lindsey Stirling version as a guide. You could adapt this to cover any of the other versions you wanted your students to focus on, or – if appropriate – give them free choice to find other versions of the song:

	General comments	Steve Pilkington arrangement	Lindsey Stirling version
Melody	A common difference in interpretations of this song is the fifth note, on the word 'I'. Is this the same as the fourth note, or does it go up by step to the sixth note? Also, you could bring relative pitch into the frame here, together with any ornamentation that is added.	Higher pitch: melody range of opening solo Db4-F5. Fourth and fifth notes same pitch. The melody is treated quite plainly in some ways, but in the third verse is passed to different parts of the choir.	Lower pitch: melody range A3-C#5. Fourth and fifth notes different pitch. She also fills in passing notes on the penultimate line of the verse on 'as I wander', and adds a lot of grace notes to the melody, even more when she plays it on the violin. A lot of her ornaments have a Celtic inflexion. When she plays the melody on the violin, she uses a much wider range. In the central part of the track, the original melody is chopped up into fragments, interspersed with new melodic material.
Harmony and tonality	Because the melody is so triadic, the minor tonality is usually clear, and nearly all versions have a tonic pedal until the penultimate line of each verse. However, the simplicity of the melody also lends itself to lush and sometimes plangently dissonant harmonies, so some feel for how 'scrunchy' the chords are can be sought.	Harmony is more complex, chromatic and 'scrunchy', particularly in the third verse. Second and fourth verses are broadly the same, with a pedal note in the basses for much of the verse, with an added 9th chord on the pause in the penultimate line. The third verse has a descending bassline and lush harmony, with an added 11th chord on the pause.	The harmony is less varied than in the Pilkington arrangement, with the same chord progression used in each verse: the focus is on texture and melodic treatment rather than the chords.
Instruments (and voices)	The Pilkington arrangement is a cappella: if students have the vocabulary to describe the voices heard, that's great – but otherwise, they should be encouraged to describe whether the voices heard are male/female and high/low, and how the melody moves between parts.	Mezzo-soprano solo with SSAATTBB choir. The melody is with the soloist in the first and last verses, with the choir sopranos in the second verse, and it passes through S, A and T in the third verse before returning to the sopranos.	The violin is the most prominent instrument, and there is also a Celtic-sounding flute. The multi-layered percussion track includes resonant finger-clicks and an array of synth pad sounds. There is autotune on the voice and generally a lot of reverb.

	General comments	Steve Pilkington arrangement	Lindsey Stirling version
Texture	Texture is always a tricky element, as textures are quite often not clear-cut. However, students can be encouraged to listen for changes in texture as the song progresses: how does the number of different things going on change?	Monophonic texture in the first verse. Broadly melody-and-accompaniment texture in the second verse, with bass pedal note and ostinato patterns in the inner parts. More basic homophonic texture in the third verse (focus here is on the harmony, and the melody moving between parts). Fourth verse very similar to second, now with soloist singing melody, and extra countermelody in choir sopranos.	At the start there is an ambient pad/drone sound, and a feeling of dialogue between the vocal melody and the violin licks. Once the tempo speeds up, the texture thickens to include multi-layered percussion and vocal snippets. There are frequent instances of a sudden thinning of the texture, so that the accompaniment can come back in with even more impact.
Tempo and metre	As well as overall tempo, students can focus on where tempo changes within the verses of the song, including how the pauses in the last two lines of each verse are handled.	Marked crotchet = c88, with flexibility given by pauses and caesuras, some of which are quite long, particularly in the last verse. There are changes of metre at the end of each verse with bars of 4/4 and 7/8, as well the pauses, which interrupt the flow of the pulse, making the music feel unpredictable and organic.	The first verse is slower and feels improvisatory. The tempo picks up from 0:48 to about 112bpm, and the accompaniment gets more rhythmic. The pauses are metrical and do not interrupt the triple time feel. Towards the end, the tempo returns to the original slower speed.

Once listening to a variety of versions of the song has been completed, don't forget to ask your students to choose a favourite, justifying their choice with reference to the musical features.

More activities: research, playlists and podcasts

There are many other Christmas songs with interesting back stories and a plethora of arrangements and recorded versions. Students could research some more of these. Particular pieces worth investigating include these:

'Silent Night' ('Stille Nacht') was first performed on Christmas Eve 1818 in Obensdorf, Austria. The organ in the village church had been damaged by flooding, so the local music teacher, Franz Xaver Gruber, was asked to compose a melody with guitar accompaniment for some lyrics that the parish priest had written previously. The new carol was an instant hit, and was picked up by some travelling folk singers who helped to spread its popularity. By the 1840s it was well-known in central Europe, and was said to be a favourite of King Frederick William IV of Prussia.

Gruber's melody was somewhat different to the one we know today. There are plenty of recordings of the original version: this one by the Vienna Boys Choir (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqUw4PgvytU) shows the notation so that you can spot exactly where the differences are. The song remains a Christmas favourite, and there are many different arrangements. Bing Crosby's version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GUnfLPjLs) from 1935 is the fourth best-selling single of all time, and the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, (www.youtube.com/watch?v=no36kBC1HEw) often include it in their service of Nine Lessons and Carols. For a more modern a cappella version, check out Pentatonix (www.youtube.com/watch?v=sme8N2pzRx8), and be sure not to miss Schnittke's mind-boggling 'wrong-note' arrangement (www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJhsodS61tl).

Also find out about the origins of:

- ▶ 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town'
- ▶ 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing'
- ▶ 'Deck the Halls'
- ▶ 'Good King Wenceslas'
- ▶ 'All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth'
- ▶ 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas'
- ▶ 'O Tannenbaum'

Students could present their research in the form of a playlist with explanatory notes, or as a podcast.

Creating a music podcast – even a short one of four to five minutes – involves many different skills. You need to research your topic and write a script, select and edit audio extracts, and then construct the finished product with consideration for balanced sound and listener attention. It is quite a meaty project for students to get their teeth into, and thanks to free programs that they can use from anywhere, could be an ideal one for remote learning.

If students have a Mac or an iOS device, they will have GarageBand. If not, they could use the free Anchor podcast app, or a free cloud-based sequencing program such as Soundtrap. Soundtrap even enables students to work collaboratively even when they are out of school. There are plenty of excellent YouTube tutorials on how to create podcasts with each of these programs. All but the most media-savvy students will need quite a lot of guidance as to the steps they need to go through in order to produce their podcast. A step-by-step list such as this one will help:

- 1 Choose a Christmas song from the list.
- 2 Research the origins of the song and write down at least four interesting things about it.
- 3 Listen to some different versions of the song. Pick three contrasting ones. Find out when they were made and any interesting background information (if they were created for a particular occasion, if they have been in the charts, etc).
- 4 Make a list of the main musical features of each of your three chosen versions.
- 5 Compile all of your background info to the song, and the information about the three versions, into a script for your narration, planning where the musical extracts will go.
- 6 Record your narration. You could do this using the voice memo app on your phone, or record directly into GarageBand or Soundtrap on a computer with a built-in or USB microphone. Cut the narration track where the musical extracts will go, and create space to insert these.
- 7 You will need MP3 files for each of your chosen versions. Plan where you will use extracts of these in your podcast. Do not have any musical extracts of more than 30 seconds in between narrated sections. It would be good to start with a musical extract – which section of which version would work best?
- 8 Edit your audio extracts: trim them and use fade in/fade out to move seamlessly into and out of narrated sections. Put each musical extract onto a separate track – this will make it much easier to assemble your finished podcast. You might decide to have music playing *under* the narration, in which case you will need to automate the sound level so that it is quieter under the spoken part.
- 9 Assemble everything so that the musical extracts and narration go in the right order. Make sure that editing is tidy and that fade in/fade out of each musical extract works well. Check the balance of each track so that nothing is too loud or too quiet.
- 10 Bounce out the audio of your finished podcast to submit to your teacher.

Assessment rubrics can be very useful for this kind of project, as they act as success criteria and an assessment tool. They can be on paper, or if you use Google Classroom or the iDoceo teacher planner app, electronically shared with students. Here is a rubric template for a music podcast project:

	Excellent (4 points)	Good (3 points)	Satisfactory (2 points)	Working towards (1)
Research and content	Interesting, relevant information chosen. Keeps to the topic. Communicates well to the listener and is effective in informing them. Musical extracts are well chosen and relevant; musical analysis is accurate. A good balance between factual content and analysis/opinion.	Information is mostly relevant and interesting. There is some feeling of there being a clear point to what is being said. Musical extracts are mostly well chosen, and there are some musical details included. There is some factual content and some analysis/opinion.	There are some facts about the music, or some opinions given, but the balance between these two aspects may be unbalanced. There are some musical extracts. The main points may be unclear to the listener, who may feel uninformed by the content.	There may be inaccurate information given, or a lack of factual information or analysis/opinion. Insufficient musical extracts, or insufficient narration to inform the listener.
Presentation style	Fulfils time requirements (3-5 minutes). Time used efficiently. Clear diction and a positive, natural tone.	Efficient use of time. May be slightly too long or short. Mostly clear narration but there may be a few awkward moments.	Some sections may be too long/short, or overall time requirements not met. Some narration may be unclear, awkward or monotone.	Significant difficulties with fulfilling time requirements. Narration difficult to understand.
Technical proficiency	Audio is clear and easy to understand. Editing is smooth, with good transitions and balance.	Audio is mostly clear and easy to understand. Editing is mostly smooth; there may be a few minor problems with balance or transitions.	Audio quality is poor or narration is difficult to understand. Editing, transitions or balance may detract from the narration.	Poor audio quality makes it hard to understand. Editing is poor and transitions are abrupt, detracting from the narration.

White Winter Hymnal: a performing, arranging or sequencing project

The song 'White Winter Hymnal' was released in 2008 by Fleet Foxes, and was rated as one of the top singles of the year. Since then, many artists have covered the song, most notably Pentatonix and Birdy. The Pentatonix version has a clapping/body percussion accompaniment that it would be fun to learn with students: there is a YouTube tutorial (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Digarwudttg) for this.

The song is unusual in that it is quite harmonically static, and reliant on similar-motion harmony parts. It is therefore quite straightforward to teach aurally, or to work out by ear. For your reference (or even for students', if appropriate) there are sheet music videos of the song on YouTube such as this one (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTRvDxwBi24).

The song can be used as a lesson in how to build harmonies underneath a melody. In the whole of the first section (up to 'and I turned round and there you go'), the harmonies are built with the noticeable omission of the 7th degree of the scale (C sharp in Pentatonix's key of D major). You could explore this vocally if current restrictions permit, or perhaps using Boomwhackers or other tuned permission if vocal work is out of the question.

D is 1. Sing or play up and down a D major scale in a 1, 121, 12321 building pattern – but leave out 7 (C sharp). Once you have got the hang of this, start at the top, and create the inverted pattern, again leaving out the 7 so it goes 8, 868, 86568 and so on. Put this together in two groups with the original 1, 121 pattern and experience contrary motion. However, this is not what happens in 'White Winter Hymnal'. Practise starting your scale on a different number, and going up (remembering to omit 7), down from 8 (again, no 7), back to 1 and then back up to the starting number. Build up to having three groups, one starting on 1, one on 3, and one on 5. This is what you will end up with:

1	2	3	4	5	6	8	6	5	4	3	2	1
3	4	5	6	8	6	5	4	3	2	1	2	3
5	6	8	6	5	4	3	2	1	2	3	4	5

The eagle-eyed among you will have worked out that by removing the 7s, every chord is either D major or E minor: chords I and ii within the key of D.

If you're teaching remotely, it would be possible to do this as a two-part vocal exercise with students if you put together a multi-tracked recording of yourself singing both parts: one panned hard left and the other panned hard right. Students then have the support of singing with you, or can be challenged to take one earphone out and maintain a part without your help.

Once this method of creating harmonies has been established, you could use it as a springboard for a range of 'White Winter Hymnal'-related tasks. These might include:

- ▶ If in school, you could build up a performance of the song, vocally if possible, or using instruments, perhaps adding the Pentatonix body percussion.
- ▶ Students could create a sequenced version of the song, using a free cloud-based program such as Soundtrap or Bandlab, either working by ear or from notation as appropriate.
- ▶ Confident singers or instrumentalists could use an app such as Acapella or Loopy HD to create a solo, multi-layered performance of the song.
- ▶ A new composition using similar techniques with harmonies in similar motion, perhaps using the same technique of avoiding the 7th degree of the scale.
- ▶ For the more adventurous, create a variation on 'White Winter Hymnal' that uses different intervals to harmonise (quartal harmony could be interesting), or omitting a different degree of the scale, or exploring different textures such as contrary motion or imitation, or putting it into a minor key or a different mode.