

Christmas music for visiting music teachers

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

Christmas is inextricably linked with music. There must surely have been more music written for, or about, Christmas than any other subject (love songs probably come a distant second place). Take a moment to think of just how many pieces of Christmas music you instantly recognise: carols, popular songs, film themes, movements from oratorios, motets, and so on. Some are religious, some secular, and they cover a full range of musical genres. Yet we have only a small window of around a month to enjoy this feast of music.

In this resource I will be looking at how we can incorporate Christmas music into our teaching. How can we continue to provide high-quality educational content in our lessons, rather than just mindlessly playing through a few token carols?

'Fun' repertoire

Christmas marks a short period of time when we can put aside the exam pieces we've chosen for our students, without fear of complaints from parents, and focus on fun Christmas pieces, which students actually want to play. Perhaps they need a bit of 'down time' after taking an exam, or there's just time to take a short break from the exam pieces they're preparing for the Easter or summer exam sessions.

But wait. That statement has a number of problems. First, we need to make it clear to parents that we follow our own curriculum, which is more far-reaching than an exam syllabus. Non-exam pieces should make up a large part of our teaching all year round. Secondly, shouldn't exam pieces be fun too? And shouldn't we allow students to have a say in choosing exam pieces, rather than us imposing them? If you find that your students suddenly become more engaged and motivated by Christmas music, perhaps you should be finding repertoire that similarly stimulates them all year round.

When is it acceptable to play Christmas music?

Last June I heard 'O Come All Ye Faithful' wafting through the wall of a neighbouring teaching room at one of my schools. I was horrified. Surely no parent or teacher wants to hear the same carol being played from October to December, let alone from June.

Most of us complain about decorations being put up prematurely and Christmas music being played in shops from October onwards. While there may be some exceptions, as a general rule I'd suggest limiting Christmas music to December.

But what if it takes a student several months to learn a Christmas piece? I've written before about the importance of building up technical, musical and reading ability so that students can learn repertoire quickly, rather than spending a disproportionate amount of time learning a small number of exam pieces by rote (see [Learning to read music, Music Teacher, May 2022](#)). If a student takes several months to learn a piece, it's clearly too difficult for them. If they have the necessary skills and the piece given is at an appropriate standard, it shouldn't take more than a few weeks to learn. Give them something easy: the chorus of 'Jingle Bells', for example, is a very simple five-note tune that should be playable by the most basic of beginners.

An exception to the December rule may be if you direct an ensemble and need a few weeks of rehearsal time for a Christmas concert. In this case, you may need to start rehearsals after half term, but preferably not before. A school brass ensemble I direct has been well trained to sightread through a lot of different repertoire during the course of a term, and we only focus on pieces for performance a week or two before the concert. We normally require just a quick run-through the week before the school carol service, and don't play these pieces to death, week after week.

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Finding educational benefits in Christmas music

I will now look at some ways we can develop students' aural, theory and general musical abilities using different aspects of Christmas music.

Intervals

A good knowledge of intervals is essential for musicians (with the possible exception of drummers). The ability to know how music sounds from how it looks on the page is at the very essence of reading music. While the importance of reading intervals is most obvious for singers, it applies to all instrumentalists. String players need to judge intervals carefully in order to play in tune; brass players will mis-pitch or split notes if they don't anticipate the pitch jumps accurately. Even pianists, who enjoy the luxury of having fixed pitches on their instrument, need to make a connection between the shape of the notes on the page and the distances their fingers need to move in order to play them. Singing should be an integral part of all music lessons, and interval practice is essential, regardless of whether intervals feature in the aural tests of your chosen exam syllabus.

Here's a list of some intervals at the beginnings of Christmas songs. It's not quite complete – can you fill in the gaps?

- ▶ Minor 2nd: 'White Christmas'
- ▶ Major 2nd: 'Unto Us Is Born A Son'; 'Silent Night'
- ▶ Minor 3rd: 'Jingle Bells'; 'Angels from the Realms of Glory'
- ▶ Major 3rd: 'While Shepherds Watched'
- ▶ Perfect 4th: this seems to be by far the most popular interval for Christmas music. Among the examples are: 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing'; 'Away in a Manger'; 'Infant Holy'; 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'; 'The 12 Days of Christmas'; 'Walking in the Air' (from *The Snowman*)
- ▶ Tritone: ??
- ▶ Perfect 5th: 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'
- ▶ Minor 6th: ??
- ▶ Major 6th: 'The Holly and the Ivy'; 'The Three Kings' (by Cornelius)
- ▶ Minor 7th: ??
- ▶ Major 7th: 'Star Carol' – see extract below
- ▶ Octave: the 'Christmas Song' ('Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire')

John Rutter's 'Star Carol' (https://youtu.be/XTSz_wTEfC8?t=28) has a wonderful sequence of intervals in the refrain, including an octave, major 7th, major 6th and perfect 5th, within the general outline of a descending scale.

The 'Christmas Song' ('Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire') (www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhzxQCTCl3E) features assorted intervals, which are set out with the alternative lyrics of The Music Theory Song: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFo74CL5vjI

Scales

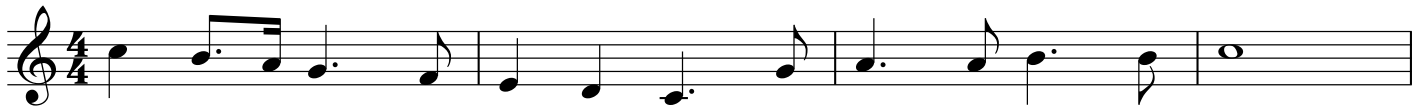
We all know that pieces are made up of fragments of scales and arpeggios, which is why those musical forms are so important in our musical development. Students, however, often fail to grasp the link between a good knowledge of scales and a fluent performance of pieces in different keys. Rather than just playing dry, boring scales in isolation, try to put them into practice by playing pieces that are particularly scalic. There's a rich seam of scalic music to be exploited at Christmas.

Students often have poor strategies for practising scales. A bad routine will go as follows: play the first few ascending notes; break down; go back to the beginning; play them again; break down; play them yet again, repeating the same mistakes; break down; lose interest and play something else, or get frustrated; put their instrument away and play with their phone. The first five notes may be reasonably fluent as a result, but they seldom even get as far as the descending half of the scale.

Major

'Joy to the World' and the 'Christmas Song' ('Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire') are both particularly good for scale practice because they start with descending scales:

Joy to the World



The Christmas Song



'The First Nowell' is a tune that could have been specially written for scale practice, with repeating patterns helping to consolidate the top section of the scale:

The First Nowell

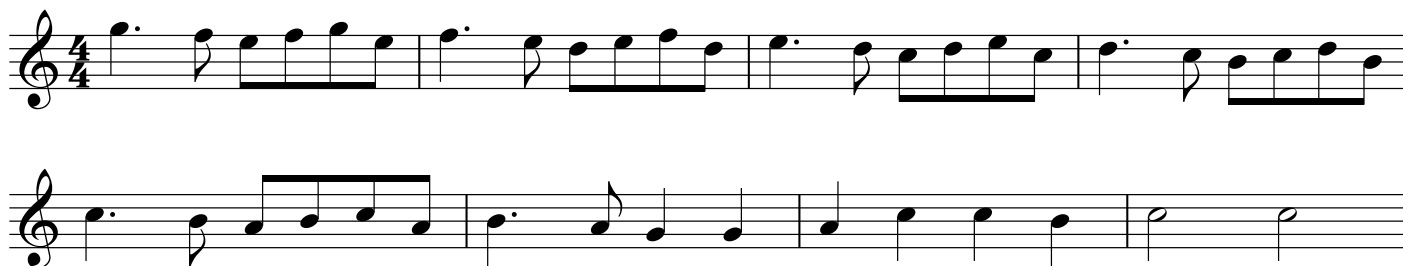


For more advanced students who have learnt their scales, we can introduce scale patterns. Particularly good examples can be found in 'Angels from the Realms of Glory' and 'Ding Dong Merrily on High':

Angels from the Realms of Glory

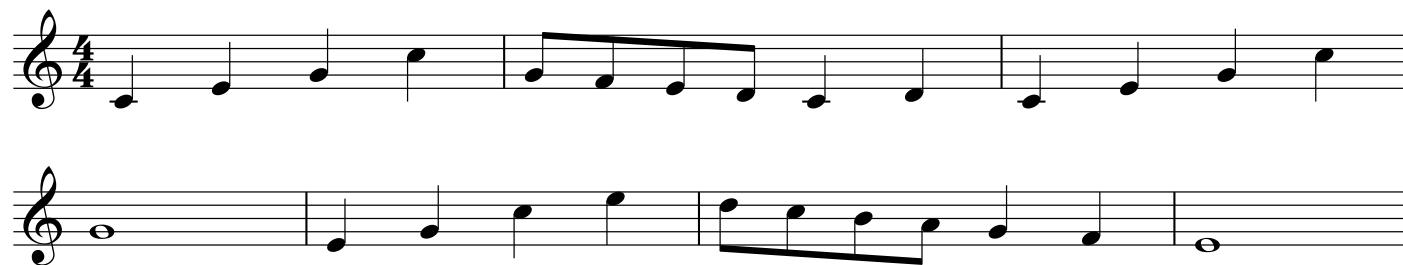


Ding Dong Merrily on High



For arpeggio practice, 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' starts with ascending major arpeggios and also has descending chunks of scale.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas



There is plenty of scope for using arpeggios to play accompaniments to carols, which often have simple harmonic progressions, such as 'O Holy Night'.

Minor

Examples of carols in a minor tonality are:

- ▶ The 'Coventry Carol'
- ▶ 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentleman'
- ▶ 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'

Many minor carols date from medieval times and are based on modes, rather than aligning to harmonic or melodic minors which may be more familiar to students. For more advanced students, this can lead to discussions about modes and the evolution of tonality.

Pentatonic

For a pentatonic seasonal song, we can look at 'Auld Lang Syne', popular at New Year.

Chromatic

An excellent chromatic exercise is to play the opening phrase from 'White Christmas', starting on every degree of the scale. If a student wants to continue the phrase, they get a bit of major scale practice to boot:



Further exercises in developing a knowledge of key and harmony

For a bit of fun, try changing the tonality: can you play a major carol, but in a minor key, or vice versa? What's the effect?

Although almost all pieces finish on the tonic, can a student identify the degree of the scale on which a piece starts?

Examples starting on the 3rd include:

- ▶ 'Jingle Bells'
- ▶ 'The First Nowell'
- ▶ 'O Holy Night'

These start on the 5th:

- ▶ 'Once in Royal David's City'
- ▶ 'Silent Night'
- ▶ 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer'

Playing by ear and transposing

If you've been working on particular scales, ask your students to play these tunes by ear in the key they've been working on. If the piece is notated, ask them to transpose it into a different key, regardless of whether it's usual to transpose on that particular instrument. For players who routinely transpose, such as trumpet players, it's a good illustration of the importance of learning scale patterns: we don't transpose each note in isolation, but transpose sequences of notes. It's a little like translating a language: you do this sentence by sentence rather than word by word, which would give a very stilted effect.

Other exercises:

- ▶ Take it in turns to play phrases by ear, perhaps two bars each.
- ▶ Try doing an improvisation on a tune.
- ▶ Can you improvise a harmony part?

Time signatures

We can also use Christmas tunes to develop an understanding of time signatures. A tune that starts with an anacrusis changes the nature of the phrasing, so it's interesting to compare tunes that start on the first beat of a bar with those which start with an upbeat.

- ▶ 4/4: 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing'; 'O Come All Ye Faithful' (uses anacrusis)
- ▶ 3/4: 'Mistletoe and Wine'; 'We Wish You A Merry Christmas' (uses anacrusis)
- ▶ 6/8: 'We Three Kings'; 'I Saw Three Ships' (there are two versions of this, both of which have an anacrusis)
- ▶ 9/8: 'Christmas Night' (adapted from Arbeau)
- ▶ Mixed metres: 'Gaudate' (this is a 16th-century carol, in which the varied metres give a lively syncopated feel. The quaver pulse remains the same throughout):

Gaudate



Rhythms

The 'hook' in a catchy tune is often an instantly recognisable rhythm. Below are some examples of common rhythms found in seasonal music.

The difficulty in using well-known tunes to teach rhythm is that students will just play the tune by ear, rather than actually reading it from the page, and if they misremember the tune, it becomes difficult to correct. We can hope that they make the connection between what's written down and the tune that they know so well, but in reality this is unlikely.

A good way to check just how much they're reading and how much they're playing by ear is to write a different melodic line to the rhythm of a well-known piece, and don't tell them what it's based on. Is their playing equally fluent? Here is an example I've written to the rhythm of 'Frosty the Snowman':

Frosty Rhythm



Dotted crotchet and quaver rhythms

There are lots of examples of dotted rhythms in Christmas tunes, for example:

- ▶ 'In the Bleak Midwinter'
- ▶ 'Silent Night'
- ▶ 'The First Nowell'

See if your student can notate the rhythms if you play them.

Dotted quaver and semiquaver rhythms

In addition to the rhythm in the first bar of 'Joy to the World', we find examples of this rhythm in the themes from the fabulous films *Elf* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYkHQkCZUTo) and *The Polar Express* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OmK3wZ6Q_A).

Syncopation

These two Christmas songs feature prominent syncopation:

- ▶ 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer' (which also has dotted quaver rhythms)
- ▶ 'Merry Xmas Everybody' (Slade)

Swing

- ▶ 'Let It Snow'
- ▶ 'Santa Baby'
- ▶ 'Jingle Bell Rock'

This last song starts with the same *notated* rhythm as 'Jingle Bells', but is a useful illustration of the difference between swung and even quavers:



The original orchestration of Leroy Anderson's *Sleigh Ride* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePfJ-jzSBCs) starts with straight quavers, but has a jazzier swung section when the tune recaps. The Ronettes version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZTzaiH9DM), with added lyrics, is swung throughout.

Composition

Students often find it hard to know where to begin when composing. Many aspects of Christmas can provide an inspiration.

- ▶ Will your composition be religious or secular?
- ▶ What genre will you choose?
- ▶ What mood do you want to portray?
- ▶ Will you try to encapsulate the cold of the frosty outdoors or the warmth of a raging fire?
- ▶ Will it be reflective or have a party atmosphere?
- ▶ Can you find a Christmas poem you could set to music?

Ensemble playing

Music is most fun when playing with other people. Even if a student can play only a couple of notes, they can still play a very simple accompaniment. The following duet, for example, introduces a basic tonic and dominant (represented by the 3rd) harmony. Students will find that the C fits in some places, the B in others.

Jingle Bells duet

The musical notation for the 'Jingle Bells duet' is presented in two systems, each with two staves. The first system contains the first four measures of the piece. The second system contains the next four measures. The melody is written on the top staff of each system, and the accompaniment is on the bottom staff. The music is in C major and 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, while the accompaniment uses quarter notes and rests.

Allow students to experiment by playing the Cs and Bs in different places – they will find some clash. Then give students two or three notes to use to accompany another tune and see if they can find which fit best where.

Try writing some simple arrangements of Christmas tunes for your students to play with family and friends.

Listening

Given the vast wealth of Christmas music, there is lots of listening you can suggest, which can be an excellent way to teach students about music history. Many well-known carols are based on ancient folk tunes or medieval melodies; then, of course, there are numerous pop and jazz songs.

It's sometimes a struggle to get students to listen to classical music, but there are some well-known pieces that can provide a gateway. The 'Hallelujah Chorus', for example, has a well-known musical tagline, which is familiar to many people, without them having any idea where it comes from:



This can become an entry point for exploring Handel's *Messiah* in more detail. The rousing finale to the *Christmas Oratorio* could encourage further exploration of Bach. There are always Christmas concerts on radio and TV, which you could look out for and recommend to your students.

Try compiling a list of YouTube videos of your favourite Christmas music, to give to your students. Include a variety of genres to encourage their musical exploration. Ask them to reciprocate with their particular favourites.

Are there any famous pieces that feature the instrument you teach? As a trumpet player myself, 'The Trumpet Shall Sound' from *Messiah* is an obvious choice. Here are two gloriously contrasting videos – one exquisitely performed on the natural trumpet; the other, an extravagant gospel version.

► www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozMydWvJMew

► www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgtAl8e351E

The horse whinny at the end of Leroy Anderson's *Sleigh Ride* is another iconic Christmas moment for the trumpet: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNsUtqR2gjM

Sightreading

As previously stated, students who already know the piece they're about to attempt will 'know the tune' and therefore play mostly by ear, roughly based on the notation. Even if they're playing it for the first time, it won't be sightreading in the true sense.

Give a student a piece of Christmas music to look at, but with the title hidden. Can they work out what the piece is just by looking at it? Can they sight-sing it? Can they play it on their instrument?

Try writing out a well-known Christmas piece, but with 'mistakes' – alterations to rhythms and pitches. Will they play what's actually written, or will they instinctively correct them? This will reveal how much they play by ear and how much they rely on notation. There will be positives and negatives for either way, but you may need to adjust your teaching accordingly.

Obviously if you have a big book of Christmas tunes, many will be unfamiliar, so these will make good sightreading exercises. I'm often surprised when students aren't familiar with what I consider to be extremely well-known tunes.

Aural development games

You can have lots of fun making up games for your students. For example, here's a combination of two carols: the pitches of one superimposed over the rhythm of another. Can they identify the two carols in question?

Carol mash-up



More ideas:

- ▶ Play the pitch sequence of one carol, but with no rhythm. It can sometimes be surprisingly difficult to identify.
- ▶ Clap the rhythm of a carol. Can students identify it?
- ▶ Play the first two notes, then the first three, then four – how long does it take to spot the tune?
- ▶ Play a tune backwards or inverted (as I did earlier with the ‘Frosty the Snowman’ example – did you spot that?).

Keeping it fun

We're normally frazzled by the time we get to December: the autumn term is long, and we're probably squeezing lots of Christmas performances into our schedule to add to our exhaustion. Hopefully this will give you some ideas to reinvigorate your teaching, to get you through the last few weeks of term. You may well only have time to fit in two lessons in December, so obviously you might want to exercise a little discretion with the 'December' rule.

The most effective way of educating young students is through fun activities, where they're learning but don't realise it. Sometimes we get in a rut, bogged down grinding through exam material week after week, and we forget that music should be enjoyable. All the ideas here can, of course, be applied all year round to non-seasonal music. We don't have to limit our fun to Christmas, but we can certainly make Christmas even more special by including lots of music.

A note about the musical examples: all have been written in the key of C. Keys of pieces are not set in stone – they can be flexible to allow for the range and capabilities of your students. Feel free to adapt pieces as necessary and encourage playing by ear in different keys.