

# Christmas 2021: ideas for in-person and hybrid teaching

KS3

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## Introduction

We still find ourselves in unpredictable times. With the continuing requirement to set work for students absent from school because of Covid, many schools are opting for hybrid lessons, with the teacher catering for those in the classroom and those at home simultaneously.

The end of the autumn term is often a time when things are interrupted by other events, just when music teachers are trying to coordinate all manner of festivities without running out of energy. Having some ideas to dip into for one-off or two-off lessons that capture a little festive spirit can be just what's required.

This resource uses Wham!'s Christmas classic 'Last Christmas' as the starting point for a range of creative and listening activities that will work for in-person and online teaching. It would be entirely possible just to do the creative task or the listening as stand-alone lessons.

## Why Wham!?

The song 'Last Christmas' has quite an interesting history. It was released in December 1984 as pop duo Wham!'s Christmas hit, but was kept at No. 2 in the UK singles chart by the phenomenon that was the release of 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' by Band Aid. Students today are likely to know both songs, but might not know what Band Aid was, and it can be good to fill them in on this event in cultural history.

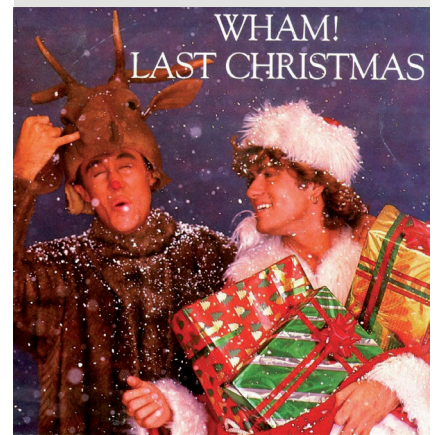
Bob Geldof and Midge Ure wrote 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' as a charity single in response to news reports of famine in Ethiopia. The song was recorded in one day, and features a huge array of the most famous British and Irish pop stars of the time. There was an incredible amount of publicity surrounding the song, with it being played every hour on Radio 1, and when the single was finally available in shops, it became the fastest-selling single of all time, shifting a million copies in the first week and shooting straight to No. 1 in the chart. Band Aid then progressed to Live Aid in 1985 – another phenomenon worth showing to students.

'Last Christmas' thus became one of the most popular Christmas songs never to have made it to the top of the UK chart – until New Year's Day 2021, when it finally reached the top spot after more than 36 years. It was also the most-played Christmas song of the 21st century in the UK until 2015, when it was supplanted by 'Fairytale of New York'. It has also been covered by numerous artists since 1984 – we will explore some of these versions through some listening activities.

What has made this song so enduringly popular? It has some musical features that might initially appear to be far from interesting. It is based on an unchanging four-chord I-vi-ii-V progression with a numbingly slow harmonic rhythm of two bars per chord for the entirety of its 4+ minutes. The chorus repeats a total of six times, which is surely too many. The Linn drum beat is soulless, and do not even attempt to play along with the original, as it is somewhere between D major and D flat major (most likely a consequence of notoriously out-of-tune 80s synths).

I think there are three answers. The first is the juxtaposition of the bouncy backing track and the poignant lyrics, which are much sadder than most Christmas songs. The second is George Michael's typically stunning vocal performance – surely one of the most exquisite voices of the 20th century. The third is the production: no two consecutive sections have the same arrangement, so there's always a feeling of it going somewhere, through the astute use of musical layers. Constant quaver movement and clever use of added notes in the chords counteract the glacial harmonic pace. Of course, on top of this, there are the obligatory Christmas sleigh bells and baubly twinkling sounds.

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### Creative task No. 1: performing and arranging

I'm going to take D major as the key of the song for the purpose of these activities. There is a version of the Wham! original on YouTube which someone has kindly put into an accurate D major tuning, which will save your sanity when students are working out the parts: you can find it here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-GaQREFFSE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-GaQREFFSE)).

It would be perfectly possible to perform 'Last Christmas' 'straight' with no embellishment to the chords. However, this would be missing the charm that the added notes bring – so let's make the most of this by getting students to work out what the added notes actually are.

The plain chords are D, Bm, Em and A. This is the 'added note' part that students could work out by ear:

The musical notation shows two staves of music in D major (one sharp). The first staff is for chords D and Bm, and the second staff is for chords Em and A. The melody is written in 4/4 time and consists of eighth notes with rests, creating a rhythmic pattern. The first staff has four measures, and the second staff has four measures, starting with a measure rest (5).

You could do this in a variety of ways:

- ▶ 'Live' in the classroom with instruments: play the 'in-tune' YouTube version of the song and students work it out using instruments. They can then add this part on top of the chords (played in quavers) and a simple root-note bassline. For differentiation this could be done in small groups, or more able students could do chords and bass, bass and melody, or add singing on top.
- ▶ Students at home could work in the same way with the video if they have access to an instrument. If they don't have access to an instrument, they could use Google Shared Piano (<https://musiclab.chromeexperiments.com/Shared-Piano/>) and record what they've done for you to assess.
- ▶ In a classroom with computers, or at home, you could create a template on BandLab or Soundtrap with the chords and bassline, and challenge students to add the extra-note part using the YouTube video (you could even embed the audio from this into the file). You could scaffold this by giving the rhythm (perhaps on an unpitched sound) and even the first pitch of each two-bar phrase.
- ▶ Any super-fast students could work out the melody of the instrumental as an extra challenge.

Creating a performance or arrangement of all or part of the song would be a good way to explore texture. Some detailed listening to the original reveals the subtle changes of timbre and added layers that George Michael uses to keep up levels of interest, starting with a single bell-like note at the start of each chord in the second chorus. This could be the focus of an arranging task, either done live using instruments and voices, or using a DAW. If using a DAW, you could provide a template as a starting point – there are plenty of free MIDI files to use to save time on this. Encourage students to be creative in how they vary the texture of the song: take the emphasis away from recreating it exactly, and see what they can come up with in the way of different ways to play the chords, added layers, or changes of timbre.

You could also take this a bit further by changing some of the elements of the song. What would happen if you put it in a minor key? Could the style be changed completely? There is a very intriguing (and perhaps not entirely successful) minor-key version here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIJ-nmO44jc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIJ-nmO44jc)). Could you turn it into an EDM track by upping the tempo and changing the drum beat? Classical? Jazz? With such a simple chord progression, the possibilities are endless.

## Creative task No. 2: composing

If you would like to try this option, it is probably best *not* to discuss or listen to 'Last Christmas' first, or you risk the composition turning into an imitation of the original song.

The premise here is to compose a Christmas song using the same chord progression as 'Last Christmas'. In common with many Christmas songs, the I-vi-ii-V progression is rather retro in its feel, being a variant on the 'magic changes' turnaround progression I-vi-IV-V, which was popular throughout the 1950s and 60s. The fact that the V at the end of the progression catapults us back to the start by way of a perfect cadence also lends a certain old-fashioned, predictable quality.

We'll take this characteristically retro chord progression, and add some other festive clichés such as sleigh bells and twinkly sounds, together with some Christmassy lyrics, to create at least one verse and chorus of a Christmas song.

If you only want to spend one lesson on this, you could pre-prepare a backing track of the four chords D-Bm-Em-A or C-Am-Dm-G so that all students need to do is write some lyrics and a melody and add some sleigh bells. There are even some useful ready-made backing tracks on YouTube such as this C major bossa nova ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2TyHFoiB6o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2TyHFoiB6o)), this B flat major swing ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHcXMTa\\_Xfk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHcXMTa_Xfk)), this C major swing ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgP-WGjY98c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgP-WGjY98c)), this C major jazz/hip hop ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbbXTjznnRs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbbXTjznnRs)), or this C major rock and roll ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoJchNc3vGs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoJchNc3vGs)).

Lyric writing needs to be fast, so it's perhaps best done as an against-the-clock challenge. You could start by brainstorming some Christmas rhyming couplets as a class. Here are a few to get you started:

Tree/me  
Sleigh/day  
Heart/apart  
Elf/shelf  
Blue/you  
Snow/go  
Star/far  
Cold/hold

Then, in pairs or small groups (or individually if at home), students can use the couplets as the ends of lines to create a verse and chorus, each with four lines. Perhaps allow a maximum of 15 minutes for this. Then, put on the backing track on a loop and students can work out how they will sing their lyrics.

Students at home could be given the YouTube link for the backing track, and could record themselves singing over it – the simplest way for them to do this and submit it to you is using Vocaroo (<https://vocaroo.com/>), which does not require creation of an account – you simply record using any device that has a microphone, and Vocaroo provides the user with a link that they can share.

Adding a bit of Christmas sparkle using sleigh bells is very straightforward. It would also be simple to add a glockenspiel part using actual glockenspiels or a keyboard sound: this could be as straightforward as adding a root note at the start of each chord, or you could explore broken-chord patterns that fit with the groove of the backing track.

If you wanted to spend two or three lessons on this project, you could have students in class using keyboards, ukuleles or guitars to play the chords themselves, choosing their own groove (perhaps using a drum beat from a keyboard) and harmonic rhythm before adding the vocal part on top, and then the Christmas sparkles.

Students at home could do the equivalent work on BandLab or Soundtrap: indeed, if you have computer access in your classroom, the whole thing could be a DAW project. Unless your students already have a good knowledge of the software, though, you're likely to need to create a template for them to use – or, if you have the time to invest, a couple of them to choose from.

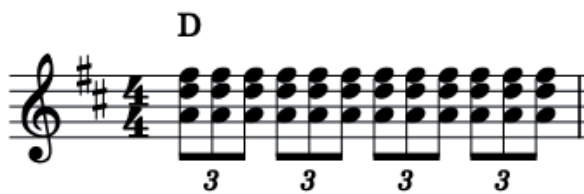
Here are some ideas for how this could work:

- ▶ Use the audio from one of the YouTube backing tracks mentioned previously, making sure that you match the bpm in the DAW and line up the audio with the click track. Students then add recorded vocals and the sleigh bell/glockenspiel parts. This is the simplest option.
- ▶ Create a few different chord figurations for the first chord *only* (see ideas below). Students choose which one they like best, and you then take them through copying it, and changing the pitch for the next three chords. Decide on a harmonic rhythm (one chord per bar? Two chords per bar? Changing chord on an off-beat – moving the second and fourth chords forward by a beat or half-beat can be effective). Once the whole four-bar progression is in place, loop for the whole song.
- ▶ Alternatively, provide two or three different versions of the whole chord progression for students to choose from, set a tempo for, and then loop.
- ▶ Find a drum loop that is at the correct tempo and has an appropriate groove to go with the chords. I would advise against giving free choice over this: there are so many thousands of great loops on both BandLab and Soundtrap that it can be a rabbit-hole that your students can disappear down for hours. It works better to give them a choice of three or four appropriate ones, and then give a very limited time-frame for making a choice.
- ▶ Record vocals and add Christmas twinkles as before.
- ▶ Other layers and refinements can be added if time allows.

## Ideas for chord figurations

All of these have a suitably retro feel for a slightly cheesy Christmas song:

- ▶ The Mariah Carey:



- ▶ Rock and roll:



- ▶ Shuffle time:



## Listening: a comparison task

This could be a one-off lesson, or even a cover lesson if you need to set something for while you're off running concert rehearsals.

There are many, many cover versions of 'Last Christmas'. Some of them are very similar to the original, and therefore not much use for a comparison exercise. However, we will delve in to some of the more interesting versions here.

The purposes of doing such a listening exercise are threefold:

- 1 To get students practising their aural skills to identify the features of different versions.
- 2 To practise using correct musical terminology to describe what they hear.
- 3 To develop an understanding of how songs are put together.

You can link your comparisons to 'MAD T-SHIRT' or whatever acronym you prefer for the musical elements. The extent to which you scaffold this depends on your students' prior experience and level of expertise.

This is an example of a very structured approach to the original version of 'Last Christmas', showing the answers in bold:

### Melody

- 1 Describe the movement of the melody: mostly step/mostly leap/**a mixture of step and leap**
- 2 Describe the range of the melody: **wide**/narrow

### Articulation

- 1 Describe the articulation of the synth chords in the introduction: legato/**staccato**
- 2 Describe the articulation of George Michael's singing: **legato**/staccato

### Dynamics

Questions about dynamics in pop songs are often a bit of a moot point, as there's nearly always quite a lot of compression to make everything dynamically even, and it's unusual for dynamic variation to be a distinctive feature. Still, there may be more variation in other versions, so it's still worth asking about here for the sake of comparison.

- 1 Do the dynamics change much during the song? Yes/**no**

### Time and tempo

- 1 How many beats are there in a bar? **3/4/5**
- 2 How would you describe the tempo? Adagio/**andante**/allegro
- 3 Does the tempo change through the song? (I often find that students imagine tempo changes when actually what they're hearing is a change of how busy the music is, so although this seems like a very obvious question, it's still worth asking) Yes/**no**

### Structure

- 1 If 'Last Christmas, I gave you my heart' is the chorus, what is the structure of this song? **Intro, chorus, chorus, instrumental, verse, verse, chorus, chorus, instrumental, verse, verse, chorus, chorus, verse (outro)**
- 2 All the sections are the same length. How many bars are in each section? **4/8/12/16**

### Harmony

- 1 How many different chords are used in this song? **2/3/4/5**
- 2 What is the harmonic rhythm (how often do the chords change?) Two chords per bar/**one chord per bar/one chord every two bars**
- 3 Is the song in a major or minor key? **Major**/minor

### Instruments

- 1 There is only one acoustic instrument on the track – the rest are synthesised. Which do you think is the acoustic one? Keyboard/bass/drums/**bells**

**Rhythm**

- 1 Are the rhythms straight (even) or swung (uneven)? **Straight**/swung

**Texture**

- 1 Some of the layers of sound in the song are there all the time, and some only come in on certain sections. Put these layers of sound into the correct category: drum beat, George Michael main vocal, sleigh bells, backing vocals, bell-like melody, bassline, synth chords

There all the time	Certain sections only
<b>Drum beat</b> <b>Sleigh bells</b> <b>Bassline</b> <b>Synth chords</b>	<b>George Michael main vocal</b> <b>Backing vocals</b> <b>Bell-like melody</b>

A very different version that's very worthwhile for a comparison is the Postmodern Jukebox version ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3Hrn2\\_LxDs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3Hrn2_LxDs)), which is in an Andrews Sisters-style close-harmony arrangement.

**Melody**

- 1 Is this version's melody at a higher or lower pitch than the original – or the same? Higher/lower/**the same**
- 2 How is the melody distributed among the three singers? There is one main singer and the other two are backing vocalists/**they share the melody between them**

**Articulation**

- 1 Describe the articulation of the piano chords in the instrumental from 2:10: legato/**staccato**
- 2 Describe the articulation of the backing vocals: **legato**/staccato

**Dynamics**

- 1 Do the dynamics change more, or less, than in the Wham! version? **More**/less

**Time and tempo**

- 1 How does the tempo of this version compare with Wham!'s version? **Faster**/slower/the same
- 2 Does the tempo change through the song? **Yes**/no (it gets slower at the end)

**Structure**

- 1 If 'Last Christmas, I gave you my heart' is the chorus, what is the structure of this song? **Intro, chorus, verse, verse, chorus, verse, verse, chorus, instrumental, chorus, chorus**

**Harmony**

- 1 Does this version use the same chords as the Wham! version? **Yes**/no

**Instruments**

- 1 What instruments can you see/hear in this version? **Piano, drums, double bass, clarinet, tap dancer**
- 2 Which of these have a call and response in the instrumental section? **Clarinet and tap dancer**

**Rhythm**

- 1 Are the rhythms straight (even) or swung (uneven)? **Straight**/swung
- 2 How would you describe the rhythms played by the piano at 2:10? On the beat/**off the beat**

**Texture**

- 1 Do you think the texture varies more, or less, than in the Wham! version? **More**/less

A third version which is good for comparison is the rock cover by Daily Grind ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrM1gk\\_yeDs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrM1gk_yeDs)).

### Melody

- 1 Is this version's melody at a higher or lower pitch than the original – or the same? Higher/lower/**the same**
- 2 Is the melody the same as in the Wham! version? Yes/**no**

### Articulation

- 1 Describe the articulation of the guitar solo at 1:30. Staccato/**legato**

### Dynamics

- 1 Do the dynamics change more, or less, than in the Wham! version, or do they stay the same? More/less/**the same**

### Time and tempo

- 1 How does the tempo of this version compare with Wham!'s version? **Faster**/slower/the same
- 2 Does the tempo change through the song? Yes/**no**

### Structure

- 1 If 'Last Christmas, I gave you my heart' is the chorus, what is the structure of this song? **Intro (double length), verse, verse, chorus, chorus, instrumental, verse, verse, chorus, chorus, instrumental, chorus, chorus, outro**

### Harmony

- 1 Does this version use the same chords as the Wham! version? Yes/**no**

### Instruments

- 1 What instruments can you see/hear in this version? **Two electric guitars, bass guitar, keyboard, drum kit**

### Rhythm

- 1 Are the rhythms straight (even) or swung (uneven)? **Straight**/swung

### Texture

- 1 Do you think the texture varies more, or less, than in the Wham! version? **More**/less