

A Christmas stocking for KS2 to KS5

Jonathan James

KS2/3/4/5

Jonathan James is a freelance music educator and conductor, having formally been a head of music in the post-16 sector. He leads workshops for orchestras and presents in venues across the UK.

Introduction

In between all the manic energy and organisational pressures of Christmas concerts and carol services, there's hopefully room for some relaxed creativity in the classroom as the curriculum eases at the end of the autumn term. The following is a Christmas stocking of ideas for KS2 through to KS5. The aims are to widen listening using the right vocabulary, to try out different compositional techniques – and to have some seasonal fun!

Although different levels are suggested below for each idea and task, the activities could be adapted to suit older or younger learners, and where possible ideas on differentiation are suggested. Have fun!

KS2 and KS3 ideas

Musical decorations

The first task is to split the class into groups to discuss what decorations students like to put up at this time of year and why. Responses will probably include:

- ▶ tinsel
- ▶ paper hoops
- ▶ Christmas tree
- ▶ fairy lights
- ▶ candles

It would be great to have some of these items hidden and then dramatically revealed every time students pick one, in true *Blue Peter* 'Here's one I made earlier' style.

Next, lead the students in imagining what the musical equivalent would be to each of the above, creating a sparkling 'sound decoration' to go with the scene, either as separate items or put together in a Christmas collage. Here are some ways in:

Tinsel

How can students capture the glitter of tinsel? With bells and metallophones, and any hand percussion that suits. Tinsel comes rolled in long lines, and that could be represented by long glissandos on glockenspiel or keyboard. Tinsel also gently rustles, so they could find ways of capturing that on a rainstick or sandpaper.

For older learners: sporadic pizzicato and staccato ideas on wind instruments would work well for the dainty strands of tinsel. Perhaps in D major, the 'key of light'?

Paper hoops

Each small group picks a note from the C major scale to start, then rotates around two other notes before coming back in to the starting note in a 'hoop'. For example:

D – E – G – D

Students can practise playing those hoop phrases on their keyboard or glockenspiel, or singing them if they can hold the pitch.

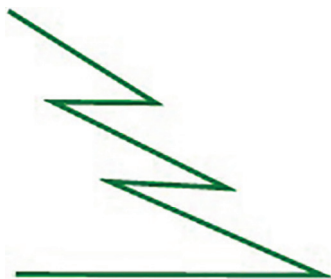
Next, students must find another group in the classroom that has either the same starting note or one immediately adjacent to theirs, higher or lower. The musical hoops can be linked together in this way, each one playing in turn and listening for their cue. You could keep the rhythm and momentum going by pulsing a pedal note or groove beneath.



Christmas tree

There are several ways in here:

- ▶ Could students sing or play a line from 'O Tannenbaum' ('O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, How Lovely Are Thy Branches')?
- ▶ Or create a homely moodscape to represent how the tree makes them feel?
- ▶ Or depict the trunk (solid pedal note), branches (scales radiating out) and pine needles (staccato gestures)?
- ▶ Or, for the more adventurous, try to outline the following tree profile in music:



It could be represented as this musical line:



- ▶ An obvious extension task would be to put the fairy on top with an appropriate dancing tune!

Fairy lights

To help distinguish this from the candles that follow below, these fairy lights could be blinking in short, repetitive rhythms. Students can pick the rhythmic unit and then pass it around the whole group. Tight cluster chords in C major would work well, played as quietly as possible, for example:



Candles

Candles are at their most effective when flickering in the dark. So, once composed, turn out the lights for this one! How could students express darkness in music? Perhaps with monotone drones, hummed or held quietly on low notes on melodicas or keyboards? Then the candle could simply be a high note or set of notes that shine over the top.

Older students could create a minor texture for the darkness and a simple tune in the relative major above.

John Rutter composed a lovely carol based on this idea: you could listen to it with your class, or even learn the first unison verse, or make up your own tune to some of the lyrics. *Candlelight Carol* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbudPRPrFWI) was written in 1984 and was later covered by Neil Diamond and Aled Jones.

Creating a snow monster

This activity is well suited to younger learners because it involves some literacy skills as well. The first step is, in small groups, to come up with the name of animal of the Arctic or snowy zones, whether real or mythical, for example:

WALRUS

YETI

Then students split the names into syllables and swap them around to create a new breed of snow monster:

RUS-TI-WAL-YET

The Rustiwalyet, a fearsome monster. They now have to add an adjective to describe it (this too, can be made up if they want):

THE TUSKY RUSTIWALYET

How does the Tusky Rustiwalyet move? They have to decide on an appropriate verb:

THE TUSKY RUSTIWALYET WADDLED

And where is it waddling to? Another adjective to add here:

THE TUSKY RUSTIWALYET WADDLED TO THE DARK ICEBERG

This sentence can, no doubt with some help from you, be made into a rhythm such as this:

The musical notation shows a 4/4 time signature. The rhythm is: quarter note (The), quarter note (Tusk - y), eighth note (Rus), eighth note (ti), quarter note (wal), quarter note (yet), quarter note (wadd - led), quarter note (to), quarter note (the), quarter note (dark), quarter note (ice - berg).

And that rhythm can then be set to simple, step-wise melody:

The musical notation shows a 4/4 time signature. The melody is: quarter note (The), quarter note (Tusk - y), eighth note (Rus), eighth note (ti), quarter note (wal), quarter note (yet), quarter note (wadd - led), quarter note (to), quarter note (the), quarter note (dark), quarter note (ice - berg).

The 'monster tunes' can then be gathered into a 'lair', as each group sings their idea in a way that fits together, with the right dynamics and articulation as befits their monster. Hand percussion can then be used to set up each monster's character before its song is sung. A Tusky Rustiwalyet, for example, would have a heavy, slow tread, with a slide in between as it drags its massive paws.

Musical Advent calendar

If you have time for a bit of art and craft to go with the session, then an adapted form of an Advent calendar is fun mini-project.

On a blank piece of paper, students should start by designing 12 boxes in random positions. This gets traced onto the front card cover, and the three sides of each box cut out to create the calendar door.

The cover can now be decorated with festive themes. Meanwhile, they should allocate a musical instruction for each box:

- ▶ A mood such as cheerful, thoughtful, homesick, etc.
- ▶ An articulation marking in Italian: legato, staccato, pesante, marcato, etc.
- ▶ A dynamic in Italian: piano, forte, fortissimo, etc.
- ▶ A tempo marking in Italian, from adagio to presto.
- ▶ Different note names from a major pentatonic scale (eg C, D, E, G, A), jumbled into any order.
- ▶ A dedication to someone at home or in class, eg 'To my dog Archie'.

The calendars are assembled and then shared within the class, so that everybody – or each group, if you're doing this in small groups instead – ends up with a different one to their own. They open the doors in turn and then have a go at interpreting the instructions on their chimes or keyboard.

Once they've composed and rehearsed one pentatonic phrase following the instructions, they repeat it three times. The group has a go at repeating it back on their own instruments. Each 'calendar piece' is played in this call-and-response way, moulding it eventually together into a seamless whole. As each phrase is based on the same pentatonic scale, those in the complimentary tempos can be easily layered over each other for a more interesting texture.

KS4 ideas

Winter Wonderlands radio show or podcast

Many composers have been drawn to depicting a winter wonderland in one way or another. In the classical world, here are some good examples:

- ▶ Vivaldi's 'Winter', from *The Four Seasons*
- ▶ Liszt's 'Chasse-neige', from his *Transcendental Studies*
- ▶ Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1, *Winter Daydreams* (second movement)
- ▶ Debussy's 'The Snow is Dancing' from *Children's Corner*
- ▶ Anderson's *Sleigh Ride*
- ▶ Sibelius's Violin Concerto (first movement)

The first step is to listen to a selection of these pieces and to discuss what they are conveying to the listener, and how effective they are. What instrumentation is being used, and why?

Students should then pick one or two of the above for their own playlist, and also research some other pieces that would go well with them, possibly from different genres of music. The aim is to put together a short podcast or radio show that students record and upload for others to listen to and enjoy. Ideally the pieces should be linked thematically to create their own distinct aspect of a Winter Wonderland – whether that's snow, or a sleigh ride, or frozen lakes, or anything else.

Fascinating facts

This will need a bit of research on students' part, in order to find some fascinating facts to use in their radio or podcast introductions. They need to get beyond the obvious facts about the pieces and find details that will make the listener prick up their ears. For example:

Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet should be rated at least a 15 certificate. Mice eat soldiers and a nutcracker stabs a mouse king.

or

Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet was originally called *The Fir Tree*, and he hated both the libretto and the score. That did not stop it, however, from coming one of the most performed pieces in any ballet company's repertoire – particularly at Christmas time.

or

Debussy, aged 50, liked playing with his daughter's toys much more than she did. It was no surprise he was so gifted at capturing a child's imagination in his music.

Piece descriptions

Students can then briefly describe what to listen out for in the piece. Debussy's 'The Snow is Dancing', for example, tells the story of a child being woken at night and seeing the snowflakes dance outside their window. At first it's enchanting, but then, in the middle section, the child is scared by the spooky shapes created by the wind in the flurries of snow.

Discussions

The podcast or radio show should include an interview on how the piece works for the listener, and whether it's effective. Could the interviewee have guessed the story behind the music? Or can they make up their own narrative, based on what they have heard? Does it remind them of other similar pieces?

Recommendations

Before the sign-off, the podcast or radio show should end with ideas on what else to listen to that would continue the theme of the programme so far. 'If you liked this, you could try...'

Hocketing a carol

The verb 'to hocket' has its roots in the French 'hoquet', which means an interruption or hiccup. In medieval practice, the melody in a motet could be broken, or 'hocketed', into different sections that are alternated through the different voices. In its most extreme form, each note to the tune is sung by a different part. The effect is one continuous melody that is given fascinating inflections through being sung by many different voices.

The device is also found in world music, and contemporary classical composers have reinterpreted it in their own ways as well, such as in Louis Andriessen's *Hoketus* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP_7SuJm1og). Schoenberg was inspired by hocketing as he developed his 'sound-colour-melody' (*Klangfarbenmelodie*), where a single note, chord or line is given melodic status (most often in a 12-note setting) by being passed through different registers and instrumentation, colouring it and giving it presence that it might not have otherwise had.

Hocketing in a more crude form can become a fun class game at any time of the year, but it works best with well-known tunes such as Christmas carols.

If you can, reorganise the classroom desks down the middle of the room into long medieval banqueting table. The students should then sit opposite each other and get ready to sing a carol or Christmas song of their choice, such as 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas'.

The activity can progress through different stages of difficulty:

1 Hocket one line each of the carol in groups, left side of the table alternating with right:

A: We wish you a merry Christmas
B: We wish you a merry Christmas
A: We wish you a merry Christmas
B: And a happy new year

So far, so easy.

2 Hocket half a line each:

A: We wish you
B: a merry Christmas
A: We wish you
B: a merry Christmas
A: We wish you
B: a merry Christmas
A: And a happy
B: new year

3 Hocket each word.

4 Hocket each syllable: this will need slow practice at first!

If the group is large enough, you can even divide the table into four and get each small group to take a verse. If they manage to reach stage three when split up into small groups like this, keeping the tempo, pitch and flow, then some sort of Christmas-themed prize should be on offer. It's a harder task than meets the eye or ear.

KS4 and KS5 ideas

Create your own Christmas No. 1 in five easy steps – and a Christmas turkey?

In our multicultural society, there are now so many different traditions that enrich December and the transition to New Year. Singing carols and celebrating Christian stories might not be appropriate for your school, or at least, not as the sole activity.

One tradition that goes beyond any religious affiliation, however, is the Christmas No. 1. The pop charts may not have the avid hold on us that they used to 30 years ago, but we probably all have a certain sound in mind when it comes to a Christmas chart-topper. It needs to:

- ▶ be fun and cheesy.
- ▶ have lyrics that make us feel warm inside.
- ▶ feature some seasonal sounds, such as sleigh bells.

Classics to draw on (if you can bear listening to them again):

- ▶ Wham!: 'Last Christmas'
- ▶ Mariah Carey: 'All I Want for Christmas Is You'
- ▶ Shakin' Stevens: 'Merry Christmas Everyone'
- ▶ Band Aid: 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'

The challenge is to imitate some elements of that writing and create a hit song of the class's own. Here are five steps to follow:

1. Write the lyrics

This should be a quick affair: a few rhyming couplets on why this time of year is special for the verses, followed by a couple of heartwarming sentences for the chorus. Keep the words simple, but remember that they need to scan well and have an obvious rhythm.

2. Set up some seasonal sounds

Don't hold back on jaunty quavers on sleigh bells, or a crisp rhythm on a side drum, or chimes and tubular bells ringing out in descending scales. All of those will help channel the seasonal spirit and get students in the right zone for Christmas-themed songwriting.

3. Three-chord wonder

Select a short progression of chords to support the lyrics, using the usual combinations of I-IV-V or I-ii-V, or indeed I-vi-IV-V. You could try making chord IV minor, for extra sentimental effect.

4. Work out the build

Many Christmas classics incorporate an epic build into their structure. They start small and then pile on extra instruments as the verses progress, ending up with a symphony orchestra for the final verse. Coldplay's 'Viva la vida' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvgZkm1xWPE) may not have actually topped the charts at Christmas, but it's an excellent example of a song that strategically builds the instrumental texture.

Make sure, as normal, that the chorus gets the highest notes and the verses lead naturally into them, ideally with a pre-chorus transition that helps build the tension.

5. Take it up a key

Surprisingly, not that many Christmas No. 1s use the Eurovision trick of putting the last chorus up a tone. However, it makes for a good exercise in transposition and gives even a rudimentary song a nice lift.

Christmas turkey, anyone?

Sometimes, doing the opposite and composing a deliberate flop can be instructive. What makes for a really dull, uninspiring and unseasonal song? This exercise might well result in a bit of creative chaos and cacophony – and hopefully a lot of fun – but if handled well and placed alongside a formulaic chart-topper, it can help reinforce core principles around songwriting.

Dodie's Christmas songs in the minor key

Dodie Clark is a successful songwriter from Essex who combines soulful lyrics with deceptively simple material, often led on her ukelele. Her popularity is driven by her successful presence on YouTube, and she has recently set up a her own tradition of changing festive classics into the minor, and singing them in a melodramatic fashion, a cappella.

In these two videos she goes from the bleakest 'In the Bleak Midwinter' imaginable through to comic versions of Wham! and Maria Carey:

▶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCzDyM8Sgyg

▶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvAhoHQ2YeM

Dodie Clark's presentational style might not be to everybody's taste, but nobody can question the skilled musicianship involved in her arrangements.

For a more skilled set of singers in KS5, it would be fun to attempt a straight cover of her version of Fleet Foxes' 'White Winter Hymnal' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrQRS4oOKNE) in three parts, before comparing it the original and discussing which version works better for them. (Dodie Clark's minor version can be found at 3:56 on her 2017 Christmas video.)

The challenge is then for students to pick their own cheerful Christmas classic and reinterpret it in a minor key, even if it's just twisting the melody to fit.

KS5: Corpus Christi Carol – a miscellany

One of the most haunting and beautiful melodies in the English tradition can be found in the Tudor carol 'Corpus Christi'. It interweaves images from the nativity scene and, possibly, mythology of the Holy Grail, taking the listener deep back into history, whether to the Tudors or beyond.

A good discussion can be had on the merits of the different versions and covers of this song, before attempting the class's own version.

Benjamin Britten set it to music, first as a solo and then for mixed voices in his suite *A Boy Was Born* (1933). Here is the solo version for piano and treble: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxtwyvZhHDM.

The singer Jeff Buckley then made his own version of the song on his album *Grace* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxqwq9BnjTo). He makes use of his beautifully controlled falsetto to bring out the intimacy of the lyrics, accompanied mainly by a clean-toned guitar with some tasteful reverb.

A cappella group Voces 8 were no doubt inspired by the drifting, overlapping tones of that guitar accompaniment (as well as the Britten original), and the gentle quality of Buckley's vocals as they did their own cover: www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8XcZ1zYIyo.

The harmonies are quite static, even though the descending upper line of the accompaniment brings a fluidity and major-minor ambiguity to the setting. Underneath, the chords fluctuate (in most versions) between A minor (Aeolian), F major, D major and a quick passing through G major, for modal colour. A good listening exercise would first be to find out which chord fits where.

The Britten version follows the irregular scansion of the text, and he uses mixed meter to achieve that. This is ironed out into a more regular meter in subsequent versions, and a discussion could be had on the various effects the two approaches have.

Part of the quality of the carol is to have a 'vulnerable', pure-sounding voice or instrument for the melody, with a sensitive, light touch in the accompaniment. Can other instrumental or vocal combinations now be suggested? How would the class make their own cover that honours the spirit of the original in terms of the tonal palette?

The final step is to attempt their own version, even if just evoking the modal atmosphere of the introduction and first few lines, sung freely and without meter if need be. It requires control and maturity to bring off, and is best performed to candlelight.