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by James Manwaring

## INTRODUCTION

If there's one department at Christmas that doesn't stop, it's the music department. Concerts, carol singing and rehearsals dominate most of late November and December. In a number of schools, music teachers will need cover in order to meet the demands of the festive season. When cover is required, a teacher from another department will inevitably end up in your room teaching your class.

The least we can do is to leave them a task that they might enjoy, and one that's linked to the subject they themselves teach. The tasks included in this resource are therefore designed to appeal to other departments. They might be left for cover work, given to other staff to use during the festive season, or even used by you the music teacher at a time of year when you need fresh ideas. Use these ideas as you see fit – and hopefully they will make the festive season just that bit easier.

## STARTING POINT

In order to get the most out of these tasks, you might like to share the ideas in advance with colleagues in school. If someone does have to cover your lesson while you're out at a Christmas event, sharing these ideas and this resource beforehand will allow them to look at the links and prepare for the lesson.

## HISTORY: CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE AGES

Christmas carols span a large number of years. The history behind them is very interesting, and there's definitely scope for students to research carols and find out more about what was going on at the time they were written.

Carols were first introduced to nativity and Christmas masses in 1223 by St Francis of Assisi. Prior to this, carols had been associated with the winter solstice and circle dancing on 22 December. Between 1350 to 1550, carols really gained popularity, and this era was the golden age of English carols. The 14th century saw carols become a popular form of religious song, and then by the time we reach the 15th century they were a popular strand of art music. However, during the 16th century carols started to lose popularity, until the middle of the 18th century, when a revival took place.

For a history teacher, this could be a great way of looking at the state of the world when a particular carol was written, or they could look at key political or social changes around that period of time. For a music teacher, looking at the year a carol was written can spark discussion and expansion on what was going on in the world of music during that time.

Here are some example carols, complete with the period or year they were written:

- 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel': 9th century
- 'O Christmas Tree'/'O Tannenbaum': 16th century
- 'Joy to the World': 1719
- 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing': 1739
- 'O Come, All Ye Faithful': 1743
- 'Silent Night': 1818
- 'Jingle Bells': 1850

- 'Deck the Halls': 1862
- 'Away in a Manger': 1885

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## BUSINESS STUDIES: THE CHRISTMAS NO. 1 – RESEARCH PROJECT

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Though it doesn't have quite the importance it once did, the Christmas No. 1 has been a firm fixture in the music industry calendar for several decades. The fight to reach that top spot at Christmas is always fascinating to watch, and it's a great source of discussion for a business studies lesson on music, or a music lesson on the music industry.

The race for the Christmas No. 1 began in 1973, just 21 years after the official UK Singles Chart began in 1952. The original fight for the top spot was between Wizzard, who released 'I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day', and Slade with 'Merry Xmas Everybody'. Slade won that first race, and ever since then we've seen bands and artists release Christmas songs from all styles and genres.

The idea behind this lesson is for students to consider what makes a Christmas No. 1 successful, and research the marketing, money and madness that characterise the phenomenon. Is it all down to timing, or style or lyrics? How many of them have actually been festive songs? And what makes the 2009 Christmas No. 1 so interesting in light of the ever-changing nature of the world and social media? There's so much scope for discussion and research, and of course the lesson can contain some singing and video watching too.

### THE OFFICIAL TOP TEN BIGGEST-SELLING CHRISTMAS SONGS

1. 'Do They Know It's Christmas?': Band Aid, 1984
2. 'Bohemian Rhapsody': Queen, 1975 & 1991
3. 'Mull of Kintyre': Wings, 1977
4. 'Mary's Boy Child': Boney M, 1978
5. 'Last Christmas': Wham!, 1984
6. 'I Want to Hold Your Hand': The Beatles, 1963
7. 'I Will Always Love You': Whitney Houston, 1992
8. 'Don't You Want Me?': The Human League, 1981
9. 'I Feel Fine': The Beatles, 1964
10. 'We Can Work It Out'/'Day Tripper': The Beatles, 1965

It might be a good idea to listen to each of these songs, and that activity could easily be turned into a quiz to see how many of them the students recognise. Once they've heard them, discussion can start as to what might have made them so successful. Can students spot any common features, or is it random? From a business point of view, is there anything other than music that has contributed the most to the success of this top ten?

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## SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES US HAPPY IN A CHRISTMAS SONG?

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There's no doubt about it: a good Christmas song or carol can really cheer us up. Every year up and down the country, people are singing songs in churches. They might not sing all year, but for those few weeks around Christmas they sing with all their might. But what exactly is it that makes us feel so happy when we sing? What is the science of singing, and what is it that makes us happy in a Christmas song?

There are three elements involved, and in this science-themed music lesson, it's the job of the students to first have a sing and feel happy, and secondly research the chemicals behind happiness

- **Endorphins** are a group of hormones that secrete from the brain and nervous system leading to a number of physiological effects. Endorphins trigger a positive feeling in the body similar to that of morphine – they are effectively pain relievers.
- **Dopamine**: when we sing or listen to music, our bodies release dopamine, a neurotransmitter, which is a chemical responsible for transmitting signals between nerve cells in the brain. Research has shown that it is the melody that really affects the release of dopamine, and so it could be that those well-known Christmas tunes really do help make us happy.
- **Serotonin**: this chemical helps to regulate mood and social behaviour. When we sing, serotonin is released, and can give us a real sense of euphoria.

Probably the best way to demonstrate this is to have a good sing with the class. Start with 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing', always a winner when it comes to a good tune. It would appear that the familiarity of the tunes in our Christmas carols, as well as the feelings of nostalgia and joy they evoke, combine with these chemicals to make us happier. You can find a backing track for 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing' [here](#).

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## ART: CHRISTMAS PAINTINGS AND COMPOSITION

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Art is a fantastic source of inspiration for musicians. Many pieces of music have been inspired by paintings, and this lesson idea links Christmas paintings and music.

A couple of images that have gone on to inspire pieces of music are:

- William Hogarth's series of eight engravings entitled *A Rake's Progress*, which was the inspiration for Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*.
- *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai is said to be the inspiration for Debussy's orchestral work *La mer*.

Both of these might serve as examples for future composition. But there are, of course, a number of great Christmas paintings. The idea behind this lesson is to get students discussing how music might represent these paintings.

First, look at the paintings with your students, and then discuss the questions below them. Art teachers will, of course, want to discuss the artistic qualities and elements, but a music teacher might focus more on musical ideas or inspirations.

**Botticelli: The Annunciation (1489)**



**Pieter Bruegel the Elder: The Census at Bethlehem (1566)**





Questions

1. What stands out most for you in each of the paintings?
2. What do you think the artists are saying through their respective paintings?
3. What style of music do you think would best suit each painting?
4. If you could only use one instrument to go with each painting, which would it be?
5. What elements of music would you use to help bring the painting to life?
6. Can you think of any existing music that would fit with the painting?

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## MATHS: THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

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This is a great idea for a maths-based music lesson. I can't take the credit myself for all these mathematically challenging ideas, but I'll package them up within this resource.

In order to make it a perfect musical maths lesson, you'll need to start by singing 'The 12 Days of Christmas'. Here is a backing track to help.

To get the ball rolling, ask the class how many presents the 'true love' finally receive in total. The answer is 364, but I'll let you work out exactly how with the class.

This link will take you to a web page that uses the concept of Pascal Triangle – which of course itself looks like a Christmas Tree. You'll find 12 different ideas, one for each of the 12 Days of Christmas.

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# ENGLISH: CHRISTMAS POETRY

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There are a great number of poems about Christmas, and in fact a number of Christmas carols are themselves inspired by poems. For an English teacher covering your music lesson, or even an English teacher who feels like trying something different at Christmas, this is hopefully a great idea.

Poetry and music obviously go hand in hand, and there are countless examples of pieces of music inspired by poetry. There are also great examples of Christmas poems that could be set to music by students.

Here are three Christmas poems that can be used as the basis for a lesson. It would be a good idea to start by looking at the poetry and studying the way in which the poems were written. Then students can listen to any carols that might be associated with them, and see how the text is brought to life by the music.

If you're a music teacher and want to use this as a lesson idea at Christmas, you could go on to ask students to compose a melody for these poems. They could consider how they could change the meaning of the words by changing the tonality, shape, time and tempo of the melody.

## ***LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS, BY CHRISTINA ROSETTI***

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,  
Worship we our Jesus,  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

*I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY, BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW*

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
'There is no peace on earth,' I said;  
'For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!'

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, goodwill to men.'

**MARMION, BY WALTER SCOTT (EXCERPT)**

Heap on more wood! – the wind is chill;  
But let it whistle as it will,  
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.  
Each age has deem'd the new-born year  
The fittest time for festal cheer:  
Even, heathen yet, the savage Dane  
At lol more deep the mead did drain;  
High on the beach his galleys drew,  
And feasted all his pirate crew;  
Then in his low and pine-built hall  
Where shields and axes deck'd the wall  
They gorged upon the half-dress'd steer;  
Caroused in seas of sable beer;  
While round, in brutal jest, were thrown  
The half-gnaw'd rib, and marrow-bone:  
Or listen'd all, in grim delight,  
While Scalds yell'd out the joys of fight.  
Then forth, in frenzy, would they hie,  
While wildly loose their red locks fly,  
And dancing round the blazing pile,  
They make such barbarous mirth the while,  
As best might to the mind recall  
The boisterous joys of Odin's hall.



# MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES: THE CHRISTMAS CAROL

There's no doubt about it: Christmas carols have very European influences, and there are some fantastic Christmas songs around that your Modern Foreign Languages department will love to sing if they should be down to cover your class. As a music teacher, you can also use these songs to spice up your lessons and replace the carols that you will almost certainly be preparing for your carol service.

## **German: *Stille Nacht (Silent Night)***

This is possibly one of the best-known carols, and it's particularly satisfying when sung in German. Pronunciation is crucial, and that's where a languages teacher will find this a particularly satisfying Christmas lesson:

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht

Alles schläft; einsam wacht

Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.

Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,

Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

*Silent night, holy night,*

*All is calm all is bright,*

*'Round yon virgin Mother and Child,*

*Holy infant so tender and mild.*

*Sleep in heavenly peace,*

*Sleep in heavenly peace.*

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,

Hirten erst kundgemacht

Durch der Engel Halleluja,

Tönt es laut von fern und nah:

Christ, der Retter ist da!

Christ, der Retter ist da!

*Silent night, holy night,*

*Shepherds quake at the sight.*

*Glories stream from heaven afar,*

*Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia;*

*Christ the Saviour is born,*

*Christ the Saviour is born.*

**French: Petit Papa Noël (Little Father Christmas)**

This is a French Christmas song, and potentially one that you won't have heard of. Listen to the song here with your class before having a go at translating and singing. The key is to get the students translating the lyrics as well as singing them.

C'est la belle nuit de Noël,  
La neige étend son manteau blanc,  
Et les yeux levés vers le ciel,  
à genoux, les petits enfants,  
Avant de fermer les paupières,  
Font une dernière prière.

*It's the beautiful night of Christmas  
The snow spreads her white jacket.  
And eyes raised to the sky,  
On their knees, the little children  
Before closing their eyelids,  
Offer one last prayer.*

Petit papa Noël  
Quand tu descendras du ciel,  
Avec des jouets par milliers,  
N'oublie pas mon petit soulier.

*Little father Christmas,  
When you come down from the sky  
With toys by the thousands,  
Please don't forget my little shoe.*

### Spanish: *Feliz Navidad (Happy Christmas)*

I have used this great Christmas song a number of times in the past. It's easy to sing, and gives students a chance to work with some Spanish. Michael Bubl  included it on his *Christmas* album, and there are several other versions available online.

Feliz Navidad  
Feliz Navidad  
Feliz Navidad  
prospero a o y felicidad.

*Merry Christmas*  
*Merry Christmas*  
*Merry Christmas*  
*A prosperous year and happiness.*

I wanna wish you a merry Christmas  
I wanna wish you a merry Christmas  
I wanna wish you a merry Christmas  
From the bottom of my heart.

If you're a music teacher, you might like to use this song to do some more interesting singing: you can sing the verse and chorus at the same time, for example, giving it a real mash-up feel.

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## MEDIA STUDIES: CHRISTMAS MOVIES AND MUSIC

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Christmas is a great time of year to settle down and watch a movie. There are thousands of possibilities, and new Christmas films are being made every year.

A great way to bring a movie to life is with music: here are some of the most famous examples of music from Christmas movies. A media studies teacher might like to discuss the impact of the music on the film and other key cinematic features, but a music teacher might like to unpack the musical elements and consider what makes the music sound festive.

- 'Somewhere in My Memory' (*Home Alone*)
- Main theme from *The Polar Express*
- 'This is Halloween' and 'What's This?' (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*)
- 'It Feels Like Christmas' (*The Muppet Christmas Carol*)
- 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' (*Meet Me in St Louis*)

# MUSIC: MUSIC VIDEOS, AND THE MERRY MODES OF CHRISTMAS

I'll end with a couple of music lessons ideas that you can use during the festive season.

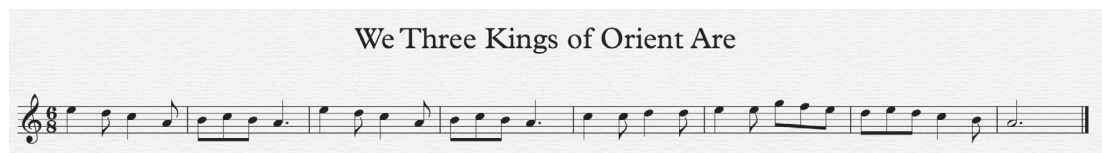
For a number of years, I made a **music video** based on the famous Band Aid song 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'. Students always enjoy watching the original, learning to sing it and then creating a video. They often like to analyse the different voices and carefully consider which part they want to sing. You can use a good-quality backing track for the final performance.

**Modes** can be tricky to teach and even trickier to bring to life. Nevertheless, they're essential for the understanding of scales, keys and harmony in general. Students should understand the modes in terms of their different patterns of tones and semitones.

The easiest way to understand modes is to think about the scale patterns created when we move from one note on the piano up to the next note. Start by playing C major on the piano. Then play Dorian mode starting on D and ask the students why it sounds different. You can eventually explain that you haven't changed the notes, but that you've simply changed their order. Here are the names of the modes and the patterns of tones and semitones they create:

Ionian	C-C	TTSTTTS
Dorian	D-D	TSTTTST
Phrygian	E-E	STTTSTT
Lydian	F-F	TTTSTTS
Mixolydian	G-G	TTSTTST
Aeolian	A-A	TSTTTST
Locrian	B-B	STTSTTT

But we need to make this topic festive. 'We Three Kings of Orient Are' is based on the Aeolian mode, and is a great carol to use for study. Let's start by looking at the modal melody:



Start by singing this melody through with your students. Ask them to identify what makes the melody modal, and see if they can identify the mode being used. Discuss the fact that the Aeolian mode is also referred to as the natural minor. Once you've played or sung the melody, look at the second half and see if the students can spot the difference:



Hopefully your students can hear that the second half of the tune is actually now major rather than modal – but can they work out what has changed?

From this starting point, you can move on to these ideas:

- Make the first half of the melody major, and the second half modal.
- Try making the whole tune minor using the harmonic minor scale. What do you notice?
- Can you write out the carol backwards (in retrograde)? What does it sound like? Does it change the overall feel?
- Try inverting the carol (ie turning it upside down). Does it work as a variation? Does it change the overall sound and feel of the melody?
- What other variations could you try? Maybe creating a retrograde inversion, or doubling all the note values?

These ideas are just a few basic ways of varying the tune, and they should help students to understand the modal writing and the way in which a melody can be changed using tonality. Techniques such as retrograding are easily executed using notation software, but students could also be challenged to do it on paper. It all depends on what you have available in your classroom. End by singing through the carol – and maybe also singing some of the ideas that students have generated.