

Simon Rushby

Introduction



Alan Menken

In September 2021, the 2019 award-winning revival production of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken's musical *Little Shop of Horrors* reopened at the Westside Theatre in New York City, the latest step in a long, successful history for a story that dates back to 1956. The Westside is an off-Broadway theatre, meaning that its capacity is less than 500, and it was off-Broadway that the stage journey of this show began.

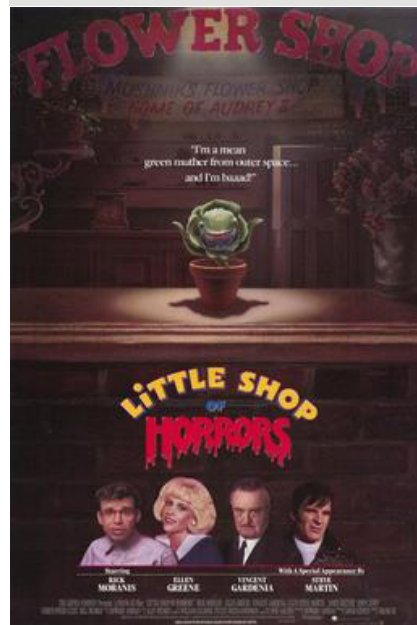
AQA has specified three songs from the original, 1982 **off-Broadway** production as its prescribed music for Area of Study 2, replacing songs from the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album and due to appear in the listening exam from next summer, 2022. In this resource, we'll look at the history and context of the show and the musical characteristics of the three songs. I don't intend to go into the depth of analytical detail that can already be found in other resources, but after an overview of each song there are some ideas for activities for students to help them get to know the music better.

Musicals in the 1980s

In many ways, the 1980s were a golden age for musical theatre. New York's **Broadway** and London's **West End** saw the first performances that decade of some of our best-known shows, such as the blockbusters *Les misérables* and *Miss Saigon* from Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, *Cats*, *Starlight Express* and *The Phantom of the Opera* from Andrew Lloyd Webber, and *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods* from Stephen Sondheim. Built on the strong foundations of a genre that stretched back more than 50 years to Gershwin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Cole Porter, musicals attracted avid audiences, and no trip to New York or London was complete without taking in a show.

Many of these well-loved shows had serious, often quite dark storylines with sad endings, reflecting the changing tastes of theatre goers who had previously demanded light music and happy escapism. The genre moved a little more towards the operatic, with some shows **through-composed** (made entirely of music) with recitatives, solo songs (like arias) and choruses.

Simon Rushby is a freelance musician, writer and education consultant, and was a director of music and senior leader in secondary schools for more than 25 years. He is author of a number of books and resources, including the ABRSM's new *Discovering Music Theory* series and books for Rhinegold Education. He is an ABRSM examiner, and a songwriter, composer and performer.



A 1980s music theatre journey

A useful lesson could be spent exploring some of the context of 1980s musical theatre and understanding a bit more about how shows and their songs from this time were constructed. Using these four clips, get students to note down and/or discuss answers to these or similar questions:

- ▶ How would you describe the **style** of the music? Think about aspects of instrumentation/sonority, rhythm, melodic structure, harmony and lyrics.
- ▶ How would you describe the way that **voices** are used? Think about the role of soloists/chorus, their range, how they tell the story and so on.
- ▶ How is each song **dramatic**? What does the composer do to provide mood, atmosphere and impact?
- ▶ What **role** does each song play in terms of its dramatic impact? Songs in shows can have various functions – they may move the plot forwards, provide a commentary, tell us more about a character or get us more emotionally involved, for example.

The opening of **Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*** (1979) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQpmnMy53gQ) borrows from opera and is performed by the entire cast, setting the scene in preparation for the telling of the story. Watch this clip from around 2:30 – a concert performance with a twist starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson.

'Light at the End of the Tunnel' from **Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express*** (1984) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-UoGYc9o6c) draws on musical theatre's love for imitating different genres – in this case gospel music underpins an energetic song and dance company number, rather like 'Feed Me/Git It' in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

This concert version of 'One Day More' from **Boublil and Schönberg's *Les misérables*** (1980, opened in West End 1985) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydpmzU_izhg) serves both as a summary of where each character finds themselves at that point, and as a rousing ensemble number, cleverly woven together to feature each character's viewpoint.

'Last Night of the World' from **Boublil and Schönberg's *Miss Saigon*** (1989) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-tM8J86xtw) is an example of one of musical theatre's staples – the love duet.

Little Shop of Horrors

Little Shop of Horrors began life as a low-budget 1960 film, made almost impulsively by director Roger Corman when he was given access to film sets still standing from a horror movie he'd made the previous year. It became a bit of a cult film, partly perhaps because it featured a small role for rising actor Jack Nicholson.

Playwright Howard Ashman and emerging composer Alan Menken picked up on the film in the early 1980s and composed the musical, loosely based on it, for a cast of just nine performers, including a puppeteer for the plant, Audrey II. It became their biggest success so far, running for five years at the Orpheum Theatre in East Village, Manhattan, and becoming the highest-grossing off-Broadway show of all time. AQA's three prescribed songs are taken from the cast album of this 1982 production.

Following a number of tours around the world and a very successful West End run (produced by Cameron Mackintosh), puppet legend Frank Oz, who had made his name with Jim Henson on *The Muppet Show* and as Yoda in *Star Wars*, made a film version of the musical in 1986 starring Rick Moranis, Ellen Greene (who had appeared in the original stage production), Steve Martin and Bill Murray.

Since then, *Little Shop of Horrors* has continued to enjoy success in further revivals on Broadway (2003) and in the West End in 2007, when Sheridan Smith and Alistair McGowan starred. It has also toured in the US and UK, and is frequently performed by amateur and school groups. There's talk of a remake of the film version, backed by Warner Brothers' studios.

Ashman and Menken

Howard Ashman and Alan Menken first collaborated on a show called *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* in 1979, and *Little Shop of Horrors* was their second and breakthrough show, winning them numerous awards for the lyrics (Ashman) and music (Menken). They also worked with Frank Oz on the 1986 film version, writing new music for it including the song 'Mean Green Mother from Outer Space', which earned an Oscar nomination.

Following this, Ashman was asked to contribute lyrics to Disney's film *Oliver and Company*, and he and Menken soon found themselves writing all the music and lyrics to a new Disney project. This, Disney's first fairy-tale animated film in 30 years, was *The Little Mermaid*. Released in 1989 it was a huge success, resulting in an Oscar for the song 'Under the Sea'.

Ashman and Menken went on to write most of the songs for Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Aladdin* (1992), though Ashman sadly died before these were released. *Beauty and the Beast* is dedicated to him. Alan Menken went on to write music for *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Enchanted* with *Wicked* composer Stephen Schwartz, and many other songs and scores including *Hercules*, *Tangled* and stage shows of his Disney classics as well as *Sister Act* and *A Bronx Tale*.

Little Shop of Horrors: a brief synopsis

Little Shop of Horrors tells the story of Seymour and Audrey, co-workers at a run-down flower shop owned by a grumpy man called Mr Mushnik. Seymour obtains a strange plant which he names Audrey II, in honour of the co-worker he secretly loves. Seymour discovers, when he pricks his finger by accident, that the plant thrives on human blood. He allows it to drink, and as it grows, it attracts a lot of customers to Mushnik's shop.

Audrey is in an abusive relationship with a dentist called Orin Scrivello and dreams of getting away from him and having a quiet, idyllic life with Seymour. Seymour is struggling to feed Audrey II, who has developed the ability to speak, and, egged on by the plant, he plots to kill the dentist. Luckily for Seymour, Orin dies in a freak accident in his surgery and Seymour feeds him to the plant.

The fast-growing Audrey II quickly takes over the shop and soon claims Mushnik too. Though Seymour is becoming famous because of the plant, he soon realises that he has lost control of it. Ultimately it claims Audrey and Seymour, and the show closes with the plant threatening to devour everyone in the theatre. The 1986 film had a happier ending, with the plant self-destructing and Seymour and Audrey living happily ever after in the suburbs, though the final shot shows a small version of Audrey II ominously growing in their garden.

The music of *Little Shop of Horrors*

Alan Menken sought to emulate the music of the early 1960s – when the original film was made – in his score for *Little Shop of Horrors*. Indeed, the trio of street urchins who sing the title song and who act as commentators throughout the show are named after **girl bands** of the time, the Crystals, the Ronettes and the Chiffons. A key influence of the sound of these groups was the legendary producer Phil Spector.

Analysis and performing: the wall of sound

Phil Spector was best known for his **wall of sound**, a recording technique that used combinations of instruments to create a full, rich tone, often doubling or tripling the parts. He produced many famous hits of the 1960s, including ‘Da Doo Ron Ron’ by the Crystals, ‘Be My Baby’ by the Ronettes, ‘River Deep – Mountain High’ by Ike and Tina Turner, and ‘You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’ by the Righteous Brothers.

For those with a music technology interest, this article (www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-ronettes-be-my-baby) from the magazine *Sound on Sound* explains Spector’s ‘building block’ recording process, in which he would painstakingly layer up the song, part by part, after hours of rehearsal.

Using ‘Be My Baby’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSPpbOGnFgk) as an example, get your students to listen and identify features of Spector’s sound, prompted by any of the questions below:

- ▶ What is noticeable about the sound of the snare drum at the start of the track, and the role of the shaker throughout the song? What percussion instruments double with the snare drum?
 - ▶ *Kick and snare drums have a prominent echo effect and are doubled by tambourine and castanets. The shaker is forward in the mix, with less echo, serving to hold together the song’s complicated textures.*
- ▶ What instruments can you hear joining the percussion just before the main vocal begins? How would you describe what they play?
 - ▶ *Bass, guitars (electric and acoustic) and pianos. They play repeating, short, rhythmic riffs based on the chords. Spector would often layer up these sounds with multiple musicians all playing the same thing, and liked to double acoustic and electric instruments to create a new sonority. The lead vocal would be relatively quiet in the mix, to enhance the impression of the wall of sound.*
- ▶ What sounds are added at the line ‘So won’t you say you love me’?
 - ▶ *Sustained notes/chords from saxophones and backing singers.*
- ▶ Describe the role of the different singers in the chorus (starting at 0:37).
 - ▶ *They sing the main melodic material of the chorus, comprising of simple, repeating stepwise phrases that fall and rise. The lead singer punctuates each phrase with freer, almost improvised-sounding counter melodies.*
- ▶ The chorus follows a very popular chord sequence, used in many songs of the 1960s and sometimes referred to as a **four-chord turnaround** using the tonic (I), submediant (VI), subdominant (IV) and dominant (V) as shown below. Time for a class performance!

	F
	So won’t you please
	Dm
(Be my, be my baby)	Be my little baby
	B flat
(My one and only baby)	Say you’ll be my darling
	C
(Be my, be my baby)	Be my baby now
(My one and only baby)	Woah, oh, oh, oh

The three prescribed songs are taken from the original off-Broadway cast album, released in 1982. You can find the complete album, with links to each track, here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNdPoXek39A

‘Prologue/Little Shop of Horrors’

Start your look at this song by doing a simple comparison exercise. After the short ‘Prologue’, what does the main song (‘Little Shop of Horrors’, starting at 0:43) have in common with ‘Be My Baby’? How has Menken recreated the 1960s sound?

Though there’s no echo effect and it’s much faster, the song begins with the very similar sound of bass, guitar and piano riffs. The chorus follows another turnaround – this time a three-chord one of **G–Am–D**. The three urchins, Crystal, Ronette and Chiffon, begin in **close harmony** with repeating melodic ideas very similar to those in ‘Be My Baby’ – except that these ones rise and fall in what’s a much more upbeat song.

There are other nods to 1960s classics, such as the shouts of ‘Look out’ that echo the song ‘Leader of the Pack’ by the Shangri-Las (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8UKf65NOzM), written by the same songwriters as ‘Be My Baby’ though not produced by Spector. The lyrics are littered with other 60s-style **vocables** (nonsense-words) such as ‘bop-sha-bop’ and ‘shing-a-ling/shang-a-lang’. The bassline is typical of the style, outlining the chords with a Latin-influenced **tresillo** 3+3+2 pattern, and the chorus melody covers three stepwise notes (G, A and B) with **syncopations**, or **pushes**, in its rhythm:

Using percussion, keyboards, guitars, bass and vocals and the snippet above, a useful part of the lesson could be spent learning and performing the chorus. Guitars and piano right-hands need to play the chords in triad form as repeating quavers, like this:

The ‘Prologue’ that comes before the main song lasts under a minute and features a spoken introduction courtesy of a foreboding off-stage voice. After a **drum roll** (intended to sound like timpani but performed on the largest of the **tom-toms** within the drum kit) the band play a **fanfare**-like accompaniment to the voice-over, in the key of E flat major (quite distant from the sunny G major of the main song) and following the chords **E flat–Cm–Fm–B flat**. As well as the standard drums, bass, guitar and piano a sustained organ sound adds to the foreboding mood. The rhythm of this ‘Prologue’ is identical to that heard at the start of ‘Be My Baby’, in another nod to the 1960s pop style.

The main song follows a simple structure of **chorus – chorus – verse – chorus** but after the first two eight-bar choruses there are some interesting and colourful structural points. The verse itself begins simply enough, following a **subdominant – tonic** chord pattern for 12 bars (or three lines of lyrics). In place of a fourth line, however, a 10-bar pre-chorus, or build-up, focuses on the **dominant** chord (with a brief move to the **supertonic**, Am) before the chorus returns.

‘Mushnik and Son’

This song appears in Act I, as Mushnik realises that Seymour’s strange plant is the reason for his flower shop’s sudden upturn in trade. Hearing that Orin is trying to persuade Seymour to leave his job and take his now-famous plant with him, he offers to adopt the innocent orphan and make him a partner in the business. Despite having been poorly treated by Mushnik throughout his time at the shop, and despite all of Mushnik’s asides in the song about making money, Seymour accepts the offer.

Writers Menken and Ashman, both Jewish, decided to focus on Mushnik’s similar background by imitating the **klezmer** style in this fast-paced, breathless number.

Listening activity: klezmer

The klezmer musical tradition comes from central and eastern Europe and features often exciting, high-energy dance pieces that are played at celebrations such as weddings. Given that the Jewish people were very spread out across Europe and parts of the Middle East, as well as America, the style developed as a fusion of many folk, jazz and classical influences.

After the Second World War, as Jewish people began to rebuild their lives and their identity, the style became increasingly popular and, from the 1960s onwards, appeared in many stage musicals and films, such as *Oliver!*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Producers* and the remake of *The Jazz Singer*.

To provide some context, watch this brief documentary (www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oQzfUGhyHM) and listen to any of these examples of klezmer-influenced music, encouraging your students to identify their common features:

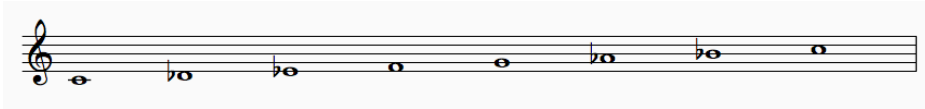
- ▶ ‘You’ve got to pick a pocket or two’ from *Oliver!* (1968): www.youtube.com/watch?v=VogHwPoC5VY
- ▶ ‘If I were a rich man’ from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964): www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBHZFYpQ6nc

The increasing stereotypical use of klezmer music for songs about money making was parodied by Mel Brooks in his show *The Producers* (1967, remade 2005). There’s profanity and some adult themes in this performance of ‘The King of Broadway’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTuFPoSFLQY) – check it first!

Comparison/composition exercise: the style of 'Mushnik and Son'

Having listened to a selection of klezmer music, students can compare 'Mushnik and Son' and come up with their own stylistic features, perhaps in the form of a short instrumental composition of their own. Key musical features of the style include:

- ▶ 4/4 metre and a fast tempo.
- ▶ The use of the minor scale (C minor in 'Mushnik and Son') and the **Phrygian mode** with its characteristic **flattened supertonic** (the second degree):



- ▶ Strong, repetitive, rhythmic accompaniment with repeating bassline and off-beat chords.
- ▶ **Homophonic**, chordal texture.
- ▶ Use of **syncopation**.
- ▶ Fast melodies with energetic wordplay and quick interaction between characters.
- ▶ Use of dark humour and Jewish words/stereotypes in the lyrics.
- ▶ Exciting rhythmic build as the song progresses.

Additionally, Menken adds a Latin flavour with the use of castanets and the same tresillo bass line as in 'Little Shop of Horrors'. Note the use of the flattened submediant chord.

‘Feed Me/Git It’

Audrey II sings this song to Seymour in Act I, when it begins to emerge that he is unable to provide enough blood to satisfy the plant’s appetite. The plant’s sudden ability to speak comes as a huge surprise to Seymour, who begins the song with a touching tribute to Audrey II, crediting it for his and Mushnik’s success despite his increasing anemia.

The bulk of the song, after the **ballad**-like introduction, is a **gospel**-influenced plea from Audrey II, listing all the things Seymour could have if the plant continues to grow and make money. A central section brings a change of tempo and feel, still in gospel style, where Seymour expresses his doubts. His mind is made up when the plant reminds him about the evil Orin and how badly he treats Audrey, and the two decide that Orin would make perfect ‘plant food’.

The outer parts of the song are structured in loose **AABA** form and have a driving, **riff-based** accompaniment based on a two-note punchy rhythm. Melodies and chords are based on the **blues scale** in C, with mostly tonic, subdominant and dominant harmony and plenty of funk/blues-style **improvised fills** from organ, bass and guitar. The style calls to mind the **call and response** style of gospel music, helped by Audrey II’s preacher-like vocals.

The central section (Seymour’s ‘I don’t know’) is slower, in **compound time** and beings on the **relative minor** chord. Again, it is gospel-like in its style and the **Hammond organ** features strongly, as does the guitar, with a **triplet** rhythmic feel providing a backing for Seymour to show off some vocal gymnastics.

Listening activity: ‘Feed Me’

Listen to ‘Feed Me’ from 23:02 to 23:38 and answer the following questions:

- 1 Name the instrument that plays short solo fills after each ‘I don’t know’ line. [1]
- 2 Which **two** of the following can be heard in the music played by the organ in this section [2]

Triplet rhythms **Sustained chords** **Riffs** **Glissando**

- 3 Circle **true** or **false** for each of these statements about the excerpt. [4]

The music is in compound time. **true** **false**

As well as the two lead parts, there are backing vocals. **true** **false**

The excerpt begins with a minor chord. **true** **false**

Seymour’s word setting is entirely syllabic. **true** **false**

- 4 Describe the musical features of the accompaniment at the end of the excerpt, for the words ‘perform mutilations’. Make **two** points. [2]

Answers:

1. Electric guitar.
2. Sustained chords, glissando.
3. True, false, true, false (there is a lot of **melisma**).
4. A drum fill, accented, repeated chords, general pause.

Sample Section B questions on *Little Shop of Horrors*

Section B of the paper, entitled **Contextual understanding**, asks more general questions about the Area of Study (students have to answer on AoS 1, and then pick one other AoS to answer questions on).

Here are some ideas for questions, based on *Little Shop of Horrors*

- 1 The songs from *Little Shop of Horrors* are influenced by music from a number of styles. Give two examples of musical characteristics from each named style in the songs listed.
 - ▶ 1960s pop music in 'Little Shop of Horrors'
 - ▶ Klezmer music in 'Mushnik and Son'
 - ▶ Gospel music in 'Feed Me/Git It' [6]
- 2 Describe **three** features of the vocal parts in 'Little Shop of Horrors'. [3]
- 3 State **three** characteristics of the organ and guitar playing in 'Feed Me/Git it'. [3]
- 4 Explain how musical elements are used to create a sense of drama and foreboding in 'Prologue'. [4]