

Friday Afternoons:

Following Folk Footsteps

By Laurel Swift

Context

The exact definition of a folk song is hotly debated! For our purposes, folk song is a varied body of songs that are rooted in a place, time or culture. Before recordings, radio or internet, they were simply passed from person to person. Often the composer is long forgotten, although all songs were created by someone at some point.

Frequently folk songs have been changed over time and place by many people, whether through misremembering, or deliberate edits that better suit each singer or community that sings them. Over time, this process creates families of folk songs that might seem quite different but have stories, tunes or lyrics in common.

Key Features of Folk Songs can include:

Transmissible (easy to pass on)

Adaptable (can be repurposed)

Accessible (Fun to join in with)

Captivating stories

Exist as a vocal line only (although may be easily harmonised by ear and people can choose to add accompaniment)

Purpose of Folk Songs

Here are some of the important functions of folk songs

Tell a story

- Remember an event or person that is important to the singer or community
- Tell the truth about a situation (especially if newspapers, government or religious institutions are hiding something)
- Cautionary tales (warning to parents, bosses or bad lovers)
- Describe an occasion or situation that is unusual, tragic or celebratory
- Fantastical, nonsense or magical tales

Celebrate

- Seasons
- Anniversaries
- Being together

Help with tasks

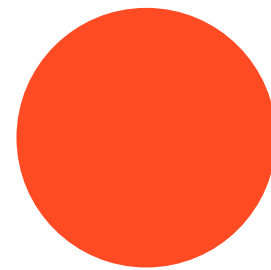
- Work together in rhythm (sea shanties)
- Stay focused on boring tasks
- Deal with hard times
- Pass long journeys

Purpose of Folk Songs



Questions for Discussion

- Do you know any songs that have these functions?
- What makes a song transmissible (easy to pass on)?
- How many times do you need to hear a song to remember it completely?
- Can you name some occasions when people might sing together to celebrate?
- Are there any facts or history that you've ever learnt from a song?



Listening - an 'active' activity!

Listen to one or more of these example folk songs in the Friday Afternoons song bank. These songs have been arranged for choir and piano

- Oliver Cromwell
- I mun be married on Sunday
- Pleasant and Delightful

A) For the first listen, focus on the vocal tune & words only.

- What is repeated?
- What is the structure of the song?
- Is the lyrical structure the same or different to the melodic structure?

B) Listen again

- Can you sing each verse back?
- Make it easier by pausing the recording and trying one line at a time.
- What happens in the song?
- Draw a quick sketch of whatever pops into your head for each verse.
- Can you summarise the plot?

C) One more listen

- Describe the accompaniment

Writing your own Folk Song!

On your marks, get set...

First, we're going to get our songwriting pipes flowing, just like an athlete preparing for a race we need to exercise the 'songwriting muscles' (imagination, an open mind, curiosity, playfulness to name a few of these 'muscles') and warm them up.

1. Object Writing

Write out the 5 senses as prompts:

I see...

I hear...

I taste...

I smell...

I touch..

Pick an object and write down how your senses experience that object. Keep returning to the prompts to stay focused on senses. No need for rhythm, rhyme or even sentences. Just keep writing!

For example: A mug. How does the mug feel under your fingers? What about the warmth of the tea on your lips? What does the aroma remind you of? How does the place in the aroma-memory look or sound?

The only rule is to keep writing. No need to stay loyal to the starting object; your senses are steering. Leaps, abrupt turns or diversions to other places and times are encouraged. Don't worry about a storyline, or telling a memory exactly. Jump around and explore through your senses.

If you get stuck, pick the next sense of the list, write it out e.g. "I hear, I hear, I hear..." something will come! It doesn't matter how daft it may seem, write it down! Keep going with that sense for a bit then move onto the next one.

The object is 'a mug'. Set a timer for 3 minutes and... go!

At the end of 3 minutes get into small groups and each read your piece. Listen to everyone else's writing. What did they write that you liked?

Repeat this exercise 2-3 more times with a different starting object. Here's some ideas, but it could be anything, and you could ask the group to come up with their own too:

Rainy day

Hot weather

In the woods

Trip to the sea

Playtime

Going to town

The kitchen

Writing your own Folk Song!

2. Rhyming Response

This quick response game helps you improve the speed you can find rhymes, and gets you digging for near-rhymes. Most importantly, it helps get lyric ideas flowing - even though at first it sounds like all sorts of nonsense is coming out!

Do this in 2's, 3's or 4's. You can play alone, or even with someone who doesn't know you're playing: simply rhyme back whatever they say.

Person 1: Pick a short phrase that you like from your object writing, or say something you see or hear around you. e.g. "The moon was bright and clear" e.g. "My coat is on the hook".

Person 2: Without stopping to think, reply to that statement, rhyming the last word.

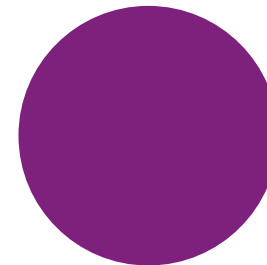
e.g. "I wonder who else was near" / "I couldn't see your ear" / "There was a chicken, a goat and a deer". E.g. "I didn't really look" / "Right next to my book".

Keep going until everyone has tried a rhyme to the first phrase. It does not have to make sense!

Start Again! Person 2 picks an opening phrase. Again, everyone takes a turn firing out a response. Don't think too hard, just say the first thing that comes to mind!

Keep going around, see how many rhymes you can make in 7 minutes.

Better poetry and more sense will emerge the more you do it.



Writing your own Folk Song!

3. Building the Bones

Revisit the purposes of folk songs, then decide what purpose will your song have. Will it tell a story? What story? Celebrate something? What? Help you with a task? What are the steps involved in that task?

Decide the purpose of your song, then discuss the key points. You need to agree on 4-6 key points.

If it's a story then you're going to summarise your story in 4-6 lines. Find one line connected to each of the following. You might not need all of them.

1. Set the scene (weather / time of year / where)
2. Key characters or incident (who is there, why are we here)
3. What is the tension or highlight (what happened first)
4. What happened next?
5. Any unexpected twists?
6. What was the outcome?

If your song is for a celebratory occasion you're going to write down some of the important features of that celebration.

1. The place / weather / time
2. Who is there?
3. Anyone or anything else worth mentioning?
4. What will happen first (food / drink / activity)
5. What else will happen?
6. What now? (when does it end? Will it happen again? Is anything different now?)

If your song is to Help With Tasks, write about that.

1. What is the task?
2. What has to be done first?
3. What next?
4. After that?
5. Anything else?
6. What will happen when it's finished?

Write down your 4-6 key points. This is the summary you'll need for the next step.

Writing your own Folk Song!

4. Words Into Melody

Look at the 4-6 line summary of your story / key points of your topic.

Each of these lines will become the centre of a verse. e.g. If you have 4 lines, you will have 4 verses. Each line appears in its own verse.

Work in groups of 2-4. Pick a line from your summary that feels easy to say without stumbling. You could see if there's a simpler way to say it. Can you make it shorter or remove any difficult or superfluous words?

Speech into Rhythm

- One person say your line out loud. E.g. "the sun shone bright in the sky"
- Everyone else repeat it back.
- Next person say the same line again and really emphasise the important words. "The SUN shone BRIGHT in the sky"
- Everyone repeat it back
- Next person try putting longer spaces into the phrase "The sun..... shone..... bright in the sky"
- Everyone else repeat it back

- Next person put the spaces in different places or say some words quicker.
- Listen hard each time everyone repeats it back.
- Try a few more variations.
- Choose the one you all like the rhythm of the best, or the one that is simplest to repeat back accurately.

Adding pitch

- One person sing your line with it's rhythm all on one note
- Everyone else repeat it back
- Next person sing the phrase, this time go up at the end
- Everyone else repeat it back
- Next person sing your phrase again, try going down or up in the middle
- Everyone else repeat it back
- Next person sing your phrase and see how creative you can get! You could run up, down, rest on a different note, jump around, or start in a different place.
- Everyone sings it back.

- Try out a few more things; how simple can you make it? What sounds great? What feels nice to sing?
- Can you find a melody that everyone can sing back easily and enjoyably?
- If everyone sings back a phrase that you really like, sing it back to them again! If everyone keeps singing it, this is the one!

Congratulations! You now have a good rhythm and a melody for the line.

Scaling Up

- Count how many syllables are in your line.
- Which syllables have emphasis on them?
- Edit each of the other lines in the story summary until they have the same rhythm as the first one.

Now you have the most important line for each verse, you're ready to structure the song.

Writing your own Folk Song!

5. Structure

Decide what structure the song will have, and where the repetitions or joining in parts will be.

Here's the structures for the example songs. You can copy one of these. You can also make your own structure - remember to repeat some lines.

Oliver Cromwell - Lyric Structure

A - Phrase 1

A1 - Nonsense words then repeat the last part of phrase 1

B - Phrase 2 (Rhymes with Phrase 1)

B2 - Nonsense words then repeat the last part of phrase 2

I Mun Be Married on Sunday - Verse Lyric Structure*

A - Phrase 1

A - Phrase 1 (new tune)

B - Phrase 2 (Rhymes with Phrase 2)

C - Phrase 3 (Also used in the chorus*)

* In the recording, the chorus happens at the start and the end of the song only

Pleasant And Delightful - Lyric Structure

A - Phrase 1

B - Phrase 2 (rhymes with Phrase 1)

C - Phrase 3

D - Phrase 4 (rhymes with Phrase 3)

D1 - Start of Phrase 4

D1 - Start of Phrase 4

D - Phrase 4

Writing your own Folk Song!

6. Creating Complete Verses

You should now have a structure and one line - with melody - per verse.

Look at your structure to see how many more lines you need to complete each verse. It's 1 more if your structure is like 'Oliver Cromwell', 2 more for 'I Mun Be Married' and 3 more for 'Pleasant and Delightful'.

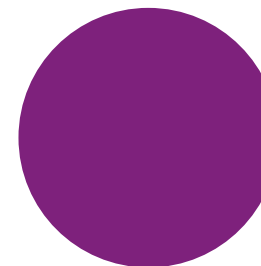
Work through one verse at a time. If you are working in 4's, split into 2's and take some verses each.

Discuss what information or atmosphere you want the other lines to convey. Can anything from your object writing help picture the scene; how it looks, sounds, smells? Are there people, moods or weather to describe? How can you add more drama, excitement or suspense? It may be helpful to do some object writing around your chosen theme.

Is your existing line the one that gets repeated? Does it go at the start or end of the verse?

To generate the missing lines, let's play Rhyming Response again. Say the first line together then take turns making a rhyming response. See how many responses you can find, then write down the bits you like best. You may come up with a good line all in one go, or you may build it from several ideas.

Repeat this with each verse. It's fine if you decide some parts are no longer needed and end up with fewer verses than planned.



Writing your own Folk Song!

7. Finishing The Melody

You've made it to the final step! Let's finish the melody.

- Sing the first line you already have.
- Will this line be repeated? If so, with the same tune or a different one? Try out some ideas!
- Use the Speech into Rhythm and Adding Pitch exercises from Step 4 to create the melody for the new lines.

When you have a tune you are happy with, try it out on every verse to check everything feels good to sing.

Folk Song Checklist

Once the whole group has completed songs, each group can sing their song, and everyone else join in on the repeated sections.

- Can you join in without really having to learn the song?
- Do you get any of the songs stuck in your head?
- Can you follow what happens in the song?

Congratulations! You have written some new folk songs!

Generously supported by



Garfield Weston
FOUNDATION

The Sackler Trust and
Scops Arts Trust

brittenpearsarts.org/friday-afternoons

brittenpearsarts.org

Britten Pears Arts is a registered charity No. 261383 and company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales No. 980281. VAT Registration No. 927 3330 30.
Registered office: Snape Maltings Concert Hall, Snape, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 1SP.