

Friday Afternoons:

# Telling a Story with a Song

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# Context

Folk music is one of the oldest genres of music that there is. Before TV, the internet, the radio and the telephone, it was a way for communities to share news, pass the time, and most importantly, tell stories. Every country has their version of folk music and it is a thriving genre of music that is extremely popular today.

The resources are written as if talking to the pupils, with questions and instructions that you can ask directly to your class. However, they are designed to be used in creative sessions facilitated by you, rather than printed out and given to the children as worksheets.

# To start



These resources have been inspired by the following songs in the Friday Afternoon collection:

- The Ash Grove
- Nicky Tams
- Skye Boat Song
- Pleasant and Delightful
- Oliver Cromwell
- Lady on the Mountain
- The Oak and the Ash

These resources will explore:

- Storytelling
- Writing lyrics
- Pulse (the heartbeat of the music)
- Song structure (creating a chorus or refrain, and verses)
- Singing

## **A quick note on resources before we get started:**

These resources focus on writing the lyrics, and then thinking about a melody / tune. But with songwriting, often it can be an interwoven process... if your class suggests a melody whilst you write, record it, so you can remember it!

# 1. What is your folk song going to be about?



Music, whatever genre, is all about storytelling; your aim as the composer or songwriter is to paint pictures in your listener's imagination. You can write a folk song about anything but here are some starting points for the story that you might want to tell:

## Something Historical

Just like Benjamin Britten was inspired to write a song about the historical figure, Oliver Cromwell, you could pick someone in history that fascinates you or that you're currently studying in class. How did their story start? And how did they rise to prominence? What happened next? And how did their story end?

## A Place

Just like Rachel Portman's take on the Syke Boat Song, or the setting of Britten's Ash Grove, lots of folk music is about a place. Sometimes it can be about a particular place e.g a town or forest. Or it might be about what happened in that place and the journey to and from it. Where is one of your favourite places? What can you see and hear there? What might've happened there in the past? Or what can you imagine happening there in the future?

## Create your own folktale

So much of folk music is based around myths and folktales. Why not have a go at writing a song about a magical tale that you have created? Where is the folk tale set? And what year is it? Who is the central character? And what do they do? Is there suspense in the story? And how does their story unravel?

## 2. Let's write some lyrics!

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### Create a word library

Once you know the subject of your song, brainstorm that subject together on a white board, or in groups on big bits of paper; write down everything that you can think of to do with this subject to create a **word library** no detail is too small. Don't get caught up in sentence structure or rhyming at this stage.

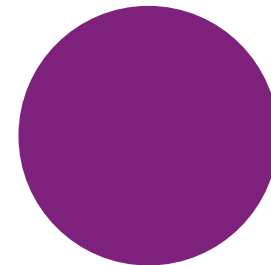
### Some top tips

Once you know what your song is going to be about, then it's time to start working on the lyrics with the help of the word library you've created. Lyrics are the words of the songs, the musical sentences, and when writing them, it can be helpful to remember...

- Often getting started is the hardest bit- there are no wrong answers!
- They can rhyme, but they don't have to.
- Working as a team can really help- and always come back to the question, 'What is the story we're trying to tell?'

### Find the heartbeat of your song

Another top tip when writing lyrics is to have a steady pulse that runs through as you write. A pulse is the heartbeat of the music; it's the thing that makes you want to stamp your feet or sway along. It's the steady anchor that grounds whatever you write. Sometimes, particularly with folk music, it can be useful to get a pulse going either by someone tapping a steady beat on the drum, everyone tapping their heart, or finding a metronome online and picking a beat (e.g this one - I used 75 BPM when writing the example).



## 2. Let's write some lyrics!

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### Writing a chorus

A chorus is the bit of the song that repeats and comes back after each verse. It's often the catchy bit and in folk music, can be the part of the song where all the voices join in. When writing a chorus, it's important to think about what is the central message of the song.

What will your chorus be?

1. Get a pulse (musical heartbeat) going...
2. What is the central message of your story? Refer back to your word library- were there any repeated ideas, or words that kept on coming up?
3. Are there any repetitions in your chorus lyrics?
4. Set a timer for 3mins, and see what you come up with.

### Example:

Here's a chorus I wrote (this is just an example...yours can look completely different!):

*Oh she took control of the skies and land,*

*And the hills and streams, and the seas and sand,*

*Yes she took control, and she kept them safe,*

*But it was far away from here...*

It has four lines, a little bit of rhyming and features the central character of my folk tale (whilst adding a little bit of mystery).

## 2. Let's write some lyrics!



### Writing some verses

Once you have a chorus, it's time to think about your verses. Folk songs can have lots and lots and lots of verses, but for the purpose of these resources, why not try writing two?

### **Verses give context, detail and more information about the story.**

The lyrics are different in each verse...so you have more opportunity to tell the story!

### What will your verses look like?

- Once again, setting a timer can be a useful tool to get a starting idea down!
- Set the same pulse as the chorus.
- And remember to refer back to your word library!



## 2. Let's write some lyrics!

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### Example:

#### VERSE 1:

She found it hard to see the lack of love for the land she called home,  
It hurt her heart to see the rain fall down on the land she called home,  
Then the fires they did burn,  
But still they didn't learn...

#### CHORUS:

Oh she took control of the skies and land,  
And the hills and streams, and the seas and sand,  
Yes she took control, and she kept them safe,  
But it was far away from here...

#### VERSE 2:

One day she conjured up a wish for the land she called home,  
Magic fell upon her shoulders for the land she called home,  
There was no other way,  
Whatever they did say...

- In verse one I'm setting the scene, whereas in verse two, I'm detailing what happened next.
- I've kept the structure the same in both, as this will help when I come to writing my melody (the melody will be the same in each verse).
- In my verses I've decided to repeat the phrase 'for the land she called home'. Often in folk music there can be repetitions in lyrics that everyone joins the solo voice in singing.

### 3. Writing your melody

Now you have the lyrics, it's time to come up with the melody. There are many ways that you can do this, but here are three options (for varying levels of confidence) to get you started. And remember, just as it might take a few times to get a maths problem correct, it can take a few times to find a melody you like!

#### Begin with one note

- To start off with, get the pulse going and encourage everyone to chant the words of the chorus altogether- do this a few times to ensure that everyone is doing the same rhythm.
- Then instead of chanting the lyrics, pick a note as a class, and encourage everyone to sing everything on that one note (again with the pulse). It's as if you were a singing robot!
- Ask if anyone has any ideas about how you could make the melody more interesting. And if you feel confident to do so, you could sing examples, or ask if anyone could sing an example of what they envision. Also, questions can help...

*Do you think our melody will go up in pitch at any point?*

*During the line, does the melody descend in steps? Or does it jump down?*

*(Depending on your chorus), are lines 1 and line 3 the same melody?*

Give your class time to try out some options! And it's often a good idea to have a voice note recording app on (or a simple video on an iPad) so you can capture the suggestions, otherwise it's quite easy to forget what individuals in your class came up with.

If this is your first time writing a song with your class, keep the melody simple- focus on the class singing the melody together, rather than coming up with a really complicated melody that is difficult to sing. Remember, the chorus is catchy!

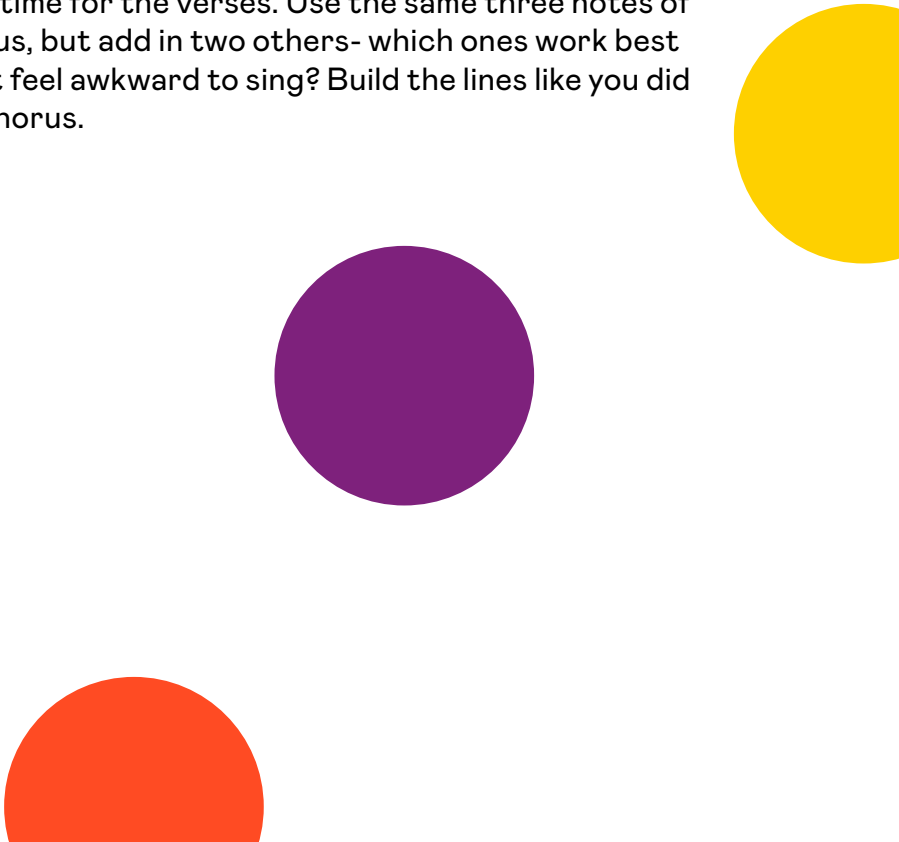
Then, move onto the verses using the same points as above. Often the verses can be a bit simpler because the focus is on the story-telling. Every verse can have the same melody.

### 3. Writing your melody

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#### Use a pitched instrument

Using instruments when writing melodies can be really useful; you can use whatever you have to hand (maybe someone in your class plays something), but for these resources, I'm going to focus on chime bars. You can work in smaller groups, or as a class.

- Using the chime bars, ask someone to play three different notes, or three different colours of chime bars. Encourage the class to sing back what was played (they can sing it on La). Do this a few times and find three notes you like!
  - Once you have chosen the three notes you are going to have in your melody, can you use them to sing a line of the chorus? To do this, chant a line with the class, and then ask someone to use the three notes to come up with a melody where there is a note for every syllable (and the melody doesn't always have to move, you could have the same note a few times... this would be good for a catchy chorus!).
  - Sing this melody back with your class.
  - Once you have a melody for one line, continue to fill in the rest of the chorus. You might want to repeat the same melody, use the same chime bars but a different pattern, or maybe you want to add one or two other chime bars.
  - Then it's time for the verses. Use the same three notes of the chorus, but add in two others- which ones work best and don't feel awkward to sing? Build the lines like you did for the chorus.
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## 3. Writing your melody



### **Come up with a chord sequence (and find a melody that fits)**

If you and your class feel quite confident with music and have experience of writing a song before, another option when writing a melody is to come up with a chord sequence first.

- The sequence of chords that you use can be as inventive as you'd like- maybe it's about putting the numbers 1-7 in a bag and your class picking three, and those are the three chords of a specific key you'll use, or maybe it's about using a sequence that is familiar to their ears (e.g a simple I IV V I which in the key of C would be the major chords C, F, G and returning to C)
- Once you're happy with your chord sequence, play it on a loop and encourage your class to think about possible melodies that would fit. Depending on their experience, you can always guide them by what you play, or give them a starting note that would fit.

### **Telling a Story with a Song, Extension ideas**

Once you have your finished song, there are some ways that you can extend this activity...

- Remember that your song is a story... how are you going to tell it? What words are you going to emphasise? Could you add some dynamics (louds and quiet)s)?
- Write more verses for your song- what else happens?
- Add some solos into your existing song- a smaller group, or solo voice could sing the verse and is there a bit where everyone then joins in?
- Add some harmony- instead of everyone singing the same notes, is there a possible harmony that could be added in the chorus? (Adding a third above the melody can be a good place to start).
- Pick another topic and start to write another song- songwriting is like a muscle, the more you do it, the easier it gets!

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