

“Ee-oh!” by Benjamin Britten – a Friday Afternoons song

Listen and Appraise

“Ee-oh!” by Benjamin Britten

Background Information to the song

About the song

In 1934 Benjamin Britten wrote a series of 12 songs for the school in Wales where his brother was a teacher. These songs, called *Friday Afternoons* (that was when pupils had their singing practice), started a long process of writing music for schools and Britten’s lifelong interest in music for young people and in music education. Britten set to music text by many different poets and authors. The music always illustrates beautifully the mood of the text. All the songs are accompanied by the piano.

- “Ee-oh!” is one of the Friday Afternoons songs. The text is by an unknown writer, taken from an anthology called *Tom Tiddler’s Ground*, edited by Walter de la Mare. Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) was a well-known English poet and writer who wrote many works for children.
- In the 1920s and early 30s, children sang mostly nursery rhymes and playground chants, and folk songs with simple accompaniments. When Britten composed these songs, they would have felt very contemporary to the children, just as it does when we sing the latest pop songs at school today.

Listen

- Play “Ee-oh!” by Benjamin Britten. Click on “The Words” tab to follow the words of the song on the screen.
- If you’d like to hear children perform the song, listen to the Naxos recording of The New London Children’s Choir.

Appraise

Use this opportunity to familiarise the children with musical vocabulary and encourage them to use it. Discuss the song and what you can hear in it.

The following questions can be seen on-screen; answers are below.

“Do You Like the Song?”

There is no correct answer to this: either individuals do, or they don’t. Ask for reasons: all sensible answers are valid.

“What Can You Hear?”

- The vocal line: how many singers? Male/female? (A female singer)
- The backing/accompaniment: how many instruments? Which ones? (piano)
- The texture: is it thick/thin or inbetween? Are there many layers of sound, or just one/two? Are there many voices singing/instruments playing or just one/two? (The texture is the same all the way through the song. It is quite thin as there is only one vocal line accompanied by a piano. The accompaniment is there to support the text)
- The tempo: is it fast or slow or inbetween? (Mostly inbetween, but it slows down at verse 7, then returns to its original tempo. The tempo change follows the story of the song)
- The dynamics: is the music loud/quiet or inbetween? Is it the same throughout or does it vary? (The dynamics change to support the text as it tells the story. Verses 3 and 4 are quieter. Verse 5 is louder and verse 6 louder again, heading towards the fox getting caught and shot. Verse 7 is very loud and slow until the farmer has shot the fox, and then the music goes back to its original tempo)
- Unusual words in the text: some words are old-fashioned terms that we don't use today. Which words are new to you? What do you think they mean? (eg. strife, yonder, stile, lugs)

“What is the story told in this song?”

This song was written for children to sing in the 1930s. How many years ago was that? The story is fun, silly and interesting. It's about a mischievous fox and his wife who loved eating and would do anything to get more food. One night, the fox went into town to look for a meal, but he ran into trouble. He went to the farmer's land and killed all the geese, but the farmer's wife heard the commotion and woke up her husband who shot the fox dead.

“What is the mood of the song?”

Music can evoke many different moods:

- Gentle
- Flowing
- Reflective
- Menacing
- Spooky
- Scary
- Grim
- Lighthearted
- Stirring
- Loving
- Calm
- Cheeky

- Rough
- Passionate
- Sad
- Spikey
- Depressing
- Fun

There are many more. Can you think of some?

What is the mood of this song?

- Cheeky
- Playful
- Menacing
- Grim
- Fun

“How does the music make the story more interesting?”

The story alone is fun, silly and interesting. The music enhances the words in the following ways:

- The dynamics follow the storyline. In verse 3 the music is quiet and gets even quieter in verse 4, with a sparse piano accompaniment. This follows the story of the fox realising there are many geese to eat at the farm and he is creeping around so that he can pounce on them and kill them. Verse 5 is louder as the fox finally catches a goose and eats it. The song is approaching an exciting climax in verses 6 and 7. In verse 7, the musical accompaniment is broad and slow as the farmer loads his pistol, ready to shoot the fox. The tempo speeds up as the farmer shoots the fox dead. The piano accompaniment is often playful and cheeky and makes us think of a mischievous fox, creeping about, causing trouble. Listen to how the piano part changes with the story-line.

“The Words”

‘Ee-oh!’

Verse 1

The fox and his wife they had a great strife,
They never eat mustard in all their whole life;
They eat their meat without fork or knife,
And lov’d to be picking a bone, ee-oh!
And lov’d to be picking a bone!

Verse 2

The fox jump’d up on a moonlight night;

The stars they were shining, and all things bright;
'O-ho!' said the fox, 'it's a very fine night,
For me to go through the town, ee-oh!
For me to go through the town!'

Verse 3

The fox, when he came to yonder stile,
He lifted his lugs and he listen'd a while!
'Oh-ho!' said the fox, 'it's a very short mile
From this unto yonder wee town, ee-oh!
From this unto yonder wee town!'

Verse 4

The fox when he came to the farmer's gate,
Who should he see but the farmer's drake;
'I love you well for your master's sake,
And long to be picking your bone, ee-oh!
And long to be picking your bone!'

Verse 5

The grey goose she ran round the farmer's stack,
'Oh-ho!' said the fox, 'you are plump and fat;
You'll grease my beard and ride on my back,
From this into yonder wee town, ee-oh!
From this into yonder wee town!'

Verse 6

The farmer's wife she jump'd out of bed,
And out of the window she popp'd her head!
'Oh, husband! Oh, husband! The geese are all dead,
For the fox has been through the town, ee-oh!
For the fox has been through the town!'

Verse 7

The farmer he loaded his pistol with lead,
And shot the old rogue of a fox through the head;
'Ah-ha!' said the farmer, 'I think you're quite dead;
And no more you'll trouble the town, ee-oh!
And no more you'll trouble the town!'

“About Britten”

Benjamin Britten was a British composer, born in 1913 and died in 1976. Many composers in the twentieth century wrote music that was very complicated to listen to and required many highly-skilled musicians to play and sing it. Benjamin Britten wrote music for everyone, and he even said so himself. He wanted his ‘music to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives’. People enjoy his music so much that he is now the most-performed British composer in the world.

He wrote music of all kinds and travelled all around the world performing it as a pianist and conductor. He was so famous that the BBC devoted a whole programme to him for his 50th birthday and he was the first musician in history to be made a Lord by the Queen. When he died he left behind more than a thousand pieces of extraordinary music and the fascinating story of a journey from Suffolk schoolboy to great composer.

For more information about Benjamin Britten and his music look at the extension activities document in this unit.

To listen to more of Britten’s works as part of these Listen and Appraise activities, go to the Britten100 website <http://www.britten100.org/new-to-britten/the-music>

This site was launched to provide a focus for the centenary of Britten’s birth in 2013. Here you can explore many more of his works. There are seven search criteria on the site:

- Mood
- Genre
- Instrument
- Writers
- Speed
- Date
- Popularity

You could start your journey by clicking on ‘popularity’ and listening to works that young people have voted as their favourite. Choose from any of the other options as you progress through the 6 units.

For more information about the Friday Afternoon songs have a look here:

http://www.fridayafternoonsmusic.co.uk/the_project

There are more units of work around many other styles of music at www.charanga.com