

Cuckoo! by Benjamin Britten – a Friday Afternoons song

Listen and Appraise

Cuckoo! 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.

- Cuckoo! is one of the Friday Afternoons songs. The text is by Jane Taylor, a poet and novelist (1783-1824), who wrote the words for Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star in 1806. Cuckoo! was 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 Cuckoo! 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? (Two female singers. This is a song for two parts).
- 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 song consists of two parts: voice 1 sings the tune and voice 2 sings a melodic ostinato (a repeated pattern): Cuckoo! On the repeat, singers can swap between melody and ostinato. The accompaniment and the ostinato support the text by mimicking the cuckoo. The texture stays the same throughout).
- The tempo: is it fast or slow or inbetween? (Slow).
- 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. The song starts very quietly, building to to the climax when the bird flies off, and tailing off again at the end).

“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 song describes the life of a cuckoo from April to August, when the bird flies far away to begin its migration.

“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?”

- Gentle
- Flowing
- Reflective
- Sad

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

After a beautiful, quiet introduction where both vocal parts and piano set up the ostinato (repeated pattern) Cuckoo!, the melody line asks the question: “What do you do?” The cuckoo replies:

“In April I open my bill;
In May I sing night and day;
In June I change my tune;
In July far far I fly;
In August away I must.”

The music enhances the words in the following ways:

- The dynamics follow the storyline. They range from very quiet to loud, and back to quiet as the bird flies away.
- Cuckoo! is sung by the second vocal part to mimic the call of the bird. The word and melody are repeated throughout the song to create an ostinato. On the repeat, singers can swap between melody and ostinato.
- The piano accompaniment also mimics the bird’s call.
- The song ends very quietly using the ostinato phrase. The piano accompanies this phrase with quiet chords to illustrate the bird’s departure.
- The feel of the song is pastoral; it makes us think about the countryside, open air, the passing of seasons. The gentle chords in the piano part are evocative of a peaceful scene from nature.

The Words

Cuckoo!

Cuckoo, Cuckoo,

What do you do?

“In April I open my bill;

In May I sing night and day;

In June I change my tune;

In July Far far I fly;

In August away I must.”

Cuckoo, Cuckoo,

Cuckoo!

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 Afternoons 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.