A New Year Carol by Benjamin Britten – a Friday Afternoons song

Listen and Appraise

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.

A New Year Carol is one of the Friday Afternoons songs. The text is a traditional folk song and was included by Walter de la Mare in his anthology of poems for children, Tom Tiddler's Ground (1931).

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 A New Year Carol 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 (on www.fridayafternoonsmusic.co.uk).

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 in-between? Are there many layers of sound, or just one/ two? Are there many voices singing/instruments playing or just one/two? (The piano accompaniment supports the melody line. The texture of the accompaniment stays the same throughout until the final chorus where the chords spread and create a broad sound with big spaces between the notes. A pedal note is featured in this song and can be heard in the piano accompaniment. A pedal note is a note that is repeated or sustained throughout a whole or most of a song while other vocal or instrumental parts move above it.)
- The tempo: is it fast or slow or in-between? (It feels quite slow.)
- The dynamics: is the music loud/quiet or in-between? Is it the same throughout or does it vary? (The dynamics range from very quiet (pp) to moderately loud (mf). There is an occasional swell or crescendo within a vocal line or phrase, and this builds to a climax in the chorus. This is a quiet, peaceful and calm song.)
- 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. levy dew, gold wires)

"What is the story told in this song?"
A New Year Carol is a British folk song originating in Wales, and it is also known as Levy Dew. This carol was traditionally sung at New Year and is associated with New Year customs, not Christmas. The song celebrates the New Year using a combination of folk stories and religious ideas.

Verse 1
"Here we bring new water from the well so clear,
For to worship God with, this happy New Year."
This verse tells us of a Welsh custom: children would collect water from a well to sprinkle on the faces of passers-by. While singing the carol they would also beg for food or money. Washing everything at the end of the old year was a tradition many people took part in: like this they would purify the house and welcome in the new year.
The chorus:
"Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;
The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine."
"Levy" is an old English word for lady. "Levy dew" comes from the french "Levez à Dieu", raise to God. The chorus is about Holy Communion: "the water and the wine".
"The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine" refer to the golden strings of the harp and the trumpets of heaven.
Verses 2 and 3 describe letting go of the old year and bringing in the new. "Sing reign of Fair

Maid" refers to folk mythology and golden maidens who represent the rising and setting of the sun, and therefore the turning of seasons and years.

This song was written for children to sing in the 1930s.

"What is the mood of the song?"

Music can evoke many different moods:

- Gentle
- Flowing
- Reflective
- Menacing
- Spooky
- Scary
- Grim
- Light-hearted
- 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?

- Smooth
- Gentle
- Lyrical
- Calm
- Flowing
- Reflective

"How does the music make the story more interesting?"

The piano accompaniment supports the vocal line: the melody (tune) is smooth and lyrical. The verses are calm and peaceful, telling us about the in-coming new year, and interestingly 5 notes are used. The chorus is louder and reaches a climax with a wider range of notes and more leaps than steps in the melody line.

"The Words"

A New Year Carol

Verse 1

Here we bring new water from the well so clear,

For to worship God with, this happy New Year.

Chorus

Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;

The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.

Verse 2

Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her toe,

Open you the West Door, and turn the Old Year go.

Chorus

Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;

The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.

Verse 3

Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her chin,

Open you the East Door, and let the New Year in.

Chorus

Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;

The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.

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, 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.