

# Black British History and Folk Songs



**By Angeline Morrison**

Image of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Goddaughter of Queen Victoria.

# English Folk Dance and Song Society

The English Folk Dance and Song Society is the national folk arts development organisation for England, based at Cecil Sharp House, Camden. We champion English folk music, dance and related arts as part of the rich and diverse cultural landscape of the UK. We are a registered charity, a membership organisation, and a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England. Through our Education programme we enable people, of all ages and backgrounds, to experience high quality, relevant and inspiring folk arts learning, in schools, with music hubs, and cultural organisations across England. Cecil Sharp House is also home to EFDSS' Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML), England's national folk music and dance archive, which provides free online access to thousands of searchable folk manuscripts and other materials.

The songs in this resource each have a link to their Roud number entry in the VWML's online archive. A Roud number is an individual index number for English folk songs. The number makes it possible to find versions of songs even if the melody or lyrics are not identical.

Please note: historical materials held by the VWML may contain content considered offensive by modern standards. Teachers are advised to check these links before sharing with students as materials may need contextualising.

## Resource credits

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Written and compiled by: Angeline Morrison

Edited by: Rachel Elliott (Education Director) and Charlotte Turner (Education Manager), assisted by Jennie Higgins (Education Administrator).

*Gathering Rushes in the Month of May*: Traditional, arranged and sung by Angeline Morrison. Music notation and piano by Rosie Vanier.

*The Brown Girl*: Traditional, arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison. Music notation and piano by Rosie Vanier.

*Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor*: Traditional, arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison and Rosie Vanier. Music notation and piano by Rosie Vanier.

*Sons of Freedom*: Words: Robert Burns. Tune: Minuetto No 2 by Ignatius Sancho.

Arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison & Rosie Vanier (notation & piano).

*Extract from Letters of The Late Ignatius Sancho, An African (1782)*: Words: created from Letter XIII of 'Letters of Ignatius Sancho'. Piano tune: Minuetto No 2 by Ignatius Sancho, arranged by Rosie Vanier. Vocal recordings: by Angeline Morrison.

Scoring and music notation by: Rosie Vanier, with assistance from Ben Sutcliffe

Sound and video recording by: Angeline Morrison.

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## About this resource

This resource is aimed at Upper Key Stage 3, 4 and 5 (age 14 and over). It can be used to support learning in and across a variety of curriculum areas, including music, English, drama, history, performing arts, citizenship, Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).

This resource explores the hidden historic presence of people of African origin and their descendants in Britain, and the relationship of these ancestors to the traditional songs of these islands that survive to this day. Its purpose is to acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of black people to life in Britain, to expand and develop interpretations of English folk music, and to encourage learning about and from different perspectives by showing how folk songs, and the stories they tell, can speak to all people regardless of background or heritage.

This resource invites learners to critique the popularly held misconception that any black people present in the UK before 1948 are most likely to have been enslaved. This assumption is only partially correct, and it is important to take a longer view of history to include periods prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was at its height. Taking this longer historic viewpoint allows us to consider the many and varied contributions of free black people, as well as those who were enslaved. Learners are encouraged to think about notions of belonging and will also be asked to consider the important role of the abolitionist movement in the UK.

### How To Use This Resource:

Learners are encouraged to work with traditional songs in creative ways to develop new interpretations and understandings. This resource asks these key questions:

1. What can we learn about history from traditional songs?
2. How can new and emerging historical scholarship help us interpret traditional songs?
3. How can we use our creativity and imagination to interpret and explore traditional songs?

Four traditional songs and one piece of 18<sup>th</sup> century music are presented, with information about each. There are audio and video files to help students learn and sing the songs in parts, questions and discussion activities, music activities, and a song-making activity.

The songs are chosen because of their inclusion of, depictions of, or allusions to, the presence of black people in Britain. There is much that we do not know, and indeed cannot know, about our histories. On these occasions we might take what we do

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know and use our creativity and imagination to think of possible ways to fill in the gaps.

Folk songs are a living tradition. They have their roots in the past, yet are vibrant and alive in the present, and ever-changing. Feel free to encourage your students to make adjustments to melodies and lyrics, to do their own songwriting, composing and arranging, to experiment with musical accompaniment, harmonies and beats and so on. These adjustments are a vital part of the living folk process.

Throughout the resource you will find reference to the Roud Folk Song Index. This is a comprehensive online database with over 200,000 references to traditional songs in the English language, found in both published and unpublished sources. Songs can be searched by title, location, singer, etc. The unique Roud Numbering system enables the user to identify variants of the same song. You will see references to the 'Roud number' next to some of the songs. For more information, visit [www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)

Any hyperlinks in this resource starting with <http://www.vwml.org/record/> will link directly to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library's (VWML) online digital archive. This holds digitised versions of original manuscripts and other archival material.

### **A Note for Teachers:**

Please be aware that the content of the VWML is unexpurgated, and contains some songs with offensive, outdated, or problematic language. If students are searching the VWML, it is advisable that teachers scan the songs they're interested in working on beforehand.

Links to external websites may change over the time. They are correct at the time of publication.

This resource, with the accompanying audio and video, is freely downloadable from the EFDSS Resource Bank: [www.efdss.org/BlackBritishHistoryAndFolkSongs](http://www.efdss.org/BlackBritishHistoryAndFolkSongs)

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## Different Ways of Learning History: Official History, Oral History and Hidden Histories

*“If there’s one thing that traditional music is about, it’s the stories. All the songs of love, and life, and death, and marriage – everything that the human being does, is all wound up in traditional music [...] it’s the working class music of these islands. You won’t find that working class history in the history books, certainly. You’ll find it in the oral tradition”.*

Norma Waterson, ‘English Folk Singing’ (The Open University, ‘Tradition and History : English Folk Singing’ 2010, © The Open University course AA317: Words and Music).

*“At its best it is music of great beauty, subtlety and insight into the human condition. It also gives ordinary people a chance to speak for themselves, and set things down in a way they think appropriate for them.”*

Shirley Collins, ‘America Over the Water’ London, SAF Publishing Ltd (2004:58)

Legendary English folk singers Norma Waterson (1939-2022) and Shirley Collins (b. 1935) speak here about the ways in which the official histories of any nation tend to not to include the experiences of ordinary people. Both singers suggest that these experiences and unofficial histories can, however, be found in traditional songs.

Running alongside official history are other histories, equally valuable in terms of what they can tell us about the past, but sometimes overlooked and considered of lesser importance. These include stories passed down orally, or in song form. This resource is about some of these hidden histories, and how they may have been passed down orally in traditional songs.

Thanks to the folk song collectors of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we now have a large and varied body of traditional songs from Britain. These songs are a national folkloric resource, and are rich with stories of human life, love, family, work, and death. There are popular ballads inspired by events in the news, tales of exploration of far-off lands, tales of ghosts, shape-shifters and supernatural beings, comedic songs, ritual and seasonal songs, songs of betrayal, songs about the land, songs about crime... In fact, there are traditional songs about almost anything you can think of that is part of human life.

It is interesting that there seem to be very few English and UK traditional songs that mention black characters, that seem to be written from a black perspective, or that reflect the experiences of black people in these islands.



For many years it was commonly believed that there were no black people at all in the UK until the mid-20th century, with the exception of a few enslaved Africans, or servants. If this were true, it would explain why we don't often hear from the perspective of black characters in traditional songs. However, recent and emerging scholarship shows that black people and other people of colour have in fact been living and working in Britain for at least two thousand years.

### **Discussion Activity 1:**

- In small groups, discuss everyone's existing knowledge about UK Black History. For example, do people in the group think of Black History as a recent phenomenon?
- Make a note of your group's responses. We will come back to this at the end.

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## Black People in British History

The transatlantic slave trade (16<sup>th</sup> century – 19<sup>th</sup> century) has cast a very long and grim shadow over world history. Over 12 million lives were lost as a result. Its influence has also meant that misinformation has accrued over time, resulting in Britain's historic black populations being effectively rendered out of official history. For example, it is commonly known that enslaved Africans were present in Britain as the property of those who owned them. However, it is not widely known that England traded regularly with African countries as early as 1500 [Kaufmann, 2017], that free black people lived and worked in Britain, or that a wealthy African woman known as 'Ivory Bangle Lady' was buried at York in Roman Britain (3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE) [Fryer, 1984].

Imagery of enslaved people of African origin kneeling in chains was common during the long period of the transatlantic slave trade, and these representations have had a lasting effect on popular ideas. Associations of black people with poverty, wretchedness and misfortune have been commonplace since then. However, as 'Ivory Bangle Lady' and some of the other black people in Britain's history show, the conditions of enslavement, poverty, and misfortune are only one aspect of a much bigger picture.

Scholars such as Miranda Kaufmann (2017), David Olusoga (2020), Gretchen Gerzina (1995), the highly influential Peter Fryer (1984), and others, have shown us that the black presence in these islands dates back at least two thousand years. Their work shows us that the black people who lived in these islands in the past were *not* always enslaved. They were often free, sometimes wealthy, sometimes poor, and everything in between. They were entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, household servants, carriage drivers, maids, mine workers, textile workers, land workers, sailors, musicians, tailors and so on. Black people in Britain worked at a great variety of jobs. They would certainly also have created, sung and shared songs.

The making and singing of songs is a natural part of being human. Wherever humans can be found in the world, they create and sing songs. Songs and music travel with people wherever they go, giving rise to many different versions of particular songs and melodies around the world. The black people who were present in these islands would certainly have made songs here, brought songs here, and sung songs here. Today, there is little or no evidence for these songs.

### Discussion Activity 2:

- In small groups, discuss possible reasons why the songs of the UK's historic black population may not have survived.
- At the end of the discussion each group can share their findings with the whole group.



## Meet the Ancestors: Examples of the UK's Historic Black Presence

In this section we will look at some examples of real black people in British history. The exception to this is the first example, Saint Maurice, whose life story may be truth or legend. He is included here because depictions of Saint Maurice as a noble African knight were at their height from around the 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, meaning that many pre-date the transatlantic slave trade. This shows us that popular images of black people in this earlier period did not always include suggestions of poverty, misfortune, or enslavement.



### St Maurice: 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE

The story of St Maurice, a North African Patron Saint of the German Holy Roman Empire, tells that he was born in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and was in charge of the Theban Legion of soldiers in the Roman Army. He was made a Saint after he refused to obey the Roman Emperor's orders to massacre a group of innocent people. Popular 13<sup>th</sup> century depictions of St Maurice represent him as a black knight in armour, or as a soldier. In the Church of Uffculme St Mary, Devon, there is a famous altar carving depicting St Maurice, which dates from the mid-1200s. This carving clearly shows the saint with African features.

A later image of St Maurice by Master Theodoric dates from the 1360s, and also shows the custom for representing this saint as an African knight in shining armour. (Kaufmann, 2017), <https://blackcentraleurope.com>

### Ivory Bangle Lady: 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE

We do not know the real name of this 3rd century Afro-Roman woman buried in York, but historians refer to her as the 'Ivory Bangle Lady' because of the costly jewellery and luxury items buried with her. She had white bangles made of ivory (likely from Africa), and black bangles made of jet (likely from North-East England). Within her sarcophagus (or stone coffin) there was also perfume, a mirror, and jewellery made of silver, bone, coloured glass, and bronze – all items denoting wealth at the time. (Olusoga, 2020).

### John Blanke: c1511

A now well-known Tudor court musician, John Blanke (also known as 'The Black Trumpet') was one of the royal trumpeters at the court of King Henry VIII. It is thought that he may have come to England as part of the entourage of royal servants of Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, who came from Spain. Spain, Portugal, and other European countries had a longer history of trading with Africa than Britain did. As a result of this trade, there is evidence for a historic black presence in many European countries. John Blanke's portrait on the Westminster Tournament Roll of 1511 is thought to be the earliest portrait of a living, identifiable black person in the UK. King Henry VIII wanted to celebrate the birth of his newborn son and heir, so he organised a two-day tournament with jousting, processions, music and so on. Sadly, the baby prince did not survive more than a few weeks. However, the celebrations were recorded in a painted scroll known as the Westminster Tournament Roll, and we can clearly see that one of the trumpeters on horseback is a black man wearing a turban or head-dress. A letter survives from this man, John Blanke, asking the King for a pay rise. This shows that Blanke was an employee of the King on an equal level with the other royal musicians and was not enslaved. (Olusoga, 2020).



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### **West African Workers: 1550s**

In the 1550s, African people from present-day Ghana came to Britain to work and to learn English. Once again, these were free black people, of whom many would have stayed and had families.

### **Black Prisoners in Bridewell: 1772**

In 1772, two black people were detained in Bridewell Prison and Hospital in London for begging, which was a criminal offence at the time. Bridewell was a place for the punishment of the 'disorderly poor' and was not like a modern hospital. What is fascinating here is that over three hundred other black people came to visit them in prison, bringing money and helping them out in whatever ways they could. This tells us some very important information about the numbers of black people in London at the time, and also about how many of these people were free to make prison visits, and had money available to donate (Gerzina, 1995).

### **Reasonable Blackman, the Silk Weaver of Southwark: 1570s – 1592**

Also known as John Reason or Reasonable Blackmore, Reasonable Blackman was a silk weaver living with his family in Southwark in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Southwark at this time was not part of London. Many immigrant families could be found living there, to avoid the tax payable by non-English workers living in London at the time. Reasonable wove fine silk, which was a luxury item, and his skills would have been highly valued. He is one of the earliest examples of an independent business owner of African origin in London. His children are buried in St Olave's churchyard, Southwark. (Kaufmann, 2017).

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### Ignatius Sancho: c.1729 – 1780

Charles Ignatius Sancho was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century composer, writer, actor, abolitionist, and entrepreneur. As the financially independent owner of his own business (a successful provisions store), Sancho was eligible to vote under British law. He thus became, in 1774, the earliest known black man to vote in a UK general election. This was quite something for a man who was born on a slave ship in the Atlantic, and who had been enslaved as a child in New Grenada and in Britain.

As a free adult, Sancho became a well-known figure in London literary, musical, and artistic circles. As a writer he was very active in the movement to abolish slavery and wrote many letters critiquing 18<sup>th</sup> century politics. As a musician, he composed many of the era's popular dance tunes.

His portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1778.





### **London's Black Population in 1764**

In this year it was estimated that there were 20,000 black people living in London. There may have been many more than this, as not everyone would have been officially documented. In other words, their names may not appear in birth, marriage, or death records, or they may not be described in ways that allow us to know for certain that they were black people.

### **London's Black Population in 1780s**

During this decade, there were many black soldiers arriving in London. These were mostly formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants from the USA, who had fought for the British Army in the American Revolutionary War (1775 – 1783).

## Billy Waters (1778 – 1823) and ‘African Sal’

Popularly known by the nickname ‘King of the Beggars’, Billy’s story was that he escaped slavery in the USA and ran away to fight for the British army. A musician, singer, songwriter and performer, Waters lived in the Parish of St Giles and was often seen out and about playing his violin, singing, and busking on the streets. He was very recognisable due to his violin, his wooden prosthetic leg, and his amazing hand-crafted hat in the shape of a ship in full sail. Waters was extremely poor. He and his family’s poverty was such that he entered the St. Giles Workhouse in 1823, and is said to have died there 10 days later. Busking at the time was considered to be a form of begging and was therefore a criminal offence.

During his lifetime Billy Waters was so well-known that he featured as a character in a popular 1821 stage play called ‘Life in London’. This play was based on an earlier novel by the writer Pierce Egan (full title: ‘Life in London, or Days and Nights of Jerry Hawthorne and his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom’). The stage adaptation by William Thomas Moncrieff was not authorised, but it was a phenomenal success – it was the first stage play to have a continuous run of 100 performances in a West End theatre (the Adelphi). ‘Life in London’ was a hit, and everyone was talking about it.

The stage show featured many characters based on people you might expect to see around London, such as ‘Dusty Bob’ the refuse collector. Interestingly, the play features at least two black characters – ‘Billy Waters’ (based on the real Billy Waters, played by Signor Paulo) and ‘Black Sal’ or ‘African Sal’ (played by Mr. J. Sanders). This suggests that black people were a part of everyday London life – at least, in certain areas of London.





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### **Pablo Fanque: 1810-1871**

Pablo Fanque was the stage name of William Darby, born in Norwich in 1810. He was the first recorded black circus owner in Britain. Circuses at this time were extremely popular, and Fanque was highly successful. On his birth certificate his parents are named as John and Mary Darby, with his father's occupation listed as 'butler'. This is notable because it tells us that at least one black family lived in Norwich at this time. Fanque died in Stockport in 1871. He is mentioned on The Beatles' iconic 1967 album 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', in the song 'Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite'. This song was inspired by an antique circus poster that contained Pablo Fanque's name.

By 1821 an estimated 10,000 black people lived in London. It is hard to believe that the black population would have halved since 1764. It is perhaps more likely that records are inexact, or difficult to decipher, or that many black people would not have been officially recorded.



### **Conclusion:**

Now that you have seen examples of some of Britain's historic black population, it's time to think about their possible relationship to traditional song. The next section will introduce you to some folk or traditional songs, with music and discussion activities for each one.

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## The Folk Songs and Activities

The following songs have been chosen for you to work with, as they all have some kind of connection with Black British History. When evidence is inconclusive or inconsistent, it can be interesting to use our creativity to help us piece things together and build up a picture.

### The Brown Girl

#### (Roud 180)

I am as brown as brown can be and my eyes as black as sloe,  
I am as brisk as the nightingale and wild as the forest doe.

My love he was so high and proud, his fortune too so high,  
He for another fair pretty maid left me and passed me by.

He sent to me a love-letter, he sent it from the town,  
Saying no more he loved me because I was so brown.

I sent his letter back again, saying his love I valued not,  
Whether he would fancy me or whether he would not.

When that six months were gone and past, were over gone and past,  
Oh then did my love, once so bold, grow sick with love at last.

When that six months were past and gone, were over past and gone,  
Oh then did my love, once so bold, lie on his bed and moan.

Oh, first he sent for the doctor-man, "You doctor must me cure.  
The pains that now do torture me I cannot long endure."

Oh ne'er a bit the doctor-man his sufferings could relieve;  
Never a one but the brown, brown girl that could his life relieve.

Oh, then did he send from out the town, oh then did he send for me,  
He sent for me, the brown, brown girl who once his wife should be.

Now you shall hear what love she had for that poor love-sick man,  
How all one day, one summer's day, she walked and never ran.

"I'll do as much for my true love as any young girl may,  
I'll dance and sing all on his grave for a twelvemonth and a day."

# The Brown Girl

## (Roud 180)

Traditional, arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison.  
 Music notation & piano by Rosie Vanier.

Lead Vocal

Hum

Piano



Hmm I am as brown as brown can be I have

4



eyes as black as sloe I am as brisk as the

7

rall. . . . .



night - in - gale. And as wild as the forest doe

rall. . . . .

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## About This Song:

This song was a popular Broadside ballad. Broadside were wide sheets of paper, printed inexpensively with popular song lyrics on one side only. These sheets did not generally include the tunes so people could choose to sing them to popular tunes of their choice. Sometimes, the person selling the sheets would sing the song to attract attention to their wares. The earliest broadsides began to appear in England shortly after the invention of printing, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They were sold at fairs, at markets, and on street corners all over Europe into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

If a particular song is found in print many times, this suggests that the song was very popular. That is certainly the case with this song, where the heroine is rejected because she is 'so brown'. The 'brown girl' here has often been interpreted as a 16<sup>th</sup> century working class girl; a young white woman who is 'brown as brown can be' because she has to spend long hours working outside.

Sun-tanned skin was at this time a signifier of poverty and low status and considered less attractive because of this. Very pale skin was a sign of wealth and high status and considered more attractive. Queen Elizabeth I and all fashionable women of her time used special makeup containing lead, said to 'whiten' the skin. Lead is very poisonous, and this makeup caused a lot of health problems for those who used it. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women used makeup containing nightingale droppings in an attempt to lighten their complexions. It was only really in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that sun-tanned skin became fashionable, as it became the new signifier of wealth – this time, a tanned skin showed that you could afford to go on holiday to sunny climates.

At the time of this ballad's popularity, audiences would have understood why a white girl with sun-tanned skin had been rejected by her lover. He has moved to the town and feels he has gone up in the world, and now he wants a light-skinned girlfriend to reflect his new status.

Since we now know that there were people of African descent, and other people of colour resident in Britain at this time, how does this affect your reading of the girl in the song?

Do you think the girl could be 'brown as brown can be' because she may be a person of colour? Do you think she could be descended from people of colour? Do you feel that she's more likely to be a white-skinned girl from a poor family who has spent a lot of time working outdoors?

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### Music / Drama Activity 1:

- Read the lyrics of this ballad, listen to / watch the recordings in your small groups.
- Divide your group in two, one small group representing the girl, and the other group the lover. Consider the characters and think about the ways you can use music, lyrics, and melody to convey each character's side of the story.
- Sing the song through a few times, playing the brown girl differently each time. For example, in one version she might be a poor white girl with sun-darkened skin, in another she might be a black girl or someone of colour.

### Discussion 1:

- In your small groups, talk about how you feel about the song, the story, and the characters.
- Did your feelings about the characters change when you sang the different versions? How did you feel each time?

### Music / Drama Activity 2:

- After you have familiarised yourselves with the song in your small groups, plot out the narrative and make a short play or dramatisation of this song.
- Ensure that your dramatisation includes the singing of an arrangement of the song. You can include the whole song, a short fragment, or sections.
- You can copy the arrangement provided, or you might like to create your own arrangement. If you want to create your own arrangement, think about the ways you can use music and lyrics to tell the story, or to create an atmosphere or mood.
- Think about why you are using each instrument, or harmony, or percussive beat (if you choose to add these). Think about what each addition brings to the telling of the story in the song.

### Discussion 2:

- What can this song tell us about society's ideals of beauty at the time?
- If you were re-telling the song's story today, how would you change the song to make all the details relevant to today's audience?
- The song tells us very little about the brown girl's lover. What sort of a person do you think he might be?

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# Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor

## (Roud 4)

Lord Thomas he was a bold forester  
And the keeper of the King's deer.  
Fair Eleanor she was a fair woman,  
Lord Thomas he loved her so dear.

“Come riddle me, mother,” Lord Thomas he said,  
“Come riddle me all at one,  
Whether I shall have Fair Eleanor  
Or bring the Brown Girl home.”

“The Brown Girl she's got riches and land,  
Fair Eleanor she's got none,  
And this I think to my blessing,  
Bring me the Brown Girl home.”

Lord Thomas he rode to Fair Eleanor's bower  
And boldly the bell did ring,  
There was none so willing as Fair Eleanor  
To let Lord Thomas in.

“What news? What news, Lord Thomas?” she said,  
“What news has thou brought me?”  
“I have come to invite thee to my wedding,  
And that's bad news for thee.”

She dressed herself all in milk white,  
and her merry men all in green.  
And every town that she went through,  
They took her to be some queen.

Then she rode till she came to Lord Thomas' bower  
And boldly the bell did ring,  
There was none so willing as Lord Thomas  
To let Fair Eleanor in.

He caught hold of her lily-white hand  
And led her up the hall.  
He set her above his own bride  
Above the gay ladies all.



“Is this thy bride, Lord Thomas,” she said,  
“I’m sure she looks wondrous brown.  
When thou could’st have had me, as fair a lady  
As ever trod foot to ground.”

“Despise her not,” Lord Thomas he said,  
“Despise her not unto me.  
For better I love thy little finger  
Than I do her whole body.”

The Brown Girl had a little penknife  
That cut both keen and sharp  
And between Fair Eleanor’s long and short ribs  
She plunged it into her heart.

Then off he cut his own bride’s head  
And dashed it against the wall:  
He leaned his sword upon the ground  
And on the point did fall.

“Oh, dig me a grave,” Lord Thomas he cried,  
“Both long and wide and deep.  
And lay Fair Eleanor at my side  
And the Brown Girl at my feet.”

Lord Thomas was buried beneath the church wall,  
Fair Eleanor in the choir;  
Out of Fair Eleanor grew a red rose  
And out of Lord Thomas a briar.

They grew and grew to the chancel top  
Till they couldn’t grow any higher,  
And there they entwined in a true lover’s knot  
For all the people to admire.

# Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor

## (Roud 4)

Traditional, arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison & Rosie Vanier.  
 Music notation & piano by Rosie Vanier.

### Plot Summary:



Lead Vocal  
 Lord Tho-mas he was a bold fo-res-ter and kee-per of the king's

Harmony 1  
 Tho-mas he was bold fo-res-ter kee-per of the king's

Harmony 2  
 Tho-mas he was bold fo-res-ter kee-per of the king's

Piano



5  
 deer Fair El-ea-nor she was a fair wo-man Lord Tho-mas he loved her so dear

deer El-ea-nor was a fair wo-man Tho - mas\_ loved her so dear

deer El-ea-nor was a fair wo-man Tho - mas\_ loved her so dear

Lord Thomas is in love with a beautiful girl named Fair Eleanor. He asks his mother whether he should marry the woman he loves, or whether he should instead marry the brown girl for her money. Lord Thomas's mother instructs him to marry for money, so he goes to Fair Eleanor's house to invite her to his wedding – to another woman. Fair Eleanor dresses herself up beautifully and turns up at the wedding with her entourage. In front of all the guests she cruelly asks Lord Thomas whether he has really married this 'brown' woman, when he could have had a real beauty like Fair Eleanor herself. Lord Thomas instructs her not to despise his new bride in front of him, reassuring Eleanor that she is the one he loves. The brown girl takes out her knife and kills Fair Eleanor. Lord Thomas then kills the brown girl (his new wife), before falling on his own sword. Before he dies, he calls for a grave to be dug for all three of them. He wants Fair Eleanor laid at his side, and the brown girl at his feet.

### About This Song:

This song has many versions, including a famous Scots ballad. The lyrics used here are from the Penguin Book of English Folk Songs (ed. Ralph Vaughan Williams and A.L Lloyd, Penguin, 1959-70).

The earliest printed version of this extremely popular Broadside ballad in England is c.1663. An earlier French lyric song with a similar story exists, which dates from the 1100s (*De La Vile Issoit Peasant*).

When tracing black people and other people of colour in British history, the task can be very difficult because of the terminology. For example, referring to someone as 'brown', as we have seen in the previous song, may have very different meanings from those we would use today.

What is interesting in this story is that the ballad tells us that Fair Eleanor is the most beautiful, but that the un-named 'brown girl' is the one who has the house, the land, and all the money.

In the previous song, some people interpret the girl's brownness as a sign of her poverty. Her white skin is darkened by the sun, because she is poor and has to work outside in the fields all day. Here, however, the brown girl is very clearly described as the wealthy one. So, we can understand from this that her brownness is definitely *not* a result of labouring out in the fields because she is poor.

Perhaps the description of 'brown' here refers to her dark hair, or dark eyes. Or perhaps the 'brown girl' could be a person of colour, or a member of Britain's historic black populations, or one of their descendants. Perhaps she is a member of a wealthy family who has moved to the area from another country.

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### Music Activity 1:

- Listen to / watch the clips of the arrangement of this ballad and sing it through in your groups. If you feel inspired to make any changes to the melody or lyrics, talk about this in your group and make some decisions on how you're going to perform it.
- Think about why you would like to make these changes and be prepared to share your thoughts on this after the performance.

### Discussion Activity 1:

- Look through the lyrics and locate all the descriptions of the Brown Girl, and all the descriptions of Fair Eleanor.
- Compare and contrast these descriptions, talking about what the lyrics tell us about each of these characters and how they are portrayed. To start you off, the first comparison might be that only one of them is given a name.

### Music / Drama Activity 2:

- Act out, or dramatise, this ballad. Try to keep spoken words to a minimum in this dramatisation, using as much of the song as you can. If you can act out the whole song, so much the better.
- Pay careful attention to each of the characters.
- As you create your dramatisation, think about the key themes in the ballad, and talk about how each character and their actions relate to these themes. The key themes include: attitudes towards marriage, respect, violence, attitudes towards race, gender inequality, beliefs about beauty, wealth and power.

### Discussion Activity 2:

- See if you can pick out particular verses or lines in the song that relate to some of the themes listed above.
- If you notice any more themes, add them – then find verses or lines in the ballad that relate to these new themes. Discuss the ways your chosen lines or verses relate to the themes you have identified.
- The Brown Girl is not named throughout. What do you think this might mean for the story?
- When choosing a wife, what is Lord Thomas looking for?
- Think about the power dynamics in the story. List all the characters with the one you consider having the most power at the top, and the one with the least power at the bottom of the list.
- Finally, what does this ballad tell us about inequality at the time? (This could be gender or racial equality, for example).

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## Gathering Rushes in the Month of May (Roud 899)

It's of three young maidens a-rushing they went,  
And a-gathering of rushes it was their intent;  
But before one's come home she's borne a little son,  
And she's rolled it underneath her apron.

So it's home came young Sally with her eyes all full of tears,  
“What is it that ails you, my little daughter dear?  
And what is it that ails my pretty little Sal?  
And what have you got underneath your apron?”

Oh then, “Father, oh father, oh father dear,” said she,  
“It is but my new gown that's too long for me,  
And I was afraid it would draggle in the dew,  
So I rolled it underneath my apron.”

But it's in the first part of the night, when all were fast asleep,  
The pretty little baby began for to weep.  
Said her father, “What's that a-crying out so shrill  
In the room all among the pretty maidens?”

Well then, “Father, oh father, oh father dear,” said she,  
“It is but a little baby someone gave to me.  
Let it lie, let it lie this night along of me  
And I tell to you its daddy in the morning.”

“Well then, was it by a black man got, or was it by a brown,  
Or was it by a ploughing lad a-ploughing up and down,  
For if I had a sword I would run the villain through,  
And leave him to die in the morning.”

“Well, it wasn't by a black man got, it wasn't by a brown,  
But it was by a sailor lad that came from London town,  
And he left me a posy to wear with my new gown  
And I met him early in the May morning.”

“Well then, was it in the kitchen got or was it in the hall?  
Or was it in the stable or was it in the stall?  
For if I had a brand I would burn the building down  
Where you met with your love on a May morning.”

“Well, it wasn't in the kitchen, it wasn't in the hall,  
It wasn't in the stable, it wasn't in the stall.  
It was down by yonder spring where the small birds they do sing  
That I met with my love on a May morning.”

# Gathering Rushes in the Month of May

## (Roud 899)

Traditional, arranged and sung by Angeline Morrison. Inspired by the singing of Gemma Khawaja. Music notation & piano by Rosie Vanier.



Vocal

It's of three young mai - dens a -

Piano

3 *Red*  
 ru - shing they went and a ga - ther - ing of ru - shes it was their in - tent But

6  
 be - fore one's come home she has born a lit tle son and she's

8  
 rolled him un - der - neath her ap - ron



---

### About This Song:

Folk singer and song historian A.L Lloyd (1908-1962) tells us that, “Gathering rushes – used chiefly as floor covering and for basket-making – was traditionally thought propitious for love encounters...” (Lloyd, 1966). In other words, the rush-gathering provided a chance for young people to meet up and get together, away from the watchful eyes of parents or other adults.

The earliest known English version of this song as a broadside ballad called ‘Underneath her Apron’ dates from around 1830, though the song is thought to be Scottish in origin.

In Verse 6 the young woman’s father wants to know the father of her baby. He asks her, “Well then, was it by a black man got, or was it by a brown?” It was common in the language of the day to describe someone as a ‘black’ or a ‘brown man’ in relation to their hair colour, in much the same way that we might describe someone as a ‘blonde man’ today. However, it is also possible that the girl’s father wants to know whether her baby’s father is a black man, or another man of colour.

This song is based on the version sung by Gemma Khawaja.

### Music / Drama Activity:

- Listen to the recordings of this song to help you learn it. Sing it through, all together.
- Now decide who will play the parts of the narrator, the girl, and the father. Sing the song through again, with your chosen singers each playing their roles (you can do this in twos or threes if you prefer).
- Sing it once through as though the terms ‘black’ and ‘brown’ refer to the man’s hair colour. Sing it through again, this time as though the terms ‘black’ and ‘brown’ refer to the man’s skin colour.

### Discussion Activity:

- The girl’s father is very angry that she has had a baby. Do you think the song suggests that he might be more angry, less angry, or about the same if she had told him the baby’s father was a black or brown man?
- Discuss the list of possible fathers for the baby. Do you think the song suggests that it might not be all that unexpected or unusual for the man to be a person of colour?

---

## Create a 'new, old song'

In this section you will be piecing together melody and lyrics from different sources, and creating your own 'new, old song'.

The practice of taking lyrics from an old or traditional song, and then pairing them with a different traditional tune, is very common in the world of folk music. In this way 'new, old songs' are created all the time.

You will first examine a popular abolitionist song, Sons of Freedom, (Pity and Protect the Slave) usually accepted to be written by Scottish poet and songwriter, Robert Burns (1759 – 1796).

## Sons Of Freedom (Pity and Protect the Slave)

### (Roud V1340)

Sons of freedom, hear my story  
Mercy well becomes the brave,  
Humanity is Britain's glory;  
Pity and protect the slave!

Free-born daughters, who possessing  
Eyes that conquer, hearts that save,  
Greet me with a sister's blessing!  
Pity and protect the slave!

# Sons Of Freedom

(Roud V1340)

Words: Robert Burns. Tune: Minuetto No 2 by Ignatius Sancho.

Arranged and performed by Angeline Morrison & Rosie Vanier.

Lead Vocal

Backing Vocals

Piano



O sons of

4

free-dom hear my sto - ry Mer - cy well be - comes the brave.

free - dom ahh



7

Hu - ma - ni - ty is Brit - ain's glo - ry

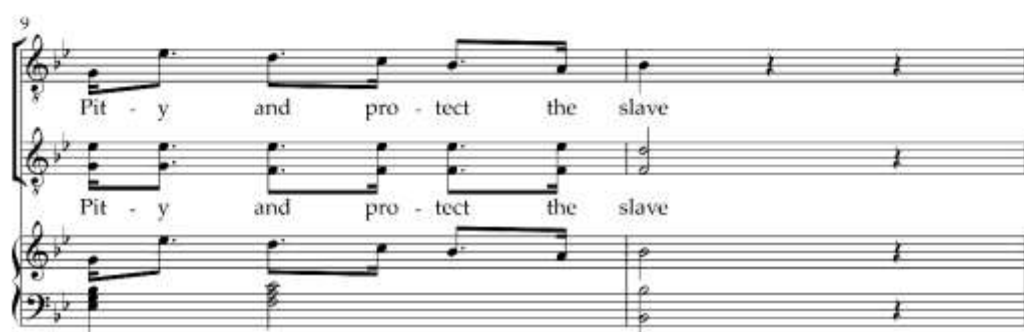
Hu - man - i - ty



9

Pit - y and pro - tect the slave

Pit - y and pro - tect the slave



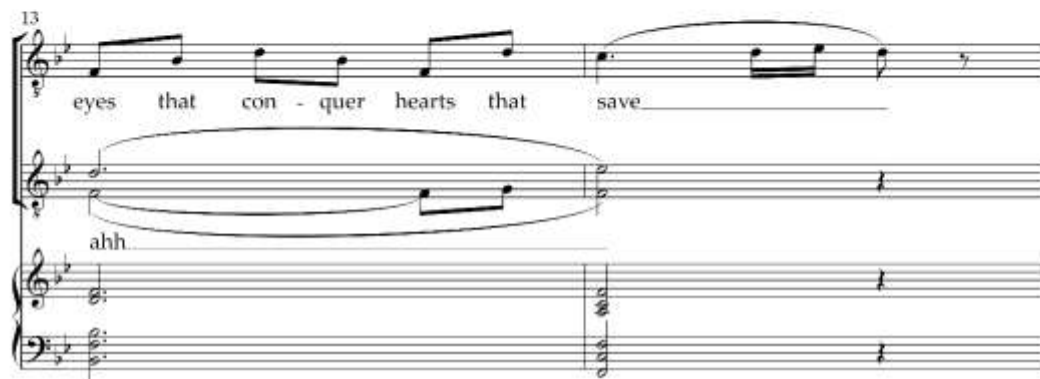
## Sons Of Freedom (Continued)

11



O free born daugh - ters that po - sses - ing  
O free born daugh - ters

13



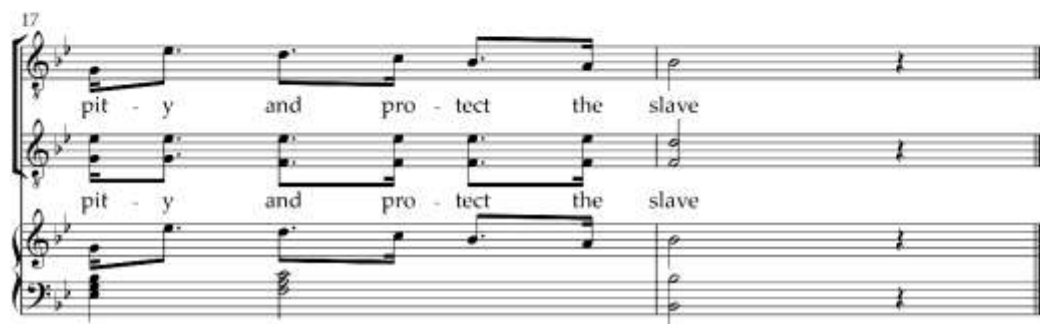
eyes that con - quer hearts that save  
ahh

15



greet me with a sis - ter's bless - ing  
greet me

17



pit - y and pro - tect the slave  
pit - y and pro - tect the slave

---

### About This Song:

'Sons of Freedom' (also known as 'Pity and Protect the Slave') usually accepted to be by Robert Burns, is an example of an abolitionist song. In 1562 John Hawkins led the first English slave voyage from Plymouth to Hispaniola. By the mid-1600s, Britain had become very involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Eventually, after much pressure from abolitionist groups and powerful testimonies from formerly enslaved people, the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. As a result of this, over 800,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, South Africa and Canada were freed, after a 5-year transitional period of unpaid 'apprenticeships'. Abolition in the USA began later, in 1865.

Abolitionist activism in Britain had been gathering support for some time. In 1786 for example, William Wilberforce gave his first speech against the slave trade. By the early 1830s the abolition movement was at its height. There were many popular abolitionist songs, 'Sons of Freedom' is one of these. This song was printed in various 'songsters' (books of popular songs) and also in broadsides. It seems to have been most popular from around 1820 to the 1840s; we can deduce from this that the anti-slavery movement was a strong cultural force at this time. As is often the case with broadsides, no tune is provided.

This song makes an appeal to the bravery of the men, and the beauty of the women with their 'eyes that conquer, hearts that save'. These highly gendered qualities would have been very much in keeping with popular thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The overall purpose of the song, however, is clear. It exists to support and promote the abolition of slavery.

We have looked at the life of Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), black English composer, artist, actor, writer, abolitionist, and business-owner. Many of his compositions – mostly dance tunes – survive to this day. Some have been performed by modern musicians and can be heard online. In the accompanying files, a musical experiment or mash-up was done. The words of the abolitionist popular song, 'Sons of Freedom' have been set to a tune by Ignatius Sancho, 'Minuetto No. 2'. The purpose of this is to retrospectively create an anti-slavery song, with a tune written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a black British composer.

You can listen to Minuetto No.2 by Ignatius Sancho, from 'Minuets, Cotillions and Country Dances' (c.1767) performed by the Decus Ensemble, on YouTube. Many other pieces by Sancho performed by modern musicians can also be heard online.

### Music Activity

- Listen to the accompanying files, where Minuetto No.2 by Ignatius Sancho is used as the tune, and the text of the popular abolitionist song 'Pity and Protect the Slave' as the lyrics.
- As you perform this in your groups, you will be effectively creating a 'new, old song', in this case an anti-slavery song with a tune by a black British composer. This is significant as the composer was not only an abolitionist himself, but he had also been enslaved in his own early life.

### Discussion:

- Think about and discuss the significance of singing anti-slavery lyrics to a tune that was composed by someone who themselves had had the experience of being enslaved.
- A minuet is a dance in triple time. When playing music for dancing, the pulse of the melody must be kept to very exactly. For singing, however, the tune needs a bit of tweaking. As you listen, think about the ways the music may need to be re-shaped so that the words can be more easily sung.



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## Create Another 'New, Old Song'

Now you will look at music and text by Ignatius Sancho, the first black man ever to vote in a British general election (October 1774).

In this activity you will again be creating another 'new, old song', but this time both lyrics and melody will be by the same person – Ignatius Sancho. The point of this is to think about what an historic English song with both music and lyrics by a black British composer might have sounded like.

Sancho was a prolific diarist and letter-writer as well as a composer and entrepreneur. His letters are very eloquent and although they are written in prose and not originally designed to be sung, many of his passages have a poetic feel to them. An extract from one of his letters can be read below, written to a young man.

As you will see, phrases from this extract have been chosen, altered, and crafted into lyrics and set to a new vocal part to be sung over Minuetto No 2 as the underlying tune, which is played on the piano. Listen to the recordings provided and you will hear how the lyrics are sung to a newly invented tune, on top of the existing melody by Sancho.

In this activity, you will perform this 'new, old song' in your groups.

### **Extract from Letter XIII of 'Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African' (1782)**

*"Nothing could possibly be more welcome than the favour of your truly obliging letter, which I received the day before yesterday. Know, my worthy young man – that it's the pride of my heart when I reflect that, through the favour of Providence, I was the humble means of good to so worthy an object. – May you live to be a credit to your great and good friends, and a blessing and comfort to your honest parents! – May you, my child, pursue, through God's mercy, the right paths of humility, candour, temperance, benevolence – with an early piety, gratitude, and praise to the Almighty Giver of all your good – gratitude – and love for the noble and generous benefactors his providence has so kindly moved in your behalf! Ever let your actions be such as your own heart can approve – always think before you speak, and pause before you act – always suppose yourself before the eyes of Sir William – and Mr Garrick. – To think justly, is the way to do rightly – and by that means you will ever be at peace within. – I am happy to hear Sir W cares so much about your welfare – his character is great, because it is good; -- as to your noble friend Mr Garrick – his virtues are all above praise – he has not only the best head in the world, but the best heart also; -- he delights in doing good."*

Facsimile edition available online at: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)  
[https://ia802201.us.archive.org/20/items/lettersoflateign00sanc\\_0/lettersoflateign00sanc\\_0.pdf](https://ia802201.us.archive.org/20/items/lettersoflateign00sanc_0/lettersoflateign00sanc_0.pdf)

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# Lyrical Extract from a Letter of Ignatius Sancho

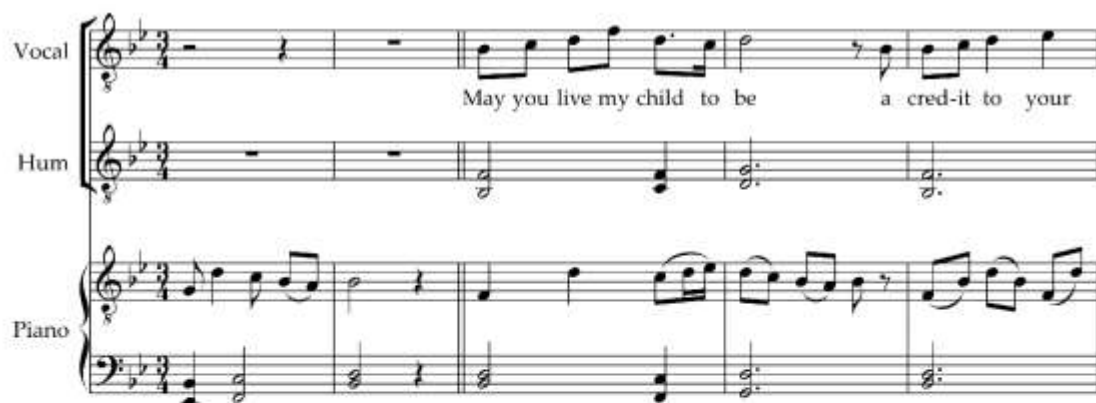
Lyrics created from an extract of Letter XIII of 'Letters of Ignatius Sancho, an African' (1782)

May you live, my child, to be  
A credit to your friends.  
And may you, my child pursue  
Humility right to the end.

Ever let your actions be  
Such as your heart approves.  
Always think before you speak,  
Delight in doing good.

## Letter From Ignatius Sancho

Words: created from an extract of Letter XIII of 'Letters of Ignatius Sancho, an African' (1782). Piano tune: Minuetto No 2 by Ignatius Sancho (arranged by Rosie Vanier). Vocal parts: by Angeline Morrison.



Vocal

Hum

Piano

May you live my child to be a cred-it to your



6

friends And may you my child pur - sue hu -

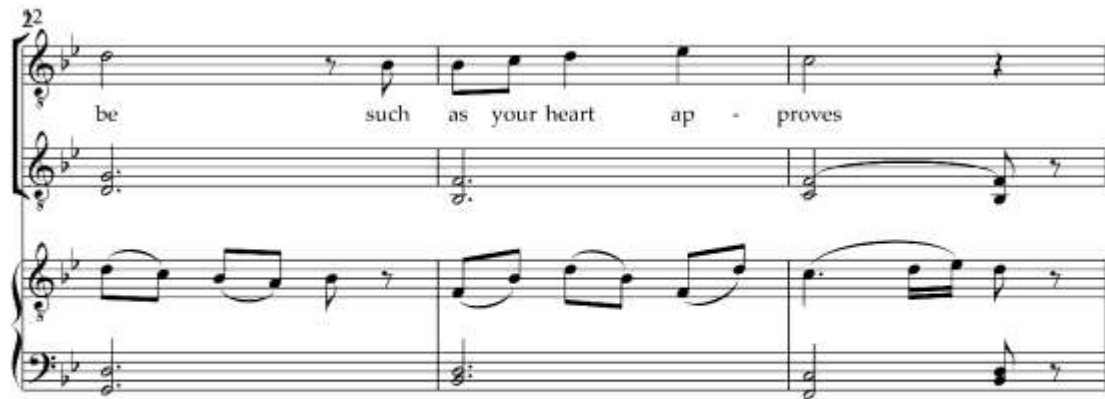


9

mil - i - ty to the end E - ver let your ac - tions

## Letter From Ignatius Sancho (Continued)

22



be such as your heart ap - proves

This musical system covers measures 22 to 24. It features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staves. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "be such as your heart ap - proves".

15



Al-ways think be-fore you speak De - light in do - ing good

This musical system covers measures 15 to 18. It features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staves. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "Al-ways think be-fore you speak De - light in do - ing good".

### Music Activity:

- Create your own version of this ‘new, old song’.
- If you are working in a studio with Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), you can add beats, take a sample from Minuetto No 2, or add other samples, and so on. You could use some different extracts from Sancho’s letter to rap over this.
- If you are working with live instruments, see how you can make the song sound more contemporary.
- If you prefer, perform the song exactly as it appears in the accompanying files.

### Discussion Activity:

- In order to make the prose lyrics more ‘singable’, it is necessary to edit and shape the text. Think about and discuss some of the things below to look for when writing lyrics to be sung.
  - Are there particular sounds that are easier or harder to sing?
  - Where do you put the pauses, to make sure the singer can breathe, but also to ensure that the meaning comes across properly?
  - Which words or phrases would you have chosen from the above extract from Sancho’s letter?
  - How might you have made this prose extract into song lyrics?

The purpose of this exercise is to imagine what an historic song by a black English composer and lyricist might have sounded like. Discuss this idea in your groups.

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## Conclusion and Final Discussion Activity

You have now completed your journey through this resource, and you have learned something about the hidden historic black populations of Britain and their relationship to the music made in these islands.

- It is time to revisit the very first activity in this resource. So, in your small groups, discuss whether the group feels any differently about the historic black populations of the UK now that you have worked your way through this resource?
- What have you learned that you didn't know before? Have any of your previous ideas about the past changed?
- Think about this quote from Gary Younge, who writes that, "...black British history is not a sub-genre of British history but an integral part of it" (2018). Talk about this in your groups and summarise your discussions to the main group.



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## Biographies of Contributors

### Angeline Morrison



Angeline Morrison is a folk singer, songwriter, singing workshop / choir leader and multi-instrumentalist who sings both traditional and self-composed work. As a direct descendant of enslaved African people, Angeline is currently working on re-storying Britain's hidden, historic Black presence back into the realm of folk song. Her current album, *The Sorrow Songs: Folk Songs of Black British Experience* (2022, Topic Records) seeks to do just this and was *The Guardian's* folk album of the year in 2022.

### Rosie Vanier



Rosie Vanier is a multi-instrumentalist singer/songwriter /producer based in Cornwall. She has worked with artists as varied as Cyndi Lauper, Pete Wentz, Benny Blanco, and Marcella Detroit.

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