

Singing Histories: London

A songbook produced by Sing London with the English Folk Dance and Song Society

TEACHERS' NOTES: Music GCSE

Further Study and Application of Songs

(based upon the 'Oxford Cambridge & RSA Examinations' and 'Assessment and Qualification Alliance Curriculum')

These notes are designed to be used in conjunction with the *Singing Histories: London* songbook. It takes aspects of the Music GCSE curriculum and applies it to the songs included in the book. Suggested are ways of understanding the craft of both folk songs and folk singers, allowing students to appreciate what is both a foreign-sounding music, yet one native to this country. Criteria for analysing the songs are presented, then workshop ideas are proposed, suggesting how to use the songs as raw material in the creation of the students' own work.

Singing Histories: London is a unique and rich educational resource for teachers of many subjects. It offers a diverse range of opportunities to explore the curriculum further through the material and challenge students with the way song has historically been used as both a literary tool and social commentary.

The *Singing Histories: London* songbook is more than just a book or a catalogue of songs; it is a musical insight into almost every aspect of London throughout the ages. Through the use of folk songs both modern and old, and accompanying notes, we can delve into the culture, locations, emotions and events of this city's past.

Written 'for the people, by the people', folk songs deal with reality in an unparalleled way. What is presented here are workshop suggestions as to how to use these songs as the ingredients or starting point in the creation of lesson plans or learners' own work.

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June 2009



Listening: Criteria for song analysis

The recordings these songs come from are old, the quality poor and the circumstances often live and noisy. Yet if when listening you can 'listen past' this, and bear the following criteria in mind, you will be aware of some very accomplished performances from singers whose musical approach and training is very different from the ones we are used to.

Comparative assessment of song structures

- Eg *London Lights*, *Lavender* and *London Steamer*.
- Exploring the diversity of structural elements, verse chorus pattern, verse repetition, non linear progressions

Singing styles

- *London Lights*, *Lavender* and *London Steamer*.
- Discuss varieties in musical devices, such as the singers use of: tonalities, structures, rhythm and meter, melodic steps, intervals, phrasing and articulation, major and minor scales and chords, accents, diction and annunciation, microtonal singing, leitmotifs and cadences

Performance stylistics

- Use with any song
- Emotional engagement and control of the song
- Breath control and use of breath
- The aging voice
- Agility and dynamics
- Variations upon the melody and adaption depending on phrase length, mood, interpretation.
- Compare the melody used in the notations to the actual song:
 - o What compromises or changes did the transcriber make? Simplification, transposition, rhythmic and textual changes.
 - o Discuss when a more or less detailed notation would be useful. Try notating a phrase or two from a recording of traditional singer and discuss the process and results.
- Vowel sounds, nasal endings on consonants, non-classical or contemporary diction.
- Attack on the song, vocal production – sharp edge sound, wide sound, back of throat, nasal, head voice, chest voice, support of high and low notes.
- Movement up to and down on to notes. Passing notes.
- Ornamentation and decorative styles

Musical text and lyrical construction

- Variations in perspective
- Repetition of phrases, lines and words
- Descriptive settings, visualisation and scene building
- Compare the scene setting, descriptive elements and narrative devices within *London Lights* to that of *Hopping Down in Kent*

Workshop suggestions: Composing

The observations made under the criteria above can be used to inform some creative choices in song writing and music composition. The following tasks will help you employ some of the devices described above. The songs must all be treated as raw material, and can be incorporated fully or just inform compositions in any genre.

- Write an updated version of the *London Wherryman* set in a contemporary trade, varying only the text (or any other song).
- Write a tune for the missing last verse of *Baskets and Chairs* paying homage to the first verse's melody or the melody of *Lavender*.
- In notating your music how much detail should one notate and how much should be left up to the interpretation of the performer? How to present the music are questions every composer needs to think about.
- Write a song on a topical theme that affects you, incorporating three points of view, (1st person, 3rd person, narrator etc).
- Within this song employ 3 of the musical devices that are mentioned above, particularly that of mixture of major and minor chords / scales in the melody, changes in tempo and rhythmic phrasing and possibly mode.
- Arrangements can be made using any of the above melodies. Taken out of an acoustic 'folk' context, see how some of these melodies can be applied to a more modern interpretation.
- Explore sampling these old recordings. Can aspects of these recordings be spliced and embedded into an electronic context / soundscape?
- Create a musical soundscape inspired by the words or melody from any of the songs in the book using no length restrictions.

Workshop suggestions: Performing

- Sing the song *London Lights* and accentuate the ornamentations, pace and unregulated timing the singer Lizzie Higgins uses. Sing and then compare it to a rendition that is metrically and decoratively more pedestrian and less elaborate. Discuss the emotional and qualitative experience of singing both ways.
- Discuss the emotional approach to some of these songs and whether the way students sing it might differ from the recorded version due to personal experience. *London Lights* might be sung less melancholically but with an edge of anger. Interpretation is open as long as it is justified by and sustained through the performance.

For more information on workshops, publications and activities run by the EFDSS please contact:

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Download the *Singing Histories: London* songbook and teachers' notes: www.singlondon.org | www.efdss.org

More folk song resources for children and teachers:
www.funwithfolk.com | www.teachingfolksong.com



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