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The Ride-by-nights

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
Text by Walter de la Mare
For treble choir: 2 parts
Piano Accompaniment (advanced!)
Oxford University Press: OCS168
Also published as a set of three songs:
"Three Two Part Songs"

CHECKLIST OF ITEMS NEEDED TO TEACH THIS PIECE

1. journals
2. finale scores (phrase 1, 2/4 with solfege and full melody with text)
3. printed scores
4. black note cards/pencils/light source
5. iTunes
6. video camera
7. lap top with SmartLesson
8. Word Wall Signs
9. Musical Planetarium Bulletin Board

Analysis

Broad Description/Type

2 part canon with piano accompaniment (20th Century)

Background Information

Composed by Benjamin Britten: English composer (1913-1976) "The Ride-by-nights" was composed in 1932 as a set of three songs with text by Walter de la Mare. Britten was very skilled at setting songs for children's voices, using texts by Shakespeare, Longfellow, de la Mare, among others.



"Music for me is clarification; I try to clarify, to refine, to sensitize... My technique is to tear all the waste away; to achieve perfect clarity of expression, that is my aim." —Benjamin Britten

Text

Walter de la Mare (1873 – 1956) English poet, short story writer and novelist, best remembered for his works for children. The poem is from *Peacock Pie: A Book Of Rhymes* (1913)

*Up on their brooms the Witches stream,
Crooked and black in the crescent's gleam;
One foot high, and one foot low,
Bearded, cloaked, and cowed, they go,
'Neath Charlie's Wain they twitter and tweet,
And away they swarm 'neath the Dragon's feet,
With a whoop and a flutter they swing and sway,
And surge pell-mell down the Milky Way.
Betwixt the legs of the glittering Chair
They hover and squeak in the empty air.
Then round they swoop past the glimmering Lion
To where Sirius barks behind huge Orion;
Up, then, and over to wheel amain,
Under the silver, and home again.*



Definition of uncommon terms in the poem

Cowled – hooded

Charlie's Wain – also known as the plough, or *The Big Dipper*.

Dragon's feet – commonly known as *Draco*.

Milky Way – the galaxy that contains the Earth.

Pell-mell – in a jumbled, confused manner

Chair – commonly known as *Cassiopeia* (a vain Queen in Greek Mythology)

Lion – Leo

Sirius – known as the Dog Star (a part of *Canis Major*)

Orion – also known as the Hunter, prominent three star belt

Amain – at full speed

Elements of Music

Form

The form is a canon in ABAA' form. The canon alternates between 1 beat and 2 beats, with the lead voice changing between part 1 and part 2, which illustrates the chase between the two witches. There is a brief departure from the canon at m.34-35, which suggests that the two witches catch up to each other!

Rhythm

The rhythm is a combination of eighths and sixteenths, dictated by the declamation of the text. The rhythm suggests more of a "march", rather than flying. The rhythm of the accompaniment begins with a steady ostinato-like 8th note pattern, but adds a surge of 16th note triplets at the high-point of the chase (m.20-27).

***NTS** (Note to self) *Why is Britten's choice of 2/4 meter important? Would the piece have the same power if it were in 6/8 meter? The rhythm would be easier to read if it were augmented (to quarters and eighths).*

Melody

The angular melody suggests a sort of recklessness as it begins in *g minor* but flirts briefly with other keys (one or two measures at a time), using a stepwise descending 5 note pattern (mi re do ti, la,) quickly countered with sudden leaps by a fifth or an octave. The recklessness mirrors the witches zipping across the sky.

***NTS** (Note to self) *Make a connection between "connecting the dots" on the page to notate the melody, and "connecting the dots" in the sky to find the constellations!*

Harmony

The harmony created by the canon is slightly chaotic and unclear, until the final chord. The piano accompaniment provides some stability with the recurring rising 5th interval, but Britten sweetens the "eeriness" factor by adding a minor second grace note to the lower note of the fifth.

Timbre

The range of the vocal parts 1 and 2 is perfectly set for children's voices. The tessitura rests between D' and A, which allows the voices to sing with good production. The singers must sing with a pronounced British accent and the consonants will be sounded more than the vowels. The piano accompaniment provides the major contrast in timbre, playing the lowest octaves in the left hand, to the highest twittering in the melody of the right hand.

Texture

The piano provides the basic rising 5th motif, while the voices literally chase each other, creating a sort of organized chaos. At m. 27, the piano enters the chase in what is a 4-part canon between the 2 voices and the left and right hands of the piano. The texture dramatically changes at m. 34-end, as the witches catch up to each other and the chase comes to a close.

Expression

The dynamic markings are dictated by the text. The text requires a sense of staccato to understand the words, and a sense of drama to tell the story.

The Heart

The heart of "The Ride-by-nights" is the unexpected, angular melody set in canon to depict a chase between two witches racing across the night sky.

*NTS (Note to self) Questions

After an intense analysis, there are still some questions to ponder. PWho is telling the story? Are the singers merely observers, or are they a part of the chase? What would the song be like if Britten chose 6/8 meter instead of 2/4? What would the song be like if Britten decided to add harmony in 3rds? Is the canon the only choice for illustrating the chase? Why does the piano seem to be on its own? (What would it feel like to fly on a broomstick?)

Music Selection

What makes "The Ride-by-nights" a great piece of art is that it pushes the limits of the canon to the extreme. Britten developed the 5-note melodic motif so that the music not only illustrates the text, it keeps the listener intrigued until the end of the rhythmic, melodic and textural chase. The difficult piano accompaniment contributes to the affect with the march-like rising fifth ostinato and flourishing left hand triplets.

Brainstorming Results

Reasons To Perform

- Begin part independence for a beginning choir (6th Grade), but also rich enough for older singers
- A "grown-up canon" for children which requires sophistication in reading text and rhythms
- Sophisticated setting of poetry that requires drama to tell the story
- 2013 is the Benjamin Britten Centenary (100 year birthday)

Things to teach with this song

- Minor scale
- Use of accidentals as a departure from tonic
- Melodic and rhythmic motif
- Identifying intervals of a 5th
- What is a grace note?
- British printing of rhythm (broken 16th notes)
- Dynamic contrasts dictated by text
- Two-part canon in a minor mode, at 1 beat and 2 beats, the leader changes!
- Keeping a steady tempo while performing the canon
- Telling the story of the poetry
- Non-music: Various constellations

*NTS (Note to self) Listen to Edvard Grieg's March of the Dwarfs, Op 54, No 3 piano solo...similarities?

The Plan

Introducing the piece

Read the text to the choir as an accomplished story-teller would, but with the sound “muted”. (Use giant remote control.) Ask students to journal about what the text might be. Choose one musical element to describe what the music may sound like.

Journal Questions:

1. What is the general feeling of the poem?
2. Choose one musical element and make a prediction of how that element might SOUND like in the song? (We have worked on identifying these elements first semester.)

RHYTHM, MELODY, TEXTURE

*NTS (*Note to self*) Devote enough time to the Musical Elements during first semester to make this exercise simple.

Share journal entries with one another. Re-visit the next day, but provide three given texts and ask students to choose the real one. Read the text again *with* the sound.

Skill Outcome

Students will read and notate rhythms of eighths (♪) and sixteenths (♫) in varied combinations.

*NTS (*Note to self*) Many students enter 6th grade with the assumption that 16th notes only appear in groups of 4, and 8th notes in groups of 2. They are unfamiliar with the broken beaming found in this publication.

Strategies

1. Augmentation of the Rhythm

Re-write the rhythm of the song with quarters and eighths. Practice clapping, tapping, hissing as usual.

Stomp = ♩ Clap = ♪ Tap = ♪ Foot Slide = ♪ Hand Slide = ♪

Hiss (2 beats) = ♩ Hiss (3 beats) = ♩ Hiss (4 beats) = ♩

2. Rhythmic Myth Busters

Myth #1: all 8th notes look like this:

BUSTED: students draw the different ways 8th notes can be beamed, printed and placed on the staff.

Myth #2: all 16th notes look like this:

BUSTED: students draw the different ways 16th notes can be beamed, printed and placed on the staff.

Myth #3: Rhythms in 2/4 are performed twice as fast as in 4/4.

BUSTED: rhythmic value may suggest a speed, but the composer/performer determines the tempo by many factors

Myth #4: Your choir teacher is sort of geeky and gets really excited about this stuff!

CONFIRMED!

3. Building Human Rhythmic Patterns

With 4 chairs placed in front (grouped in 2s), explain that each chair gets one beat. Ask for 8 volunteers from one team. Each 2-chair combo represents 1 beat in 2/4 time. Each person will be an 8th note (peach colored scarf) or a 16th note (blue colored scarf). While one team builds the human rhythms, the other teams must

correctly notate the rhythms in their journal. (Use 4 people. Use 6 people. Use 7 people.)

Variation: introduce a rest and use fewer people.

4. Rhythm Survivor

A. Prepare the Rhythm Bank with the many rhythmic combinations of 8th and 16th notes.

B. Place the rhythms in order of difficulty so that individual students may earn points the farther they accurately navigate the grid.

- C. 1.  2.  3.  4. 
5.  6.  7.  8. 
9.  10.  11.  12. 

5. Rhythm Quest

Students will be asked to find and hi-light the various rhythm patterns in their score.

Assessment

1. Informal assessment of all strategies

The teacher will observe the students perform the strategies in large and small groups. (Thumbs up/thumbs down. Hidden Hands 5 4 3 2 1. Vote/Defend)

2. Journals

- A. Myth Busters responses
- B. Notating Human Rhythmic Patterns

3. Rhythmic Survivor

Assessment of how far students are able to clap through the Rhythm Bank Grid.

4. Rhythm Quest

Take a look at each student's score to see if the rhythms were identified.

5. Rhythm dictation

- Written notations.
- Physical actions.

Knowledge Outcome

Students will recognize homophonic and polyphonic textures and explain their expressive implications in the music.

*NTS (*Note to self*) Students should have a basic understanding of homophony and polyphony from 4th and 5th grade General Music, but a quick review will be necessary.

Strategies

1. Let's Experiment With...Texture

One part sings the melody one beat before the other. What does that sound like?

One part sings the melody and one part sings the same rhythm, but sings the note mi, AT THE SAME TIME. What does that sound like? What if I sing the note la? What does that sound like?

2. Word Wall

Add the words *Homophonic* and *Polyphonic* to the Word Wall. Students will write the definitions in their journal.

Homophonic hom·o·phon·ic adj “like sounds”
relating to music in which the parts move together in simple harmonization, at the same time

Polyphonic pol·y·phon·ic adj “many sounds”
consisting of two or more largely independent melodic lines, parts, or voices that sound simultaneously

3. Discovering homophony and polyphony in familiar tunes

Students will sing four familiar songs, deciding if the texture is **homophonic** or **polyphonic**. As a class, put colored stickers beside each title. All students must defend their choices in their journal.

- The Water is Wide
- Black Socks (canon with homophonic rhythm)
- The National Anthem
- Hi Ho Sang The Merry Dwarfs (canon with polyphonic rhythm)

4. Visual homophony and polyphony “hunt” in nature or at home

Show students photos of common items in a living room at home, deciding if the picture best represents homophony or polyphony. Show on projector. As a class, label with an **H** or a **P**. All students must defend their choices in their journal. Assignment: have students look in their own home for visual representations.

5. Musical Planetarium

Identifying Constellations

Students must label each constellation in the text and identify them with a diagram. (See below).

A Musical Look At The Night Sky

Encourage students to “connect the dots called music notes” with the “dots that are called constellations”. Are the stars placed in polyphony or homophony? This is what stars might look like if in homophony: * * * * *

Compose a constellation 1

Create the five-note motif by drawing the outline of each pitch and rhythm on a piece of paper. (Use star icons). Place on the Bulletin Board called **The Musical Planetarium**

Compose a constellation 2

Provide students with black construction paper and a single hole punch or sharpened pencil. Create the five-note motif by punching holes in the paper. Layer their composition with others. If the room is dark enough, use a flashlight to project the constellations. Or simply use the 2 colored cellophane covered flashlights on the ceiling to show the chase of polyphony.

Variation: Consider the accompaniment and what it might look like!

6. Composers’ Choices: WHAT IF.....?

Discuss how composers must make choices about polyphony and homophony when writing music. Composers must consider the text, the vowels and

consonants, and all of the musical elements. (*Recall your prediction in your journal several weeks ago.*)

Starting points:

1. What if Britten did not use a canon at all, and instead he used a more homophonic texture. (Encourage students to explore adding thirds to the melody to make harmony.) What is your opinion? Defend your answer in your journal.
2. What if Britten wrote the piano accompaniment that matches the voice parts exactly? (Encourage the students to consider the piano as a 3rd and 4th voice in the polyphonic texture.) What is your opinion? Defend your answer in your journal.

Assessment

1. Informal assessment of all strategies

The teacher will observe the students perform the strategies in large and small groups. (Thumbs up/thumbs down. Hidden Hands 5 4 3 2 1. Vote/Defend)

2. Journals

- A. Definitions
- B. Homophony and polyphony in familiar tunes
- C. Visual homophony and polyphony hunt (in nature or at home)
- D. Composer's Choices: What if.....? responses

3. Written quiz

- Definitions
- Aural recognition of homophony and polyphony
- Visual recognition of homophony and polyphony

4. Texture Quest

Students must find other songs that suggest polyphony or homophony

Affective Outcome

Students will explore the non-verbal qualities of a story-teller and how they contribute to the performer's deeper knowledge of the piece.

Strategies

1. Introducing the piece

See above.

2. Tell A Story Two Ways

Tell the students a great story with animation and expertise. Then a few days later, tell the story again with no emotion, facial expression or excitement. Is it truly the same story? Write responses in the journal.

3. Mirror-Mirror Dance Moves

Pair up students to have them mirror each other as they listen to Edvard Grieg's March of the Dwarfs, Op 54, No 3 piano solo...Do you notice similarities to The Ride-by-nights? (5th note descending motif, ABA, March like, awesome piano theme)

4. Characteristics of famous story tellers (and not so famous ones)

Students go on the look-out for great story tellers. Keep a list of characteristics.

5. YouTube No Sound

Students will watch YouTube clips without sound. What is happening?

Variation: Watch choral performances of their own choir from earlier concerts.

6. Possible clips for more in-depth story telling

<http://www.NationalYouthStoryTellingShowcase.org>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAUe1e1sHkY&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxXPTheVkJog&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THDXEjMmPtl&feature=related>

7. Story Teller Quest

Students must be on the lookout for excellent story tellers in their daily lives

(classroom teachers, parents, grandparents, etc.) Make observations in their journal about what makes them exceptional.

Assessment

1. Informal assessment of all strategies

The teacher will observe the students perform the strategies in large and small groups. (Thumbs up/thumbs down. Hidden Hands 5 4 3 2 1. Vote/Defend)

2. Self Evaluation and Journal Entries

A. Re-watch the video of the first concert (written observations)

B. Story Teller Quest

3. Video recording

Record the singers in rehearsal and complete an evaluation in their journal.

10 Ways To Take Out The Piece

1. The song by Benjamin Britten
2. The text by Walter de la Mare
3. "Quidditch and Muggles"
4. Constellation Chart
5. Sophisticated canon
6. Play the motif
7. The song with G minor tonal center
8. Ready, set, race!
9. Show the illustration
10. Polyphonic canon

