



In this unit the children learn about African-American spirituals. It builds on the children's knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade, which they will have learnt about in spring B if using the PKC history curriculum. A spiritual is a type of Christian folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South. The songs were first sung in the last few decades of the nineteenth century leading up to the abolishment of legalised slavery in the United States in the 1860s. The term 'spiritual' comes from the Bible which talks about singing 'spiritual songs' in praise of God. Enslaved people would sing these songs at informal outdoor gatherings. The white colonists of North America were often alarmed by the slaves' African way of worship. As a result, the gatherings were often banned and had to be conducted in secret. The African population in the American colonies had initially been introduced to Christianity in the seventeenth century. Uptake of the religion was relatively slow at first but as Africanized Christianity became followed by more of the enslaved population, spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes.

During the course of the unit the children listen to different spirituals (*Swing low, sweet chariot*, *Go down Moses*, *When the saints go marching*, *Steal away to Jesus* and *Michael row the boat ashore*) and learn how African-American spirituals have influenced other music, in particular blues, gospel and jazz. They learn to sing *Swing low, sweet chariot*, and *When the saints go marching* and put these two songs together so they are singing in two parts. They also learn to sing *Michael row the boat ashore* in simple 2-part harmony.

Lesson Sequencing

In lesson 1 the children listen to a version of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* recorded in 1916. The song was composed by Wallace Willis who was a freedman (a formerly enslaved person) sometime after 1865. The words refer to what awaits in heaven when we die and in particular, the Old Testament account of the prophet Elijah's ascent to heaven by chariot. The song is made up of verses and a chorus. The song is sung 'a cappella' which means without instrumental accompaniment. At the end of the lesson the children start to learn to sing the song.

In lesson 2 the children listen to another African-American spiritual, *Go down Moses*. They explore that spirituals often told biblical stories containing parallels with the lives of enslaved people. This song discusses the liberation of the ancient Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. In the story of Moses God commands Moses to demand the release of the Israelites (ancient Jewish people) from slavery. The spiritual also held a second meaning for enslaved African-Americans, as they related their experiences under slavery to those of Moses and the Israelites who were enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh. In this lesson the children listen to Louis Armstrong singing the song with a choir. Louis sings the solo part and the choir respond to him singing the line 'let my people go' in response. They sing in 'call and response'. African-American spirituals were often sung in call and response, where a soloist sings a line and a chorus, or group of singers sing a line in response.



At the end of the lesson the children practise singing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* in call and response.

In lesson 3 the children start to explore how African-American spirituals have influenced other music, in particular blues, gospel and jazz. Blues, which the children will study in Spring A of year 6 is a form of music which originated in the 1860s in the southern states of America. The form is thought to have been developed by generations and communities of enslaved African-Americans starting as unaccompanied work-songs of the plantation culture. Gospel music refers to songs, including some which were originally spirituals, which are in praise of God, and were sung in the churches of the southern states of America in the early 20th century. Jazz is a type of music that originated in New Orleans which the children will learn more about in lesson 4. In this lesson they practise *Swing low, sweet chariot* and revise/learn the gospel song *When the saints go marching*. They will sing both of these songs together in lesson 4.

In lesson 4 the children listen to Louis Armstrong's jazz rendition of *When the saints go marching in*. Louis Armstrong was an American trumpeter and singer. He is known as one of the most influential figures in jazz. He was born in New Orleans and became known in the 1920s for his inventive trumpet playing. In the version of *When the saints go marching in* which the children listen to in this lesson you can hear him playing the trumpet and singing. He was known for his instantly recognisable and distinctive gravelly style of singing. In New Orleans, spirituals like *When the saint go marching in*, were performed in church, but also made their way into the repertoires of the earliest jazz bands. Children previously learnt about Louis Armstrong in the year 4 unit 'Take the A Train'. At the end of the lesson the children practise singing *Swing low, sweet chariot* and then *When the saints, go marching in* at the same time, creating a piece of music in two parts.

In lesson 5 the children explore how African-American spirituals were sometimes regarded as protest songs that contained messages of encouragement for enslaved people to escape. Songs such as *Steal Away to Jesus* written by Wallace Willis have been thought to contain hidden messages encouraging slaves to run away on their own, or with the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century and used by enslaved people to escape slavery. African-American spirituals have also played a significant role as vehicles for protest at points during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (which children study in Summer B of year 6). During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s in America (which the children will study if studying PKC history in Summer B in the unit on 'The History of Human Rights') spirituals as well as Gospel songs were sung to express support for the efforts of civil rights activists. Many of the 'freedom songs' of the period, were adapted from old spirituals. At the end of the lesson the children learn to sing another African-American spiritual, *Michael row the boat ashore* in two parts, creating harmony. This song is thought to have first been sung when slave owners abandoned enslaved people on an island. It refers to the River Jordan which is the river in which Jesus was baptised. Like many other spirituals it references finding deliverance and freedom through the Christian faith.

In **lesson 6**, the children perform and record the spirituals which they have learnt over the course of the unit. They then evaluate their performance. In doing so, they learn that we can evaluate a performance to make it better next time. By practising the songs so they are ready for performance they develop their skills in singing together as an ensemble.

Musical Focus

Texture

- Singing in parts
- Harmony

Structure and Form

- Verse and chorus
- Call and response

Instrumentation

- Singing a cappella
- Jazz band

Links to Prior/Following Units

Year 4

Autumn A—*Working Songs* (Structure and Form—songs with call and response;; Texture—Solo/Chorus)

Autumn B—*Take the 'A' Train* (Structure and form —song form AABA; Pulse/Rhythm and Metre– off-beat, swung rhythms; Texture-Melody and accompaniment, solo/duets (improvisation/scat singing)

Spring B—*Solo* (Texture and harmony—Chords and arpeggios)

Year 5

Autumn B—*This Little Babe* (Texture—Three part canon, singing in rounds)

Spring A—*Jin-Go-La-Ba* (Form—Call and response)

Summer B—*English Folk Songs* (Structure and Form—Songs forms, verse/chorus, call and response; Texture—singing a cappella, singing in unison and in parts, harmony built on triads)

Year 6

Spring A—*Blues and the Groove* (Harmony, Rhythm and Form—chord progression for the 12 bar blues over 12 bars of 4/4 time, AAB lyrical form of the 12 bar blues, use of flattened notes in the blues, using the minor pentatonic scale in the blues)

Summer B—*Protest Songs* (Style, structure and form—verses/chorus; songs as an expression of a need for social change; development of song style and genre; African- American spirituals, gospel songs, protest songs, jazz, folk)

Links to other PKC subjects

This unit links to the History curriculum in year 5, where in Spring B the children learn about *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. It also links to the History curriculum in year 6, where in Summer B the children learn about *The History of Human Rights*.

Outcomes

Practice and perform singing *Swing low, sweet chariot* and *When the saints go marching in* separately and together and *Michael, row the boat ashore* in simple two-part harmony.

Key Learning Points

- African-American spirituals are songs associated with the enslavement of African people in the U.S.A.
- African-American spirituals often told Biblical stories containing parallels with the lives of enslaved people.
- African-American spirituals were sometimes seen as protest songs that contained messages of encouragement for enslaved people to escape.



- African-American spirituals often used 'call and response'. 'Call and response' is where a soloist sings a line and a chorus sings a line in response.
- African-American spirituals influenced and were used in other styles of music like blues, gospel and jazz
- Blues originated in the 1860s in the Southern states of America.
- Gospel music refers to songs which praise God and originated and were sung in churches in the Southern States of America.
- Louis Armstrong was an important jazz trumpeter and singer. He played When the saints, go marching in which is a song in the spiritual/gospel tradition.
- Singers can sing different parts, in harmony with each other.

Progression: Technical, Constructive, Expressive

Singing

Children learn and sing call and response and action songs, to warm up at the beginning of each lesson. This develops their technical singing skills which include posture, breath control, singing with a pulse, imitating rhythms, varying speed, holding a particular pitch and singing together in an ensemble. Practising songs over the course of six lessons ensures familiarity and increasing sophistication of musical expression.

Listening

Children practise 'active' listening, comparing different renditions of the same song, listening closely to the words to identify what the song is about and saying how the music makes them feel. By listening to the spirituals, they begin to have conscious understanding of how music is constructed, focussing on the dimensions of texture and structure/form. By studying these songs, they begin to develop an increasing understanding of the expressive qualities of music from a particular culture/genre.

Practising

Practising singing songs develops an internal sense of pulse, rhythm and pitch. Singing songs which uses a verse/chorus structure, call and response, part-singing and singing in harmony develops knowledge of handling pulse, rhythm, metre, tempo, pitch, texture and form/structure as component dimensions of making music. Practising the songs gradually over the course of the unit, ensures increasing confidence and sophistication in the expressive quality of musical outcomes.

Performing

Working towards performance of various songs over the course of six lessons ensures increased technical accuracy, confidence, fluency, expression and the ability to sing securely in an ensemble.