

“Fishing Song” by Benjamin Britten

A. Listen and Appraise

Background Information to the Song

“Fishing Song” is one of the Friday Afternoons songs which we have been learning about. The text is from Isaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler*, published in 1653. In the 1920s and early 30s, children sang mostly nursery rhymes and playground chants, and folk songs with simple accompaniments. Remember, 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 to the song:

(If possible, follow it using the lyrics sheet – listen to it several times so that you become familiar with what it sounds like.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZHUJFdB3BM>

(This link is also on the Remote Learning Plan.)

Follow the discussion below – it is similar to what we did last week, using the Elements of Music:

(You can go back and listen to the song or parts of it as often as you wish.)

“Do you like the song?”

There is no correct answer to this: either you do, or you don’t! Try to justify your answers using the vocabulary you have been learning.

“What can you hear?”

- The vocal line: how many singers? Male/female? (One 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 first halves of verses 1 and 2 provide us with a flowing piano accompaniment which is texturally thick. In the second halves there is a thinner staccato sound. The first half of verse 3 is chordally thick and sustained. In the second half the accompaniment is more florid, flowing and lively).

- The tempo: is it fast or slow or in between? (The tempo in verses 1 and 2 is medium. It changes in the first half of verse 3 to very slow, and then goes back to the original speed in the second half. Unusually, this song has 5 beats in each bar).
- The dynamics: is the music loud/quiet or in between? Is it the same throughout or does it vary? (The dynamics stay mainly quiet to match the pastoral nature of this song. They become loud towards the end of the 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 strife, sluggard).

“What is the story told in this song?”

This song was written for children to sing in the 1930s. It is a pastoral song describing the beautiful English countryside, and it tells us that fishing is a wonderful, peaceful pastime. The text was taken from *The Compleat Angler*, a book well known to be a celebration of the art of fishing. How many different types of fish are named in the song?

“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 ● Spiky ● Depressing ● Fun

There are many more. Can you think of some?

What is the mood of this song?

- Gentle ● Reflective ● Calm ● Flowing

“How does the music make the story more interesting?”

The flowing piano accompaniment in this pastoral song paints a colourful and beautiful picture of the countryside. The musical features help to tell the story and enhance the words in the following ways:

- The flowing yet steady piano accompaniment in the first half of verses 1 and 2 reminds us of water. This supports the syncopated melody on which the text sits. The second half of these verses is light and staccato in accompaniment and match the text exactly.
- The dynamics in verses 1 and 2 remain quiet, painting a picture of the countryside and again supporting the text.

- Verse 3 starts much slower and lazier with widely spread and florid chords as the text describes the excessive heat of the sun. The tempo speeds up towards the end of the song when the text reminds us of how contented the fisherman is.