

Working out a tune that pupils already know -

Deck the Hall with Boughs of Holly

Why?

Working tunes out by ear is a great way to improve aural skills, including discriminating between pitches, becoming aware of structure, self-evaluating, and improving intonation. At the same time, pupils will be developing and consolidating technique.

How:

- Check that pupils are familiar with the tune (see Top Tips below).
- Think of a key which fits the technical learning you are focussing on with pupils.
- Play the scale of that key.
- Do some echo playing using notes from the scale: you sing/play two bars of 4/4, then they copy back on their instruments. (See Top Tips below.) Start your first phrase on the tonic (first note of the scale). Begin with repeated notes and notes a tone or semitone apart, and move onto intervals of a third and then a fourth - particularly the 5th note of the scale to the 2nd, which appears in the tune.
- Invite pupils to think about the contours of the tune – ask them to demonstrate where it goes higher/lower etc. by moving their hand up/down whilst you play or sing it.
- See if they can identify any sections that are repeated.

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- Give the starting note, then play/sing a phrase at a time and ask them to copy back. You can refer to snippets of well-known tunes if they occur in the melody – for instance Frère Jacques in this case (bar 2).



Once a phrase is learnt, you can ask them to copy the same phrase back but adding the first note of the next phrase



...then learn the next phrase, having already worked out the first note.



- In the third line of the tune, there is a small modulation, which may need extra help.



- There is a gap of a major 6th in the melody going into the penultimate bar*, which for some pupils may be challenging - play or sing the note beginning the penultimate bar, repeatedly or for a long time, and ask pupils to experiment on their instruments until they have found it.
- Gradually piece the bits together.

**Depending on the version you are using*

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Top Tips

- To check that learners are familiar with a tune, play or sing it and ask '*have you heard this tune before*' rather than '*do you know this tune?*' – They may think you mean '*have you **played** it before.*' You could ask pupils to sing the melody to check that they know it, but I recommend that this is done with pupils you are familiar with: pupils may mis-pitch due to psychological, sociological or physiological reasons. Singing the wrong note **does not necessarily** mean that they don't have the tune in their heads.
- Note that this is an aural, not a visual activity. Learners shouldn't see your fingers – they need to use their ears, not their eyes. Sing or, if playing, ask them to turn around or close their eyes. This latter option is perhaps not appropriate with individual lessons. If you are working in a school, you may want to ask them for guidance.
- This activity is suited to small and large groups
- Practising at home shouldn't be a problem as long as a) the starting note is given, b) the tune is already well known to the pupil, c) pupils have understood the strategies to use, d) pupils have the confidence to try.
- See also Working out Jingle Bells By Ear under the Christmas Activities on musicwild.co.uk
- The melody can be used for the well-known Christmas song, or a Welsh New Year's carol – Nos Galan.

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Points to note

- Working out by ear should not be an 'add on' but integral to pupils' learning. It will help develop and or consolidate other points you are working on.
- For more advice on incorporating this and other types of aural learning into your teaching, please see my books **Wild About Strings/Wild About Woodwind/Wild About Brass/Wild About Piano and Keyboards/Wild About Guitars** – available from Amazon or other online retailers.
- This method is about pupils playing by ear using tunes they already have in their head. Learning *new tunes* by ear is also useful. For this see links to my videos on my website: <https://musicwild.co.uk>

