

Working out the melody and accompaniment to a tune pupils already know – Jingle Bells.

Why?

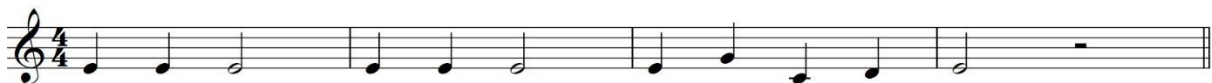
Working tunes out by ear is a great way to improve aural skills, including discriminating between pitches, becoming aware of structure, self-evaluating, and improving intonation. At the same time, pupils will be developing and consolidating technique.

How:

Melody

- Think of a key which fits the technical learning you are focussing on with pupils.
- Check that pupils are familiar with the tune (see Top Tips).
Play or sing (see Top Tips) the first phrase and ask learners some questions:

Jingle Bells - beginning



- 1) *Thinking about the beginning do the notes go higher, lower, or stay the same?*
 - 2) *How many notes are repeated before it changes?*
 - 3) *Did the tune go higher or lower then?*
 - 4) *By a little or a lot?*
- Give pupils the first note.
 - Ask them to experiment to find the eighth note, i.e. the G – see below. They can take it in turns to do this, or quietly experiment all together. This may depend on your instrument, the space, or number of pupils.

Jingle Bells - first eight notes



- When someone has found the correct note, ask everyone to play the first eight notes together.
- Repeat the process to find out the next bit, starting back to the beginning or beginning of a line so pupils can check that it all matches i.e. that they haven't inadvertently changed key.
- Play/sing through the whole tune (chorus only) and ask: '*are any sections (or bits) the same?*' Pupils will normally spot that the first and third phrases are identical, as are the beginnings of the second and fourth. With this in mind, ask pupils to work out the whole chorus. This may take a few lessons.

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.
- 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.
- If you sing a section where notes are repeated, pupils sometimes mistakenly think the notes change, when actually it is just the words that change. You may wish to sing a phrase to 'la' or another syllable.
- If a pupil answers questions incorrectly, you can give an example to show how their suggestion doesn't match the tune – employing tact and sensitivity of course!
- If a pupil tries an incorrect note, help them to realise what might be wrong by asking pertinent questions, so that that informs their next experimentation. For instance '*that note you played is lower but doesn't sound quite right yet – do you think you have chosen one that is too low or not low enough?*'
- Emphasise the need to experiment – the correct notes may well not be found immediately – that is normal, not a sign that they are bad at this process.
- Advise learners not to go on to the next bit unless they are absolutely satisfied the previous bit is right – this ensures they don't go wildly off into the wrong key.
- In a group lesson the task can be shared: pupil A finds the first bit, all play; pupil B finds the next bit, all play etc.
- 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.

Harmony (for advanced students, or pupils more used to working with chords, such as guitarists or keyboard players)

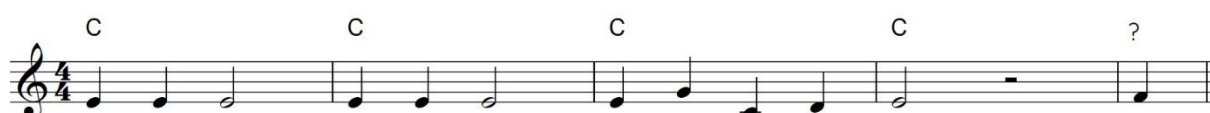
- Give a choice of three notes or three chords (depending on the instrument), that can be used to harmonise Jingle Bells in a way that learners are used to hearing i.e. one of the usual harmonisations. So, for instance, in the key of C, this would be C F and G.
- Pupils are going to hear the first half of the chorus played or sung over the first chord only, and they need to identify where it sounds wrong, i.e. where does chord C clash with the melody. They could play the first chord continuously whilst you play/sing the melody, or you could sing the melody whilst playing the first chord continuously. In the former method they can identify on which word it sounds wrong, in the latter method they can raise their hand where it sounds wrong (see **Top Tip**).

Jingle Bells - first two phrases with C chord underneath



- Having established where the pupils think the first change of chord is (probably the beginning of the second phrase – on the word ‘Oh’) ask them to experiment to find out which chord sounds better at that point - F or G. This is a matter of choice, as the F in the melody could form a seventh with the G chord underneath.

Jingle Bells - first phrase and a note



- Taking a section at a time, go through the whole of the chorus in this way.
- Discuss the different effects of finishing a phrase with a C (tonic) or G (dominant) chord – see second and last lines. Ask learners:
 - *at the end of this line does it feel like the music needs to sound finished or unfinished?*
 - *should it sound like we are finishing with a comma or question mark, or a full stop?*

Top Tip

- An obvious place where the tonic chord sounds ‘wrong’ is the beginning of the second phrase, however, some discerning pupils may spot that alternative chords may be used near the end of the first phrase.

Points to note – melody and harmony

- 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. Choosing an appropriate key is important. The first few notes of a tune can be used for beginners.
- Some learners may not need any help at all, some will need reminding of the stages, and some will find the process bafflingly abstract... *‘I can’t see the note so how can I know what it is.’* Pupils in the last group normally just need to learn to trust their ears, which they will do by taking it a step at a time – even just by realising that they know when a note is repeated or different. For a helpful activity regarding this last point, 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.
- Other tunes that could be used (the first few notes for beginners): Frère Jacques, Three Blind Mice, Kum Ba Yah, London’s Burning, Happy Birthday, Eastenders theme tune. For harder (and possibly more cool ones): Last Christmas (I gave you my heart), We Will Rock You (chorus), the James Bond theme, Seven Nation Army (White Stripes), Smoke on the Water (Deep Purple). Note – these have stood the test of time – not all pop songs do, so take care with your choice, and ensure pupils still recognise them.
- 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>

