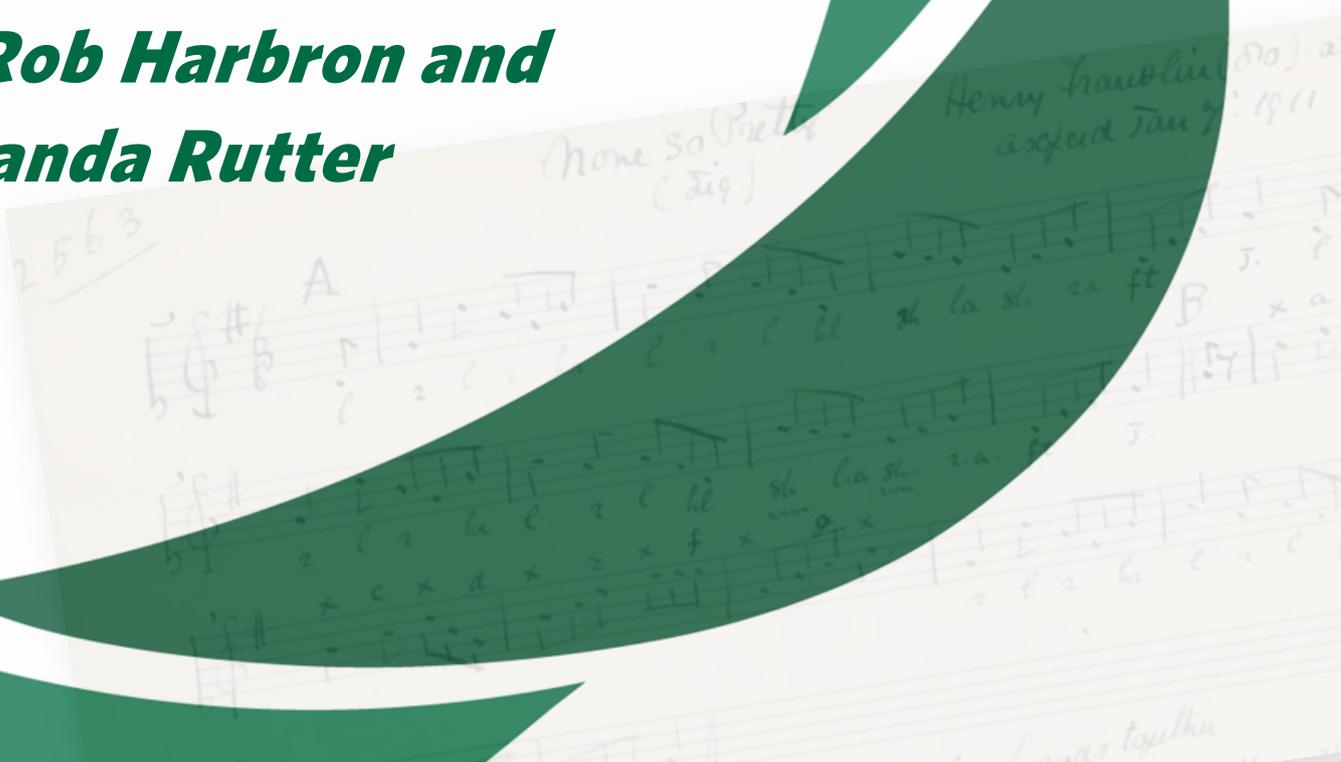




Working By Ear

Ideas and resources for learning and teaching music by ear

***By Rob Harbron and
Miranda Rutter***





*Unlocking hidden treasures of
England's cultural heritage*
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The Full English

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive (www.vwml.org) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

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Written by: Rob Harbron and Miranda Rutter

Edited by: Frances Watt

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Additional Resources

Audio recordings by Rob Harbron and Miranda Rutter of all the tunes in this pack are available for free download from www.efdss.org/resourcebank.

Introduction

The material in this booklet is derived from our ongoing work as folk musicians and workshop leaders, and draws heavily on ideas we developed and experiences we had while working at Hanham Wood Academy in Spring 2014 as part of the national *The Full English* schools programme. We visited the school nine times over several months, working mostly with year 8 students in their timetabled music lessons. We also worked with a sixth form music group, and developed an after-school folk group. The material and suggestions are intended as starting points rather than fixed points, and we hope you'll find ways of incorporating ideas like this into your teaching.



Photo: Hanham Wood Academy students performing with Rob Harbron, Miranda Rutter and Jon Dyer at The Full English National Showcase, June 2014 (Photo by: Roswitha Chesher)

Why work by ear?

Over the course of human history, an unimaginable amount of music has been created and passed on between musicians working by ear alone. Although many musicians in different traditions now make use of some form of notation, transmission by ear is still the most basic and natural way for many people to learn music. There are very few genres of music that rely on written notation to the extent that Western Classical music does, and although sophisticated notation makes it possible to create incredible music, it can also make it hard for new musicians to find a way in.

The traditional music of Britain and Europe, in which Western Classical music has its roots, is still practised largely by ear – written music might be used as a reminder of the basics of the tune, but only in the form of 'the dots' – a basic transcription of the tune, lacking details of interpretation and arrangement. Yet traditional musicians have developed numerous ways of developing musical ideas working by ear, and these methods are ideally suited to developing creative music making with young people who may not have learned to read music. They can also help to develop good musicianship in musicians who are used to working from written notation.

Working by ear can be:

- a way of making music accessible to all
- an intuitive way of learning music, not just a string of notes
- a way for music making to be sociable and enjoyable
- a way of developing good musicianship – interpretation, ensemble awareness, internal rhythm and more
- a way of helping musicians develop creative interpretation – variation, improvisation and composition

Many teachers are reluctant to work by ear as their own musical training may have been entirely based on written music. But learning, playing and teaching by ear are all skills which can be developed and improved, and there are ways of making the process of both teaching and learning by ear more approachable for teacher and student. This booklet contains some ways into teaching and learning by ear and some repertoire and resources for you develop and adapt as you wish.

Musicians from many different genres work by ear using the same general principals, although the structures and forms of each genre differ. This booklet will deal with English traditional music – although you will find that traditional musicians from Ireland, Scotland, America, Europe and further afield tend to work the same way, and the same repertoire often crops up in a surprising number of places. Tunes don't carry passports and there are only so many notes to go round!



A folk tune session in Bampton, Oxfordshire, 1983 (photo by Doc Rowe) and Lady Maisery teaching a song by ear at Shrewsbury Festival, 2013 (photo by Mike Dean).

Warm up exercises

Learning and imitating by ear is something we all do all the time – it's an extra challenge when we're using an instrument but it's still building on skills that we've

used since childhood. Before teaching by ear on an instrument, it can be good to get warmed up by doing some clapping exercises that practice the same skills of listening and repetition that we'll use later. These exercises might not be appropriate for all age groups but feel free to adapt and develop them as you see fit:

- Stand in a circle with your group. You can do a gentle stretch and shake-out if you'd like
- Start by establishing a regular beat by tapping your feet alternately at about 80bpm. Encourage your group to join in (non-verbally if possible)
- Working in 4-beat phrases, clap out a simple pattern and encourage your group to clap it back in time
- Repeat the same pattern until everyone gets it. If some people don't pick it up straight away, clap it out again but try to do all the communication non-verbally
- Once everyone's got the first one, clap out a different phrase, gradually increasing in complexity
- Try varying the phrase lengths, maybe combining two phrases you've already used into one longer one
- Get half of the group to keep clapping a simple phrase while teaching the other half a different phrase
- Introduce dynamics – clap a phrase quietly and then loudly, and include crescendos and diminuendos
- You can introduce syncopation and cross rhythms
- You can use body percussion or percussion instruments as well as just clapping – clap out the same rhythm using legs and chest as well as hands
- You've probably started off working in common time. Keep the same pulse going with your feet but try changing the rhythm into triplets or compound time and then going back to common time
- When it's time to finish, try building up to an ending and finishing all together – hopefully you'll be able to convey this all non-verbally – a huge amount can be expressed through body language and eye contact and a lot of good musicianship is based on this

Learning and teaching by ear - basics

If you have always worked from written music and don't have confidence in your ability to work by ear, you may want to do some work on your own ear-learning before beginning to teach in this way. Here are some things to try:

- When listening to a new tune, listen to the overall shape and structure of the piece before trying to learn it. Try to identify elements that are repeated and elements that change
- Most traditional tunes from England and beyond use very similar structures which are repeated many times. There are usually two parts to a tune – folk musicians call them 'A' and 'B' parts – and each part is often repeated. Within each part there is usually an opening phrase (the 'question') and an 'answer' to it; then the opening phrase is often repeated and followed by a slightly different 'answer'
- The second part (the 'B' part) will often share some of the same phrases from the A part although other phrases will be different. Perhaps the 'question' phrase will be different but the 'answer' phrases the same; or the first answer may be different but the final answer the same. Something like this:

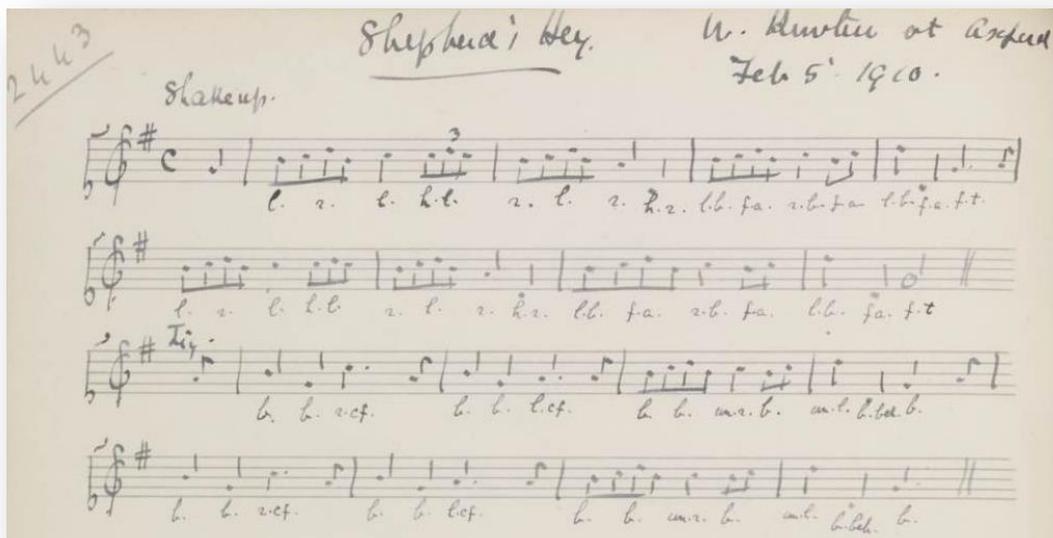
A part: question 1 – answer 1a – question 1 – answer 1b
(repeat) question 1 – answer 1a – question 1 – answer 1b
B part: question 2 – answer 2a – question 2 – answer 2b
(repeat) question 2 – answer 2a – question 1 – answer 1b

Practical Exercise

There are two audio recordings of the tune *Shepherd's Hey* (collected from William Kimber by Cecil Sharp, Oxford, 5 Feb 1910, www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2443) at

www.efdss.org/resourcebank. One is played slowly to help learning, and one is played up to speed.

- Listen to the *Shepherd's Hey (tune)* track and try to identify the elements mentioned. If you have your instrument handy, find the key note and keep listening to the tune. You may find that you're beginning to map out the shape of the tune on your instrument
- When you feel familiar with the structure of the tune, grab your instrument and listen to the *Learn Shepherd's Hey* track in which we'll teach it phrase by phrase
- The reason we call it 'playing by ear' is that you have to *listen* to learn! The thing most people of all ages find hardest is to listen without playing. Whenever we're teaching by ear, we try to use the same system: set up a continual pulse – tap your foot, or use a metronome or drum beat – then play one phrase of the tune, alternating between teacher and pupil. You can start with just a few notes and gradually increase the length of the phrase, but it will work best if you keep working to the same beat and stick to the teacher plays, pupil listens / teacher listens, pupil plays system
- Once the student has the first phrase, you can move on the next phrase. Then you can join the first and second phrases together and build up to one whole part of the tune



Tune - Softly Robin

From *The Dancing Master*, Vol. 3, Playford 1726, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, London; via *John of the Green The Cheshire Way*, John Offord, 2008 (Green Man Music)

This tune follows the question / answer format, using the same 'question' phrases twice within each part and the same 'answer' phrases for both the A part and the B part, although in this tune each phrase is only one bar long. If you look at the music below, you can see that the tune, with repeats, lasts for 16 bars, but only contains 4 bars of distinct musical material. A small amount of learning by ear can provide musical material that can be developed in a number of ways.



Additional resource: Two audio recordings of the tune for *Softly Robin* are available for free download at www.efdss.org/resourcebank. One is played slowly to help learning, whilst the other is up to speed and includes melodic variations.

Teaching the tune by ear

- Adapt the key for the instruments you are teaching on. C is ideal for keyboards and tuned percussion and is ok for guitars and violins; D or G may work better for recorders and flutes and is also good for fiddles and guitars
- Work through the tune phrase by phrase as we did with *Shepherd's Hey*. Be careful not to start off too quickly or the quavers in the B part will take people by surprise!
- If the quaver notes are too quick for some people, they can miss out those bars and join back in on the 'answer' phrases, or just play the first note of each group.'

Developing an arrangement

- Once your group have learned the tune, you can try splitting up the tune, getting smaller groups to play some of the 'question' phrases with everyone playing the 'answer' phrases
- The A and B parts can be played simultaneously, so the tune will work as a round – wait 4 or 8 bars before the next part starts so that everyone is playing the same 'answer' phrases at the same time
- If you have guitars or bass instruments you could add chords and a bass part. Try playing bar three of each part over an Am7 chord and bar four over an F/G chord (an F chord with a G root, so the tune doesn't resolve until the first bar of the next part)
- Try putting the whole tune in the relative minor
- Listen to *Softly Robin* by the band Spiro (on the album *Kaleidophonica*, Realworld 2011; available on iTunes and Spotify). Analyse and discuss their arrangement and any ideas it inspires – they started with the same raw material as you

Song - Poor Old Man

Additional resource: Two audio recordings of the tune for *Poor Old Man* are available for free download at www.efdss.org/resourcebank. One is played slowly to help learning, whilst the other is up to speed and includes melodic variations.

This is a great song, a catchy shanty with a refrain and a slightly quirky story. The pupils we taught it to at Hanham Wood Academy really liked it, and it's one of those songs that kids seem to want to sing even if you don't try to make them!

- It might work better to teach the refrains first, as they begin on the key note
- If you're teaching it on keyboards, it's worth working out the fingering and teaching that as well – it's a good tune for establishing good fingering technique on the keyboard
- You could use this basic call and response pattern as a template for your own songwriting
- You could get your pupils to come up with their own 'question' phrase for a B part, using the same 'answer' phrases or refrains as the A part

Poor Old Man / The Dead Horse

Based on following versions:

(a) Collected from John Scott by Cecil Sharp, 20 April 1914, Watchet, Somerset
www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2884

(b) Collected from James Tucker by Cecil Sharp, 14 July 1914, Bristol, Somerset
www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/3015

(a) Roud number: 513
(b) Roud number: 3724
Trad. arr. Rob Harbron

A poor old man came rid - ing by, And I hope so, And I
say so, A poor old man came rid - ing by, Oh poor old man

A poor old man came riding by,
And I hope so, and I say so,
A poor old man came riding by,
Oh poor old man

Oh poor old man your horse will die,
And I hope so, and I say so,
Oh poor old man your horse will die,
Oh poor old man

If he dies we'll tan his hide,
And I hope so, and I say so,
If he dies we'll tan his hide,
Oh poor old man

And if he lives away we'll ride,
And I hope so, and I say so,
And if he lives away we'll ride,
Oh poor old man

But this old horse is dead and gone
And we know so, and we say so
Yes this old horse is dead and gone
Oh poor old man

Tune - None So Pretty (Jig)

Collected from Henry Franklin by Cecil Sharp, Oxford, January 1911
www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2563

Additional resource: An audio recording of *None So Pretty* is available for free download at www.efdss.org/resourcebank. It starts with the original tune as shown here, and then introduces some melodic variations on the second time through the tune.

This tune doesn't quite share the strict *question – answer – question – answer* structure but it's not very different. You can see that the A part comprises two identical four bar phrases, and the same phrase occurs at the end of the B part.



- If you're teaching this tune by ear, it'll probably work best if you work in two bar units – and encourage your students to join in with the upbeat when you get to the end of bar two
- If you listen to the recording, you'll notice that the rhythm is not quite as even as the notation suggests. One reason most folk musicians prefer to work by ear is that there are rhythmic subtleties and swing that it's really hard to record accurately with musical notation

- You can point out that this tune is made up almost entirely of extracts from scales, arpeggios and dominant sevenths. This is relevant to GCSE students but it's also worth pointing it out to instrumentalists who have to practice scales and arpeggios but who don't understand why!
- A tune like this can be used to introduce the idea of variation. Once you've played the tune a few times, you start to get the feeling that some parts of the tune should be fairly fixed as they're structurally important, but other parts of the tune are really just linking material; different variations could be substituted without changing the 'essence' of the tune
- Some musicians find that this sort of variation comes naturally; others find it less intuitive. For musicians who are more used to written music, you can find a way into melodic variation by substituting other bits of the same tune – for example, bar 2 can be replaced with the first bar of the B part
- Listen to the recording of the original tune and then the tune with melodic variations then have a go at introducing your own variations. Make sure you decide which bits of the tune you think are the structural points and which bits you think you can change
- Lots of musicians have their own individual ways of learning the structure of a tune without written notation – some think in terms of 'waymarkers' or structural points – but there's no substitute for lots of playing!

2 5 6 3

None so Pretty (Dig)

Henry Franklin (D.D.) at Oxford Jan 7. 1811

x = clap hands together

Taking it further - new composition using traditional structures

- You can use the structures of traditional tunes as a way of guiding your students through the composition process. Rather than starting with a blank page (metaphorical or otherwise) you can start with a structure that we know works well for other tunes and use it to develop your own melodic material
- Most traditional tunes are defined by a few key notes – usually the first 'question' phrase. Set your students the challenge of coming up with their own 'question' phrase of four or five notes. You may want to consider the inspiration behind tunes and the images they can capture, or you may prefer to work simply with ideas that people come up with from their instruments
- Once you've heard everyone's ideas, you can guide them through developing them using the same structure as one of the tunes you've learned by ear. You could keep the refrains, or answering phrases from *Poor Old Man* (as below), but make up your own question phrases:



- Or you could start with a blank structure along these lines, and fill in all your own melodic material. Of course this structure is just a starting point so you should feel free to vary it if you'd like:

QUESTION 1 ANSWER 1a



QUESTION 1 ANSWER 1b



QUESTION 2 ANSWER 2a



QUESTION 2 ANSWER 1b



Rob Harbron

Rob is a sought-after multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer and one of the country's leading players of the English concertina. He performs and records with numerous artists including Leveret, Fay Hield and the Hurricane Party, Emma Reid, Jon Boden and the Remnant Kings, Kerr Fagan Harbron and Fieldfare. He was Musical Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2013 production of *The Winter's Tale*, and he has recently been commissioned to write music for the British Silent Film Festival, the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the Royal Geographical Society. He is a popular teacher and workshop leader, directs the English Acoustic Collective Summer School and has been a tutor for the National Youth Folklore Troupe of England. www.robertharbron.co.uk



Miranda Rutter

Miranda is a fiddle and viola player. She performs with Methera who focus on making folk music through the voice of the string quartet. She has also performed with the English Acoustic Collective and Morris Offspring in 'On English Ground' and with Chris Wood in his 'Listening to the River'. She was also a member of Jabadaw and Fika. She has taught on Newcastle University's Folk Music degree course, at Folkworks' Fiddles on Fire Festival and led a youth music project in Somerset.





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