

Global Music Lesson Plans

Lesson 1: Britten and Japan – Japan and the UK.

For ages 14-16.

Time required:

60 minutes.

Activity:

Exploring the influence of Japanese Ceremonial music on the music of Benjamin Britten.

Aims:

- To explore the place of Gagaku and Noh plays in Japanese society.
- To look at how Japanese music inspired the music of Benjamin Britten.

Pupils will learn:

- To identify Japanese techniques and conventions in the opera Curlew River.
- To perform a unison medieval plainchant.

Resources you will need:

- CD recording of Etenraku in Hyogo. You can find it from online retailers.
- Images and information about Gagaku instruments:
 - [Sho](#)
 - [Biwa](#)
 - [Hichiriki](#)
 - [Ryuteki](#)
 - [Gakuso \(Koto\)](#)
 - [Wagon](#)
- [Online video clip of Noh play](#). Note: click on 'movies' and then select the Noh video clip.
- [Online Images of a Noh play](#). Any of these images may be used.
- [Online images of mystery plays](#). Any of these images may be used.
- [Translation of the plainchant 'Te Lucis Ante Terminum'](#).
- Audio of the ending (final track) to Curlew River by Benjamin Britten. You can find it from online retailers or here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InBawPCqN1c>

Other resources you will need:

- Etenraku card sort provided.
- The medieval plainchant 'Te Lucis Ante Terminum' - notation provided.

Useful information

Benjamin Britten was an English composer whose musical interests extended to the music of South East Asia and Japan. Britten successfully synthesises these diverse influences creating a highly personalised style.

Etenraku is a piece of ancient Japanese Gagaku court music originating in the 8th century. It is essentially ceremonial and is characterised by its clarity, dignity, texture, slow free rhythm, deliberate placing of notes, pentatonic modality (including pentatonic clusters played by the Sho) and mix of pipe, reed, plucked and percussion timbres.

Noh plays are ancient Japanese theatre pieces which are severe, very traditional, with little scenery and lighting and few characters. Noh plays are generally accompanied by a flute and drums (the sound reminiscent of Etenraku) and also a male chorus that sits at the side chanting.

Benjamin Britten was captivated by both Gagaku and Noh plays. He was interested in the link between Noh plays and the English mystery plays e.g. the use of minimal resources in terms of staging and music, the use of an all male cast and chorus and the frequent use of Christian plainchant sung by the chorus. Having composed the children's opera 'Noyes Fludde', with a setting of an early English mystery play, Britten later synthesised aspects of Noh theatre and a medieval mystery play into an opera or church parable called 'Curlew River'. The influence of ancient Japanese music is clearly evident in the opera's textures and instrumental sound worlds.

'Curlew River' tells of a group of pilgrims going to worship at a shrine in the Eastern Fens. As they wait for a ferryman they hear singing which the ferryman tells them is the sound of a madwoman. During the crossing the woman tells how her son was abducted and of her search for him. The Ferryman tells of a heathen Northman and child who crossed a year ago. Upon reaching the bank, the child was abandoned and died. The child's final words were 'Kyrie Eleison'. The madwoman recognises the boy as her own. They pray together over the boy's grave whereupon his voice is heard and he appears in spirit. He blesses his mother, curing her of her madness before sinking back into the grave. The opera begins and ends with Monks entering and leaving a church singing plainchant.

Lesson plan	Lesson 1: Britten and Japan – Japan and the UK (Age range 14-16)
Starter	<p>Cut up and distribute sets of cards to pairs or groups of three pupils (see resources). Ask pupils to listen to a piece of Japanese Gagaku Court music ‘Etenraku’ but do not disclose any information about the music at this stage. Ask them to consider the statements on the cards and group the cards into three sets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those that they strongly agree with. • Those that they strongly disagree with. • Those they are not sure about. <p>Ask pupils to feedback on each of the categories and discuss these with the class. Display the key features that the class identified and then provide them with information about the piece (see ‘Useful information’). Explain that during the lesson they will consider the way in which this music influenced the English composer Benjamin Britten.</p>
Main	<p>Introduce the instruments of the gagaku ensemble (see web links in resources) and discuss how each was used in Etenraku. Next show an image of a Japanese Noh play and discuss what they see. Using the ‘Useful information’ provided explain a little more about the plays including the fact that historically they originate from the same time as Gagaku court music. Watch a video excerpt of a Noh play and elicit from pupils the features of the short excerpt of music that they hear and its similarity with Etenraku. Show an image of an English medieval mystery play pointing out that these originate from about the same time as Noh plays and have some features in common e.g. a restricted performing space, limited number of male actors and instrumentalists, a male chorus (which often sings liturgical plainchant) and a similarly stylised performance style. Point out that Medieval plainchant, a feature of English mystery plays has much in common with the melodic lines of Japanese Gagaku music (see ‘Useful information’). Teach the class ‘Te Lucis Ante Terminum’ as an example of a medieval plainchant (see the notation provided), using hand movements to indicate the pitch of the chants. Perform the chant as a procession, the context in which many chants are sung, particularly in English mystery plays. Note: Click here for a translation.</p> <p>Before listening to an excerpt from the opera ‘Curlew River’ by the English composer Benjamin Britten, explain that the opera was influenced by Gagaku music, Noh plays from Japan and English mystery plays. Give pupils information about Benjamin Britten, his music and ‘Curlew River’ using the ‘Useful information’ provided.</p>

	<p>Listen to the final scene from 'Curlew River'. The text of the final track begins with the words 'Hear his voice'. Ask pupils to identify features in Britten's music that originate in the music of ancient Japan. Copies of the excerpt from the libretto would be useful for pupils to follow. Because the excerpt lasts for about eight minutes it is suggested that the music is interrupted at the end of each sub-section and the features discussed with the class.</p>
Plenary	<p>Discuss with the class ways in which features of Gagaku music could be incorporated to form a simple accompaniment to the plainchant 'Te Lucis Ante Terminum' (e.g. sustained high pitched pentatonic clusters using CDE GA, drums, a plucked arpeggio on each pause, wind instrument in unison with the voices, etc.) Perform the chant with the Japanese accompaniment.</p>

Worksheet: Etenraku card sort

Solo	Ensemble
Orchestra	Chromatic scale
Ceremonial	Dignified
Humorous	Pentatonic
Piano	Organ
Plucked instrument	Drum kit
Choir	Dissonant
Transparent texture	Sustained notes
Strong pulse	1000 years old
Contemporary	Classical
India	Japan
Royal court	Java

Te lucis ante terminum

The image shows a single line of musical notation on a five-line staff. The notation is in a treble clef and consists of a sequence of notes with stems, some of which are beamed together. There are several fermatas (breve symbols) placed over specific notes. Below the staff, the Latin lyrics are written in a small font, aligned with the notes above them.

Te lu - cis an te ter min um, re rum Cre a tor, pos ci mus, ut pro tu - a cle - men - ti - a, sis prae - sul - ad cus - to - di - am.