

BBC
**TEN
PIECES**

MIGHTY RIVER BY ERROLLYN WALLEN

PRIMARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN by Fran Hart

[WATCH THE FILM](#) | [LISTEN TO THE AUDIO](#)

For:

- National Curriculum in **ENGLAND** (KS2)
- Curriculum for **WALES**: Expressive Arts (Progression Step 3)
- **SCOTLAND** Curriculum for Excellence (Second Level)
- **NORTHERN IRELAND** Primary Curriculum (KS2)

Background

The composer: **ERROLLYN WALLEN**

Pronounced: ERR-uh-lin WOL-uhn (-err as in merry, -i as in pin, -ol as in olive)

- Errollyn Wallen has travelled far and wide for her passion for the arts. Born in Belize, after taking a diploma in piano performance she studied at the Dance Theatre of Harlem, New York then decided to pursue studying composition in the UK at universities in London and Cambridge.
- Her music is also well travelled – a CD of her music was taken into space by an astronaut on NASA mission STS-115. It travelled nearly 5 million miles by orbiting the Earth 186 times!
- Back on Earth, Errollyn Wallen is in the ‘Top 20 Most Performed Living Composers’ and her music has appeared at many prestigious events. She was the first black female composer to feature in the BBC Proms and she has also written music for the Paralympic Games 2012, the Queen’s Golden and Diamond jubilees and the global climate change conference COP 26.
- Errollyn Wallen founded the group ‘Orchestra X’ whose motto is “we don’t break down barriers in music... we don’t see any”.

The music: **MIGHTY RIVER**

- This piece of music explores the themes of slavery and freedom through the idea of a ‘Mighty River’ – a natural, unstoppable force

heading for the ocean, just like the innate human desire to be free.

- *Mighty River* is in one single [movement](#) and therefore there are no breaks in the music. It flows, like water, from one idea to another.
- Errollyn Wallen has included the well-known songs, or [spirituals](#), 'Deep River' and 'Go Down Moses', as well as the hymn 'Amazing Grace', in this piece. These melodies were first introduced to the UK by previously enslaved people over 150 years ago.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- Listen and describe the music, with a focus on the spiritual
- Sing and play music
- Create music using [call and response](#), [a pentatonic scale](#), [chords](#), [pitched and unpitched sounds](#)
- Perform in an ensemble
- Learn musical vocabulary

Resources required:

- Tuned classroom instruments e.g. xylophones, glockenspiels
- Untuned classroom instruments e.g. tambourines, triangles, drums, cymbals

Curriculum checklist

National Curriculum in ENGLAND (KS2)

- Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression
- Compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
- Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory

SCOTLAND Curriculum for Excellence (Second Level)

- Perform songs in unison and in parts, individually or as part of a group, and communicates the mood and character of songs from a range of styles and cultures
- Uses voice, instruments and technology to create music, experimenting with timbre
- Perform on instruments, individually or as part of a group, to communicate the mood and character of a piece of music

Curriculum for WALES: Expressive Arts (Progression Step 3)

- I can explore how creative work can represent, document, share and celebrate personal, social and cultural identities
- I can reflect upon how artists have achieved effects or communicated moods, emotions and ideas in their work
- I can identify and respond creatively to challenges with resilience and flexibility

NORTHERN IRELAND Primary Curriculum (KS2)

- Sing and perform with simple instruments from memory, by ear or from notation to develop vocal and instrumental skills.
- Work creatively with sound by creating musical stories, pictures, patterns, conversations, accompaniments and by investigating ways of preserving the music they have created

The lessons at a glance

This scheme of work is plotted out over four lessons. You may wish to adapt it to suit your children and the time/resources you have available.

[For guidance on notation, please see here.](#)

LESSON 1:

Activities:	<p>Listen to the extract/watch the film</p> <p>Identify the spiritual</p> <p>Listen and compare to another version</p> <p>Explore, prepare and perform <i>Amazing Grace</i></p>
Learning intention:	<p>Listen, reflect and compare the music heard</p> <p>Sing and play with control (Year 5 & 6 – use pitch notation)</p> <p>Learn to play chords to prepare and perform <i>Amazing Grace</i></p>

LESSON 2:

Activities:	<p>Sing and develop an understanding of call and response and the pentatonic scale</p> <p>Play <i>Amazing Grace</i> with more control and add chords</p>
Learning intention:	<p>Develop an understanding of call and response</p> <p>Develop accurate playing skills</p> <p>Explore the pentatonic scale</p>

LESSON 3:

Activities:	<p>Focus on the slavery journey across the sea</p> <p>Create music using call and response, chords, pitched and unpitched instruments and vocals, using the pentatonic scale</p>
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Learning intention: Listen and reflect on the music heard
Explore developing knowledge of musical components by composing music to create a specific mood
Use the pentatonic scale, chords, pitched and unpitched instruments and vocal sounds with control

LESSON 4:

Activities: Perform a piece that structures together the class performance of *Amazing Grace* with call and response and the group slavery compositions

Learning intention: Develop control of sounds to play and sing with more expression
Perform a structured composition in an ensemble

LESSON 1

Learning intention

- Listen, reflect and compare the music heard
- Sing and play with control (**Y5&6/P6&7** – use pitch notation)
- Learn to play chords to prepare and perform *Amazing Grace*

1. STARTER

[Listen to](#) or [watch](#) *Mighty River* by Errollyn Wallen. Read to the class and discuss this quote by Errollyn Wallen about her piece:

“It is an innate human instinct to be free. Just as it is a law of nature that the river should rush headlong to the sea. The perpetual motion of the music, like water, like time, through its sheer momentum, carries with it the cries and echoes of human hearts and voices that are singing out of suffering, repentance, humility and hope.”

2. LEARNING

Discuss the opening of *Mighty River*, played on the horn, asking the class if anyone recognises the tune that is being played.

This is a well-known [hymn](#) tune (a song sung in church) that is also a [spiritual](#), called *Amazing Grace*.

Listen to the opening of *Mighty River* again and then listen to alternative performance of *Amazing Grace* online (be sure to check the version is suitable for children before showing it to the class). Compare the two versions with the class, considering a) similarities b) differences c) student’s personal preference with explanation as to why.

Discuss with the class what a spiritual is and its link to the slave trade.

As a class, sing *Amazing Grace*:

Amazing Grace

A - ma - zing grace, how sweet the sound that save a wretch like me I

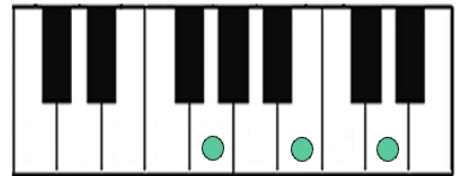
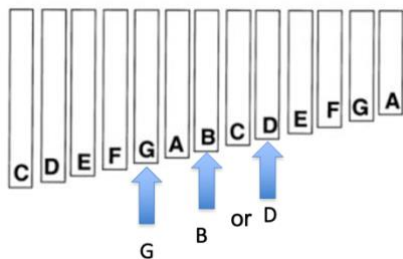
once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see

3. MAIN TASK

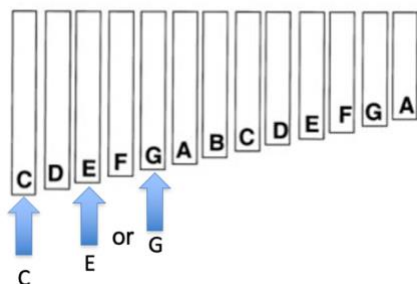
Y3&4/P4&5 – develop singing accuracy

Explain to the class what chords are: chords are when two or more notes are played at the same time. Next door notes played at the same time clash and are uncomfortable to our ears; they are called discords. When alternate notes are played at the same time, they are comfortable sounding and called concords. Concords have names, e.g. C major, and commonly consist of three notes (a triad), CEG. [See this KS2 BBC Bitesize page for more detail.](#)

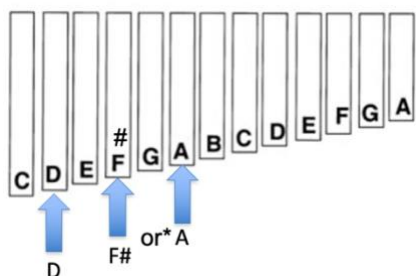
G MAJOR



C MAJOR



D MAJOR



*replace the F bar for an F# if possible. If not, use D and A only

Learn to play the chords, giving different children different notes to play on classroom instruments such as xylophones or glockenspiels.

Chord	Chord notes	Xylophone/glockenspiel
G major	G B D	G B or G D
C major	C E G	C E or C G
D major	D F# A	D F# or D A

Practise playing the chords at the correct time in the song with half the class playing, half the class singing. Challenge a pupil who learns an instrument to play the [melody](#). Challenge pupils to sing a verse on their own (a [solo](#)).

AMAZING GRACE LYRICS

1 Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.	4 The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.
2 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!	5 Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease: I shall possess, within the veil, a life of joy and peace.
3 Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come: 'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.	6 The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine; but God, who called me here below, will be forever mine.

Y5&6/P6&7 – Learn to play the melody of *Amazing Grace* from [notation](#):

AMAZING GRACE

D-G G - B A G B A G E D D G G B A G B A B D _____ B D

9 D B A G B A G E D D G G B A G B A G _____

This can be broken down into 4-bar [phrases](#) – part, with a group learning one phrase. N.B. phrases 1, 2 and 4 start in the same way.

Phrase 1	<p>D-G G - B A G B A G E D</p>
Phrase 2	<p>D-G G B A G B A B D _____</p>
Phrase 3	<p>B-D D B A G B A G E D</p>
Phrase 4	<p>D-G G B A G B A G _____</p>

Challenge pupils who feel more confident to play the whole melody.

You could start by telling the class that it starts in the key D. Ask them to try to work out the next notes by listening and experimenting. Can they work out any of the melody by ear? For support, the class might need paper copies of the melody and some work might be required to help them work out each note of their part.

4. PLENARY

Prepare and perform *Amazing Grace* agreeing on the number of verses to play, whether there is a solo singer for any verse and how the performance will start and stop.

5. OPTIONAL QUIZ

Where is a hymn usually heard?	In a church
What is a chord?	Two or more notes played at the same time
What is the word for someone performing music on their own?	Solo
What is the name of someone who creates music?	Composer
What is a phrase in music?	Part of a melody, e.g. 4 bars or a line of lyrics
What is notation?	Symbols representing sound

LESSON 2

Learning intention

- Develop an understanding of call and response
- Develop accurate playing skills
- Explore the pentatonic scale

1. STARTER

[Watch](#) and [listen](#) to *Mighty River* by Errollyn Wallen. Ask children to identify (for example by raising their hands) every time they hear a reference to *Amazing Grace*: [1'56 \(flute\)](#), [2'06 \(oboe\)](#), [2'28 \(strings\)](#), [4'05 \(trumpets\)](#) etc.

Listen to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (for example, [this version by the Plantation Singers](#)) which is another spiritual.

Ask the class if they have heard of or come across call and response before.

Call and response is a musical 'conversation' where the first melody is like a question from one musician (the musical leader) and then others reply or respond. It can be [vocal](#) or instrumental and is a structure used in many different traditions of music, including in music from Africa.

As a class, identify the use of call and response in *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

Sing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* as a class.

SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

The image displays two staves of musical notation for the song 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. Each staff is divided into a 'Call' section and a 'Response' section. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The 'Call' section consists of the first five notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. The 'Response' section consists of the next seven notes: F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The second staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The 'Call' section consists of the first five notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. The 'Response' section consists of the next seven notes: F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The lyrics 'Swing low sweet cha - ri - ot' are written under the first staff, and 'co - ming - for - to ca - rry me home.' are written under the second staff. The lyrics 'swing low sweet cha - ri - ot' are written under the first staff of the second system, and 'co - ming - for - to ca - rry - me - home' are written under the second staff of the second system.

2. MAIN TASK

Revise *Amazing Grace* from last lesson, developing accuracy in playing. **Y5&6/P6&7** – add chords is possible (see Lesson 1, Y3&4/P4&5).

AMAZING GRACE

D-G G - B A G B A G E D D G G B A G B A B D _____ B D

9 D B A G B A G E D D G G B A G B A G _____

Looking at the notation, identify which pitches (notes) are used in the melody:

D E G A B

This is a pentatonic scale – five note scale. There are many examples of these, and they are used in music from different traditions around the world, e.g. Africa, China, Indonesia. Western music tends to use a diatonic scale – seven pitches that cover an octave.

Y3&4/P4&5 – as a class, explore the pentatonic scale (D E G A B) and create a pentatonic call and response, where one player is the caller and everyone else responds. Only the notes D E G A B can be used.

Y5&6/P6&7 – in groups, create a pentatonic call and response, where one group member is the caller and the rest of the group respond.

Questions to consider:

- Will it be sung and/or played?
- Who will be the caller?
- How many times will it be played/sung?

3. PLENARY

Use the call and response, rehearse and perform *Amazing Grace* with a call and response introduction and ending.

Y5&6/P6&7 – agree on different groups to share their call and response with, with the whole class singing for each performance.

4. OPTIONAL QUIZ

What is call and response?	One musician sings or plays a musical phrase, and other musicians reply to or copy the phrase
How many notes are in a pentatonic scale?	Five
What is the opening section of a piece of music called?	Introduction
What structure is commonly used in the start of some African music?	Call and response
What is pitch?	How high or low a sound is
What is a hymn?	A religious song

LESSON 3

Learning intention

- Listen and reflect on the music heard
- Explore developing knowledge of musical components by composing music to create a specific mood
- Use the pentatonic scale, chords, pitched and unpitched instruments and vocal sounds with control

1. STARTER

[Listen](#) to *Mighty River* and identify/consider what and how this music reflects water and the journey made by enslaved people

Discuss with the class how the instruments are used (particularly the flowing, overlapping repeated patterns e.g. [1'22 in woodwind](#)).

The music is [legato](#), meaning smooth sounding, and there are changes of [time signature](#), meaning metre or the number of beats in a bar, possibly reflecting a journey that is not predictable or easy. Does the music sound comfortable? Sometimes the notes clash, creating discords, which could reflect the difficult journey.

Discuss how the melody is played by different instruments during the piece – the horn, violins, flute, clarinet and trumpet, before returning to the horn at the end. Ask the class to discuss and feedback why they think Errollyn Wallen (the composer) may have done this.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

As a class, recap the content covered so far in Lesson 1 and 2 (including learning and performing *Amazing Grace*, creating a call and response, and learning about pentatonic scales).

Revise the pentatonic scale, playing the notes D E G A B.

Consider *Mighty River* and the inspiration for its creation – the abolition of the Slave Trade Act, the flow of people, journeying the sea, and the suffering of being displaced from your home. If you feel appropriate, link this to current day news stories of those looking to seek asylum in the UK.

Ask the class how it is possible to represent these themes in music.

3. TASK

Create an expressive (meaning music that shows emotions and feelings, achieved through careful and controlled use of elements such as tempo, dynamics, pitch, texture etc.) piece of music to reflect this journey, using:

- Pentatonic scale (D E G A B)
- Vocal sounds
- Pitched instruments
- Unpitched instruments
- Chords

Y3&4/P4&5 – work as a class with different groups of children allocated to different instruments/vocals. The pitched instruments and voices can work together to develop a pentatonic melody or could work separately to create different melodies. Questions to consider:

- Will these work at the same time?
- Will the vocalists use lyrics or vocal sounds?
- How will the chords be used?
- Which chords will be used? Concords, e.g. G Major, C major, D major.
- Will there be discords – uncomfortable chords?
- Will the rhythms be an ostinato (constantly repeating pattern)?
- Which unpitched instruments would be suitable to use?
- When would this play?

Y5&6/P6&7 – groups (same groups as Lesson 2) create a pentatonic melody and develop chords (concords and discords) around this. Questions to consider:

- How will vocals be used?
- How will unpitched sounds be used?
- How will the music be expressive to reflect the emotions of the journey?
- How will the groups use their call and response from lesson 2?
- How will their music reflect the movement of the sea?

4. PLENARY

Perform the journey music (**Y3&4/P4&5** – as a class, **Y5&6/P6&7** – separate group pieces). Consider the following questions:

- Does it reflect emotions?
- Does it meet all the criteria?
- Does the structure work?
- How can it be improved?

5. OPTIONAL QUIZ

Is a drum pitched or unpitched?	Unpitched
What are types of sounds made with the mouth called?	Vocal
Name the two types of concords	Major and minor
Name the notes of the pentatonic scale starting on D	D E G A B
What are dynamics?	How loud or quiet the music is
What is expression in music?	Emotions or feelings

LESSON 4

Learning intention

- Develop control of sounds to play and sing with more expression
- Perform a structured composition in an ensemble

1. STARTER

[Listen](#) to the opening of *Mighty River* by Errollyn Wallen, which was dedicated to her great-great-great-great-great grandmother. Discuss the emotions that may have influenced Errollyn Wallen when composing the music. Think about the personal emotions linked to the slave trade and movement of people (discussed in Lesson 3).

Consider with the class how students can make their music more expressive. Expression is the emotion and feeling shown in music, achieved through careful and controlled use of elements such as tempo, dynamics, pitch, texture etc.

Sing *Amazing Grace*. How can we make this more expressive? This could be done by changing the tempo, the dynamics or texture. Sing it unaccompanied – without any instruments in the background - and then add the melody and chords. How does this change the expression?

2. MAIN TASK

So far, the class have learnt *Amazing Grace*, created a call and response and composed expressive journey music using the pentatonic scale.

Students should now [structure](#) (organise) a performance that:

- starts with a call and response
- includes the expressive pentatonic journey music
- includes *Amazing Grace*

Decide as a class how to structure the different sections.

Y5&6/P6&7 – this can be separate group performances with the whole class performing the song, or one long performance in which each group performs their call and response and pentatonic journey music, returning to the whole class song between each group's work. This would be a rondo structure.

All Year groups: Rehearse the agreed structure, giving pupils the chance to improve their work, using feedback from previous lessons.

Questions to consider:

- How will the performance start?
- How will it end?
- How will the song be performed? Solo? Accompanied? Unaccompanied?
- Will a conductor be needed? A conductor is the person who controls the performance, setting the tempo and pointing at players to start and stop. They might also help to show dynamics.
- How will the performance be expressive? Can this be improved?
- How will everyone know what they are singing or playing and when?

3. PLENARY

Perform and record the final performance(s). This might be a live performance in front of the class or in an assembly or a recorded performance on a recording device, such as an iPad.

4. EVALUATE

Discuss what the class have achieved and how effective it was. Ask the class to reflect on the following questions:

- What would you do differently if you did it again?
- What have you learnt from doing this?

5. OPTIONAL QUIZ

What is structure in music?	The order of sections or plan
What does accompany mean?	To play music in the background/in a supporting role
What does a conductor do?	Controls the performance
What is texture?	The layers of the music – how ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ it sounds
What is the musical word for emotion?	Expression
Is a glockenspiel pitched or unpitched?	Pitched

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **MUSIC:** Listen and learn to sing other spirituals, e.g. *Down By The Riverside*, *Good News*, *Go Down Moses*, *Steal Away*. Perform a range of these in a school assembly or concert (see below).
- **ENGLISH/RE:** Analyse the words of spirituals and compare. Do they have common metre? Do they have common number of lines? What do they mean? Are there references to the bible? What can we learn from them?
- **DANCE:** Learn an African Juba dance which uses patterns of clapping body parts, which were drumming rhythms used to communicate messages. See [BBC Ten Pieces – Florence Price Symphony No. 1, Juba Dance](#)
- **MUSIC:** Learn about African instruments and rhythms. Research how these influenced to other musical styles e.g. Blues, Samba etc.
- **HISTORY/GEOGRAPHY:** Learn about the slave trade, including the movement of people around the world and the impact on life today (including the music that has resulted from this, for example, blues). Present the information learnt in the assembly above, helping other children and/or families to have a deeper understanding of slavery.

GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS USED

TERM	DEFINITION
Call and response	One musician sings or plays a musical phrase, and other musicians reply to or copy the phrase
Chords	Two or more notes played at the same time
Compose	Create original music
Hymn	A religious song
Legato	Smooth sounds
Melody	The tune, made up of a mixture of high and low pitch sounds played one after the other (it's the part of the music that you often find yourself singing along to or remembering)
Movement	A structure used to divide up a longer musical composition e.g. a symphony may be made up of three or four movements
Notation	Sound represented in symbols e.g. staff notation
Pentatonic scale	A 5-note scale, e.g. CDEGA or DEGAB
Phrase	A part of a melody or rhythm, e.g. a place to breathe, like a comma in writing

Tuned instruments	Instruments that have different pitches and can be used to play a melody or tune e.g. glockenspiel
Solo	Player or singer performing on their own
Spiritual	A religious song linked to black enslaved people, thought to derive from the combination of European hymns and African music
Structure	The order of the different sections that make up a piece of music, e.g. intro, verse, chorus, outro
Time signature	The number of beats in a bar, or metre
Untuned instruments	Instruments that do not have different pitched sounds and cannot be used to play a melody, e.g. triangle
Vocal	Sounds made by the mouth, e.g. ssh, humming, singing, beat-boxing