

Purcell 'Music for a While' - what's in the exam

Revisions tips

1. **Memorise the facts below. What create revision strategies do you have?**
2. **Test yourself! Work out what you didn't get right, relearn and test yourself again...**
3. **Listen to the piece until you know it inside out. Then you can 'play it through your head' in the assessment. Make sure you know the words, so that you can explain how the music reflects the meaning of the words.**
4. **Don't forget that in your music exam, musical skills are very important, and they cannot be crammed! See over the page for ideas...**

Revision: up to Grade 4

Key facts

- The composer is Purcell
- The piece was written in the Baroque era, which was 1685-1750, approximately.
- Structure of the song: the piece has three sections which could be named ABA₁. It is a version of ternary form. It has a ground bass (bass line which repeats over and over)
- The tonality of the piece is minor
- Depending on the recording used, the solo voice is normally accompanied by organ or harpsichord. There might also be a cello playing the bass line.
- This piece uses a ground bass—a bass line lasting a number of bars, which is repeated over and over while the piece develops above it.

Revision: Grades 5-6

Key facts

- Key features of baroque music include:
 - Use of basso continuo, which means a harpsichord or organ improvising chords, plus a cello playing the bass line
 - Terraced dynamics: clear contrasts between loud and soft sections rather than gradual changes
 - Use of ornaments in the melody line (these are short, quick notes to add decoration)
 - Typically, there would be just one mood expressed throughout the piece (if you find this hard to understand, compare this song with the Beethoven *Pathétique* which seems to fly through moods such as anger, playfulness, fear, grandiosity...)
 - Baroque composers would not have written tempo and dynamics markings on the score. They often knew the performer, or would expect the performer to make these decisions.
- The background of the piece: the song was written as part of a play, to try and use the power of music to raise a ghost from the dead
- This particular ground bass lasts for three bars before repeating—this is unusual as it would normally last 2, 4, or 8 bars
- The 'B' section of the piece passes through a number of different keys
- The key signature at the start is A minor
- The piece was originally written for countertenor (high male voice, singing falsetto)
- Be able to explain how the 'A' section is different the second time round, and what the performer might add to it as well. Can you hear any words that have been ornamented to add interest? Which words/phrases are missed out this time round?
- Be able to name and recognise two different ornaments, such as trill (two notes rapidly alternating) or mordent (single rapid alteration with note above or below)
- Notice how this ground bass is chromatic (uses notes not from the scale) and is generally ascending (rising) in sequence (same melodic pattern is repeated up a note, and the same again for 5-6 times)
- The texture is homophonic (melody plus accompaniment)
- Give at least two examples of word painting. For example, the short notes on 'drop' at different pitches sound like the snakes dropping, and there is a long melisma (many pitches to one syllable) on the word 'eternal' to reflect the word's meaning.
- Be able to explain how repetitions of a certain words or phrases (e.g. 'music', 'drop' helps to emphasis these words.

Key musical skills

- Very important: be able to use words from your blue/yellow mind map correctly, to describe what you hear in a given extract
- Recognise by ear further baroque instruments (bassoon, lute, for example) that might be played in an extract
- Hear in the music when the tonality becomes major ('till Alecto' etc), and explain how this reflects the words of the song. Likewise, notice in the recording when the ground bass stops.
- Hear when an ornament is happening in the melody, or accompaniment. As you listen to more and more baroque music, you will start noticing when the performer is adding ornaments in, to add variety.
- Notice when the melody moves stepwise (e.g. 'wond'ring' and 'eased') and when there are larger leaps (e.g. on repetitions of 'drop' and between the two times 'music' is sung at the start)
- Be able to hear which parts or words are melismatic (many pitches to one syllable—to add expression) and which sections are syllabic (one note per syllable—help the words to be heard clearly)
- Be able to show how features of this piece are typical of the baroque style (see 'key features of baroque music' above)

Revision: Grade 7+

You can certainly learn a lot from the notes below in the run-up to your assessment. However there is much musical understanding which simply cannot be learned overnight. Instead, these aspects will develop over time, through:

- weekly participation in musical activities (ensembles, stage school, bands, choirs, groups, theory club, for example)
- being inquisitive: exploring the genre online, listening to further works by Purcell and other Baroque composers, asking questions about aspects of the work in class/at break, learning to play/sing this piece and other pieces by the composer
- studying the actual score. You might need to describe a small section in detail in regards to melody or harmony, for example.

Knowledge & Understanding

- Be able to explain how the harmony is used to create word painting on 'wondering' 'eas'd', 'pain'
- Describe how word painting is used on 'eas'd' ('signing' phrase with dissonance that is resolved on the second note), 'pain' (dissonance with E in melody set against D in the bass), 'wond'ring' (long, contemplative), 'whip' (scotch snap), and through the ground bass itself (gradually rising in pitch—eerily suggesting how the spirit of Laius is rising from his bones)
- Research online, read your notes and/or find time outside of lesson time to have more in-depth discussions about historically informed performances. I.e. how Baroque music might have been played in the day (this is called 'performance practice'). E.g:
 - limitations of period instruments (brass instruments had no valves so only certain notes could be played, string instruments had different shaped bow that gave a lighter sound and greater contrast between down- and up- bows). Research equal temperament to explore how even keyboard instruments were restricted to playing in particular keys...
 - roles of performer (in Baroque times performers were expected to interpret the score themselves and add ornamentation to create own version, a little like interpretation of jazz standards today)
 - role of the musical score (in the past it gave just an indication to the performer with lots of details missing, but in the today the score is expected to give almost every detail)
 - don't forget, in Baroque times, the composer often knew the performers well (no cheap printing press for scores to be sent all round the country) and knew how they would interpret their work
 - importance of improvisation (baroque harpsichord/organ players were expected to improvise chords from a figured bass—a bass line with symbols to show how performers which chords to base their improvisation on)
- Get a feel for how common it was to have a ground bass in Baroque music, and listen to other pieces with a ground bass. How many bars does the ground bass last for in other pieces? Get an understanding of how clever Purcell was to write a ground bass that is three bars long. Also, be able to describe parts of 'Music for a While' where a vocal phrase continues beyond the three bar ground bass to add variety (e.g. the ground bass restarts part way through the 'pains were eas'd' phrase)
- Understand the patronage system (composers were essentially servants to noblemen, royalty or the church. They had very little say themselves in what style of music they could write and what singers/instruments they could write for. They had to be very creative within the strict boundaries of the given brief)
- Know the original key of the piece (C minor), and understand why you are studying it in a different key (fewer sharps/flats in A minor, plus A minor better suits a soprano voice). NB it's typical for singers today to change the key of a piece to suit their voice
- Understand the features of the work that help it to establish the key of A minor (bass line and vocal line both start on 'A', first chord of the piece is A minor, perfect cadence at the end of each ground bass repetition and to end the piece)
- Explain which keys the B section passes through, and how each key relates to A minor. This is grade 4-5 theory stuff! E minor (the dominant) at the end of A section leads to G major (dominant or relative major), then to C major (relative major)
- Get a sense of Purcell's compositional style (and works) in comparison to those of Bach, Vivaldi, Handel and other Baroque composers. If you have an essay question, you can work these thoughts into your answer
- Understand that this is a piece of incidental music - music written to be part of a play
- Know the role of castrati from the time—you might have to compare a piece that could have been written for one
- Know key features of baroque music relating to all elements (melody, harmony, texture, dynamics, etc) and be able to hear these aspects in the music. i.e. explain why this is clearly a baroque piece.
- Name further baroque instruments and understand how they were played
- Understand baroque pitch (used to be a semitone lower than today i.e. an 'A' in Baroque times would now sound like an 'A#')
- A Tierce de Picardie used on the word 'snakes' when sung for the first time—to really bring out this word
- Grade 6 theory explores how to realise a figured bass successfully. Have a go yourself to understand how it works.
- Explain the intervals used in the ground bass (e.g. starts with A rising up a 5th to an E, then the same pattern happens up a tone)
- Be able to explain the relationship between harpsichord and voice (e.g. is there any use of dialogue/imitation?)
- Be able to describe any of the vocal motifs or phrases (dotted, weaving, melismatic)
- Be able to explain which words and phrases are repeated to add extra emphasis (and how are they different when repeated?)
- Know what the symbols on the score mean (ornaments, spread chord, figured bass, for example)

Skills (gain these by extending your listening and increasing your musical participation):

- Be able to spot the following in the music and describe their effect: false relation, suspension
- Be able to play the ground bass on a chosen instrument, sing it, and notate it on manuscript paper.
- Be able to hear when the music changes key and be able to name the key at any given point in the score
- When there is a leap in the melody line, be able to name the interval (e.g. a perfect 5th from first 'music' to its repetition)
- Be able to name any ornament sung in the music, such as appoggiatura, acciaccatura (grace note)
- Notice when the voice right hand/bass line are in parallel 3rds/6ths, or when the bass line and voice are moving in contrary motion