



Songs of Slavery – Africa, America and Europe (Age range 14-16)

Time required: One 60 minute lesson.

Activity: Singing, listening to and appraising songs of slavery.

Aims:

- To explore the characteristics of ‘spirituals’.
- To analyse and appraise spirituals.

Pupils will learn:

- How spirituals sung by slaves on American plantations often contained coded messages.
- How spirituals fuse characteristics of European hymns and African vocal techniques and rhythms to create a new style.
- To sing call and response melodies adding vocal harmonies.

Web links you will need:

- [Information about Negro spirituals.](#)
- [Sheet music to ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot’.](#)
- Audio file of [‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’.](#)
- Recording of an [English congregational hymn](#). Note: click this link and select a BBC service. Most services begin with a traditional hymn.
- Sheet music to [‘Go Down Moses’.](#)
- Sheet music of [‘Follow the Drinking Gourd’.](#)

Other resources you will need:

- Lyric to *‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’*: see lyric worksheet provided.
- Lyrics to *‘Go Down Moses’*: see lyric worksheet provided.
- Lyrics to *‘Follow the Drinking Gourd’* with explanation of coded message: see worksheet provided.

Useful information

Slave songs are an especially important resource for studying slavery, particularly as music that arises out of oppression often has a particular potency and poignancy. Spirituals contained the hopes and dreams, frustrations and fears, of generations of African Americans. It’s important to note that slavery still exists in forms such as bonded labour and the trafficking of women, and is still an ongoing issue in today’s world.

[Read a concise but authoritative summary of the Negro Spiritual.](#) The rich drumming traditions of the African slaves were viewed with suspicion and banned by slave owners who feared that they would be used as a form of communication between the slaves. Singing, particularly the singing of spirituals, was tolerated and even considered a good thing. Firstly, it added rhythm to the slaves’ work which improved productivity. Secondly, the owners who considered themselves ‘good Christians’ were glad to hear pious music being sung in their plantations. However, many of the spirituals were used to pass on coded messages. Words such as ‘chariot’ and ‘train’ referred to a train of people who would hide slaves as they made their way to freedom. The ‘river Jordan’ often referred to the Ohio river. ‘Canaan’ meant Canada and ‘Follow the drinking gourd’ meant follow the star formation (shaped like a hollowed-out gourd) that included the North star. The spiritual ‘Steal Away’ includes the line ‘My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder’. The word ‘thunder’ indicated the time or place when a slave needed to make his or her escape (the word thunder would be replaced with other more precise times or places).

Spirituals combined African characteristics such as pentatonic scale, call and response, syncopation, a cappella singing and characteristic long and irregular melodic phrases with the structural and harmonic conventions of European Christian hymns. In this respect, spirituals can be viewed as a form of nineteenth century fusion music.

Lesson Plan		Songs of slavery –Africa, America and Europe (Age range 14-16)
<p>Starter</p>	<p>Display the following 5 lines pointing out that they are all taken from Negro spirituals i.e. they are from songs of slavery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Swing low sweet chariot comin' for to carry me home</i> • <i>Goin' over Jordan, goin' over home</i> • <i>The trumpet sounds within-a my soul, I ain't going to stay here</i> • <i>Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus</i> • <i>You got to move</i> <p>Briefly discuss these lines in groups and feedback what each might mean (pupils may well suggest that the words are religious, describing death and moving on to 'the next world').</p> <p>If none of the pupils has thought of it, explain that the words of Negro spirituals often had a double meaning. They were used by slaves as a way of communicating in code without raising the suspicions of the slave owners and drivers. Look at the words again and ask the groups to come up with both meanings the words might have.</p> <p>Explain that the words speak in code about escaping from captivity from the Southern to the Northern states of America and that we can learn a lot about a group of people by examining the type of music that they liked to create, perform and listen to.</p>	
<p>Main</p>	<p>Explain that African slaves were not allowed to practice and perform their own traditional music, particularly drumming, as slave owners feared that it would be used to communicate between slaves. Instead the slaves were made to attend weekly church services and sing Christian Hymns.</p> <p>Display and discuss the words of the Spiritual 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. Quickly sing through the song (it is likely that students will know the tune already) then listen to a recording made in the 1920's by the vocal group. Other recordings may be used if they display the same characteristics.</p> <p>Compare this recording with the performance of an English Hymn sung by a congregation.</p> <p>Discuss the characteristics of the two performances (<i>Swing Low</i>: call and response, syncopation, a cappella, vocal harmonies on each response, fluid rhythms. English Hymn: unison or part singing throughout accompanied by an organ, whole verse sung a cappella, 'straight' rhythms). Point out that the vocal features observed in <i>Swing Low</i> are traditional African devices infused into the framework of the European hymn. <i>Swing Low</i> is also pentatonic (another African characteristic) and that many spirituals use either this modality or the Western European minor scale.</p> <p>Slaves enjoyed writing lyrics that used Biblical themes mirroring their own situation. One example is 'Go Down Moses'. Distribute copies and teach the melody singing it together in unison with an appropriate swing rhythm. The frequent use of syncopation in the song can be added to the other African devices observed previously in <i>Swing Low</i>. Discuss how they think the slaves might have felt while singing these words – and how the slave owners might have felt when they heard this song.</p> <p>Rehearse the first verse of the song together as a class, adding call and response during the verse (response: <i>Let my people go</i>) and aurally developing vocal harmonies on each response (the online sheet music provides vocal parts).</p>	
<p>Plenary</p>	<p>Sing pupils the spiritual <i>Follow the Drinking Gourd</i> (click here for the sheet music - the lyrics are provided). Can pupils analyse the words and crack the code? Feedback and finally summarise the key contextual and musical features of spirituals learned in the lesson.</p>	

SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

*Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home*

*I looked over Jordan and what did I see coming for to carry me home
A band of angels is coming after me, coming for to carry me home.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home*

*If you come to heaven before I do, coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'll be coming there too coming for to carry me home.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home*

*Well I'm sometimes up and I'm sometimes down coming for to carry me home,
But I'd steal my soul if it ever were down coming for to carry me home.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home*

Go Down Moses

*When Israel was in Egypt's land (let my people go);
Oppressed so hard they could not stand (let my people go);
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

*The Lord told Moses what to do (let my people go);
To lead the children of Israel through (let my people go).
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

*The pillar of cloud shall clear the way (let my people go);
A fire by night, a shade by day, (let my people go).
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

*As Israel stood by the water-side, (let my people go);
At God's command it did divide, (let my people go).
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

*When they had reached the other shore (let my people go);
They sang the song of triumph over (let my people go);
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

*Oh, let us all from bondage flee, (let my people go);
And let us all in Christ be free, (let my people go).
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

Follow the Drinking Gourd explained

Lyric

Explanation

Chorus

Follow the drinking gourd!
Follow the drinking gourd!
For the old man is awaiting
for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the drinking gourd!

Verse 1

When the sun comes back
And the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd!
For the old man is awaiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

*The coming of winter (when the Ohio river freezes and makes it safer to cross)
Migratory birds that fly south in winter.*

*Star formation shaped like a hollowed-out gourd used to locate the pole star.
Peg Leg Joe, a former sailor / handyman who travelled from plantation to plantation singing this song.*

Chorus

Verse 2

The riverbank makes a very good road,
The dead trees will show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, travelling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Bank of the River Tombigbee, Alabama

Dead trees marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot, which would help them distinguish the Tombigbee from other north – south rivers.

Chorus

Verse 3

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side
Follow the drinking gourd.

These verses informed slaves that the Tennessee River eventually joins the 'great' Ohio River. After crossing the Ohio, they would meet a guide from the Underground Railroad who would accompany them on the rest of their journey.

Chorus

Verse 4

When the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.