

The Willow Pattern Story

Introduction

The London Jing Kun Opera Association (LJKOA) promotes the learning, appreciation, and practice of Jingju (Beijing/Peking Opera) and Kunqu. The association offers workshops on opera movements, voice, acting, music, percussion, face-painting, make-up and costuming. Please visit <http://www.londonjingkunopera.co.uk>

In January 2008, LJKOA actors and musicians worked with children and their teachers in rural primary schools in North Cumbria as part of the Chinese Cinderella music and storytelling project led by Creative Partnerships, Cumbria and Cumbria Music Service.

- how Chinese opera performers tell stories by singing and moving in special ways
- How musicians support the actors through skilful improvisation

Children discovered how Chinese legends and art influenced the Willow Pattern design and stories associated with it. They went on to interpret the story through music and drama adopting techniques learnt from LJKOA workshops and using a range of tuned and untuned percussion instruments. This work was subsequently developed by Cumbria music service within a KS2 tuned percussion first access programme. This popular three term programme develops percussion techniques and repertoire using a range of classroom percussion. At the end of term one, children and their teachers

- develop increasing control and fluency on a range of percussion instruments
- use the pentatonic scale and a range of other devices from traditional Chinese music to improvise, compose and perform simple songs, melodies and accompaniments
- read and perform from musical notation
- develop an understanding of the history, performance and conventions of Chinese Opera
- plan, practise and stage a music theatre performance influenced by ideas and traditions of Chinese story and Opera

Children could go on to

- investigate masks, face painting and costume worn in Chinese opera
- design and make masks/headwear/costume for characters using a range of materials
- explore and investigate features of stories from Chinese opera from written sources and the internet
- consider the influence of China on European art
- find out how Western musicians have been influenced by Chinese music and Chinese thought (Benjamin Britten, John Cage)

What the Willow Pattern Unit does

The Willow Pattern unit is a simple retelling of the traditional story. The characters superimposed on a Willow Pattern plate are vintage Chinese paper festival figures found in a junk shop! Songs from the First Access programme have also been included. Schools might explore the unit in conjunction

with the programme, or create their own retelling of the Willow pattern story through music, drama, dance and art with the help of these notes.

Willow Pattern

During the eighteenth century, Chinese porcelain painted with scenes from opera stories became very popular and sold well in England. Keen not to lose the market, Spode produced a 'Chinese' design called 'Willow pattern', bringing together several common Chinese motifs. It quickly became popular, and other English potteries followed with their own variations.

Stories and rhymes based on the pattern and its meaning began to circulate. The 'Willow Pattern Story' appears in various versions, and probably originated in the early nineteenth century as folk stories to fit the various motifs depicted on the plate. Our online story version draws on several of these.

Chinese Opera

The Willow pattern story provides a useful framework for children to find out about Chinese opera. Chinese opera is a wonderful mixture of singing, acting and dancing, pantomime, acrobatics and clowning! Operas play out episodes from traditional stories and legends

There is very little scenery in Chinese opera. Audiences can tell what is happening through the music, costumes, make up, and movements of the actors. Opera characters are skilled mime artists, and their stylised movements are understood by audiences. Make up and costumes all have meaning. For example, different beards give clues to character; e.g. a beard reaching to the waist suggests wisdom. Roles are divided into male (sheng) and female (dan) characters.

- *Wu-Sheng (warrior sheng)*: skilled in unarmed combat. Played by skilled acrobats
- *Hsiao Sheng (young sheng)*: handsome, clean-shaven, lively and talented. Sometimes he is a poor scholar.
- *Lao Sheng (elderly sheng)*: distinguished older man (e.g. a court official, general, etc.)
- *Guimen Dan*: The 'leading lady'. Singing ability important
- *Hua dan*: Young girl. May be the leading lady's maid.

Jing or 'painted face' characters

The colours and patterns of the faces are traditional, suggesting good or bad qualities

Red: dignified, honest

White: cunning /crafty/ treacherous

Black: honest, reliable and strong

Blue: lively, brave, quick witted


Yellow: intelligent and quiet

Willow Pattern Song


The *Willow Pattern* song is based on an original Chinese pentatonic folk melody. Words from an anonymous nineteenth century rhyme from the Potteries are set to a pentatonic m

Verse 1

Intro

Flute 

Two pig - eons fly - ing high! Chin - ese ves - sel sail - ing by

Fl. 

Weep - ing wil - low hang - ing o'er, Bridge with three men if not four.

Verse 2

Flute 

Chin - ese temp - les there they stand, Seem to take up all the land!

Fl. 

App - le trees with app - les on, Pret - ty fence to end my song.

Pupils might

- perform the song as an introduction and ending to their interpretation of the Willow story.
- compose their own melody using C Pentatonic (notes CDEGA) or F pentatonic (FGACD')
- improvise an accompaniment on tuned percussion instruments incorporating a drone pattern: i.e. two notes played together a fifth apart (C and G to accompany C pentatonic: F and C to accompany F pentatonic)
- Add rhythms on claves, guiro and other percussion instruments
- Add a short introduction on xylophone or recorder
- Sing as a two- or four-part round

The Soldier's Chant

*Listen when we say
If you hear us play
Stay inside and lock your door
Just keep out of our way!*

Musical episodes for percussion instruments in Chinese opera often accompany battle scenes. Instruments include wooden clappers, drums, cymbals and gongs. The rhythms of the soldier's chant (based on 'Jelly on a Plate') may be played on a variety of small school percussion instruments.

- Pupils might assemble their own Chinese percussion orchestra. A cymbal might take replace a large gong, finger cymbals or triangles small gongs, etc.
- The drum part could be played on various percussion instruments, including snare drum, congas or djembes. Children should familiarise themselves with the rhythms by tapping them out on their knees.

In Chinese opera, actors and musicians work closely together to interpret moods and actions. When actors walk, their steps are accompanied by instruments

Percussion instruments accompanying the Da Jin's walk are

- Large gong
- Small Gong
- Cymbals

Kuang is the sound of the large gong

Dei is the sound of the small gong

Ci is the sound of the cymbals

- Instruments are played in the following order: Big gong/Cymbals/Small gong/ Cymbals
- The sequence is called **changchui**, and may be played in fast or slow tempo
- Practise chanting and playing the sequence

Kuang Ci Dei Ci

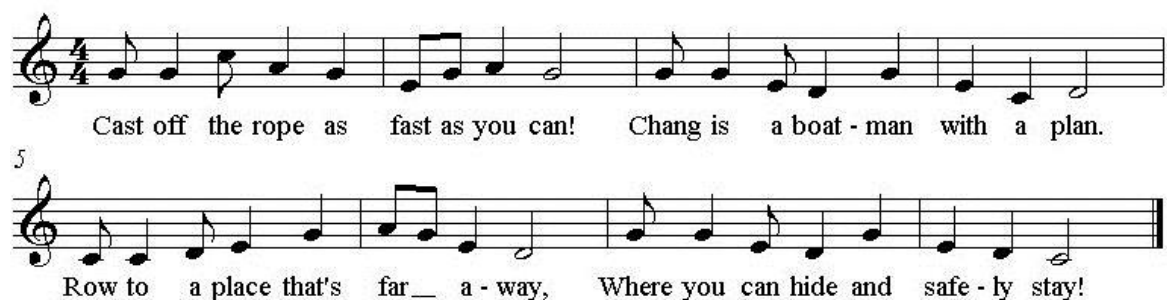
Kuang Ci Dei Ci

Willow Boat Song

The *Willow Boat* song is based on a traditional Chinese pentatonic folk song. In the story, Chang, disguised as a boatman, gate crashes the wedding ceremony and snatches Koong-See. The two lovers run across the bridge, escaping in Chang's boat to the island up river.

In traditional Chinese opera, actors mime stepping into a boat, casting off, bobbing about in the water, then tying up again before disembarking. The boatman is frequently a comic character, identified by an oversized oar he carries.

This is an opportunity for the percussion section of a Chinese opera orchestra to demonstrate their improvisational skills by providing the appropriate sound effects exactly on time. This is excellent practise for young percussionists. The following *Willow Boat* song could introduce the mime.



Composing and Recording Musical Episodes

There are lots of opportunities for introducing and composing musical episodes within the Willow pattern story. These might include

- Sailing music for the paper boat/the Boatman
- Wedding Music for the Da Jin and Koong See
- Motifs: short melodies reflecting the characters of Koon See, Da Jin, The Mandarin, Chang. Considering how characters move, talk and behave will help shape these

Pupils might record their music using different notations, including:

Cipher Notation

Recording melodies with numbers is called *cipher* notation. Substituting numbers for letter names of notes is straightforward. In the Chinese cipher system, the first note of the pentatonic scale is **1**.

- C pentatonic is represented as follows: **C-1, D-2, E-3, G-5, A-6**
- There is **NO** note number **4**
- **0** indicates silence

A sequence of numbers is played at a steady pulse as crotchets

e.g:

1 2 3 5 6 5 3 2

Underlined notes indicate quavers.

e.g

3 5 2 3 1 2 3 5 6 0

- Can children translate their cipher notation into staff notation?

Colour Song

The ancient Chinese connected musical sounds with the elements, seasons, political hierarchies and colours. Compose a 'Colour Song', in which notes of the pentatonic scale are each given their Chinese name, and colour. Removable coloured stickers for xylophone bars could be prepared.

NOTE NAME	CHINESE NAME	COLOUR
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C	KUNG	YELLOW
D	SHANG	WHITE
E	CHIAO	BLUE
G	CHI	RED
A	YU	BLACK

The musical score consists of two systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system contains the lyrics 'Kung Shang Chiao' and 'Chi Yu Chi'. The second system, starting with a measure rest and the number '5' above it, contains the lyrics 'Sec - ret meet - ing' and 'Und - er the tree'. The melody is written in a simple, accessible style with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes.

5