

**Friday Afternoons:**

# **A Round Britten....**

# **How to write a round**

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# Context

Rounds (and canons) are when the same melody is sung, but at staggered entry points, creating immediate layers and harmony.

One of the most popular and impressive songs in the original Britten set of Friday Afternoons is Abram Brown. This sinister and atmospheric piece has very few lyrics and a simple melody, but all the drama arrives when the song becomes a round.

The Friday Afternoons songbank has a lot of songs that work as rounds, and this creative music making resource will help you and your students to write your own round.

# Start at the very beginning...

**There are several ways you can go about constructing a round, but for this exercise we are going to work on creating a 4 line melody over a repeating chord sequence.**

First, we need to know what we are going to write about. This can be based around whatever theme you like – *perhaps you want it to fit in with a winter concert, or end of term leaving assembly. Perhaps you want to link it to a topic the class are working on, like the sea or planets.* it really is entirely up to you what your lyrics are about.

If you are stuck, why not try this simple exercise to get a new perspective on things:

Pick an object that is not human and write to it as if it were a human, using phrases like 'you are' 'you have' 'you make me feel'

To begin with this can just be a series of statements, it doesn't need to be poetry at this stage.

For example:

**Object = A tree**

**You stand tall and strong.  
Your roots reach deep into the ground.  
You provide shelter and food for birds and animals.  
Your colours change with the seasons.**

Now taking your initial thoughts, refine and edit them into 4 lines, taking the essence of your thoughts and distilling them into neat and 'singable' phrases.

Take out any unnecessary 'filler' words and get the point as succinctly as you can.

A good pattern to follow is an ABCB rhyme scheme, where just your 2nd and 4th lines rhyme.

So I could turn the above prose into this:

**Tall and strong  
Roots deep in the ground  
Shelter and nourish  
Orange, green and brown**

# From Poem to Song...



**Ok. Now we've got our 4 lyric lines, we can start to add the music.**

Because this piece is ultimately going to become a round, we need to make sure that the underlying harmony of the song stays the same. For this exercise we are going to make a 2 chord repeating sequence as our harmonic base.

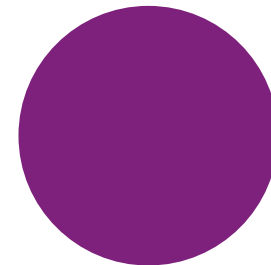
We will then write different melodies for each of our 4 lyric lines, and each one will fit over those 2 chords.

This means that when the song is sung as a round, we know that each of the lyrics lines independently works over the chord sequence, and will therefore work when layered on top of each other.

For my song I am going to use the chords D major and E minor, and play each chord for a bar of 4 beats.

**NOTE:** If you want to keep it really simple you can stick with one chord, if you vary the melodies enough this will still work as a round, in fact Abram Brown works over one drone pedal note the whole way through.

*Vamping* these chords (playing repeatedly on loop, which could be on a guitar or piano or ukulele, or via a digitally generated loop like Garage band or other programmes) experiment with singing each of your lyric phrases over the chords. Start with one note melodies, and gradually extend the range and complexity. [\(for more ideas of generating melodies, for an example of how this might sound, watch this video example.](#)



# From Poem to Song...

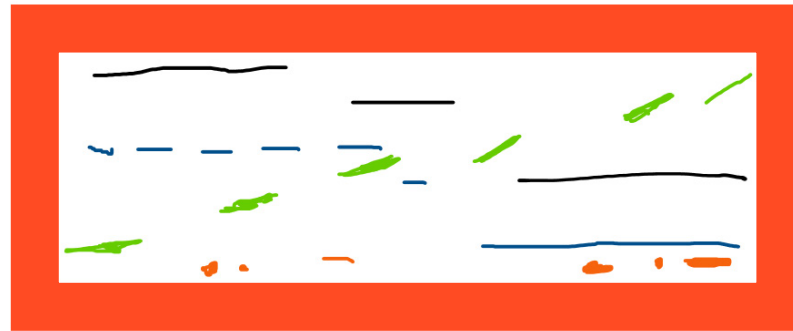
**Try to give each line its own very unique and memorable shape.**

When you are crafting your melodies, try to think of the 'sonic space' each line occupies, and see if you can make each one of your 4 lines occupy a different space.

Use high notes  
 Use low notes  
 Use quick rhythmic patterns  
 Use on the beat phrases  
 Use off the beat phrases  
 Use more drawn out, longer note phrases.

This will help your round create interesting harmonies and rhythms when you put it together. A visual example might look like this...

1. Tall and strong
2. Roots deep in the ground
3. Shelter and nourish
4. Orange green and brown Orange green and brown



When you are happy that each line of the song has its own DEFINITE melody that can be repeated and sung confidently, try singing each of the lines after each other over the chord sequence as a little 4 line song. Insert video example

**Keep a regular pulse to ensure no rushing.**

Successful round and canon singing relies on a really strong sense of shared pulse and working together.

Sing it through **MANY** times! Make sure everyone in the room knows this little song inside out and super confidently.

# Round and Round We Go...



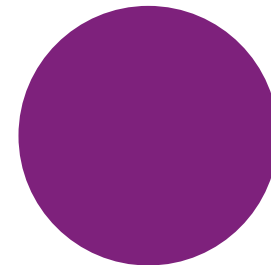
## Now for the really fun part – let's put it in a round

- Start with a 2 part round by splitting your class into 2 equal groups.
- Hear each group sing the song through on their own to ensure the confidence is still there now you've made the group smaller. If it is not secure, repeat the singing until it is!
- Group 1 starts singing the song as normal. Once they've reached the end of the 2nd line, group 2 starts singing the song from the beginning.
- **IMPORTANT:** It is not a competition between parts to see who is louder or faster – it is teamwork and listening to each other is vital.
- When the 2 part round is secure and confident and you want an extra challenge, try splitting each group in half again. Each group comes in once the previous group have reached the end of line of the song.

This should create a multi-layered 4 part harmony piece!

Top Tip for part singing: Use confident students from within the class to be 'team-leaders' for each part. Having someone to watch/follow will really help support those in the group who are finding it challenging to hold their own part in the round.

[For a handy guide to successfully leading rounds, have a look at this video.](#)



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