Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Contemporary folk music of the British Isles

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The folk tradition

- Folk music of the British Isles (England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Channel Islands) was passed on by ear, from person to person: the **oral tradition**. Songs changed as they were passed on.
- Types: **ballads** that tell stories, work songs, sea shanties (call and response songs sung by sailors while working), and dance tunes.
- Dance tunes include jigs (in 6/8), **reels** (in 4/4) and hornpipes.
- Guernsey has its own traditional songs, some in Guernésiais, the island's own language.

Features you can hear

- Melodies often use **modes** (such as Dorian or Mixolydian) instead of major or minor keys.
- Songs are usually **strophic**: the same tune for every verse. Harmony is simple, and some songs are sung unaccompanied.
- Drones (a held note underneath), ornaments such as grace notes and rolls, and the singer's own decoration.
- Instruments: fiddle, accordion, concertina, tin whistle, acoustic guitar, harp, **bodhrán** (an Irish frame drum), uilleann pipes (Ireland) and bagpipes (Scotland).

Contemporary folk

- In the 1960s folk revival, singers recorded and performed traditional songs and wrote new ones in the same style.
- Folk rock adds electric guitars, bass and drum kit to folk songs and tunes.
- Contemporary folk can mix traditional instruments with modern production, but it keeps modal melodies, storytelling lyrics and dance rhythms.

Key terms

Oral tradition	Music passed on by ear rather than written down.
Ballad	A song that tells a story.
Sea shanty	A work song sung by sailors, often with call and response.
Jig	A lively folk dance tune in 6/8.
Reel	A fast folk dance tune in 4/4.
Mode	A scale that is neither major nor minor, such as Dorian.
Strophic	Every verse is sung to the same tune.
Bodhrán	An Irish frame drum.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. How was folk music traditionally passed on?
2. What is a ballad?
3. What is a sea shanty?
4. What time signature is a jig usually in?
5. What is a mode?
6. What does strophic mean?
7. Which instrument is an Irish frame drum?
8. Which instrument is common in British folk music?

Answers

1. By ear, from person to person
2. A song that tells a story
3. A work song sung by sailors, often with call and response
4. 6/8
5. A scale that is neither major nor minor, such as Dorian
6. Every verse is sung to the same tune
7. Bodhrán
8. Fiddle

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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