Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Vocal music

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Voices and how words are set

- Voice types from high to low: soprano, alto (or mezzo-soprano), tenor, baritone and bass. **Countertenors** are men singing in the alto range.
- **Syllabic** setting gives one note to each syllable; **melismatic** setting stretches one syllable over many notes.
- **Word painting** is when the music shows the meaning of the words: a rising melody on "heaven", a falling one on "down", a long held note on "forever".
- Vocal techniques: vibrato, falsetto, belting, head voice and chest voice, and ornaments.

Baroque vocal music

- Baroque songs, **arias** and operas (1600 to 1750) were often accompanied by basso continuo: harpsichord or lute with cello or viola da gamba.
- A **ground bass** is a bass line that repeats again and again while the melody above changes. Purcell was a master of it.
- **Recitative** is sung speech that moves the story on quickly; an **aria** is a song that shows a character's feelings, often with repeats and decoration.
- Other features: dissonances that resolve, ornaments such as trills, and text repeated for emphasis.

Vocal music in popular styles

- In rock and pop, the lead vocal is often supported by layered backing vocals and close harmonies, sometimes multi-tracked in the studio (one singer recorded many times).
- Songs mix verse and chorus structure with sections that change the mood, key or texture.
- Listen for how the voice and the accompaniment work together: doubling the melody, answering it (call and response), or contrasting with it.

Key terms

Syllabic	One note for each syllable.
Melismatic	Several notes sung to one syllable.
Word painting	Music that shows the meaning of the words.
Ground bass	A bass line that repeats while the music above changes.
Recitative	Sung speech that moves the story on.
Aria	A song in an opera or oratorio showing a character's feelings.
Countertenor	A man singing in the alto range.
Multi-tracking	Recording a part several times and layering the takes.

Quick questions

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

1. What is syllabic word setting?
2. What is melismatic word setting?
3. What is word painting?
4. What is a ground bass?
5. What is recitative?
6. What is an aria?
7. What is a countertenor?
8. Which instruments play the basso continuo?

Answers

1. One note for each syllable
2. Several notes sung to one syllable
3. Music that shows the meaning of the words
4. A bass line that repeats while the music above changes
5. Sung speech that moves the story on
6. A song showing a character's feelings
7. A man singing in the alto range
8. Harpsichord or lute with cello or viola da gamba

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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