EDUCATION & COMMUNITY
London Philharmonic Orchestra

The Twelve Days of Christmas

In this festive lesson, we use the cumulative structure of the popular song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* to create a class performance on percussion instruments, with some ideas for taking it further.

We have provided an outline of the lesson plan, and some supporting resources. Please feel free to adapt the ideas below to suit the resources you have and the needs of your children.

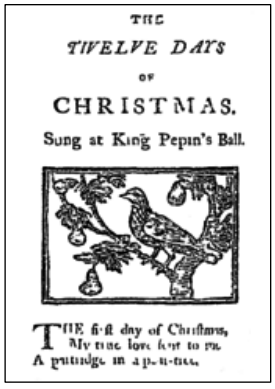
This project is a downloaded version of the online version, which can be found here:
https://www.lpo.org.uk/creative-classrooms-connect/the-twelve-days-of-christmas.html

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Resources needed for this project:

- Variety of classroom percussion (ideally plenty of tuned instruments, such as chime bars, glockenspiels, xylophones)
- Any children who play other instruments can play them for this lesson
- Twelve Days colour lyric sheet
- Twelve Days group colour cards (versions in C and for Bb instruments downloadable from online project page)
- Twelve Days melody sheet music (optional – use if you have children in the class who would like to play along) – downloadable from online project page
- Piano accompaniment: sheet music and links to recorded backing track available on online project page (link at top of the page)

Background


THE
TWELVE DAYS
OF
CHRISTMAS.
Sung at King Pepin's Ball.

Mirth without Mischief is, I think we can all agree, what teachers are looking for when they plan that festive end of term lesson. However, it's also the name of a 1780 collection of children's games, and the earliest recorded instance of what is now the popular carol The Twelve Days of Christmas.

The Twelve Days of Christmas refers to the traditional celebrations which began on Boxing Day and finished on Epiphany, 6th January.

The Twelve Days of Christmas was originally a rhyme which was used as a forfeit game, traditionally on the Eve of Epiphany or Twelfth Night.

It worked in a similar way to the game "I went to the moon and I took…"
So the first child would say:
"On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me a partridge in a pear tree"
The next child:
"On the second day of Christmas, my true love sent to me two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree"
And so it would go on, with each child adding to the list. Anyone who made a mistake would pay a forfeit.

The order of the verses and specific gifts vary, and there are versions from all over the UK and in France, America and Canada. In 1909, the English singer and composer Frederic Austin arranged this popular rhyme using a folk melody and this is the version so familiar to us all today.

Cumulative songs

The song structure of The Twelve Days of Christmas is common to many other children's songs as they are such fun to sing. Your children probably know one already. Cumulative songs that are often sung in school include:

- *The Rattlin' Bog*
- *There was an old lady who swallowed a fly*
- *I bought me a cat* (for listening, there are many wonderful recordings of Aaron Copland's setting of this song)

There are also lots of songs that have cumulative actions. There seems to be no age limit on enjoying these great examples as warm-ups:

- *Hi! My name's Joe* (*Sonsense Nongs*, A & C Black)
- *The Penguin Song* (*Singing Sherlock Book 1*, Boosey & Hawkes)

Instant performance of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*

In this lesson, we use classroom tuned percussion to create an instant performance of *The Twelve Days of Christmas.*

The structure of the song means that it is made up of a few short melodies which can be divided between children and instruments. This is a good lesson for exploiting a variety of tuned percussion and making the most of those boxes of assorted chime bars and incomplete instruments that so many of us have in our music cupboard. You can incorporate untuned instruments as well – anything with jingling bells would sound festive, or scrapers and shakers can be used rhythmically. As long as each group has some tuned instruments, the song will work.

1. **Setting up the task**
   This lesson provides great instant gratification if your students are already familiar with the song, so check this first – you might want to sing it with them or watch a version online. When you're sure your class knows the song, move on to step 2.

2. **Allocating groups and instruments**
   Divide your class into 7 groups and allocate them instruments according to this table. Each note set is shown in order of pitch from low to high (so long as the notes are in the right order within each set, it doesn't matter which octave they are in. We are often mixing register when we use classroom percussion of differing sizes anyway).

Group	*Song lyrics*	*Notes set*
Red	On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me	**G B C D E F**
Orange	A partridge in a pear tree	**C D E F G A**
Yellow	Five gold rings	**F# G A**
Green	Six geese a-laying, seven swans a-swimming etc.	**D E F G**
Blue	Four calling birds (after verse 5)	**C D E F G**
Purple	Three French hens (after verse 5)	**A C F**
Black	Two turtle doves (after verse 5)	**G A B C D**

The Orange, Green and Blue groups will work with a standard diatonic octave set of chime bars or smaller glockenspiel. All the other parts will work with a standard diatonic xylophone or metallophone (with an F# required for "Five gold rings"); you can supplement these instruments with sets of chime bars or any other tuned instruments you have. Untuned instruments can play the rhythm, pulse, just the first beat of the phrase or throughout their section – the groups can decide.

Needless to say, you can include any mixture of other instruments children play in your class, as long as they can play the set of notes needed for their group (a different set of cards is available for B flat players such as clarinets and trumpets, see resources section above – all downloadable from online project page).

3. **Groups work on their section of the song**
   Give out the **colour coded cards** to your groups (PDF downloadable on online project page) and give them a few minutes to work out their part, encouraging them to play and sing it together as a group. Then get each group to play their fragment and check they have it right.

4. **Putting it together**
   Now you can bring up the **colour coded lyric sheet** (PDF downloadable online) on your interactive whiteboard and away you go! If you don't have an interactive whiteboard, maybe someone's job can be to follow the printed out lyric sheet and call out the colours. The whole class can sing the verses, with each gift from my true love to be played on instruments. This may take a while to become fluent, but that is part of the fun!

5. **Performing the song**
   Once you've worked it out together, you might want to play it along to the **piano backing track**, or if you are lucky enough to have a pianist to accompany you, download the **piano part** (PDF downloadable online).

Please note that the cards mix up the tune in two different octaves. That's to make all the individual fragments easiest to read, avoiding ledger lines. If someone with facility on their instrument wants to figure out the whole tune, you can **download the complete version** (written out in a variety of registers to suit different players). In the lesson, though, it's doing the tune in all those little bits that makes it so much fun.

When you've got the song together, you can perform to another class, or record your performance. If you would like to share any of your class's work with the LPO, we would love to see it (see Sharing your work section below).

Taking it further

Write your own version of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*

Make up new lyrics for the carol, as a whole class or in smaller groups. You can change all the Christmas presents on the list, or make it about something other than Christmas. The possibilities are endless. A fun example is the *Sesame Street* version "…and one delicious cookie!" (easily found on Youtube)

Use the cumulative structure as a stimulus for composition

In groups, create your own idea for a Christmas present from your true love, then choose instruments and turn your idea into a rhythm pattern which your group can play. This gives you the building blocks for a whole class rhythm piece using the cumulative structure. This requires a lot of concentration as a class, and the results can be impressive.

Links to numeracy: how many presents did my true love give me in total?

There is some debate about whether the person singing the song receives all the presents every day, or just the present for that numbered day. (That is, do they end up with 12 partridges in pear trees, or just the one?) Either way, the maths is interesting and a nice extension problem for able students at Key Stage 2.

Supposing my true love gave me only the presents for that numbered day. There is a rather elegant solution for the total number of presents:

- If you add the presents for the first and twelfth days, you get 13.
- If you add the presents for the second and eleventh days, you get 13.
- Continuing to do this, you end up with six pairs of days, each totalling 13 presents, giving you a total of 6 x 13 = 78.

Students who like this solution might enjoy this anecdote about the German mathematician Gauss (1777–1855). The story goes that when he was eight, a teacher who wanted a quiet morning gave the whole class the problem of adding up the numbers from 1 to 100. Gauss solved the problem in his head in a matter of seconds using this neat method (in this case, 50 x 101 = 5,050) and marched up to the teacher with the answer chalked on his slate. Gauss went on to make many discoveries and is described as one of the most influential mathematicians of all time.

Sharing your work

We would love to see or hear your performances and see any examples of extension work your class have done. If you would like us to share any of your work, you can send in any audio, images or video to education@lpo.org.uk (please send any large files via wetransfer or other filesharing service rather than direct email).

About the author



Rosamond Savournin started out as a half-hearted psychologist, became a rather more enthusiastic pianist and then finally found her forté (via all sorts of schools, and lots of community music projects, theatre companies and choirs) getting people to sing and make music together. She currently works as a musical director, arranger, teacher, consultant and occasional performer, conducts several youth and adult choirs, and writes music education projects making orchestral and operatic repertoire more accessible to young people.