Mini-Project 103 The First Nowell Tasks

Using a diagram of the 8 notes of a scale, you are going to work out all the notes in the carol. All you have to decide is whether the notes go up or down — it's a very helpful tune. You'll find out that some notes in a scale are more important than others and that knowing this can help you predict which note comes next. You'll practise keeping the beat while you sing the song and play the tune on a keyboard. (You don't need a real one). Finally, you'll use what you've found out about the shape of the tune to write it out in music notation, with a minimum of help.

There are 2 pdfs in addition to this one. You need a hard copy of "Mini-Project 103 The First Nowell Task 12" in order to write out the tune. Apart from that you can cope without printing anything else out if you want to save the ink, though you will need some paper to draw a scale diagram and write the note numbers on in steps 2 to 9.

The bits in italics offer you some extra help if you are finding a step tricky. Most of the questions are to encourage you to have a think and you shouldn't need answers.

"The First Nowell" is a very useful carol when you are starting to get to grips with notation. Not only is there lots of repetition, but it mainly goes by step, up and down a scale.

It's such a repetitive tune that it can be easy to lose track of it and get lost in an endless loop round and round the same notes. If you find yourself at risk of this happening as you focus more on more on bits of the tune, get yourself back on track by listening to a recording. Here's King's College Cambridge nowelling in 2010 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mltWsC8RtM

We don't know who composed "The First Nowell". As far as we know it was published first in the early 19th century and is probably Cornish in origin.

1. Start by singing through the first verse and the chorus which is lines 5 and 6.

The first nowell the angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay,
In fields where they lay akeeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
Born is the king of Israel.

Notice how often there are two notes for a single syllable. Right at the start "The" has two notes, and so does "first". Sing through carefully noting which syllables have two notes. Do any have three? You could circle the syllables with more than one note,

Now sing the first line only – and then sing it to la. That will probably make it easier when you do the next step as it helps you be more aware of all the notes and you don't have to think about the words. But you do have to detach the notes from the words which can be a task in itself if you haven't done much of it.

How many syllables are there in the first line? How many notes do you sing?

2. Here's a diagram representing a scale.	8
It may feel rather childish, but it's really helpful to point at each space as	7
you sing the note – it means you are using your kinaesthetic sense and reinforcing your awareness of up and down in addition to singing and	6
listening.	5
Point to note 1 and sing up a scale – doh ray me far soh lah te doh as	4
you point to each number. It's like that bit in "The Sound of Music".	3
Now sing it to the numbers.	2
Now sing it downwards – 8, 7, 6 etc – keep pointing.	1

3. You are going to sing (to la) the first two lines of the carol, pointing to the numbers on the diagram. It isn't an unreasonable task as the tune goes by step – each note is one higher or one lower than the one before.

The tune starts on note 3 so "la" your way up from note 1. Sing note 3. That's your starting note. Sing the first word (which has two notes). It started on note 3 Which note came next - 4 or 2? Point to the numbers and sing those first two notes. Add the next one. What number is next. Work your way through the whole of the first line.

Write down the numbers here. If you really want to check, the answers to Steps 3-9 are on "Mini-Project 103 The First Nowell Answers". If you've got it correct you should have had to use all the notes, 1 to 8 at least once. And all the numbers will be consecutive.

Practise singing the line to the numbers on the vertical diagram, pointing as you go.

4. Make a more sophisticated version of this note row, one that gives an idea of the relative length of the notes. Here's a graphic representation. It indicates how long the different syllables and notes last and you can see clearly when a syllable has two notes. Write the numbers of the notes into the top row.

The	first	no -	well	the	an -	gels	did	say

5. Did you learn about metre and stress in poetry at school? When we speak, and it's usually most obvious in poetry, we emphasise some syllables. They may be longer or just stronger. The underlined syllables are the stressed ones:

"The first nowell the angels did say"

Look at the diagram. "First", "well" and "say" all last for a relatively long time. "An" is no longer than any other syllables, but you're going to find it joins the other underlined syllables being made important in another way.

6. In a scale, the most important notes are numbers 1 and 8. 8 is really the same as 1 - it's an octave higher.

The next most important note is note 5.

Note 3 is pretty important as well.

Look at the note row you made in Step 4. What do you notice about the notes for the underlined syllables?

Important notes are more likely to:

- be given to stressed syllables
- be longer
- come at the beginnings and ends of phrases and of whole tunes

They are also more likely to be:

- be the turn-round points in the tunes the highest or lowest notes
- be the note that's landed on after a jump it's as though they are more secure

That last bullet point is going to help you with Step 6

7. You're going to work out the note numbers for the second line. That goes by step again, except in just one place.

Here are the words: "was to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay" Underline the stressed syllables – there are four of them.

That will help you, as the important notes rule operates here too.

Sing from the beginning of the carol in order to work out was the note for "was" is. Then carry on, going by step one note up or down up to "fields".

was	to	cer -	tain	poor	shep-	herds	in	fields	where	they	lay

What happens between "fields" and "where"? Is that a step or a jump? Use what you now know about important notes and landing places after jumps to predict which note it is for "where".

Once you've got to "where" the tune goes on by step.

8. Sing the first two lines of the carol to la. Then sing them to the note numbers, pointing to the vertical diagram.

Here are the words for lines 3 and 4:

"In fields where they lay akeeping their sheep

On a cold winter's night that was so deep".

Underline the stressed syllables.

Sing those two lines. What do you notice about them compared with lines 1 and 2? There's a good chance it was obvious to you that the tune for lines 3 and 4 is the same as that for lines 1 and 2. You can write in the note numbers. Since the words are different sometimes some other syllables have two notes. Where does the jump come this time?

in		fields		where	they	lay	a -	keep -	ing	their	sheep
on	а	cold	win -	ter's	night	tha	t	was		so	deep

9. Now it's just the last two lines to work out: "Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, Born is the king of Israel".

Underline the stressed syllables.

Sing from the start of the carol to the words. Once you get to the chorus focus on the tune. Some choruses have quite a different tune from the verse – think of "Ding Dong Merrily on High", where the chorus has all those amazing glorias. What about "The First Nowell"? Is the chorus tune quite different to the verse tune or similar? Very similar? Identical?

If this is difficult for you, follow these steps in italics, taking it bit by bit:

- Focus on the first two Nowells. Sing from the start of the carol and carry on into those two Nowells then stop. Notice that they have the same tune as the start of line 1 (and line 3)
- Focus on the last line now: born is the king of Israel. If you can't sing that straight off, start again from the beginning and la yourself all the way through then sing the last line to its words. Notice the tune is the same as for line 2 (and line 4) but without the first two notes. It's the phrase with the jump
- That just leaves the second pair of Nowells. They have a different tune at last, there is some variety.

Write in the numbers for the notes for the first two Nowells. That's familiar territory. When you come to nowells 3 and 4, the tune changes. The note for the start of the third nowell follows the rule of important notes, so you can predict which note it is.

From then on the notes almost always go by step – there is just one repeated note.

The tune for the second half of the line deviates from the pattern in the rest of the carol. A stressed syllable doesn't have an important note. This helps give a bit of contrast however small and freshens up your ear for the last line – which you have heard before.

| No - | well, |
|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|

You've found that the tune for the last line is the same as for lines 2 and 4 with one difference. The first two notes aren't there, because the line of words starts with a stressed syllable. The first note of the line is note 8. Write in the note numbers.

born	is	the	king	of	ls -	ra -	el.

The time for the two missing notes at the start of the last line is taken up by the time for the last syllable of the previous line. That's why the diagram had been extended. We don't tend to notice it when we are singing, because we're usually taking a good breath before "born". You'll check this out in the next step.

Now you've worked out the note numbers for the whole tune, there are three things to do, developing your skills.

10. Practise being able to perform the beat while you sing "The First Nowell". The tune is in three time. Like a waltz.

There's a useful sitting down slap and clap pattern for three time. On **1** you slap your knees and on **2** and **3** you clap. Slap, clap, cl

Notice how the slap comes when the stressed syllables start - "born" "king" "Is" "el".

Think about the words for the first line – look at them if you need. The first stressed syllable is "first", so you'll need a slap for that. The two notes for "The" come on a clap just before the slap. A lot of tunes do this, start before a stressed syllable / note.

In music notation stressed notes come straight after bar lines. Or, the other way round, the first note in a bar is a strong note. The beat before the bar line is weak. It's called the **up beat** perhaps because conductors do a downwards motion at the start of a bar on the strong beat and an upwards one on the last beat.

So "The First Nowell" starts at the end of a bar on the up beat. The technical term for the bit that comes before the first strong beat is an **anacrusis**.

What this means for performing the beat in the song is that you must be clapping on "The", ready to slap on "first".

Give yourself an introduction of nearly 4 sets of slap clap clap and then carry on

											The	first		no -	well		the
S	С	С	S	С	С	S	С	С	S	С	С	S	С	С	S	С	С

You may find it really easy to keep the slap clap clap going while you sing the carol. That's great. You don't need to practise it. If you don't find it easy it would help your musical skill development to work on it. Practise each line separately until you can do it – it's mainly a co-ordination matter. Notice how the note for the last "well" in line 5 takes up 3 beats,

Lines 1-5 start on the upbeat. Line 6 starts on a strong beat – the slap.

11. Play the tune on a keyboard

You can do this on a real or virtual keyboard. Here's a straightforward one on line https://www.musicca.com/piano

The 8 notes from lowest to highest are C D E F G A B C. You don't need any of the black notes. Use your knowledge of the note numbers to work out which note to start on, and then play the tune. You know where it goes by step, up or down, jumps or stays the same.

12. Write the tune out in music notation (with some help)

This task in on the pdf headed "Mini-Project 103 The First Nowell Task 12". You can check what you've done on "Mini-Project 103 The First Nowell Answers".