

9 Sumer is icumen in

RESOURCES ▶ ▶

■ You need to know

This wonderful song was first written down by a monk at Reading Abbey in the 13th century, and no wonder it has survived so long. It is a lusty and exuberant celebration of summer's arrival; 'icumen' is equivalent to the German 'gekommen' and means 'has arrived' rather than 'is on its way'. It is an exciting round that goes into many parts, supported by an ostinato that is also a canon. The words are Middle English, and the term 'sumer' covered a longer period than our summer, starting in mid-spring. There are many printed versions of this song showing numerous subtle variations in the melody, and spelling and pronunciation of the words, and scholars are divided about some of the real meanings! No modern translation can really do it justice, but a general understanding of the words is necessary to give a performance of real vigour. They mean:

Summer has arrived! Sing loudly 'cuckoo'. Seeds grow and meadows wave their blowing grasses. The ewe goes bleating after the lamb, the cow goes lowing after her calf. The bullock prances, the buck paws at the ground. Merrily sing 'cuckoo'. Cuckoo, cuckoo, well you sing 'cuckoo', and never stop singing 'cuckoo'.

■ Warming up

- Sing the scale exercises on page 34. Do them in several keys to open up and stretch the voices.

■ Learning

- Teach this a phrase at a time in any comfortable key; D or Eb are good. Be patient; it may take a while, as many of the phrases are similar in shape. Use notation if necessary.
- Next tackle the ostinato pattern and try singing it as a canon, two bars apart.
- Go back to singing the melody until really confident, then add the ostinato with a few voices.
- When first attempting the melody in canon, try it in two parts only, with the second group of singers entering at *. Gradually build up the parts as the singers' confidence increases, each new part entering when the previous one reaches *.

- Eventually the canon entries should start every two bars rather than every four; it's possible to have up to twelve parts singing at once. Add the ostinato as a two-part canon to create a fourteen-part piece!
- If some singers find the whole song too difficult, they can choose any two- or four-bar phrase and keep repeating it like an extra ostinato.

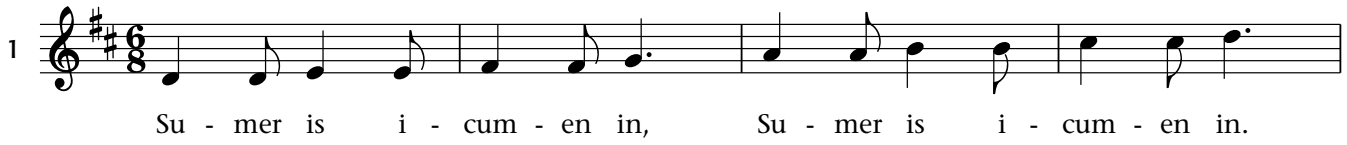
■ Listen out

- Keep the tempo steady but brisk; take care that the melisma for 'in' in bar 2 doesn't rush. If this is proving a problem, practise singing all the notes in the bar to 'na' until the rhythm is really secure.
- Only attempt the number of parts for which you have confident singers, and keep the groups a reasonable size.
- Bear in mind that the change from unison singing into canon can sound and feel weak or exposed. Prepare those singing the first part so that they sing boldly.

■ Creating a performance

- You can be totally flexible about this. The principle is to announce the song, then branch off into parts, featuring the ostinato at some stage. The number of parts and times through depends on the forces available. A suggested structure is:
 - 1: unison
 - 2: lower voices singing the ostinato, while upper voices sing the melody in two parts
 - 3: ostinato in canon and upper voices in four or more parts, entering every two bars. Keep the ostinato going in canon as each melody part drops out
 - 4: finish on an open 5th by sustaining the first beat of the ostinato bars 2 and 4
- Try dividing your singers into four groups by birthdays! This way they can sing mixed up, which makes for a good blend, and more independent singing.
- Teach the ostinato—or any phrase, such as bars 9–10 or 17–18—to the audience so that they can join in the fun and be applauded by the choir!

Warm ups

1 



2 