

Male

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Femme



Noye's Fludde

Introductory pack

Introduction

Why *Noye's Fludde*?

Britten's community opera *Noye's Fludde* remains one of his most famous and engaging works. With its familiar story, scope for elaborate costumes, hummable tunes and multiple parts of musical participation at different levels, this piece has something for everyone!

Britten wrote *Noye's Fludde* for people - to enjoy planning, rehearsing, performing and generally making music together. Central to Britten's musical ethos was his desire to have children take part on an equal footing with seasoned music professionals. As a result this opera contains a wide range of opportunities for children and amateurs (as well as the audience) to participate as fully integrated members of the cast that drive the drama forward.

Noye's Fludde is dramatic, joyous, surprising and, at times, humourous. It remains a moving experience for both performer and audience and the sight and sound of amateurs, children and professionals performing together realises one of Britten's most important and entrancing musical ideals.

In this pack

This pack contains background information on *Noye's Fludde*. It gives details on Britten, when the piece was written, what the story is and who the characters are. It also provides a window into the rich collections relating to the opera, held by the Britten-Pears Foundation at The Red House in Aldeburgh. These items tell the whole story of *Noye's Fludde* from Britten's initial thoughts through to the first production and continuing to its life today.

Key musical moments are highlighted to allow detailed listening and engagement with the music. Unfamiliar terminology is explained and questions are posed that give focus to discussion based on the opera. There are also ideas of things to do in the classroom that relate to the ethos and nature of *Noye's Fludde* itself. If you are planning on taking part in a performance this pack provides valuable information to better understand the context of the piece and how it all fits together.



Benjamin Britten



Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft in 1913. After showing early musical promise he embarked on piano and viola lessons and began to compose his own music. At first he was more concerned with writing notes down rather than the sound they made but, with work and study, he began to create highly original pieces. His talent enabled him to take lessons with the noted composer, Frank Bridge, when still at school. He developed both his own unique style and personal philosophy about life and music as a large result of Bridge's teaching.

During the 1930s Britten met influential figures in the UK creative world who, like him, were left-wing leaning pacifists. He worked on documentary films with the poet W.H. Auden before travelling to America in 1939 with his life partner, the singer Peter Pears.



Feeling homesick Britten returned to Suffolk in 1942 (where he remained for the rest of his life) and wrote the work that made his name internationally and established him as a major force in music, the opera *Peter Grimes*. A string of major works followed that only enhanced his reputation.

Britten's output is remarkable for its range and breadth. As well as writing large scale works like operas for some of the world's leading venues he also created intimate works for amateurs and children that were performed in community settings in his own native Suffolk. Britten believed in music as a social tool and wanted his music to be useful to people. He was passionately interested in encouraging music-making across all ages and believed that the role of the artist should be firmly rooted in their own community and should serve it.

After a period of poor health Britten died at his home in Aldeburgh, Suffolk in 1976; honoured and respected throughout the world.

Britten's legacy lives on in the work of the Britten-Pears Foundation and Aldeburgh Music and his music has never been appreciated by a wider audience than today. His music is accessible, fun and often surprising and yet remains multi-faceted enough to engage, enthrall and inspire.





What is it?

Noye's Fludde is a community opera written by Britten in 1957/58. Based on the story of Noah's Ark the opera combines professional performers with large numbers of children who perform both in the orchestra and on-stage.

What was Britten doing at the time?

Britten was at the height of his career in the late 1950s after a string of landmark operas like *Peter Grimes* (1945), *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954). During the 1950s Britten undertook a world tour and the music he encountered abroad (such as the Balinese Gamelan) made a lasting impression on his music and he began experimenting with new ideas. In 1957 he moved from his house on Aldeburgh seafront to the seclusion of The Red House next to the golf course - he wrote *Noye's Fludde* here.

Chester Miracle Play

Noye's Fludde is a musical setting of one of the Chester Miracle Plays. The original Aldeburgh Festival programme gives the following details on the text on which the opera is based:

The Chester Miracle plays were written in the fourteenth century by ordinary people for performance by the craftsmen and tradesmen and their families. Each Guild chose one play from the cycle and acted it on a cart, called a 'pageant'.. Effects and miracles were readily improvised for the occasion and the scenic devices, although carefully



worked out, had to be extremely simple. This essentially unsophisticated style of presentation would be clearly out of place in the artificial world of theatre: a much closer relationship with the audience is needed and Noye's Fludde in this musical version is intended for the same style of presentation - although not necessarily on a cart!

[Aldeburgh Festival Book 1958]

How does Britten make it 'for children'?

Apart from their involvement as the masked chorus of animals on-stage Britten uses children in a variety of roles in the orchestra. To cater for the fact that children may be at different levels in their instrumental abilities, Britten wrote a whole series of different parts that take this into account. For instance the violin parts range from beginner level (just open strings), intermediate (staying in one position) to more advanced (using multiple positions and more complex rhythms). The same is true of the recorder and percussion parts. He invented the 'slung mugs' to depict rainfall and this features vividly throughout. At no time is one part given priority over another and all ability groups are a fully integrated part of the final orchestral and vocal texture.



The characters

Noye's Fludde contains few major characters and instead focuses on a large ensemble of children who play the animals on the ark. The main parts of Noye and his wife are performed by professional singers but the rest can be played by amateurs and children. Britten cleverly creates the parts so that everyone has something interesting to do.

The voice of God is an offstage character who speaks to Noye and tells him about his plan to send a 'fludde' as he believes that the world has turned evil and wants to start afresh.

Noye is told by God that a flood is due and he has been chosen to build a 'shippe' to save his family and the animals. He calls on his sons and their wives to help him.

Mrs. Noye is Noye's wife who initially helps to build the ark but changes her mind about getting on to the boat when her friends start to mock the project and she doesn't want to see them drown.

Sem, Ham and Jeffett are Noyes sons who come to help him build the ark along with their respective wives; **Mrs. Sem, Mrs. Hem and Mrs. Jaffett**.

Mrs. Noye's gossips are close friends of Mrs Noye who mock Mr Noye's attempts to build an ark and try to persuade their friend not to board the ship. They perish in the flood along with all other living things.

There are **49 species of animal** referred to in the libretto, which are split into 7 groups:

- Group 1 – Lions, Leopards, Horses, Oxen, Swine, Goats and Sheep
- Group 2 – Camels, Asses, Buck and Doe
- Group 3 – Dogs, Otters, Foxes, Polecats and Hares
- Group 4 – Bears, Wolves, Monkeys, Squirrels and Ferrets
- Group 5 – Cats, Rats and Mice
- Group 6 –Owls, Bittern, Peacocks, Redshanks, Ravens, and Cocks& Hen
- Group 7 – Herons, Kites, Cuckoos, Curlews, Doves, and Duck & Drake

The **congregation** (audience) also play a part in the action. They join in with the hymn-tunes throughout the opera which helps give the piece its community feel.





The story

In brief

God destroys the earth and everything on it in a huge flood. Noye and his family are chosen to be the only survivors and they build an ark to ride out the flood. They take a pair of each animal on the planet with them so they can start the world over again.

Expanded

Noye's Fludde tells the biblical story of Noah's ark in which God instructs Noye to build an ark to save him and his family from a catastrophic flood, which will be sent to destroy the world ridding it of all evil beings. Noye builds the ark with the help of his family and saves himself, along with a pair of each of the world's animals. Mrs Noye doesn't want to get on the ark as it means leaving her friends to drown. She is saved by her sons who persuade her to get on board. God sends the flood and wipes out all living things left on the earth. After forty days and forty nights, the rain subsides and the earth begins to dry out. A dove leaves the ark to find dry land and returns with the branch of an olive tree. This is seen as a sign of peace and new beginnings. God tells Noye that he will never send another flood and as a sign of his promise, a rainbow appears in the skies above the ark.

Main events

- God tells Noye that he's going to destroy the earth and that he and his family are to be saved
- Noye learns that he must build an ark
- Noye's family are sceptical but try to support the building project
- Mrs Noye dithers about getting into the ark and has to be persuaded in
- A procession of animals arrives
- The storm begins and the ark sets sail
- After the storm ends Noye sends out two birds to look for dry land. The dove returns with an olive branch
- The family and animals rejoice and God sends a rainbow



The first performance

The first performance of *Noye's Fludde* was held on 18 June 1958 in Orford Church, Suffolk as part of the 11th Aldeburgh Festival.



The cast

The cast consisted of professional singers that Britten had worked with many times before like Owen Brannigan, who played Noye. The chorus of animals came from schools in Suffolk and consisted of about 68 children!

The orchestra

Like the cast the instrumentalists featured a small professional contingent as well as a huge army of Suffolk school children playing string instruments, recorders, percussion, bugles and handbells.

The venue

St Bartholomew's Church in Orford was built between 1170 and 1220 and is an excellent example of an East Anglian medieval church. The wide nave and excellent acoustics made it a favourite venue for the Aldeburgh Festival. *Noye's Fludde*

was the first of four works Britten wrote specifically for this space.

Costumes

The first costumes which included the distinctive animal masks were designed by Ceri Richards who was a famous painter and print-maker.

Director

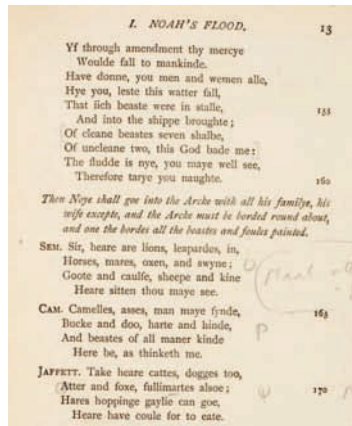
The first director was Colin Graham. After *Noye's Fludde* Graham went on to direct most of Britten's later stage works. He kept the production style as simple as possible in the manner of the original medieval miracle plays.

Conductor

The young Charles Mackerras conducted the first production. He worked for Britten frequently at this time before moving on to become a world famous conductor.



The material



The Britten–Pears Foundation houses an archive that contains a huge array of items relating to *Noye's Fludde*. A more detailed look at the unique items can be seen at www.brittenpears.org in the *Noye's Fludde* section. Archive items provide a fascinating window into the opera and how it was written and performed.

Composition draft

Britten's original manuscript of *Noye's Fludde* is displayed in the new exhibition at The Red House. After thinking of his ideas on long walks he returned home and wrote them down on manuscript paper. His handwriting is very clear and you can see how the dramatic and musical ideas were linked even at this early stage.

Orchestral score

After writing the whole piece out on a few musical lines that gave all the vocal parts and accompaniment, Britten set about creating a score with all the instrumental parts written out. You can see all the lines he wrote for children, amateurs and professionals and how they all have different complexities. Looking at a composer's original manuscript gives an inspiring insight into their methods.

The text

Britten's own copy of the Chester Miracle plays contain all his annotations about how to construct his musical setting. You can see which bits he crosses out or re-orders and how this made it into the final opera providing a look at how adaptations are made.

Programmes

The collection contains copies of the programmes for the first performances in 1958 as well as many subsequent ones. You can see the huge variety of different productions and how *Noye's Fludde* has travelled around the world. A recent production actually took part in a real zoo!

Costume designs

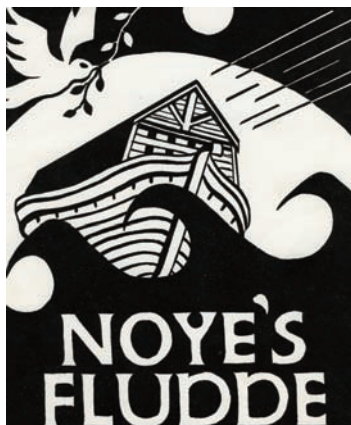
Ceri Richards beautifully painted original designs are on display in an exhibition. They show the breadth of costumes that had to be made for the large number of performers and how a designer has to consider both the wearer themselves and how they'll appear to the audience.

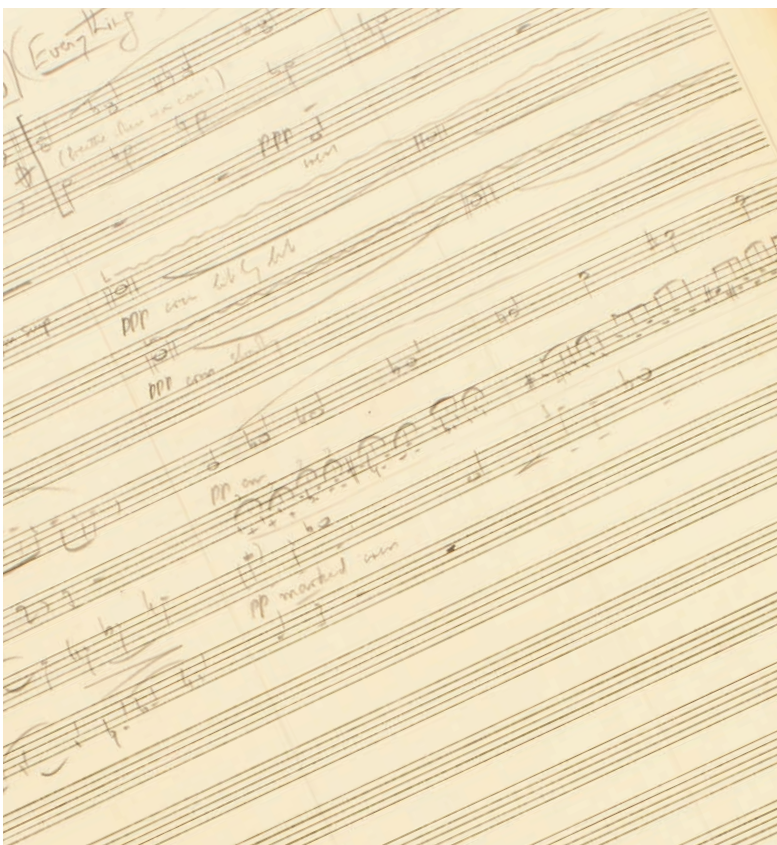
Headresses

Many of the actual headresses used in the first performances are still in the collections and on display. They are designed so that they sit atop the head yet leave the face totally visible for the purposes of singing and smiling at the audience! The range of animals features farmyard chickens and Suffolk birds through to exotic pandas and camels.

Demo recording

To help out the schools who were involved in the first performances and so they could hear the whole piece a demo tape was made. Colin Graham, the original director, Peter Pears, Britten's partner and Imogen Holst, Britten's music assistant, gathered round Britten on the piano at home to record the whole opera. As well as a unique record of Britten playing the score it is also wonderful to hear how much fun they seem to be having!





Things to listen out for



Noye's Fludde contains nearly 50 minutes of music. The music listed below are some of the key moments that will help to focus the listening. Britten often used a series of ideas that he then developed throughout a whole piece. A familiarity with the highlights listed and the techniques used will help young listeners navigate throughout the whole work.

1 – Kyrie Eleison (which means ‘Lord, have mercy’ in Latin) is sung by each of the groups of animals as they board the ark. Each time the theme is repeated it is sung in the style of each animal from low growling bears to squeaking cats and mice. It is finally sung by Noye and the children as they, themselves, get on the great ship. Listen to how Britten uses a simple and short phrase to build up the tension over time through repetition. [Track 5](#).

2 – The storm is heard with a heavy use of percussive instruments such as timpani rolls, cymbals and snare drums which are used to represent the sound of thunder and crashing waves. The recorders and strings play scalic passages moving up and down to mimic the boat rocking from side to side. Think about how the music starts gradually and build up the layers of sound (texture) as the storm takes hold. [Track 7](#).

3 – The well-known hymn, ‘Eternal Father strong to save’ is heard from out of the storm, sung by the whole cast with the congregation joining in on the second verse. They pray to God to keep them safe - ‘O hear us when we cry to thee, for those in peril on the sea.’ What effect does having the audience join in at this moment have on the drama? [Track 7](#)

4 – A graceful waltz is heard as the dove leaves the ark and flies away in search of dry land. This is a joyful moment in the music and symbolises a new peaceful world. The solo recorder part (played by a professional) uses a technique called ‘flutter tonguing’ which sounds like the ‘coo’ of a dove. The string instruments all play with mutes on which makes them sound distant and peaceful. [Track 8](#).

5 – ‘Slung mugs’ is an instrument created by Britten for use in this work. It consists of a number of mugs of varying sizes and pitch, tied onto a length of string and hit with beaters. They have a very unique percussive sound that suggests raindrops and can be heard as the storm begins. Like much of the other music in *Noye's Fludde* the slung mugs play repeated patterns many times (ostinato) which keeps the part playable by children by also still provides dramatic and musical interest. [Track 7](#).

All track listings are taken from the original recording of the opera made in 1961 and conducted by Norman Del Mar.
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Things to talk about



Examining or performing an opera will generate lots of questions. Here are some suggestions of things to discuss in order to further engage with the work or to explore new themes.

Story

Knowing what you do about Britten, why do you think this story appealed to him?

What things need to be considered when making an adaptation of an existing text?

To what extent is *Noye's Fludde* a successful retelling of a Biblical story?

Music

How does the music cater for the varying abilities?

Can you describe (using the terms 'crescendo', 'diminuendo' and 'ostinato') how Britten builds up tension in the storm sequence?

How successful is the music in depicting the sounds of a storm and the rocking motion of a large ship? Why?

Recorders and bugles were common instruments in schools in the 1950s. Does this pose any problems now?

Performance

Do you think Britten was successful in creating a score that is enjoyable for professional performers

as well as amateurs and children? Why?

What challenges are faced by such a number of performers when performing in this opera? How could these be solved or made easier?

Context

In what ways does Britten manage to incorporate a historical text with a 20th century musical score?

To what extent do you think this is successful? Why?

We live in a less religious time today. Do you think this impacts how effective *Noye's Fludde* is?

How important do you think it is to see resources from the original staging of the opera, when recreating it nowadays?

What effect might this have on modern performances of the work?



Things to do

The below activities give suggestions of projects to explore in the classroom that will provide context and integrated understanding to a study of *Noye's Fludde*.

Each suggestion is linked to various curriculum areas and can be expanded as is appropriate.



1. Making instruments

Resources:

Art Supplies
Recycled materials

National Curriculum links:

Art and design
Music

Britten used an instrument called 'Slung Mugs' in the music of *Noye's Fludde*. It is a handmade instrument and consisted of a number of mugs of varying sizes and pitch, tied on a length of string and hit with beaters. Making simple percussive instruments from recycled materials; get children to think about how they might be able to make an instrument which can play a variety of pitches by changing the length of a tube, or using different materials. Encourage the children to think about what the instrument sounds like and what it could be used to represent.

2. Soundscaping

Resources:

Anything found in the environment
Recording equipment

National Curriculum links:

Geography (natural environments)
Music
Technology

Part of the music in *Noye's Fludde* was composed to create the feeling of a storm. Soundscaping involves using or recreating naturally occurring sounds and bringing them together to make an immersive sound environment.



Thinking about how sounds work together and different ways of recreating sounds; children should record what they hear in their natural environment, both inside and outside the classroom. They should be encouraged to think about what sounds they might have heard if they were on-board the ark and think of ways to recreate and record a similar sound environment.

3. Creative writing

Resources:

Copy of Hugh Chesterman's poem

National Curriculum links:

Literacy
Music

Hugh Chesterman wrote a poem about Noah's ark from the perspective of a rabbit on-board the ship. The poem, called; Noah and the Rabbit, is about how the rabbit feels about being trapped on a boat with no land left to enjoy. Children should be read the poem and then encouraged to take the perspective of one of the animals on the ark in order to write their own short poem, how do they feel about their situation? What is it like to live there?

4. Understanding medieval text

Resources:

Worksheet listing animals in the text

National Curriculum links:

Literature
Language

Noye's Fludde's text is taken from a Chester Miracle play and is written in Medieval English. Although the spellings of words are very different, the pronunciation of the text, in its' musical context, should be in modern English. Encouraging children to understand where their language originated and how it has evolved, they should be given a list of the animals names as they appear in the original text and asked to translate the animal names into modern English.





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