

**Jane Werry** is a specialist leader in education, and Director of Music at Hayes School in Bromley. She is co-author of *Being a Head of Music: A Survival Guide*, a Musical Futures Champion Teacher, and a regular contributor to *Music Teacher* resources.

by Jane Werry

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

This wide-ranging area of study is likely to have massive appeal to teachers and students alike, since it contains a generous range of very accessible and enjoyable music. The featured artists are likely to be a mixture of familiar names and less familiar musicians, providing an easy way in as well as somewhere to go.

This resource aims to provide a structure for tackling the AoS, with advice on ways of presenting information to students and some ideas as to where to find useful teaching materials.

---

## PROVIDING AN OVERVIEW OF THE NAMED ARTISTS

---

It's helpful to give students the bigger picture before zooming in on musical specifics, especially when not all the named artists are likely to be familiar. This includes providing some context for each artist, to put them into the historical and stylistic timeline of popular music.

How you approach this depends on the time you have available, the size of your class, and your assessment of their prior knowledge and research skills. Sometimes this boils down to the extent to which students have already been trained to do high-quality research: if this has not previously taken place, it's unlikely that you will have time to do this in your lessons, and you may be disappointed with what comes back from research tasks. It may, therefore, be more time-effective to cover much of this via direct instruction, and leave a few musical details for students to figure out for themselves aurally.

This part of the teaching process is important in modelling to students how a song should be analysed. It's only by taking them through this in a detailed, step-by-step fashion to start with that they will ultimately be able to analyse pieces more independently later on.

Of course, you may have done this through your work on AoS1, so students might only need a couple of exemplars as to how to approach a pop song before they feel confident to have a go by themselves. You will need to feel your way in this respect, and adjust your level of support as necessary depending on their experience, abilities and confidence.

Here's a complete overview, any sections of which could be omitted for students to fill in after their own research:

Artist	When/where active	Styles	Representative song	Musical features
Stevie Wonder	USA, 1961-present. Many of his classic songs are from the 1970s.	Soul, funk, pop	'Superstition'	Based on a groove and riffs that provide momentum and drive. Distinctive use of clavinet and horn riffs. Chord extensions include Eb <sup>7(#9)</sup> which features both major and minor 3rds. Pentatonic scale used to create riffs and melodies. Faster harmonic pace in the chorus.
Joni Mitchell	USA, 1964-2007. Classic period late 1960s and early 1970s.	Folk, rock, jazz, pop	'Big Yellow Taxi'	Acoustic guitar with open E tuning. Use of primary chords, I, IV and V, with extensions (added 6ths, 7ths, bare 5th chords). Folk-style vocals extending into upper and lower registers.
Muse	UK, 2001-present	Alternative/progressive rock	'Supermassive Black Hole'	Diverse influences on display include disco, funk and R&B. Falsetto vocals and distorted guitar are prominent timbres. Harmony includes 'blue' notes such as the flattened 5th, and use of tonic pedals.
Daft Punk	France, 1997-present	Electronica, dance, French house	'Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger'	Use of sample of the song 'Cola Bottle Baby', use of vocoder effects or a talkbox synth to create a robotic vocal sound (Daft Punk are secretive about how this sound is actually produced). Wide vocal range made possible by the synth processing on the voice. Adventurous and sometimes tonally ambiguous harmony.
Beyoncé	USA, 2003-present (as solo artist)	Contemporary R&B	'Listen'	Standard pop line-up with added strings. Emotional, power-ballad vocal delivery covering a wide range of pitch and dynamics and featuring riffing (melisma).
Labrinth	UK, 2009-present	Contemporary R&B, hip hop	'Jealous'	Piano ballad with Hammond organ and synth strings to allow for emotional build-up and a nostalgic timbre. Accompaniment sounds simple but features added-note chords, unexpected changes of key, and hints at modality.

There are detailed analyses of all these songs in the Rhinegold study guide.

### SCORES OR NO SCORES?

You'll need to decide how you're going to approach each song, and what, if any, visual material you might use with students. It will rarely be hugely useful to use a fully notated version of any of these songs (or even a piano/vocal/guitar reduction), unless you're planning to have students actually perform from it – and even then, you'll need to consider the types of musicians you have in your class as to whether a lead sheet, or just lyrics and chords, would actually be better for their musical development, as they will need to use some aural skills to realise the song.

It might be useful to have notation for particular important features of songs – riffs, rhythms or melodies – that can be used to illustrate particular points in Section C essays. There are times when writing a quick musical quotation can actually save time writing lots of words that do not adequately describe the music. However, even when this is the case, it could be a possibility to use these as dictation practice, getting students to home in on a particular musical feature and notate it as part of their preparation for Section A of the exam, before adding the quotation to their stock of examples to be used in essays. Likewise, by not providing full notation, students can be encouraged to work out other musical features such as vocal range or chord progressions by working aurally, which will assist them with their aural skills.

As a follow-up from this introduction, students could explore another song from each artist to find similarities and differences. These could be from the list of suggested listening, or you could allow students to be freer in their choices. Developing an awareness of typicality for each artist – what is usual for them, and being able to spot anomalies where they occur – is an important part of working towards success in this Area of Study.

Being very definite about the language that students will need to use in this Area of Study is also a useful thing to introduce right from the start. The AQA specification is extremely helpful in providing vocabulary lists for each AoS divided by element, which can be expanded into an AoS-specific glossary as a helpful resource for students to keep to hand.

Element	Term	Definition
Melody	Riff	A short melody that repeats. Not to be confused with riffing.
	Pitch bend	When a note is bent upwards or downwards in pitch, either by a vocalist or on an instrument such as guitar, saxophone or synth.
	Melisma, syllabic	Melisma = more than one note on a syllable. Syllabic = one note to each syllable.
	Riffing	A highly embellished, melismatic way of singing. Not to be confused with riff.
	Hook	The catchy part of a song, often heard multiple times in the chorus.
	Slide	In classical music, a portamento: gliding between two notes with no discernible discrete pitches in between.
	Glissando	A slide between two notes that is actually a very fast scale: there are discrete pitches heard, albeit briefly.
	Ostinato	The same as a riff: a short melody that repeats.
	Blue note	A chromatic note from outside the scale: often a flattened 5th or (in a major key) flat 3rd. Makes the music sound bluesy.
Harmony	Power chords	On guitar, bare 5th chords with no 3rd – and therefore not major or minor.
	Sus4 chords	A chord with no 3rd, but with a ‘suspended’ 4th. Feels like it wants to resolve with the 4th falling to a 3rd – whether or not this happens is always a point of interest.
	Chord extensions: secondary 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th	Added notes in chords: the number denotes the interval above the root. Sometimes 13ths are written as 6ths, as it makes the chord symbol easier for the musician to read. Chord extensions are much more prevalent in some styles than in others.
	Other complex chords: diminished etc	A diminished triad is made of two minor 3rds, and a diminished 7th chord from three minor 3rds. A half-diminished chord has two minor 3rds and then a major 3rd at the top. Whenever there are two minor 3rds, a tritone is created between the outer notes: look to see how these notes resolve in the next chord.
	Chord symbols	Am, B7 etc. A small ‘m’ always denotes a minor chord: if there is no ‘m’ then the chord is major. A number denotes the interval above the root. A sharp, flat, or natural sign affects the number it precedes.
	Pedal note	A held note in the bass, above which the harmony changes. Usually the tonic or dominant, but always worth looking at which degree of the scale is used. If the pedal note is at the top of the texture, it is an inverted pedal.
Tonality	Modes, eg Dorian, Lydian, etc	<p>Collections of notes used to create melodies and harmonies. Major and minor are really just two of the modes, but the term ‘modal’ is applied to music that uses other modes. The various sequences of tones and semitones in each mode is often identified using the white notes of a keyboard. Here is a summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ionian: C-C (major)</li> <li>• Dorian: D-D</li> <li>• Phrygian: E-E</li> <li>• Lydian: F-F</li> <li>• Mixolydian: G-G</li> <li>• Aeolian: A-A (natural minor)</li> <li>• Locrian: B-B</li> </ul> <p>Of course, they might use any note as the tonic; for example, ‘B Dorian’ is the Dorian mode with B as its tonic. The most common modes used in pop music are Dorian and Mixolydian.</p>
	Pentatonic	A five-note scale common in folk music and blues. Major pentatonic has the intervals tone-tone-min 3rd-tone (ie CDEGA) and minor pentatonic has min 3rd-tone-tone-min 3rd (i.e. ACDEG). Minor pentatonic is the basis for the blues scale.
	Blues scale	A minor pentatonic scale with an added flattened 5th. Other versions of the blues scale, with additional notes, also exist.



Element	Term	Definition
<b>Structure</b>	Intro/outro	Introduction and coda.
	Middle eight	The contrasting section in a song, often heard after the second chorus, and featuring new melody/chord progression. Often eight bars long.
	Bridge	An ambiguous term. Sometimes used interchangeably with middle eight, but sometimes used to describe a section that links the verse and chorus.
	Breakdown	Where the texture of a song thins out, either to allow for instrumental solos or a build-up.
	Verse	The first main section of a song after the introduction. Usually the melody and chord progression of the verse are repeated later on with different lyrics, and perhaps different texture and instrumentation.
	Chorus	The main section of the song, usually heard after each verse, and often containing a hook and/or the title lyrics.
	Instrumental	A section where the singer stops and the main focus is on an instrumental solo.
	Break	A short solo, often improvised.
	Drum fill	At the end of a phrase, the drummer adds a more complex rhythm to add interest.
<b>Sonority (timbre)</b>	Effects (FX) eg reverb, panning	Reverb (reverberation) adds a sense of space to a sound. Panning is the left-right placing of a sound within the stereo field: ie the proportion of sound coming out of each speaker.
	Standard instrument types, eg electric guitar, synthesisers	A standard pop line-up consists of drum kit, bass guitar, lead guitar (which is usually electric), rhythm guitar (which can be electric or acoustic), and vocals. Synthesisers are electronic keyboards that allow the player to create sonorities from scratch or change existing sounds by manipulating the waveform.
	Drum kit components and techniques, eg rim shot	A standard drum kit consists of bass/kick drum, snare drum, up to three tom-toms, hi-hat, ride, and crash cymbals. Hi-hats are usually played in combinations of open and closed positions. Drummers may also use stick techniques such as rolls, flams (a grace note before the main note), and rim shots (where the stick hits the head and rim of the snare drum simultaneously).
	Vocal timbres, eg falsetto, belt, rap	Falsetto is a male vocal timbre which goes above the 'break' right into the soprano register. Belt singing is usually a female timbre, where the timbres of upper and lower registers are mixed to create the impression that the lower register is being pushed to a higher pitch to create heightened emotion.
	Specific instrumental techniques, eg slap bass	Slap bass is when the string is played by hitting it with the thumb, and allowed to bounce on the frets, creating a very percussive sound.
	Specific instrumental effects, eg distortion	Distortion and overdrive are ways of processing a guitar sound to make it sound gritty and dirty.
	<b>Texture</b>	Looping
Layering		Adding layers of sound, either the same as each other or different, using technology or live performance.
A cappella		Using only voices and no instruments.
<b>Tempo, metre and rhythm</b>	bpm (beats per minute)	A common way of describing tempo accurately: the number of beats heard per minute.
	mm (metronome marking)	The same as bpm, although less commonly used.
	Groove	The rhythmic feel of a piece, often created by a combination of riffs and a drumbeat.
	Backbeat	An emphasis on the 2nd and 4th beats of the bar. Often accented on the snare drum.
	Four on the floor	When the drummer plays every crotchet beat on the kick drum.
	Irregular metre	Unusual time signatures, usually 5/8 or 7/8.
	Harmonic rhythm	How often the chords change.
<b>Dynamics and articulation</b>	Fade in/fade out	Gradually increasing or decreasing the volume of the audio signal. Accomplished by audio engineers rather than musicians.

As with the overview, there are different ways that you could use this. One approach would be to leave the definitions blank and ask students to fill them in as they encounter them in the songs, or as a research homework. Another would be to give the complete glossary to students from the start, and then expect that they use the terminology in their work on the songs. Sections of it could also be set for a knowledge recall homework, with a test next lesson. The glossary could also be used to help students structure any song analyses that they are attempting by themselves.

## INVESTIGATING THE ELEMENTS

With any area of study, there are choices to make about the order in which to tackle the content. It would be perfectly possible to start with Stevie Wonder and work through each artist in turn. However, having given students an overview of the named artists in AoS2, and ensured that they have a good understanding of the vocabulary that they will need to describe the music accurately, it could be a good idea to consider the music one element at a time. Doing it this way round will consolidate students' understanding of the elements, and also give them the information they need in a format that will be useful for writing section C essays.

### Melody

Melody is almost inextricably linked with rhythm and tonality, and it would be unlikely for an essay to focus on melody alone. These are some of the examples of interesting melodic features in the suggested listening:

Feature	Song	Details
Pentatonic melody	'Superstition'	Vocal and instrumental melodies are predominantly E flat minor pentatonic.
Melisma	'For Once in My Life'	Vocal melody has a mixture of syllabic and melisma. Melisma usually used to emphasise particular words or to embellish the end of a phrase.
	'A Case Of You'	
	'Listen'	
Tessitura	'Get Lucky'	A higher tessitura is used in the chorus than it is in the verse,
	'Listen'	
	'Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger'	The tessitura of the melody changes wildly with octave displacement made possible through the use of technology,
	'Superstition'	A particularly high note is used as the 'money note' at the climax of the song in the bridge'
Chromatic inflection	'Supermassive Black Hole'	Flattened 5th in guitar riff in the intro gives a bluesy sound. The vocal line of the verse also includes 'blue' notes.
Hook	'Around the World'	Even in the shorter radio edit, the title hook is heard 80 times in the song. Indeed, the whole song is structured around this, always stopping just before the repetition gets too much.
	'Superstition'	The song's style is completely based on its riffs, each of which is a hook in its own way: it is the combination of these that makes the song irresistibly catchy.
	'Big Yellow Taxi'	The hook 'paved paradise, put up a parking lot' is used at the start of the first verse, and repeated in the chorus.

## Harmony and tonality

Understanding harmony and tonality – essentially how the notes are put together – is a crucial part of becoming a better musician, and will require some meaty coverage at A level, even if you're not planning on going for the harmony option for Composition 1 in Component 3.

Hooktheory is a great place to start for understanding pop harmony. The website features tabs for more than 18,500 songs in a unique visual format. Here is an example, for Muse's 'Uprising':

The screenshot shows the Hooktheory interface for Muse's 'Uprising'. At the top, there are controls for 'Play (sb)', 'YouTube', 'Piano', 'Loop', 'Key' (D Minor), 'Tempo' (127 BPM), 'Inst.', and 'Settings'. Below these are two guitar staves with color-coded notes. The bottom part of the interface shows a chord progression bar with Roman numerals and chord symbols:  $i$ ,  $iv$ ,  $III$ ,  $V$  (maj),  $iv$ ,  $III$ ,  $V^6$  (maj). Below the bar, the corresponding chord symbols are listed:  $dm$ ,  $gm$ ,  $F$ ,  $A$ ,  $gm$ ,  $F$ ,  $A/C\#$ .

If students respond particularly well to the Hooktheory layout, they might try drafting some compositions using a free account on the Hookpad plug-in.

Chords are given in both Roman numerals and chord symbols. These and the melody notes are colour-coded so you can see how they fit in with the key of the song. The harmonic rhythm is easy to see, as are any chromatic notes. Melodic shape is also instantly apparent, enabling you to see at a glance where melodic phrases are repeated or developed. If you hover your mouse over one of the chord symbols, the chord notes are highlighted above, so that you can easily see which melody notes are from the chord and which are not.

Songs from the suggested listening list that appear on Hooktheory are:

- 'For Once in My Life'
- 'Superstition'
- 'You Are the Sunshine of My Life'
- 'Sir Duke'
- 'Stockholm Syndrome'
- 'Uprising'
- 'Crazy in Love'
- 'Single Ladies'
- All four Daft Punk songs
- 'Beneath Your Beautiful'

There are also two Hooktheory textbooks, in multimedia ebook form, that are well worth the investment at £14.99 each. The focus is not only *how* harmony works in pop songs, but also *why* it works in the way that it does. Chapters in *Hooktheory 1* include chord formation, chord functionality, metre, rhythm, the use of specific chords such as  $vi$  and  $iii$ , and inversions. Each section has a 'check your understanding' interactive quiz.

There are also some excellent YouTube tutorials that explain various features of harmony, and also the specific harmonic traits of certain artists. Here are some highlights that are worth exploring:

- An explanation of modal interchange (an interesting concept at the heart of some of the more harmonically interesting pop songs).
- Exploration of modal interchange in the music of Stevie Wonder (does not include any of suggested listening, but still very useful).
- A tutorial in the use of the Dorian mode in pop songs.
- Daft Punk 'Get Lucky' analysis including excellent explanation of tonal ambiguity and modality.

- Secondary dominants tutorial.
- How Muse write a chord progression

What follow are some highlights from the suggested listening that demonstrate interesting use of harmony and tonality. They could form the basis for examples in an essay that asks about the various ways that harmony and tonality are used in AoS2.

Feature	Song	Details
Complex harmony	'Superstition'	Verse is built over a static E flat (b7 #9) chord (has major and minor 3rd in it). Climax of chorus is on V+ chord – the use of an augmented chord in a pop song is unusual.
	'Sir Duke'	Intro: [B – G#m – G7 – F#] [I – vi – bVI – V]. The bVI is essentially a substitution that pushes to V (F sharp). This happens a lot in the song, using a chord that then changes by a semitone to get to a chord that is part of the key – a passing chord. For example, the chorus goes [B – Fm7 – Emaj7 – C#m7 – F#7] [I – #iv – IV – ii – V]. So here, instead of substituting a G major chord, Stevie Wonder simply alters the second chord in this sequence, where the listener would expect to hear that G#m, but instead gets a Fm7. It's an odd choice as it doesn't have much in common with the G#m chord, but it resolves nicely into the Emaj7 chord.
	'Stockholm Syndrome'	Owes much to Baroque and Classical music. Chords are chosen so they create strong descending (sometimes chromatic) basslines and feature secondary dominants and sus4 chords at the end of each verse that resolve conventionally onto four bars of dominant preparation which then catapults the music to the tonic at the start of the chorus.
Harmonic rhythm	'Superstition'	Verse is built on static harmony. Harmonic rhythm speeds up to two chords per bar.
Modulation	'For Once in My Life'	Modulates up a semitone (from F to F sharp) for the bridge (then stays there), achieved by a short transition with a repeated phrase 'someone who needs me' that uses the flattened mediant (A flat/G sharp) to pivot onto C sharp and then to cadence onto F sharp.
	'Listen'	Tertiary modulation from B major to D major in the pre-chorus, to help the build up to the chorus.
Modality	'Get Lucky'	Implies B Dorian with a Bm7 – D – F#m7 – E chord progression, although see the video link above for further explanation of the tonal ambiguity in this song.
	'Crazy in Love'	B flat Lydian, which creates a very bright sound.
Added-note chords	'Big Yellow Taxi'	Uses primary harmony I IV V (E A B), but with some added 6ths (ie intro) and 7ths, bare 5th (E5) at start of chorus.
	'Help Me'	Written a little later than 'Big Yellow Taxi', this shows jazz influence through more complex harmony, wide range of chords including major 7ths, 9ths, 11ths, chords including flat 6th degree and false relations make tonality slightly blurred.
Resolution/non-resolution of chords	'Listen'	In the first bar of the verse there is an unresolved Bsus2 chord which gives a sense of yearning, while in bar 4 of the verse, the F#sus4 chord resolves in the conventional way to F#. Also has an interesting progression in the chorus. V7d in D major (A7/G) resolves not to the expected Ib (D/F#) but to D#/G.



## Sonority

Here are some of the interesting examples of use of sonorities in the suggested listening:

Feature	Song	Details
Use of particular instruments for distinctive sonority	'Superstition'	The use of a multi-tracked Hohner clavinet, with its distinctive bouncy timbre, creates an essential sonority within the riff-based funk style.
	'For Once in My Life'	Harmonica.
	'A Case of You'	The Appalachian dulcimer is the distinctive sonority.
	'Supermassive Black Hole'	Distorted guitars define the Muse sound.
	'Stockholm Syndrome'	
Falsetto vocals	'Supermassive Black Hole'	Matt Bellamy sings entirely in falsetto to create an ethereal, slightly sinister effect.
	'For Once in My Life'	Stevie Wonder occasionally ventures into falsetto to provide variety and as a soulful embellishment, especially after the key change.
Treated vocals	All Daft Punk songs	Treated vocals from Daft Punk use a mysterious combination of vocoder, autotune, equalisation and talkbox synth to achieve a robotic effect. Part of Daft Punk's image is the sense of mystique conjured by their masks and their secretive approach, and their refusal to explain the details of their technical processes.


## Structure and texture

Structure and texture tend to go hand in hand, often with links to tonality. Here are some of the distinctive examples of structural and textural features:

Feature	Song(s)	Details
Conventional pop song	'Crazy in Love' 'Jealous'	Standard verse-chorus format with a bridge for variety.
Unconventional structure	'Supersition'	Chorus is extremely short: only two four-bar phrases.
	'For Once in My Life'	No real chorus section; just three verses with an intro and outro.
	'Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger'	Based on an eight-bar phrase that is developed.
	'Around the World'	There is a huge amount of repetition of the 'Around the World' phrase – 144 in the album version, and 80 times in the radio edit. Texture and sonority is varied, and the repetition always stops just before it gets too much.
Variation in texture to emphasise structure and provide interest	'Superstition'	Essentially this is riff-driven funk, with many layers of sound, beginning almost from the start with the multi-layered clavinet riffs. The horn section is brought in during first verse to maintain interest. At the climax of the chorus there is a thinning of texture plus the dramatic repeated chord from the horns to emphasise the climax of the vocal line. In the bridge there is a NC (no chord) bar on Wonder's howl, which acts like a mini-breakdown section before the return of the clav riff.
	'Big Yellow Taxi'	The texture thins at the start of the chorus, then becomes thicker (with backing vocals and return of thicker strummed chords) on 'They paved paradise...'
	'Listen'	Along with the tertiary modulation from B to D in the pre-chorus, there is a huge buildup that includes triplets, glissandi, a cymbal roll, the entrance of the drums and a melisma.

## Rhythm

Rhythm might include harmonic rhythm as well as the actual rhythms that are played or sung.

Feature	Song(s)	Details
Harmonic rhythm	'Superstition'	Harmonic rhythm changes from static in verse to two chords per bar in chorus.
	'Jealous' 'Beneath Your Beautiful'	Chorus based around a four-chord pattern, with each chord being of equal length.
	'Crazy in Love'	Chorus based around a two-chord pattern, with each chord being of equal length.
	'Stockholm Syndrome'	The verse is mostly one chord per bar, but ends with four bars of chord V, to provide build-up to the chorus.
Syncopation and rhythmic variety	'Superstition'	Rhythmic grooves form the basis for the funk style, with bass guitar and kick/snare anchoring the beat (with a strong emphasis on the backbeat) while hi-hats and clavinet are freer and more syncopated. An interesting effect occurs when the horns come in during first verse: bass guitar has semiquaver ascent which gives the illusion of double time – increases impetus at this point.
	'Crazy in Love'	Features one-bar riffs that employ semiquavers and syncopation, giving a busy feel that make the tempo feel faster than it actually is. One of the main vocal riffs –  – uses a traditional samba cowbell rhythm, and helps to give the song its go-go vibe.