



ROYAL  
COLLEGE  
OF MUSIC  
*London*



## RCM Sparks

# Music in Elizabethan England

- Music in the Elizabethan Royal Court
- Music in the Elizabethan Theatre

RCM Sparks is the Royal College of Music's learning and participation programme.  
To find out more and get involved visit [www.rcm.ac.uk/sparks](http://www.rcm.ac.uk/sparks)

## Music in the Elizabethan Royal Court

Queen Elizabeth I was the Queen of England from 1558 until 1603 - more than 450 years ago! Music and theatre blossomed under her reign because she loved music. She played the virginal - which is a type of keyboard instrument - and the lute, and she also sang and danced. She employed professional musicians to play for her while she danced. They would often travel to England from other countries like Italy. She also loved watching theatre and had performers come to her royal court to entertain her, one of whom was Shakespeare himself.

## Discover - Elizabethan Instruments

### Virginal

One of Queen Elizabeth's favourite instruments was the virginal - a keyboard instrument in the harpsichord family. You could play it on your lap or rest it on a table. The strings inside the virginal are plucked using tiny pieces of bird quill (the hard bit of a bird's feather) which gives them a distinct tinkly, light sound.

If you were wealthy, then your instrument would be highly decorated with precious materials like gold leaf and mother-of-pearl and painted with dramatic scenes. Have a look at this virginal which is from the Royal College of Music Museum. If you look closely at the paintings on the virginal you might be able to spot the Greek god of music Apollo in a music competition with the god of nature, Pan. You can also see Orpheus taming the wild beasts with the beauty of his playing!



Virginal full view



Virginal (Apollo and Pan)



Virginal (Orpheus taming the beasts)

## Viol

The Queen's father, King Henry VI, owned an instrument called the viol which is a stringed instrument that you play with a bow like a cello. Expensive viols had interesting ornamentation. Look at these wooden carved heads on the top of the viols from the Royal College of Music Museum! Can you copy their facial expressions?



## Lute

Queen Elizabeth could also play the lute, which was the most popular stringed instrument of the Elizabethan era. Lutes have angled heads and pear-shaped bodies and their strings were made out of sheep gut! They are plucked with fingers or a plectrum. Have a look at this lute which is from the Royal College of Music Museum. Its back is decorated with ivory and ebony which are exotic materials that would have been imported from abroad. The sound hole is decorated with a very intricate design called a 'rose'.



## Watch

In **this video** you will meet Francesco, an Elizabethan court musician! He will tell you more about the music of the Elizabethan royal court and Queen Elizabeth's love for instrumental music and dance. If you like, you can join in with the dance routine at the end. Follow Francesco's instructions for the dance steps of the Pavane dance.



# Dance

Queen Elizabeth was extremely fond of dancing and she influenced all of England with her love for dance. She practiced dancing every day and demanded that all members of her royal court learned to dance as well... so now it's your turn!

1. Start by listening to the two pieces of music below – you'll probably find they are very different from the kind of dance music you know. Elizabethan dances were usually quite slow and very refined.
2. Now use the tips below to create some dance moves to match the music. We have suggested different moves for each piece

## Listen to: **Midnight by John Dowland**

- Start with a 'reverence'. This is a low bow, your knee has to almost touch the ground! And you have to stretch one arm out in front of you and the other out behind you!
- Stand up tall on your tip toes
- Spread out your arms
- Walk forwards on your toes and back on your toes
- Turn around one way with your arms outstretched and then the other with your arms outstretched.
- Then make a final 'reverence' at the end

## Listen to: **Corrente and Passacaglia by Frescobaldi**

- Start with a 'reverence'. This is a low bow, your knee has to almost touch the ground! And you have to stretch one arm out in front of you and the other out behind you!
- Keep your arms stretched out
- Kick one leg out in front of you and then the other a few times
- Now hop up on one leg and then on another
- Repeat the routine until the music changes and slows down:
- Now keep your hands stretched out
- Twist from side to side without moving your legs
- Slowly turn on the spot one way and then the other. Keep your eyes looking around you and not on the floor.
  - Walk around the room slowly on your tip toes as if you are in a procession
  - Repeat the routine until the music finishes and then make a final 'reverence' at the end.

Congratulations! You have now completed your dance routines, you are ready to perform for Queen Elizabeth I at the royal court!

## Music in the Elizabethan Theatre

Thanks to the support of Queen Elizabeth I, the Elizabethan era became the Golden Age of Theatre. Music was an essential form of expression and entertainment for Elizabethan audiences. They did not have the visual effects and sound effects that we have today, so instruments, songs and dances were essential for dramatic effect.

One of the most famous playwrights and performers of the Elizabethan era was William Shakespeare. He made more than 500 references to music in his plays and poems which shows how popular it was to use music in theatre! Shakespeare often used musical effects and songs in his plays to show something magical is happening.

For example, he used music:

- To create a mood with sound effects
- To cast a spell with a rhythmic chant
- To put someone to sleep by singing lullaby
- To celebrate an important event like a marriage through dance
- To make magic or to indicate madness with a song



### Watch

In **this video** a character from one of Shakespeare's plays called Miranda tells us about the different ways Shakespeare uses music and song in his theatrical performances. You can join in with the rhythm of the witch's magical chant if you like, using Miranda's body percussion! Follow the directions in the video. Pat your chest twice and then clap twice: Pat – pat, clap – clap, Pat – pat, clap – clap.



### Explore

- Can you think of examples in stories or films when music or song makes something magical happen? Eg: In the Disney movie 'Tangled' every time Rapunzel sings she is able to heal people or in 'Cinderella' the fairy god mother sings a chant and she is able to transform the pumpkin into a carriage!



## Create

Shakespeare knew about the wonderful power of music and he often used musical songs and chants to make magical and interesting things happen to the characters in his stories. Using the power of your voice and body percussion, use these tips to create a song or chant to make something magical happen in a story of your own.

- Think of a story or fairy-tale that you know well, for example Sleeping Beauty
- Think of where a song or chant would work well in the story. What do you want your song to do to the main character? Do you want to make them fall asleep? Do you want to change them in some way? If Sleeping Beauty is your chosen story then you could create a chant like a lullaby to put her to sleep!
- Let's collect some words for a good lullaby. Think about words you could use to put Sleeping Beauty to sleep. You can also think about what sort of words or sounds make you think of sleep and write down what they are. For example: shhh, it's dark, sleep! Not a peep! warm blanket, have some milk, sheets like silk! story book, don't look!
- See if you can find words that rhyme and circle the rhyming words because rhymes help words sound like a chant!
- Write down your words in an order and then say them out loud using Miranda's musical rhythm to turn it into a rhythmic chant!
- Miranda's Rhythm: Remember while you say your words you pat your chest twice and then clap twice: Pat – pat, clap – clap, pat – pat, clap – clap.
- Once you have learnt your rhyme with the rhythm you can use your hands in different dramatic ways so you can wave them in the air to make your magic happen or stir a pot while you say your rhythmic chant!
- Remember that our voice is our instrument. Try whispering your rhythmic chant. Now start with a whisper and get louder and louder.
- Now try saying your rhythmic chant on a note or to a well-known tune like Twinkle Twinkle

Congratulations! You have now created a rhythmic chant for your story that Shakespeare would be proud of!