



THE UNIVERSITY OF
**WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**

Conservatorium
of Music

YEAR 11 ATAR DESIGNATED WORKS 2023-2026

UNIT 2 – NARRATIVES

The Beatles: *A Day in the Life*

Duke Ellington & Ella Fitzgerald: *Take the "A" Train*

Bedrich Smetana: *Vltava*

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Resource prepared by UWA Conservatorium of Music staff

Dr Sarah Collins (Musicology), Dr Paul De Cinque (Brass & Music Education), Dr Jonathan Fitzgerald (Guitar & Harmony), Dr James Ledger (Composition) and Dr Cecilia Sun (Musicology).



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ATAR Music Workbook

Unit Two: Narratives



The Beatles: *A Day in the Life*

Duke Ellington & Ella Fitzgerald: *Take the "A" Train*

Bedřich Smetana: *Vltava*

Resource prepared by faculty members from the UWA Conservatorium of Music
*Sarah Collins (Musicology), Paul De Cinque (Brass & Music Education), Jonathan Fitzgerald (Guitar
& Harmony), James Ledger (Composition) and Cecilia Sun (Musicology).*

Edited by Alan Lourens (Head of the Conservatorium of Music)

FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure for us to present support material for the 2nd unit of the ATAR Music Syllabus. This unit is about “Narrative” and includes music that tells a story.

Whether we look at jazz, popular music, Western art music, or the traditional music of a community, music has been used throughout civilisation to share stories and to communicate feelings. We are excited that the new ATAR Music syllabus does not divide us into “classical musicians,” “contemporary musicians,” and “jazz musicians” anymore, but unites us as musicians.

All styles of music discussed above use structure to help convey their message. The structures we all use are different, but by having a clear structure, we can make sure our audience understands our intent. Popular musicians often use verse and chorus form in their songs to explain a story, classical composers used two themes and unpack them for over ten minutes in a structure called sonata form, and many jazz musicians start with a twelve-bar chord progression called the blues as a starting point for their compositions.

In Unit Two, we will discuss Narrative. All music tells a story. Some of these stories are explicit—an obvious story that is probably linear in nature. Some of these stories are less obvious, a feeling or sense of emotion. How we do this in music—western art music, jazz or commercial music—is the subject of this unit.

These three background and analysis documents are intended as a step off point for you in your classrooms as you explore these pieces of music. There are suggested readings and listenings which we hope will broaden your understanding of the topics, and encourage you to find lots of other resources on the composers, writers, and pieces of music. We also have a significant number of resources on our UWA ATAR Music resource page which we encourage you to check out.

We hope you enjoy studying these works and enjoy your time studying ATAR Music.

Alan Lourens

Head of the UWA Conservatorium of Music



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CONTENTS

THE BEATLES, “A Day in the Life” from <i>Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band</i> (1967)	4
Background (Prepared by Dr. Cecilia Sun)	4
Suggested Listening.....	6
Analysis (Prepared by Dr. James Ledger)	8
Suggested Listening for Context	11
DUKE ELLINGTON & ELLA FITZGERALD: <i>Take the “A” Train</i>	13
Background (Prepared by Dr. Sarah Collins).....	13
Analysis (Prepared by Dr. Sarah Collins).....	17
BEDŘICH SMETANA: <i>Vltava</i> (1874).....	19
Background (prepared by Dr. Paul De Cinque)	19
Listening	21
Analysis (prepared by Dr. Jonathan Fitzgerald).....	24
Recommended Recordings.....	30
Recommended Resources.....	30

THE BEATLES, “A Day in the Life” from *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967)

Background (Prepared by Dr. Cecilia Sun)

The Beatles



The Beatles with their matching haircuts and suits (c. 1963)

Originating from Liverpool, UK, the Beatles went through various line-ups under a number of different names from the late 1950s until they settled in 1962 on the following line-up:

John Lennon (1940–1980): primarily voice and rhythm guitar
 Paul McCartney (b. 1942): primarily voice, bass guitar, and keyboards
 George Harrison (1943–2001): primarily lead guitar
 Ringo Starr (b. 1940): primarily drums

This quartet played together until 1969. In 1970, the Beatles released their final album *Let It Be*. Over the band’s short seven-year existence, they redefined the music industry with their phenomenal commercial success and expanded the artistic possibilities for pop and rock music. Unlike their predecessors, the Beatles sang their own compositions (mostly written by Lennon and McCartney). Their creative output developed from relatively simple pop tunes to sophisticated songs that clearly showed influences from classical music and the classical avant-garde. They were also trailblazers in the recording studio. The Beatles recorded their debut 1963 album *Please Please Me* in just one day. By the time of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967, they were well into their ground-breaking exploration of recording technology, enabled in large part by the time afforded them after their decision to stop touring in 1966 and their collaboration with classically trained producer George Martin. *Sgt. Pepper* took an unprecedented 700 hours to produce because, for the Beatles, the studio was no longer just a place to record live performances—it was a haven for exploration and experimentation.

Influences

This is a little simplistic, but one way to understand the early Beatles is to think of them as a combination of the rock and roll of the 1950s—from which they got their raw energy and excitement—with Motown acts and early 1960s girl groups—from which they got their vocal arrangements. All of this was wrapped up in the safe packaging of four well-dressed, charismatic white musicians from England, which undoubtedly contributed significantly to their initial success.

All of these formative US musical influences came more easily to the Beatles because they grew up in the port city of Liverpool. During the second world war, there was a significant presence of American soldiers and sailors. When they left after the war, they often left behind their record collection including harder-to-find R&B recordings.

The Beatles, all born in the 1940s, were the first generation of musicians who grew up with rock and roll as the foundational music of their youth. The earliest extant recording of the group, from 1957 when they were still the Quarrymen, was a cover of Buddy Holly's "That'll be the Day." Their early performances were largely more-or-less note-by-note reproductions of music of their boyhood heroes. This is still present in the first albums in which they covered, amongst others: "Rock and Roll Music" (Lennon trying to be Chuck Berry), "Long Tall Sally" (McCartney trying to be Little Richard), and "Everybody's Trying To Be My Baby" (Harrison trying to be Carl Perkins).

Early Beatles albums also featured covers of Motown and girl group songs. (There are accounts of the Beatles singing "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" in their early live performances, but no recordings have surfaced as yet.) They did their version of hits including Barrett Strong's "Money (That's What I Want)," the Cookies' "Chains," and the Shirelles' "Boys." They would often change the pronouns, but sometimes not even that. A good example of this is their version of the Marvelette's "Please Mr. Postman" (which scored Motown its first #1 hit in 1961). The Beatles change "this boyfriend of mine" to "this girl of mine," but their performance otherwise hews very closely to the original: they mimicked the vocal harmonies, the sentiment of the song, and the arrangement—complete with handclaps.

The Beatles, "Please Mr. Postman" (live in-studio performance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzy4R8EbWJ4>

The Marvelettes, "Please Mr. Postman"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=425GpjTSIS4>

In addition to covers, the Beatles also consciously wrote in the styles of the musicians they admired. For example, McCartney channels Little Richard in "I'm Down" (1965), and "This Boy" (1963) is a Lennon's self-conscious attempt to be Smokey Robinson.

The Beatles, "I'm Down" (live concert performance in Germany)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_l8-FUdUWI

This Beatles, "This Boy" (live TV performance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=425GpjTSIS4>

Suggested Listening

The Beatles, "Please Please Me" from *Please Please Me* (1963)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czw8eqepir8>

"Please Please Me" was the Beatles' first #1 and is a good example of Lennon and McCartney's early song writing. On the surface, it is very much a typical pop song of its era: it is in classic AABA form; it is energetic, efficient, and short at only 2 minutes; and it is about love. But even in this straightforward romantic song, we can see typical Lennon touches like the clever word play and internal rhymes in, for example, the different meanings of the word "please" in the title, and rhyming "complainin'" with "rain in [my heart]." Note also the vocal harmonies (inspired by Motown and girl groups), which was one of the things that made the early Beatles stand out from their competition.

The Beatles, "Yesterday" (1965)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXTJBr9tt8Q>

Although attributed to Lennon-McCartney, "Yesterday" was solely the creation of Paul McCartney. This song shows the distance the Beatles had travelled by 1965. Given "Yesterday"'s ubiquity, it may be difficult for us to understand what a radical move it was for a group such as the Beatles to use orchestral strings in one of their songs. It was the first time that someone other than the four Beatles and George Martin had played on one of their recordings.

The video linked above comes from the Beatles' last appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1965. Their first appearance in February 1964, on their first visit to the US, was a landmark cultural and historical event. The *Ed Sullivan Show* was the longest-running variety series in the US. From 1948 to 1971, it played every Sunday night on CBS. By the mid-1950s, it was consistently one of the top 10 TV shows, with an estimated audience of 44 viewers weekly, out of a population of 165 million. Just about every popular music act of the 1960s played on *Ed Sullivan*.

The Beatles' appearance on the show was part of a carefully calculated move to transfer their European success to the US. Before them, no British act, however successful, had made it in the US. The Beatles waited until they had their first US #1 hit and when they arrived, Beatlemania was in full swing. (You can see some of that in the behavior of the audience in the clip linked above.) There were an astonishing fifty-thousand-plus requests for the 728 available seats for the rehearsal and the taping of the show. The ensuing "British Invasion" (term coined by the press) saw a huge influx of bands coming over to capitalize on the Beatles' success. The Beatles themselves, already big in European, catapulted to staggering commercial achievements in the US and worldwide.

The Beatles, "Tomorrow Never Knows" from *Revolver* (1966)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O58ouPdjgo0>

"Tomorrow Never Knows" represents a landmark song in the Beatles' development as a band, especially in its use of the studio as a compositional tool. Although they would not stop touring and playing live until after the release of *Revolver*, they did take three months off concertizing at the beginning of 1966 to record this album. Freed from having to replicate songs live, the band turned to studio technology to put this song together. Primarily composed by Lennon, "Tomorrow Never

Knows” was the result of his interest in Eastern mysticism, growing experimentation with the hallucinogenic drug LSD, and Timothy Leary’s *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Moving away from the typical chord structure of pop music, “Tomorrow Never Knows” is based on a drone. Inspired by avant-garde German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and techniques used in *musique concrète*, McCartney and then the other Beatles created a series of tape loops which form the basis of this song.

Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967)

Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was the Beatles’ eighth studio album and their first after they stopped touring. This not only gave them the time to experiment in the studios, but it also freed them to experiment with sounds and effects that could not be recreated in a live situation with the technology of the time. This included tape effects such as varying the speed and pitch, and reversing and chopping the tape up to create collages of sounds. There also used other effects like delays, reverbs, and filtering.

The album was released in 1967 during the so-called “Summer of Love” and the height of the hippy counterculture. The image of the band below shows how much they have changed in just a few years. No longer dressing in matching suits, they have now embraced the aesthetics of the psychedelic counterculture. McCartney came up with the lengthy fictional band name to mimic the trend set in the San Francisco psychedelic scene with groups such as The 13th Floor Elevators, and Big Brother and the Holding Company.



Cover of Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band

The album is noted for its distinctive cover, which features the Beatles standing in front of many life-sized cardboard cut-outs and wax models of famous people. The eclectic group includes artists, writers, actors, athletes, and political and spiritual leaders. There are surprisingly few musicians, but those featured include avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, contemporaries Bob Dylan, and the Rolling Stones, and former Beatle Stuart Sutcliffe. Tellingly, they have four wax models of their younger selves in the front row as an indication of how much they have evolved from their early years. The complete lyrics are printed on the back—the first time this has happened on a rock LP.

“A Day in the Life” is the final song on *Sgt. Pepper*. Although credited to Lennon and McCartney (as all their songs were), these two were by this stage largely composing separately. “A Day in the Life” is mainly a Lennon song with the middle-eight section coming from a fragment of an incomplete song by McCartney, with the final version merging imagery of routine day-to-day life with dreamy surrealism. Lennon literally got a lot of the lyrics from a newspaper. When he sings the opening line “I read the news today oh boy,” he was being truthful. He read about the “400 potholes in the roads of Blackburn, Lancashire” and these too made their way into the song.

Analysis (Prepared by Dr. James Ledger)

Performers:

John Lennon: vocals, acoustic guitar, piano

Paul McCartney: vocals, piano, bass

George Harrison: maracas

Ringo Starr: drums, bongos

George Martin: harmonium

+ orchestra of 40 players

The structure is quite sophisticated and a long way removed from the verse/chorus structure of their earlier songs. A breakdown is as follows:

Section	Time	Bars length	Description
Introduction	0'00"	4	guitar emerges from “applause” of previous track. bass & piano enter soon afterwards,
Verse 1	0'12"	10	starts with Lennon’s vocal “I read the news today, oh boy”, maraca & bongos added
Verse 2	0'44"	9	Lennon’s vocal “He blew his mind out in a car” drum fills added
Verse 3	1'11"	9	Lennon’s vocal “I saw a film today, oh boy”
Bridge 1	1'39"	12	Lennon’s vocal “I’d love to turn you on” followed by orchestral climax
Middle 8	2'15"	23*	Double tempo, starts with McCartney’s vocal “woke up, got out of bed”
Transition	2'49	10	Back to original (half) tempo. Lennon’s “aahs”
Verse 4	3'18"	9	Lennon’s vocal “I read the news today, oh boy”,
Bridge 2	3'44"	12	Lennon’s vocal “I’d love to turn you on” followed by orchestral climax as before – ends with E major chord played 3 pianos

*This would be 11.5 bars in the previous half tempo

Breakdown:**INTRODUCTION & VERSES 1-3.**

The musical notation consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has seven measures with chords G, Bm, Em, Em7, C, Em, and Am. The second system has nine measures with chords G, Bm, Em, Em7, C, F, Em, Em7, and C. The bass line features a simple rhythmic pattern of quarter notes, while the treble line uses block chords and some melodic movement.

The song starts like many pop songs: it has an introduction, followed by a verse. The instrumentation is also pretty standard: acoustic guitar, piano, bass. There is also percussion consisting of maraca and bongos. Verse 2 follows, which is also pretty standard it is varied with some fills in the drums. No steady beat though, just fills. Then there is a third verse. This again is not that unusual—other than the song might becoming repetitive. However, what comes next is incredibly unusual:

BRIDGE 1.

An orchestra joins in to perform a bridge section. Each individual player starts on their lowest note and works their way up to arrive on their highest note 12 bars later. Because of this *ad lib* approach, no real harmonies are generated. It is a huge singular gesture in the orchestra. To call it a bridge section slightly underplays it's incredible uniqueness. No pop song had ever had something like this in it. It is something that might be found in an avant-garde score from around that time. However, it does serve as a bridge between the verses of John Lennon's to the next section, composed by Paul McCartney. (See example under "Bridge 2, below)

MIDDLE EIGHT.

The musical notation for the middle eight section is in a key of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and common time. The first system has four measures with chords E and D(sus2). The second system has four measures with chords E, B9, E, and B9. The bass line is a simple eighth-note pattern, and the treble line features block chords and some melodic movement.

This section is quite a contrast to the verses. Normally, they probably would not occur in the same song. Because of the experimentation the Beatles were undertaking in the studio now led to all facets of song-writing, they felt they could join these two compositions with the bridge section. It is twice the tempo of the rest of the song and has an old-timey music-hall vibe about it.

TRANSITION.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano accompaniment. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a common time signature. Above the first three measures are the chord symbols C, G, and D. The second system also consists of two staves, with the chord symbol A above the first measure. The music features a steady, rhythmic accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes or simple patterns in the left hand.

Here is another section that is highly unusual for pop music. A 5-bar chord progression accompanied by orchestra. Above this, John Lennon’s highly reverberant voice singing wordless “aah”. It is a perfect continuation from McCartney’s last line of the middle eight, where he sang “somebody spoke and I went into a dream”.

VERSE 4.

The music returns to where we were at the start, with one final verse from Lennon.

BRIDGE 2.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano accompaniment. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a common time signature. The second system also consists of two staves, with a bracket above the first measure indicating a 12-bar section. The music features a steady, rhythmic accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes or simple patterns in the left hand.

This is a repeat of the monumental orchestral climax. This time it is followed by a brief silence before there is a thunderous clang of E major played simultaneously by three pianos and harmonium. As the sound of the pianos naturally die away, the microphones were gradually turned up. This creates an otherworldly sound as the overtones (harmonics) from the pianos continue to evolve over an incredible thirty-five seconds. Fun fact: If you listening carefully, you can hear a chair creak at 4'50" !

But we're still not done! To finish the song the Beatles put in some good-humoured electronic trickery. At 5'06" there is a high frequency tone (15kHz) that is towards the limit of human hearing. It is at a similar frequency to a dog whistle, and it was John Lennon's intent for dogs to be stirred up when hearing it. This is followed by some spoken gibberish. It is a loop that was designed to get stuck in record players from the time that weren't fitted with an automatic return arm. It would mean that the loop would be stuck in the groove of the record until the arm was manually removed.

Film clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usNsCeOV4GM>

Suggested Listening for Context

Rolling Stones, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (1965) (comp. Mick Jagger & Keith Richards)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrIPxIFzDi0>

Live performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEjkftp7J7I>

The press pitted the bad-boys Rolling Stones against the playful mop-top early Beatles. (The Stones' manager asked: "would you let your daughter date a Rolling Stone?") The truth was, of course, much more complicated. The two bands knew each other and were friends. (Lennon and McCartney wrote their first hit.) And the Stones were no more "street-fighting men" than the Beatles were wholesome, carefree lads.

The Stones were a much more straight-forward blues band, one of many English bands of the 1960s who idolized what they considered to be the authentic, unfiltered expression of the kind of Blues music exemplified by Robert Johnson. This song is notable for being sexually suggestive in its lyrics, its very famous riff-based hook, and its very early use of the fuzz box effects pedal in the guitar riff.

Beach Boys, "Good Vibrations" (1966) (comp. Brian Wilson)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eab_beh07HU

The Beach Boys were a US band whose career trajectory matched the Beatles: they started with relatively simple tunes aimed at the teen market, and developed to write more sophisticated music that featured studio innovations. Their competition with the Beatles fuelled some of the most innovative music of the 1960s: the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (1966) was a response to the Beatles' *Revolver*. In turn, *Sgt. Pepper* was the Beatles' conscious effort to out-do *Pet Sounds*.

Brian Wilson, the Beach Boys' co-founder, lead singer, and main composer, called "Good Vibrations" his "pocket symphony." By this stage, he had stopped touring and lavished money and

time on this song: it took seventeen sessions and six weeks to complete, making it the most expensive and elaborate single to date. It uses a wide array of instruments, including a lot of percussion, organ, cello, and theremin. The voices of the Beach Boys were overdubbed so it could sound like twenty voices were singing. Like much of the Beatles' output from this time, the inspiration was psychedelic: Wilson said that he imagined the song and its lush arrangement while he was tripping on LSD.

Lulu, "To Sir With Love" (1967) (comp. Don Black & Mark London)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV1qmmMwc9M>

While the British Invasion has become known primarily for their male bands, there were a number of successful female acts. In 1967—the same year as *Sgt. Pepper*—Scottish singer and actor Lulu scored a #1 hit with "To Sir With Love," the title song of a movie in which she also starred. This success made Lulu only the second British woman to top the US charts in the rock era (after Petula Clark's "Downtown" in 1965).

The song consists of two verses with choruses, but no middle eight. That is, it sets up the expectation of the standard AABA song form, but delivers only on the first two As. A listener may be expecting the contrasting material, but the song ends in this unexpected place. Jacqueline Warwick interprets this unusual structure as a depiction of a girl's transition into adulthood. She argues that a contrasting middle eight would have worked against this short song's portrayal of ephemeral transition period as "fleeting, evanescent, and unfinished."¹

Xenakis, *Metastaseis* (1953–54)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jjqq2Y4tUGI>

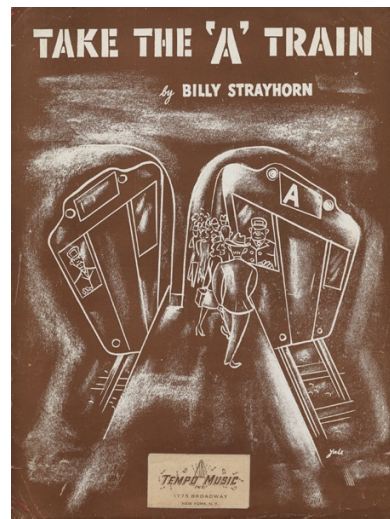
Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001) was Greek composer who was injured badly from a shrapnel blast during WWII. The sound of warfare was something that influenced his music after this. *Metastaseis* is an orchestral work that utilises the 'sound mass' technique. Here, the density of the sonorities becomes so crowded that the harmony becomes redundant. It verges on noise. To help achieve this, every player has their own part, 61 in total. The work opens with a rising glissando in the strings that sounds not unlike the rising orchestral gesture in "A Day in the Life". In this instance however, it is precisely notated, it is not randomly generated.

Penderecki, *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1961)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HilGthRhWP8>

This work is written for 52 string instruments, is dedicated to the first ever victims of atomic warfare—the residents of Hiroshima, Japan. The work opens with the entire ensemble playing their extreme highest note. The overall effect is one of screaming. It contains an abundance of extended technique for the players, including bowing the strings behind the bridge, bowing *on* the bridge and even on the tail piece. It is an indeterminate score as most of it is score without time signatures. The players work out approximately when to execute the notation.

¹ Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Group, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 127.

DUKE ELLINGTON & ELLA FITZGERALD: *Take the “A” Train*



Take the “A” Train original sheet-music edition cover.

Sam DeVincent Collection of American Sheet Music, National Museum of American History Archives Center <https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/ellington_strayhorn_6.html>

Background (Prepared by Dr. Sarah Collins)

Take the “A” Train is a swing era classic that became known as the ‘signature’ tune of the jazz orchestra of the famous American bandleader and composer, Edward Kennedy ‘Duke’ Ellington (1899–1974).

For your ATAR exam you will be studying Ella Fitzgerald’s 1957 recording of this piece, but you will also need to know the context for its original composition and recording in order to understand the full meaning behind the piece.

To understand *Take the “A” Train*, you must build a picture in your minds of 1930s America—it was a time of racial segregation, where African Americans were excluded from social and educational spaces occupied by white Americans, and they suffered a huge range of other injustices that were, in many cases, enshrined in law. It was also a time of economic recession—the massive Wall Street stock market crash had occurred in 1929, and there was a global economic recession that played out over the course of the 1930s. It was also a time of Prohibition, which was a period of heavy restrictions on the sale of alcohol in the USA.

This is more than simply a backdrop or context to the piece—it is integral to how the music is constructed, both in instrumentation and form, as well as of course in its swing rhythm. These elements are all tightly bound up with a particular social phenomenon that really relied on the sense of subversiveness and transgression that enabled it—namely a spirit of opposition to the prevailing social conditions just mentioned.

Swing

The social phenomenon was swing. Swing was a popular form of social dance in the 1930s and 40s, and it also named the style of jazz music played for it. It had a thriving subculture of social dancers (known as jitterbugs), as well as associated record labels, magazines, clubs, and bands.

Swing usually has 4 beats in the bar (as opposed to the 2-beat rhythms of pre-swing jazz), and includes riff-based choruses and call on response gestures, as well as improvised solos over driving accompaniments, and it often had a prominent rhythmic drive, appropriate to its function as dance music.

The original 1941 recording of *Take the "A" Train* partakes of this subculture of swing, so when you are listening to it and writing about it, it is useful to remember that the music was all about dance—about moving bodies in subterranean dance halls that used the aura of subversiveness as way to attract audiences. Social dance is what makes this music sound the way it does.



Property of Museum of History & Industry, Seattle

'Dancers at a Duke Ellington show, probably at The Showbox in Seattle, 1940'
<https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/imismohai/id/2263>

Having said that, the musical style of swing outlived the popularity of swing dancing by decades. And indeed later styles of music that accompanied social dancing after swing dancing began to wane, such as R&B, and other forms of jazz such as bebop that was embraced by serious jazz connoisseurs as the new and experimental form, still owed a lot to swing—their rhythms were still often swing rhythms. We see this too in the later, 1957, recording of the piece by Ella Fitzgerald, meaning that your set work recording a *combination* of the earlier swing band style associated with Duke Ellington together with later developments in bebop, of which Ella Fitzgerald was one of the pioneers.

Duke Ellington

But first, back to Duke Ellington and the context of the song's original composition. Swing bands and jazz orchestras grew from a typical size of 10 players in the 1920s to up to 17 players in the 1940s, and they were divided into quite defined sections including brass (trumpets and trombones in one

section usually), reeds such as clarinets and saxophones in another section, and a rhythm section of double bass, guitar, piano and drums. These sections tended to move together and serve defined functions in relation to each other.

The bands were often named after their figurehead band leaders such as Fletcher Henderson, Bennie Moten, and of course Duke Ellington. There were still bands that played conventional dance music, called 'sweet' bands, whereas 'hot' bands played swing. On the other hand, for some jazz purists swing was an inauthentic, commercial, or lesser alternative to 'real jazz'—namely to New Orleans jazz.

Duke Ellington's band followed this instrumentation, and sat at the cusp of these developments in swing as a subculture. Ellington had a massive influence on jazz history, through his band's performances and recordings, through his compositions, and through the celebrity force of his personality. Unlike a number of other figures who became prominent in jazz history, Duke Ellington was not born into poverty and was not self-taught. He was born into a middle-class African American family in Washington in 1899. He was originally named Edward Kennedy Ellington, but was nicknamed Duke during childhood, apparently due to his air of sophistication.

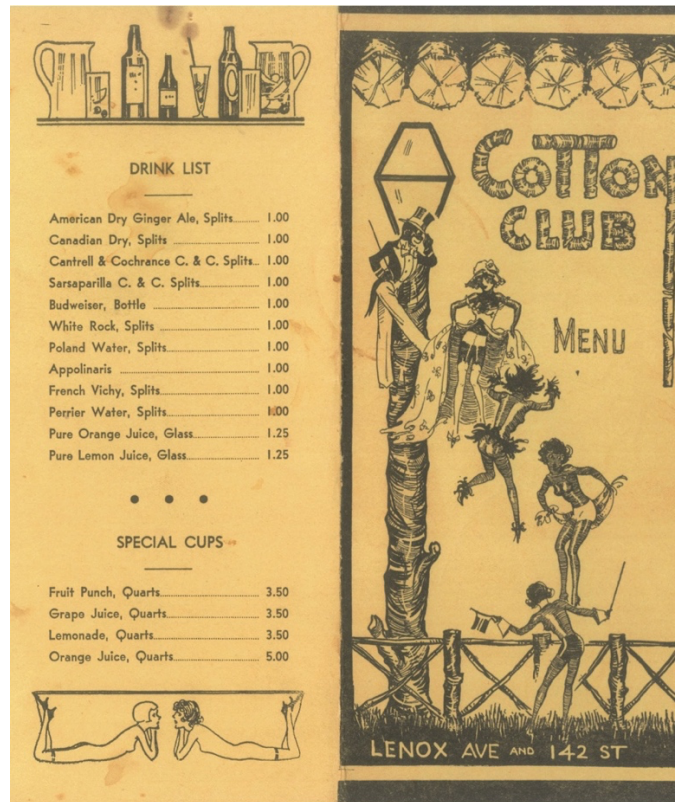
Ellington played at social events in his late teens with his first band, called 'The Duke's Colored Syncopators', who then went on to play larger gigs in New York. He began recording, and with a new manager Irving Mills in the late 1920s Ellington was on his way to becoming a well-known figure.



Duke Ellington's First Concert with Symphony Orchestra (1949)
The Mann Center for the Performing Arts
<https://manncenter.org/vault-7-24-49>

From 1927–1931 Ellington played at the Cotton Club in Harlem—one of the numerous venues that emerged during the era of Prohibition that played what was considered to be 'exotic' music and sold bootleg alcohol. The club had jungle pictures on its walls and its printed flyers were often jungle themed, picturing African American performers entertaining what was mostly a wealthy white

audience. Gradually, Ellington's audience expanded further, with hits like *It Don't Mean a Thing* and *Sophisticated Lady*, in the 1930s.



Cotton Club Menu. ca. April 1932. Menu Collection. New-York Historical Society.
<https://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/the-aristocrat-of-harlem-the-cotton-club>

Ellington and his band began touring internationally and he also became well known as a composer, turning to larger works in the 1940s in his contract with Carnegie Hall to provide an extended work per season, like his 48-minute *Black Brown and Beige* symphonic work. These extended works were sometimes seen as being of dubious quality, with his real talent lying in small forms. But more recently his larger works are beginning to be reassessed.

Ellington had a range of music teachers, in piano as well as in composition and orchestration. From the late 1920s his works became more chromatic and complex. Although he used simple chord progressions, he relied on the minor 2nd and major 7th and minor 9th to offer richness. He was interested in tonal colour and timbre as well, using unusual combinations of muted brass to highlight colour, in songs such as *Mood Indigo*.² Rhythmically, even within the context of swing, Ellington was more conventional, likely because social dance was the basis of his audience. Though later in his career he sought to draw jazz beyond dance music.

² Listen/watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GohBkHaHap8>

Analysis (Prepared by Dr. Sarah Collins)

Analysis of the Original Composition and Recording of *Take the "A" Train* (1941)

Ellington used onomatopoeia in several of his songs, and he had a particular interest in train, such as in 'Lightnin', 'Daybreak Express', 'Happy-Go-Lucky Local', and 'Track 360'. On the same theme, though not using as explicit onomatopoeia as in these works, 'Take the "A" Train' was actually composed by Billy Strayhorn, who became a significant collaborator for Ellington. The piece was first recorded in 1941, when Ellington was in his early 40s. It can be heard here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydqB3T6NVDI>.

The title was said to relate to a new subway line to Harlem, linking the piece not only to where Ellington lived but also to his earlier connection with the area through the Cotton Club. The subway line to which the 'A train' refers was literally—as the lyrics in later versions suggest—the quickest way to reach Harlem.

Features of the piece that are characteristic of Ellington's band style included the use of contrast, such as between the saxophones carrying the smooth lyrical melody contrasted with (and punctuated by) the short sharp interjections by the muted trumpets and open trombones, as we see in the first 16 bars of the piece, after the typical 4-bar piano introduction played by Ellington. The form of the piece is AABA. The first statement of the A theme features saxophones on the melody, with muted trumpets and trombones offering interjections. Then after a short transition and modulation there is an improvised muted trumpet solo based on the main theme, played on the original recording by Ray Nance—it became one of his most well-known solos. The B section features saxophones and open trumpet solo, in conversation. Then back to saxophones reiterating the A theme, with a slow thinning of texture and diminuendo over several other repetitions of the theme—it is as if the band is walking away. The care taken with dynamics is also a feature of Ellington's bands performances, in addition to timbral contrasts.

The fact that Ellington's work stretched across jazz, swing, musical theatre and symphonic work was symptomatic of a broader trend to explore more diverse applications of jazz, taken forward by Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz experientialists of the 1940s.

By the early 1950s the swing band as a dance medium was outmoded, and Ellington's band's fortunes began to falter. Jazz was becoming a solo genre, and in any case it was becoming prohibitively expensive to tour with large bands. After a short crisis though Ellington re-grouped and experienced a new level of prestige in the context of jazz festivals, as well as utilising longer recording times enabled by developments in LP technology.

When listening to *Take the "A" Train*, it is important to remember that this was a social dance piece. The swing jazz orchestra in Ellington's style, and the music that was composed for this instrumentation, was intimately bound up with its intended performance venue and the social activity that it defined.

It is worthwhile listening to different versions and recordings of the piece. The most important recordings can be found here:

https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/ellington_strayhorn_7.html

Analysis of Ella Fitzgerald's Recording of *Take the "A" Train* (1957)

Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996) recorded a new arrangement of *Take the "A" Train* in 1957 in her collection *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Song Book*, which can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v74hPyQmKA>. The arrangement was by the original composer of the piece, Billy Strayhorn, a long-time collaborator of Duke Ellington, mentioned above.

Fitzgerald's recording does include onomatopoeia, with a train-whistle gesture heard in the muted trumpets after the four-bar piano introduction, interspersed with Fitzgerald scat-singing over the top. After singing the lyrics of the song in the first iteration of the main theme, she then moves to scatting for a chorus.

You must take the A Train
 To go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem.
 If you miss the A Train,
 You'll find you've missed the quickest way to Harlem.
 Hurry, get on, now it's coming
 Listen to those rails a-thrumming.
 All aboard! Get on the A Train.
 Soon you will be on Sugar Hill in Harlem.

Then there are three choruses of solo trumpet, with Dizzy Gillespie featured on this recording. Fitzgerald then plays with the melody, switching between lyrics and scat singing, and we hear the train whistle gesture again toward the end, mimicked in Fitzgerald's vocal glissandi.

Scat singing was most strongly associated with Louis Armstrong, made famous in his 1926 recording of *Heebie Jeebies*. But Fitzgerald was also highly influential in this vocal style of bop improvisation. She uses it to recompose the melody of *Take the "A" Train* in her 1957 recording, and to add in quotations from other pieces into her improvisation, repurposing them over the harmonic progression of the piece.

An excellent example of the incredible precision of Ella Fitzgerald's improvising and scat singing in the context of *Take the "A" Train* can be heard in her later 1963 performance, which can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZWYyww1BK0>. Notice the accuracy of pitching and her command of the melodic terrain, as well as structurally the flexibility of the length of the sections, including even the last cadence, which is prolonged. It is worth listening right to the end of this performance, and comparing it with the 1957 recording, as well as with Duke Ellington's original recording in 1941.

The harmonic progression underlying the theme in *Take the "A" Train* is quite interesting. Within the space of eight bars, it moves from the tonic C to Dmaj7 with a flat 5, then to Dm7 (so from the tonic C to the supertonic D), then to the dominant, closing the phrase with the more typical dominant-tonic movement. The flat 5 in the first D7 chord—namely the G#, functioning as an A-flat in the melody (or it can also be seen not as a flat 5 but as a raised 11th) makes the chord sound like the subdominant of A melodic minor, which of course is a related key of C major. This gives the melody an interesting forward-movement, which is driven on also by the rhythm in the accompaniment that pulses below the held notes.

BEDŘICH SMETANA: *Vltava* (1874)

Background (prepared by Dr. Paul De Cinque)



Nineteenth-century music is full of colour and contrast. Often we forget that all the different trends in nineteenth-century music were happening at the same time. Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of the Faun* premiered in 1894, and is often seen as a piece of music paving the way forward for twentieth-century music. However, only ten years before that, Brahms premiered his *Symphony No. 4*, a work that has very little to do with the harmonic and structural palettes Debussy was using. Smetana fits well into this latter part of the nineteenth century, a composer who was starting to strike out a path of romanticism in music, proud of his ethnicity, forward thinking and yet rooted in tradition. *Vltava* sits at the crossroads of a series of decades which were full of great change in the Western Art musical traditions.

Smetana's Life

There are published biographical accounts of Smetana's life which you can read to get more information about his development as a composer. This dot-point analysis is a summary of information from *Grove Music*, and other sources.

Childhood and early career

- Born in Litomyšl to parents František and Barbora (2 March 1824)
- Music was an important part of family life, his father played the violin in a string quartet and his mother was a dancer
- Bedřich started playing violin and piano as a child and first performed in public at the age of 6.
- Graduated from the Premonstratensian Gymnasium in Plzeň in 1843 and stated he wanted to become a musician; 'By the grace of God and with his help I will one day be a Liszt in technique and a Mozart in composition'
- Developed his career during the 1840's and early 1850's in Prague
- Married Kateřina in 1849

Middle Life (1856–1874)

- Smetana moved to Göteborg in Sweden in 1856, stating to his parents that 'Prague did not wish to acknowledge me, so I left it'
- He established a music institute in Göteborg upon arrival
- After his first wife died in 1859, he remarried in 1860 to Bettina Ferdinandi
- Built a relationship with Liszt in Sweden, and remained a supporter of Liszt stating in 1858 'regard me as your most passionate supporter of our artistic direction who in word and deed stands for its holy truth and also works for its aims'
- Returned to Prague in 1862, with an optimism about Czech cultural life
- Used Czech language in his writing during this time, including nationalistic Czech opera

Final Years

- Started to go deaf in 1874
- Wrote his famous cycle *Ma Vlast* during this period
- Became recognised as a main representative of Czech national music in this time
- Passed away in an asylum on 12 May 1884

Smetana's Compositional Output



Smetana contributed works in primarily the fields of opera and orchestral music. His operas are often the primary examples of Czech nationalist opera, and the *Ma Vlast* cycle is one of the main examples of Czech programmatic music in the nineteenth century. He wrote eight operas, some of which are still performed regularly today.

He also wrote a number of chamber works and pieces for solo piano. In the area of chamber music, he wrote two string quartets and a piano trio which are still well known. He also wrote a number of songs for solo voice and piano and other choral works.

Selected Important Works

Prodaná nevěsta (*The Bartered Bride*) was a comic opera Smetana composed between 1863 to 1866. To this day, the overture remains a staple of orchestral repertoire and is often performed separately from the opera in orchestral performances. The opera has become very successful and is performed as one of the main examples of Czech nationalist music. The use of Bohemian dance forms within the opera (including the polka) make this a largely nationalist work. The opera tells the story of true love winning against the odds.

Listen to: Overture performed by Jiří Bělohávek with the Czech Philharmonic

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZWynrxqKVc>)

Listen to: *Ten lásky sen* performed by Natalya Romaniw with Garsington Opera, conducted by Jac van Steen

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKR6SXF6WMM>)

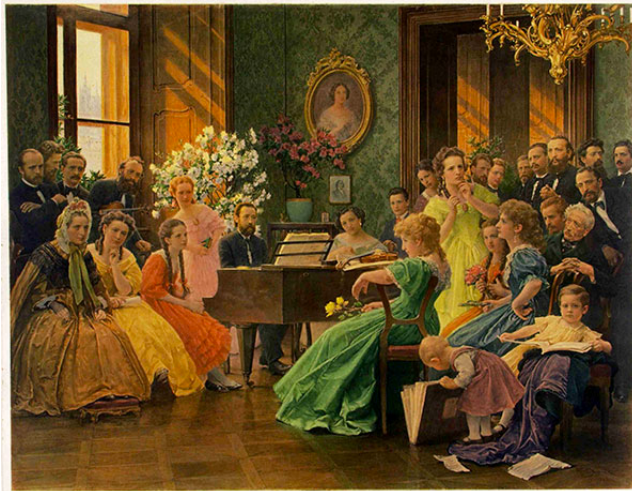
Piano Trio in G minor (1855) is one of his most important works and is autobiographical in nature. Smetana wrote to a doctor stating “The death of my eldest daughter, an exceptionally talented child, motivated me to compose ... my Trio in G minor.” It is a three-movement work, and the entire work is covered in the sadness of this death. Most of the work remains in a minor tonality, and even though the last movement, a scherzo begins with energy, it quietens down, leading to a sad ending. You may choose to compare this dark and sombre work with his String Quartet “From my Life”—they are very different in tone.

Listen to: Smetana Trio (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_ALGae36to)

Smetana: The Father of Czech Music?

Smetana is often referred to as the father of Czech music, even though most would acknowledge Dvořák as the most well-known and important Czech composer. Dvořák was only seventeen years younger, but Smetana paved the way for a music that was specifically Czech at a time when these areas were part of the Habsburg Empire.

There are two main reasons for this designation. Firstly, his eight operas are the first extant examples of operas in Czech language. Other composers had written operas in Czech but they are now lost. Further to this, Czech folk music is found throughout his theatre and concert music. Some



Czech nationalists were disappointed that he modelled some of his compositions on Liszt—rather than Czech composers, however this did not limit his integration of Czech music into his language.

Secondly, at a time where the idea of Czech identity was growing, Smetana embraced his own. At this time, the primary language in Prague was German, as the area was part of the Habsburg Empire. Smetana learned Czech language as an adult, further reinforcing his Czech identity.

Smetana playing piano for his friends in 1865 (painting by František Dvořák, 1923)

Listening

Antonín Dvořák: *Slavonic Dance No. 8* performed by Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Daniel Barenboim
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiJh34AzCow>)

Antonín Dvořák: *Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém* (Song to the Moon) performed by Kristine Opolais with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, conducted by Antonio Pappano

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS_aB9u1jVvk)

Bedřich Smetana: *March of the National Guard* with Věra Řepková (pianist)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXkm13DIZ5M>)

Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Music

Discussing nationalism in a short document such as this is very difficult. However, to summarise nationalism in music, it is important to begin with the larger concept of nationalism itself. When we look at the French Revolution, we see that the idea of “the people” being important comes to the fore. Prior to this, the aristocracy ruled, and the lower classes had no power. The revolution in France changed this and other countries followed. Nationalism movements grew in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Serbia in Europe during the nineteenth century, as well as Latin America. Indeed, nationalism is often cited as one of the main causes of World War 1.

Given that, how does nationalism present in nineteenth-century music? We have already discussed the use of regional languages for operas in Smetana and Dvorák's music, and this was also the case in Russian music. In the eighteenth century, opera was sung in Italian, German, or French normally (with some English and exceptional cases). Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* from 1836 was the first opera sung in Russian throughout.

The use of folk material was common throughout all of Europe, and can also be seen in the music of Edvard Grieg, with his use of modal melodies, harmonies, and dance rhythms. He also used Norwegian texts in his music. Polish composer Chopin is well known for his mazurkas (a traditional Polish dance).



The use of folklore is also present in much of this nationalist music. For example, Dvorák's *Rusalka* is based on a Slavic folkloric entity and Grieg's *Peer Gynt* is based upon a Norwegian fairy tale.

However, it is worth noting that the sound of a piece of music could even evoke nationalism. Kamien states "A genuine feeling of national style does not come merely through the use of folk songs or patriotic subjects. A piece of music will *sound* French, Russian, or Italian when its rhythm, tone colour, texture, and melody spring from national tradition." We only need to look at the use of the octatonic scale (a scale which alternates tones and semitones over the full octave) in so many of the Russian nationalist composers' music to know it sounds Russian in a way that little other music from this time did.

Monument of František Palacký in Prague, nicknamed "Father of the Nation" and a key figure in Czech nationalism.

Programme Music

There is much discussion in the music world as to the definition, and indeed the "boundaries" of programme music. In his *Grove Music* article, Scruton defines programme music as "music of a narrative or descriptive kind; the term is often extended to all music that attempts to represent extra-musical concepts without resort to sung words." Liszt was the first nineteenth-century composer to use this term extensively to describe his music.

Scruton's article is extensive in that it deals with how we represent works such as Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* (1808) and even Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (1718 to 1720) concerti. Both these works are described by Scruton as "narrative music," as proposed as perhaps a more simplistic precursor to the nineteenth-century programme music ideal Liszt described. For the purpose of this document, we will defer to other deeper and authoritative sources in how we define the works of earlier centuries for the term "programme music."

There are several types of programme music that were popular during the nineteenth century. Norton describes these four types: the concert overture, incidental music, the program symphony, and a symphonic poem/tone poem.

The programme symphony is probably most well-known from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830). This five-movement symphony tells the story of a man who is in love, however the love is unrequited. There is a clear narrative for the story, and his love has a recurring theme, referred to as an *idée fixe*. We hear the tune in different tempi and styles, representing his encounters with his love across the piece. This piece is one of the most popular symphonies of the 19th century, and one of the clearest examples of programme music.

Concert overtures were popular during the nineteenth century, and perhaps one of the most famous examples is Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture*. You will undoubtedly know the story of Shakespeare's young lovers and Tchaikovsky paints a musical picture of their tragic end. Incidental music was written to be performed alongside other artworks. Grieg's *Peer Gynt* is a good example of this style of programme music and has a clear narrative it portrays through music.

Finally, a popular tone poem by Richard Strauss, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (1894-5) is a clear piece of program music, with a similar aesthetic to the Smetana work we are studying. The music follows a clear narrative, and uses returning themes and motifs which are adapted to the music at the time. The narrative follows Till, a peasant through the countryside, the market, mocking the clergy, his capture by the authorities, and his death. While it may sound like a bleak ending, the music ends positively with a reiteration of Till's theme, implying Till may be dead, but "the joker" in society can never be truly destroyed.

What is Happening in Western Art Music in the late 19th Century?

It is worth noting some major trends in the latter part of nineteenth-century Europe so we can place Smetana amongst his peers. If you listen to some of these works, you may have a sense of the colour of this time period.

Robert Schumann: Symphony No. 4 (1850-1)

Franz Liszt: Les préludes (composed 1845-54, performed 1854)

Richard Wagner: Das Rheingold (composed 1869, performed 1876)

Giuseppe Verdi: Aida (1871)

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 (1874)

Modest Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)

Bedřich Smetana: Ma Vlast (1874-1879)

Georges Bizet: Carmen (1875)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4 (1877-1878)

Johannes Brahms: Symphony No. 1 (performed in 1876)

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade (1888)

Mahler: Symphony No. 1 (1888)

Analysis (prepared by Dr. Jonathan Fitzgerald)

Background:

Smetana's *Vltava* (*The Moldau*) is a symphonic poem that depicts the journey of the Vltava river (or in German, the "Moldau" river), the longest in the Czech Republic. A symphonic poem is a programmatic³ genre unique to the Romantic period which proved to be an ideal medium for composers to express extramusical ideas in a freely constructed instrumental movement. While *Vltava* is the second in a cycle of six symphonic poems collectively known as *Má vlast* ("My Fatherland"), they are in fact independent works that each premiered separately. Nevertheless, the cycle is unified via what is essentially an *idée fixe* or *reminiscence motif*⁴ that Smetana has imbued with Czech nationalistic associations (which will be discussed later). *Vltava* thus combines many trends that were in vogue in the latter half of the 19th century: a focus on nature, the musical depiction of extramusical themes (ie program music), organicism (the idea that everything is unified), and the overt musical expression of nationalism.

As *Vltava* is a programmatic work, its structure is largely determined by the program (the extramusical sequence of events/storyline), which Smetana explicitly lays out both in brief "chapter headings" marked directly on the score, as well as a more detailed description in his preface:

Two springs pour forth in the shade of the Bohemian Forest, one warm and gushing, the other cold and peaceful. Their waves, gaily flowing over rocky beds, join and glisten in the rays of the morning sun. The forest brook, hastening on, becomes the river Vltava (Moldau). Coursing through Bohemia's valleys, it grows into a mighty stream. Through thick woods it flows, as the gay sounds of the hunt and the notes of the hunter's horn are heard ever nearer. It flows through grass-grown pastures and lowlands where a wedding feast is being celebrated with song and dance. At night wood and water nymphs revel in its sparkling waves. Reflected on its surface are fortresses and castles—witnesses of bygone days of knightly splendour and the vanished glory of fighting times. At the St. John Rapids the stream races ahead, winding through the cataracts, heaving on a path with its foaming waves through the rocky chasm into the broad river bed—finally. Flowing on in majestic peace toward Prague and welcomed by time-honoured Vyšehrad (castle.) Then it vanishes far beyond the poet's gaze.⁵

Vltava is delineated into clearly marked sections which each depict a portion of the river's journey, and the recurring "river" theme gives the movement an overall structure that shares similarities with rondo form (a returning A theme interspersed with contrasting episodes—see **figure 1**). Smetana musically depicts the program using well established representational devices in a very straightforward, readily recognisable manner: beginning with the murmurings of the two distant streams which form the river, over the course of the movement it flows past hunters, a peasant wedding party with polka dancing, and a calm moonlit night (complete with dancing fairies) before reaching the Vyšehrad castle and urban grandeur of Prague. Each of these sections will be discussed in detail in the analysis below.

³ "Program" music is simply music that was written to depict or evoke something "extramusical" (ie, something outside of music). In this case, the extramusical subject is the journey of the river.

⁴ These are recurring motives which composers use to represent a person, place or emotion.

⁵ Robert Bagar and Louis Biancolli, *The Concert Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to Symphonic Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 672.

	Intro	A	B	C	D	A	E	A'	F	Coda
Bar:	m. 1	m. 36	m. 80	m. 118	m. 181	m. 239	m. 271	m. 333	m. 359	m. 404
Program/ theme:	source of the river	Moldau River Theme	Forest Hunt	Country wedding/ peasant dance	Moonlight, nymph's dance	Moldau River Theme	St. John's Rapids	Moldau River Theme	Vyšehrad Theme	
Key Area:	e	e	C	G	Ab	e	developmental/ unstable	E	E	E

Figure 1: Overall structure, themes and key areas in Smetana's *Vltava* (*The Moldau*)

Analysis:

Introduction mm. 1–35

The work opens at “The two sources of the Moldau”, where one cold brook and one warm brook come together to form a stream which will become the river Vltava. The first source is depicted by an undulating ascending motif in E minor presented in the flutes at m. 1 (see **figure 2**), accompanied only by sparsely punctuated *pizzicato* chords in the violins and harp. This undulating semiquaver motive will prove to be a very important unifying force as the movement unfolds, serving as a common thread that provides continuity between the disparate sections.



Figure 2: The first source of the river, presented in the flutes

At m. 16, the source of second brook is presented in the clarinets. Unlike the ascending motif of the first source, this second source is descending (and a mirror image inversion of the first), thus musically depicting the opposites of the cold and warm brooks (see **figure 3**). The two water sources interlace and interweave, with the undulating lines representing ripples and swells in the water: these are tried and true methods of musically depicting flowing water, a convention dating all the way back to the madrigals of Monteverdi. The texture thickens as the two distinct brooks gradually combine into a single stream flowing together as a unified force, preparing for the first statement of the Vltava/Moldau River Theme.

Figure 3: The second source of the river, presented in the clarinets (compare with the first source motive in the flutes from m. 1)

A - River Theme mm. 36–79

There is a dramatic timbral shift as the undulating motive in the clarinets and flutes is passed to the strings at m. 36. Over that perpetual undulation, at m. 39 the first violins and oboes lyrically present the Moldau River Theme (with support from the bassoons), which represents the main stream of the river, in e minor (see **figure 4**). This is a very important theme which will return throughout the movement, and is unquestionably the most famous melody Smetana ever wrote. It has a popular, folksong-like quality, and indeed is a folksong—but its origins are Swedish, not Czech.⁶



Figure 4: The opening bars of the Moldau River Theme

The 8-bar River Theme is stated several times, before a modulatory passage begins around m. 65. This leads to brief E-major statement⁷ of theme at m. 73, before quickly returning to the home key of e minor to close the section (clearly marked with double bars and repeat signs). We will see later on that this brief glimpse of E major was a foreshadow of the Vltava’s triumphant arrival as a powerful river in Prague.

B - Forest Hunt mm. 80–117

As the river courses through the Bohemian forest, at m. 80 we are suddenly presented with the scene of a hunt (Smetana has literally titled it “Forest Hunt”). This new, clearly delineated section contrasts with the previous material in just about every way possible: dynamically, texturally, motivically, and with a sudden unexpected modulation to the submediant C major. The horns and trumpets blare a hunting call (see **figure 5**—the leaps are typical of hunting horns), while the undulating semiquavers in the violins keep the sound of the river flowing in the background, and maintain an element of continuity which helps to connect these starkly contrasting sections. The hunt gradually builds to a climax at m. 102, before slowly receding in preparation for the following section.

Musical score for Horns (C) and Trumpets (C) starting at measure 80. The Horns part features a series of eighth-note chords and single notes, creating a rhythmic pattern. The Trumpets part plays a series of eighth notes, also in a rhythmic pattern. The music is marked 'f' (forte). There is a dynamic marking of 'p' (piano) for the oboes at the bottom right.

Figure 5: Horns and trumpets depict the sounds of a hunting call

⁶ Smetana would have heard this folk melody while he was living in Sweden. Surprisingly, the theme would later become the national anthem of the State of Israel. From Swedish folksong, to Czech nationalist symphonic poem, to Israeli national anthem—what are the odds?!

⁷ Called “mode mixture”, the free interchanging of chords between the parallel major and minor systems was common practice among composers in the latter half of the 19th century.

C - Country Wedding mm. 118-180

As the river continues its course, we leave the forest and come upon a rustic peasant wedding celebration. Again, Smetana presents the listener with a series of musical changes to clearly delineate this new section—a quick modulation to G major (the relative major of the home key) and shift to a homophonic texture, while both tempo and meter changes set the stage for a polka, a popular Slavic dance (see **figure 6**). The rhythmic, joyful polka theme conjures images of merry wedding guests dancing and carousing along the river's banks. The theme builds to include the full orchestra, before again gradually receding into the distance as the river moves on to its next destination.

Bauernhochzeit
118 *L'istesso tempo, ma moderato*

L'istesso tempo, ma moderato

Figure 6: The Polka theme in a homophonic (and largely homorhythmic) texture

D - Moonlight, nymph's dance mm. 181–238

The next stop on the river's journey takes us deep into the mysticism and fantasy of Romanticism, where "wood and water nymphs revel in its sparkling waves. Reflected on its surface are fortresses and castles—witnesses of bygone days of knightly splendour and the vanished glory of fighting times." Smetana has again clearly delineated this section with just about every musical tool at his disposal: another meter change, modulation (this time to Ab major, a distantly related key to our home of E minor⁸), a drastically quiet dynamic, delicate ethereal texture, and colourful orchestration where muted strings play a "melody" of very long notes while phrase ends are punctuated by arpeggios in the harp. Smetana creates a sense of calm and stillness, and evokes the image of ethereal nymphs dancing on a calm moonlight river. In spite of the drastically contrasting character of this section, Smetana again maintains a sense of unity and continuity through the return of the opening undulating brook motive in the flutes (see m. 185).

⁸ Ab major is the Neapolitan (bII) of the previous key area of G major. While it is indeed a distantly related key, such chromatic modulations were commonplace in the music of this era.

At m. 200, the atmosphere temporarily darkens with a shift to C minor (note the D-naturals). The texture thickens slightly as low brass enters (initially at a very delicate *ppp* dynamic) at m. 213, slowly becoming more active as the intensity builds to a large crescendo at m. 233. Chromatically snaking lines in the flutes and clarinets lead to the return of the river theme, back in the home key of E minor, at m. 239. Note the key signature change and the appearance of the persistent B-natural pedal point in the bass and cellos at m. 229—this sort of dominant prolongation (B is the dominant in the key of E) is a common feature of re-transitions (modulatory passages which prepare for the return of the home key).

A - River Theme mm. 239–270

The River Theme returns, and with it Smetana also brings back the same key, tempo, meter, texture and orchestration as the original A section, which is repeated nearly verbatim (compare mm. 40-79 with mm. 239-270). Just as the first A section was brought to a close with the sudden arrival at the *Forest Hunt*, this second A section similarly ends when the listener abruptly and unexpectedly finds themselves in the chaotic swirling whitewater of St. John's Rapids.

E - St. John's Rapids mm. 271–332

A jarring *fortissimo* dynamic, insistent repeated chords in the brass, and frantic semiquavers in the strings (note that these melodic lines only ever ascend!) depict the surging waters of St. John's Rapids. The turbulence of the rapids is further represented by Smetana's use of harmony, which is decidedly unstable, searching and modulatory, with heavy use of chromaticism throughout.

In the midst of the rushing whitewater, we can still faintly hear the opening fragment of the River Theme. But it's no ordinary statement of this now familiar theme: Smetana has chromatically modified the fragment, lending an ominous edge to the already turbulent rapids (see **figure 7**). This motivic fragment permeates the section, and combined with the continuous semiquaver motives in the strings, helps to create a sense of continuity in spite of the chaos.



Figure 7: The chromatically modified River Theme fragment, first presented in basses and bassoons.

The rapids build to a climactic *fff* at m. 321, after which the dynamic drops to an unexpected *subito pianissimo* and the texture just as suddenly clears with only strings and rolling timpani remaining. As we've seen before, the B pedal in the bass and cellos prepares for a return to the home key of E, and a rapidly ascending chromatic line in the strings at m. 332 ushers in the next section.

A' - River Theme mm. 333–358

Titled "The Vltava in all its width", this new section marks the return of the River Theme, but now presented with full orchestra in the triumphant key of E major (the parallel major to the home key of E minor), and at a slightly faster tempo (*Piu moto*) than its previous statements. We can now in hindsight make sense of the hints of E major that Smetana teased in the previous A sections (see

m. 73 and 264), foreshadowing the river's transformation from a small stream to a broad, powerful river.

F - Vyšehrad Theme mm. 359–403

We reach the final destination on the river's journey, as it passes by the legendary Vyšehrad castle: "there rises the vision of the castle on high in its ancient splendour, its gleaming golden crown that was the proud dwelling place of the Premysl kings and princes, the ancient dynasty of Bohemia". Still in the key of key E major, beginning at m. 359 the winds and brass present the Vyšehrad theme in triumphant homophonic and homorhythmic solidarity, set in majestic rhythmic augmentation above the rushing, wavy river motives that continue in the strings beneath it. The overlapping rhythms in the strings, featuring frantic ascending septuplet and octuplet figures, evoke images of waves violently crashing against the rocks surrounding the castle. Echoes of the forest fanfares build to a powerful and triumphant climax (see m. 395).

We've already seen several instances of motivic unification in this movement—a theme being utilised in multiple places (and in multiple ways) throughout to create a sense of cohesion—but the statement of the Vyšehrad motive in this section is on another level altogether. The Vyšehrad motive was first heard in the harp at the very beginning of the first symphonic poem in *Má vlast*, and its return here helps to unify the entire cycle. This is an example of a distinctly 19th-century concept known as "organicism", the idea that everything is unified—themes, sections, and movements all relate to the whole and to each other. This is quite a different approach than the 18th century idea of music as rhetorical art.

Coda mm. 404–427

While there is no clear sectional delineation here, the rhythmic change in the upper strings' undulating arpeggio motive (now taking twice as long to make its ascent and descent) creates a sense that we've reached the end of the river's journey, where it "disappears majestically into the distance" and joins the Elbe river towards its final destination in the sea. As the river recedes out of view, the texture gradually thins until only violins remain. After a fermata, two final triumphant chords (V7-> I) utilising the full orchestra bring the movement to a satisfying close.

Summary

Smetana's *Vltava* is an emotive musical portrayal of the Vltava river, noteworthy for its expert use of simple (and immediately recognisable) musical devices to colourfully depict the changing scenery along the river's journey. It embodies many of the important musical trends and compositional priorities of 19th century, including nationalism, organicism, the Romantic fascination with the natural world and mystical themes, and of course program music. Much more could be written about this work, especially Smetana's use of harmony, but the preceding discussion should give you a firm starting point from which to continue your musical exploration of this popular work.

Recommended Recordings

The Chamber Orchestra of Europe, conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3_EsIKarl8

The National Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Michael Buttermann

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItAxKVP3jIU>

The entire Ma Vlast cycle, performed by the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Theodore Kuchar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6jlhLUgER0>

An entertaining performance of a selection of the piece arranged for five pianists

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpAgq0_92cY

Recommended Resources

An introductory interview to Má Vlast made by performers from the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lppqVRjDIqM>

A short introduction on Nationalism in Classical Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h999cAvg0w>

Bedřich Smetana article on *Grove Music Online*

<https://doi.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.3000000151>

Programme music article on Grove Music Online

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.22394>

Nationalism article on Grove Music Online

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.50846>

A list of five iconic romantic composers on masterclass.com

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/romantic-period-music-guide>

Section on Romantic Music in Roger Kamien's *Music: An Appreciation*

https://glencoe.mheducation.com/sites/0002022011/student_view0/part6/



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