



Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

[Episode 20, Elizabeth LaPrelle](#)

Elizabeth LaPrelle has been performing Appalachian ballads and songs since she was eleven. Her magnificent voice, her respect for the songs, and her authentic mountain sound and style make her “the spirit of the Appalachians in song.”

Elizabeth was raised in southwestern Virginia, near the town of Rural Retreat. She grew up hearing a lot of music in her home, including old songs of the Appalachians that her mother learned from friends and recordings. Elizabeth was very young when she began learning and absorbing those songs. As she got older, she became interested in the origins of the songs and visited archives of recorded music to research folk songs, especially ballads. She learned to sing dozens, perhaps hundreds, of songs from singers who were recorded many years ago. Some of these recordings dated back to the 1920s, a hundred years ago.

Ballads are songs that tell a story. They arrived in the United States with immigrants who brought them from the British Isles. In Appalachia, these immigrants were mainly from England, Scotland and Ireland. Ballads are usually sung a cappella—without accompaniment. In Appalachia they were passed down from one generation to another orally. Over time, this resulted in different versions of songs, which also began to vary from one region to another. Ballads tell stories of historic events, love, loss, rural life and traveling. Other themes center around legends, heroes and villains, holidays, religion, jobs and occupations, and good times amongst friends. Some ballads are humorous, some quite dark in subject and mood.

The narrative of a ballad unfolds in verses, typically four lines each, with each verse telling more of the story. There is sometimes a refrain—a line or two that's repeated throughout the song. And sometimes there is a chorus, which is an entire verse repeated several times throughout the song.

Elizabeth sings without vibrato, which is the "quavering" of the voice you hear in [opera singers](#) or [well-known pop singers](#). The "straight" Appalachian style results in a pure, open sound. Elizabeth also illustrates [the difference in timbre](#), or placement of her tone, from the placement an opera singer might use. Appalachian singers "decorate" their melodies with what Elizabeth calls [sighs, or grace notes](#), and sometimes the singer slides up into notes.

Elizabeth performs three songs on our episode:

- "[The Devil's Nine Questions](#)" is a riddle song. The devil asks tricky questions, which the surprised traveler must answer. Elizabeth learned this song from listening to Texas Gladden, a singer from Salem, Virginia, who sang traditional Appalachian ballads. [CLICK HERE](#) to hear Texas sing "The Devil's Nine Questions." Verses are four lines each, alternating between the devil's questions and the traveler's answers. (Lyrics are [HERE](#).)
- "[The Cuckoo](#)" is a ballad Elizabeth learned from the singing of Clarence Ashley and Rufus Thompson. It is in verses of three or four lines each. Two of those lines are used to tell the story; an instrumental refrain of one or two lines ends each verse.
- "[Away Down in the Valley](#)" is a "cumulative" song Elizabeth learned from listening to Maude Long, who lived western North Carolina. Cumulative songs introduce a new element with each verse, adding to the elements mentioned in previous verses. Beats are repeated to accommodate the list, which grows longer with each verse. Other examples of cumulative songs are "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" and "The Twelve Days of Christmas."

Elizabeth has performed frequently with fellow ballad singer Anna Roberts-Gevalt. They have recorded several albums of traditional songs, taking them beyond the traditional with innovative arrangements and experimental music (see Resources below for links).

Anna & Elizabeth (the name of their duo) have resurrected the "crankie" in their performances. Crankies are pictures drawn on a long sheet of paper or fabric that are rolled up. The rolls are then arranged into a box. As the story unfolds a performer scrolls through the pictures, a kind of slow-motion movie that illustrates the song. Crankies are an old form of storytelling dating back to the 1800s. Listen to Elizabeth and Anna describe crankies starting [HERE](#), and read more about the duo's crankies on the website [The Crankie Factory](#).

Vocabulary

Accompaniment – Singers or instruments that support the solo or lead musician. Musically they stay in the background and complement what the lead instrument or singers are doing.

Arrangement – The way a piece of music is "arranged" involves deciding what changes to make to the original. This could involve adding or using different instruments, changing the harmonies or changing the original music's rhythmic structures.

Banjo – [A stringed instrument](#) with a drumhead and a long neck. Modern American banjos usually have five strings; the top-most string is a drone string that plays just one note. Enslaved Africans made early banjos out of anything they could find to mimic instruments from home. Banjos then found their way into many genres of American music.

Beat – A unit of rhythm that you can tap out. For example, in "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," you would probably tap on **TWINK-le TWINK-le LIT-tle STAR**—giving you four strong beats in the first line of the song.

Genre – A particular style of music. For example, jazz, country, classical, hip hop and traditional are all different genres of music.

Lyrics – The words of a song.

Rhythm – The time element of music and dance. Different elements of rhythm are the beat (the repeated emphasis you hear that you can tap your foot to), patterns of sound, duration of sound, tempo (speed) and meter (or time signature).

Timbre (TAM-ber) – The quality of the sound, which is unique for each singer or instrument. For example, a flute has a "brighter" timbre than a bassoon, which in comparison has a "darker" timbre.

Vibrato – A fast, slight variation in pitch. A singer may choose to use vibrato only on longer notes, or on some, or on none. The word "vibrato" in Italian means "to vibrate."

Activities and Questions for Students

Before you watch the episode—Locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a printed map.

Europe: Scotland, Ireland, England (all in the United Kingdom).

Africa: West Central Africa, home of Africans brought to the US as enslaved people, and home of their instrument that later became the banjo.

US: Virginia and North Carolina.

US: The Appalachian Mountain range.

After you watch the episode—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. Elizabeth mentions people she's learned from, musicians of the past she's heard only on records who "taught" her songs and styles and influenced her music making. She also learned from seventh-generation ballad singer [Sheila Kay Adams](#). Pretend you're being interviewed about your "personal influencers," people who've had a positive impact on your musical life, or your life in general. Who would you name? Have you met them or not? What effect have they had on your life?
2. The Appalachian Mountain range in the eastern US has smaller mountain ranges within it. Do some Internet research and 1) find out the length of the entire Appalachian range, and 2) list some of the "mini-ranges" in the chain from West Virginia south. (Hint: Elizabeth names one in the episode.)

- When you're learning to play music by ear, you listen to learn—just like when you're a baby learning to talk, you listen to people talking. Lots of musicians learn by ear. What songs are "in your ear" that you can sing from memory? How many do you know?
- Ballads were originally passed down from singer to singer; lyrics changed over time and when songs "traveled" with singers to new geographic areas. Compare these two versions of lyrics for "The Cuckoo"—which version do you think might be the original lyrics sung in England? Why?

Version 1	Version 2
O the cuckoo, she's a pretty bird and she warbles as she flies She don't ever holler cuckoo Til the fourth day of July	She sucks all sweet flowers To make her voice clear She never sings cuckoo Till summer is near

- Listen to Elizabeth's version of "[The Cuckoo](#)." Musically speaking, how does she portray the idea that the song is about a bird? What does she do with her voice or the banjo that makes you think of a bird?
- Listen to Anna & Elizabeth's version of the song "[Mother in the Graveyard](#)." Now listen to a [more traditional version](#), sung by Margaret MacArthur around 1960. What do you like about Anna & Elizabeth's arrangement? How do you think it honors the original spirit of the song?
- Make a crankie! Listen to [what Elizabeth has to say about making crankies](#) and choose or write a simple story or story-song. It can be as long as you like but make your crankie at least three scenes long. [The Crankie Factory](#) website has instructions on making crankies, but you can use whatever you have to make your own. Make it as big as you like (for example, with a roll of craft paper) or as small as you want (using a cereal box or a matchbox). Use crayon, paint, markers—whatever you have. You can even make a shadow crankie, pasting cutouts on transparent paper and shining a light through the scenes to project them onto a wall. Now perform your story or song for others using your crankie.
- Traditional musicians like Elizabeth embrace innovation in their music making. Take the idea of a traditional crankie and translate it into modern media. Make a digital crankie with video, PowerPoint or whatever digital tools you have. Your modern crankie can be as long as you like but make it at least three scenes long.
- On our episode Elizabeth performs "[Away Down in the Valley](#)," which is a "cumulative" song (see Vocabulary above). A very similar Irish song is "The Rattlin' Bog." [Here's a YouTube version with lyrics](#)—sing along! How tempting is it to get faster as you sing?
- You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Elizabeth's episode, what she talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
- Elizabeth knows hundreds of songs. Every song has its own lyrics, which means she must commit thousands of words to memory. Do you think it's easier or harder to memorize the words of a song or the words of a spoken story? Why?

12. Elizabeth mentions the advantages of ballad singing. How would you describe them? What's beneficial about using no accompaniment? What's beneficial about telling a story in song? What's beneficial about not using a microphone? Your opinion, please—there are no wrong answers!
13. [Listen to Anna and Elizabeth](#) describe their work with crankies. What modern art forms do crankies remind you of?
14. "The Cuckoo" is an old song that was probably written in the 1780s or before. Which of these versions is closest to how you imagine the original song might have been performed over 200 years ago? Which version do you like most and why?
 - [Jean Ritchie](#) (often called "The Mother of Folk" – recorded around 1950.
 - [Bob Dylan](#) (famous singer-songwriter) – recorded around 1962.
 - [Clarence Ashley](#) (one of Elizabeth's inspirations) – recorded in the 1950s.
15. [This is Elizabeth's version](#) of "The Cuckoo" that she sang on our episode. She learned the song listening to recordings of two people, one of whom was Clarence Ashley—his version is [HERE](#). What is similar about Elizabeth's and Clarence's versions? What's different?
16. What is the musical device that Elizabeth uses in her version of "The Cuckoo" to let you know that [the end of the piece is coming](#)?
17. Here are two other, very different, versions of "The Cuckoo." The Ben Mill Band does a [Southern rock version](#), and The Cambridge Singers [do a choral version](#). What are the advantages of arranging the song for a group? What do you like or not like about the arrangements of each of these two versions? (See the definition of "arrangement" under Vocabulary, above.)

Additional Resources

Elizabeth LaPrelle

[Elizabeth's Facebook page](#).

Elizabeth's albums on Spotify:

[Rain and Snow](#)

[Lizard in the Spring](#)

[Birds' Advice](#)

Anna & Elizabeth

[Anna & Elizabeth's](#) Facebook page.

Anna & Elizabeth's [NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert](#).

Anna & Elizabeth's albums on Bandcamp:

[Anna & Elizabeth](#)

[Sun to Sun](#)

[The Invisible Comes to Us](#)

Ethnomusicology

Musicology is the study of music; ethnomusicology is the study of traditional music and the culture that produces it. Ethnomusicologists go into the field and make recordings and notations of traditional music like the songs that Elizabeth sings. Two musicologists were especially interested in recording Appalachian music and song; without these records, much of this music might have been lost forever.

Alan Lomax worked from the 1930s into the 1990s to gather musical traditions from around the world. Thousands of songs and field interviews are housed on the website CulturalEquity.org. Alan first worked with his father, John Lomax, recording on metal cylinders in the 1930s. Around 17,000 sound recordings have been digitized.

Cecil Sharp was an English-born musician who gathered tunes in the Southern Appalachians from about 1915 to 1918, recording on paper the words and music notation of songs. He was particularly interested in how English songs survived the journey to America.

Tell us what you think!

We want to make Carry On™ even more useful and enjoyable for students and educators across the country. [Send us your feedback!](#) Tell us what you liked and what we could do better. And please... tell other educators and schools about the show. Help us all carry on!

With the help of generous donors, [Carry On™](#) is produced by the nonprofit [Northeast Ohio Musical Heritage Association](#) (NEOMHA). The show is programmed by [Laura Lewis](#), artistic director of NEOMHA's [Lake Erie Folk Fest](#). Carry On's resource guides are the work of writer and musician [Rita Lewis](#).

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