

# 8 School dinners

RESOURCES ▶ CD1 track 8 (performance); CD2 track 8 (backing)  
▶ Warm ups: Nos. 20, 32, 34

## Information

‘School dinners’ comes from the imagination of the popular children’s songwriter Alan Simmons, and the subject, presented here with a touch of humour, is as topical now as it has ever been. Each of the four musical lines has a distinct character, and there are plenty of words to chew over and choke on. This song will work unaccompanied but some piano would add solidity and musical depth, both in rehearsal and in performance.

## Starting

- Clap the rhythm to ‘What did you have at school?’ and, after the dotted-crotchet rest, ask the group to copy you rhythmically. Don’t mention any words at this point. When this is perfect, do the same for the rhythm to ‘What did you have for dinner today?’, which is a beat longer.
- Play around with these two rhythms, then put the two phrases together in the right order and practise them. Explain that this is the rhythm of part 1.

## Teaching and rehearsing

- Following on from the ‘Starting’ exercise, teach part 1—there are only two notes and the rhythm repeats, ostinato style. Be cheerful and conversational as you ask the question.
- Demonstrate part 2, showing how it joins on to the end of part 1 by singing the last ‘What did you have at school?’ and then going straight into ‘We started with’. You will have to go over the (unfamiliar) names of ‘minestrone’ and ‘mulligatawny’—words that are rarely set to music!
- Go on to part 3 if the group is willing, or if necessary leave it until a later session. Sing the C at the top of the F major triad and show how the second and third phrases follow sequentially, descending a note at a time; children will pick up on this. Teach the last three notes carefully: this sounds like a bass-line, which outlines the closing cadence of the round.
- Teach part 4 which begins on A, the middle note of the F major triad. Sing long vowels: ‘roobaarb, caarstaard’, etc. The phrase beginning ‘things we adore’ moves stepwise, the only jump being between ‘have’ and ‘more’. Go over this as necessary and make sure it is accurate; do it in a single breath if possible.
- Sing through parts 1–4 in sequence, as a unison song. Add some piano backing to help keep things steady, or tap dotted-crotchet beats.

- Finally, divide into four groups (A–D). Start by singing the song in unison, to remind the group of the intricacies of the song and ensure a strong opening. Then sing the song as a round, Group A starting first:

	Parts										
Group A	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			
Group B	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		
Group C	1	2	3	4			1	2	3	4	
Group D	1	2	3	4				1	2	3	4

## Ideas

- There are lots of interesting words to enjoy singing. Draw attention to words such as ‘crisps’, ‘pop’, ‘bangers’, and ‘steak’ by putting aside a few minutes to focus on consonants.
- Experiment with the dynamic level of each part and ask the children to decide what sounds best. As arbitrator, you might suggest that the words will be heard more clearly with a soft and light approach.
- Explain how opera works! When all the parts are spoken simultaneously it is impossible to hear what is going on; but when all the parts are sung together it is possible to ‘tune-in’ to each part and hear the words. Select a panel of listeners to prove this theory by listening to their peers first chanting the song, then singing it.

## Listen out

- Listen carefully as you follow, or ‘tail’, each group from start to finish. You may have to remind certain individuals of the need to blend with their group.
- Check for evenness in the texture. Is every word audible? Slow the tempo temporarily if you cannot hear all the words.

## Performing

- When full four-part singing is established, fade out the piano so that listeners can appreciate the harmony and texture of the song *a cappella*. Bring back the piano towards the end to support groups C and D. It is good to vary the approach to performance and there is room for spontaneity.
- If you want to include the audience, invite them to join in with part 1—but rehearse it with them first. Too many performances are spoilt by bland invitations to ‘sing along if you want’!

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Words and Music: Alan Simmons

With gusto ♩ = 110

The piano introduction is in 6/8 time, marked *mf*. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

The vocal part consists of four staves, numbered 1 to 4, with lyrics written below each staff. The piano accompaniment is shown at the bottom. The lyrics are: "What did you have for dinner today? crisps, bottle of pop and nibbled a Steak and onions and burgers and mash, Rhu - barb, cus - tard,". The piano accompaniment consists of chords in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand.

Sing each part through in sequence.