Music Curriculum Guide

“A Brief History of Music”
A BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSIC

ANTIQUITY: Creation – A.D. 200

Relatively little is known about the music of antiquity (from Creation – A.D. 200). Historians theorize that music existed in ancient civilizations and that our European musical heritage stems mainly from non-Western cultures.

Hebrew
The Bible refers to Jubal “the Father of all who play the harp and flute” (NIV); Miriam’s women’s chorus; David’s harp; and Jesus Christ, who sang hymns with His disciples. Hebrew music was primarily religious and in the form of psalms, which were sung in unison antiphonally.

Egyptian
Pictorial evidence shows that music was an important part of ancient Egyptian culture. The harp, lyre, double-pipe, and a lute-type instrument were in common use. Egyptian music strongly influenced that of the Greeks, Hebrews, and early Christians.

Greek
Greek culture has had the greatest influence on later theory, aesthetics, and musical concepts. Greek music was inseparable from poetry and drama. The Greeks believed that music had a direct influence on the character (the Doctrine of Ethos). Greek theory was based on the mathematical theories of Pythagoras. Scale patterns, called modes, were based on the tetrachord. Their rhythmic modes used the rhythm of poetry. The Greeks were among the first to develop systems of notation. Their principal instruments were the kithara, a small harp, and aulos or panpipe.

The Early Christian Church
Christian song or plainsong was the principal music of Western civilization for approximately a thousand years. It was monophonic, based on the church modes and normally sung a capella. It was sung in Latin in free and flexible prose rhythms. Hebrew chant was probably the most direct and extensive source of early Christian plainsong.

THE MIDDLE AGES: 800 – 1400

In music history, the Middle Ages includes some late development in plainsong, the rise and growth of polyphony, and the first literature of secular song. Musical leadership was shared by France and Italy. There were many medieval instruments – bowed string instruments, the lute, recorders, shawms. The organ also came to prominence, especially for use in the church. Drums of differing sizes and shapes and various kinds of cymbals and bells were also used. Developments in polyphony took place in church music and were based on plainsong. Rules for time values of sing notes and rests were developed by Franco of Cologne. Music notation was first recorded by signs called neumes. The first important step toward indicating exact pitch was the introduction of a horizontal line representing the tone F above or below which neumes were written. This was the origin of the staff. By the 11th century four-line staves were in use. More
and more lines were added, up to 11 or more, then separated into two staves by eliminating the “middle-C” line. Eventually, by about the 13th century, five-line staves became common. The motet was the main musical form of the Middle Ages. It was a polyphonic vocal style that could be either sacred or secular. It originated in church music.

RENAISSANCE: 1400 – 1600

During the Renaissance the musical centers of Western culture shifted from France and Italy to England and the Netherlands. The main performing medium was the unaccompanied vocal ensemble. Three-part song, melodic progression in thirds, and triple meter became common. The vocal musical forms of the period were the mass, motet, carol, and madrigal. Four-voice writing became more fashionable and imitation played a prominent role. During the 16th century, the beginning of an independent instrumental style was evident. Secular music reached new prominence under patronage of the nobility. Mode still influenced sacred and secular music, but the shift was toward major and minor tonalities, and the trend became an important part of harmony. There was a steady mechanical improvement in string, wind, and keyboard instruments during the Renaissance. Renaissance viols, fretted instruments with strings, were used in various ensembles. The lute was the most popular solo instrument. The most important Renaissance wind instrument was the recorder. Cornets and various kinds of trumpets were also in use but only for fanfares or outdoor festival music for large ensembles. The clavichord and harpsichord also came to prominence. Considerable solo literature was composed for all the keyboard instruments. A school of English composers also contributed to Renaissance keyboard literature for the virginal. Protestantism stimulated musical creativity. The most important musical contribution of the Reformation was the Lutheran chorale. Calvin and other Protestant leaders opposed any influence of the Roman church, so the Psalter, a rhythmical musical translation of the Psalms, was developed.

BAROQUE: 1600 – 1750

The 150 years from the end of the 16th century to the middle of the 18th century is known as the baroque era. Drama, painting, architecture, and music were characterized by grandiose concepts, magnificent effects, and design.

During the baroque period in music, the modern concept of major and minor tonalities finally replaced the modes. The key of a composition was indicated in its title. Modulation between keys also became commonplace. For the first time in music history composers began to indicate tempo and dynamics in their music. Although not entirely new, improvisation became an important part of performance. Counterpoint, two or more melodic lines sounding at the same time against each other, became a natural outgrowth of Renaissance polyphony during this time as well.

Opera was born at the turn of the 17th century as an innovation in Italy. Is soon influenced all types of baroque music. The most important operatic composer of this era was Claudio
Monteverdi. These operas all had dramatic plays or texts as their basis, but by the 18th century people had grown tired of opera’s serious character and the comic opera was born.

Though less important than opera, a considerable amount of non-theatrical vocal music was composed in the baroque period. Vocal chamber music was composed for performance in a small room with a limited audience.

Instrumental music gained equal status with vocal music during the baroque period. Most of the instruments used in the Renaissance period continued to be used throughout the baroque, but all went through further mechanical improvement.

Keyboard instruments were used for accompaniment as well as for solo music. There were three keyboard types: the clavichord, harpsichord, and organ. Sounds on the clavichord and harpsichord were produced by quills, which plucked the string when a key was depressed. The piano was invented around 1709 by Bartolomeo Cristofori, but did not come into general use until later in the 18th century when baroque music was composed for this instrument.

The violin family as we know it today emerged at the end of the 17th century. The principal woodwind instruments were the oboe, bassoon, and flute. Brass instruments included various kinds of trumpets, horns, and trombones, which were used mostly in large ensembles, not as solo instruments. Timpani were the only percussion instruments in general use and were a part of large orchestras only.

The baroque orchestra was composed mainly of strings. Wind and percussion instruments were used sparingly. The harpsichord consistently filled in the bass part of the orchestra. The latest orchestral form to develop was the concerto for a solo instrument with orchestra. It was standardized into a three-movement form, fast-slow-fast, which remains the structure of this form to the present day. The most important form of baroque orchestral music was the concerto grosso. It was constructed on the basis of a group of two or three solo instruments opposing the full orchestra.

Music for the church continued to develop in the Catholic and Protestant churches. The mass became the major musical form of the Catholic Church. The main developments in Protestant church music took place in Germany. The church cantata, using the chorale as its base, became an integral part of the Lutheran service. The leading composers of German Protestant music were Heinrich Schutz, and J.S. Bach. The principal composer of music for the Anglican Church was Henry Purcell.

About the middle of the 17th century, oratorio emerged as a religious form distinct from operatic and church music. The oratorio used a narrator who told the story through recitative and made greater use of the choir. George Fredrick Handel was the most prominent composer of baroque oratorio. J.S. Bach and Handel were the most prominent composers of the baroque era.
CLASSICAL: 1750 – 1820

During the classical era in music, the old forms of the baroque were gradually replaced by new sectional forms. Counterpoint gave way to more homophonic textures, where a single melodic line was accompanied by non-melodic or less melodic accompaniment. A thin, light sound replaced the heavy texture of the baroque style. Classical melody was more compact, had more thematic identity, and remained more closely within the key of the work.

New instrumental media emerged as a result of experimentation by many composers in different countries. Sonata form became the basic structural plan of instrumental compositions in three or four movements. Also called “sonata-allegro” form, or ABA, it consisted of three main sections; exposition, development, and recapitulation. The exposition presents the basic theme of the movement, the development “develops” that theme in various ways and the recapitulation restates the material of the exposition.

The classical symphony, as a form, was one of the major achievements of the 18th century. By the end of the century the orchestra itself consisted of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, horns, and timpani and a string choir of violins, violas, cellos and string basses. Strings were still the most important instruments of the orchestra, with other instruments providing mainly harmonic accompaniment or doubling strings. Franz Josef Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven made the most significant contributions to the symphony of the classical era.

The solo concerto carried over from the baroque but differed in style and structure. Chamber music, composed for small ensembles of only a few players, was a significant category of music literature. Compositions of this type were written in great quantities and were composed for various media ranging from small chamber ensembles to small orchestras. By far the most favored chamber music medium was the string quartet, consisting of two violins, viola and cello. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were the most significant composers of classical chamber music.

While classical instrumental music holds a prominent place in today’s repertoire, relatively little opera, oratorio, and church music of the period is known. The pinnacle of the 18th century opera was attained by Mozart. Religious music was much less important than instrumental music and opera. After about 1780, the oratorio was almost indistinguishable from the opera, and nearly all composers of classical church music were opera composers. The mass became the “opera” for the church.

ROMANTIC: 1820 – 1900

The 19th century is generally known as the romantic era, but aspects of romanticism appeared before 1800 and continued well into the 20th century. It was an age that longed for the unattainable and viewed with fascination the strange, mysterious, and supernatural.

Composers of the romantic era were more socially and economically independent. They no longer depended on the patronage of the church or aristocracy. Music was generally composed
for two kinds of audiences – those of the concert hall and those of the small parlor. Composers increased the length of symphonies, concertos, and operas, while reducing the length of solo songs and piano pieces. They enjoyed poetry, literature, and art of the day and this carried over into their musical compositions. Composers preferred writing for piano, symphony orchestra, and opera. They also fostered national style by using folklore as subjects for their compositions and by incorporating folk tunes and folk styles in their music.

Melody showed more personal warmth and lyricism and a more flexible phrase structure. Dissonance was used more frequently. Seventh and ninth chords, chromaticism and modulation played important roles. Music of the 19th century was noted for its rich sound. The romantic composers discovered new ways of using dynamics for emotional expression, and the form of the classical period became more flexible.

The romantic desire to know more about the past stimulated the rise of a scholarly discipline known as musicology, which involves research in music history and transposition of manuscripts into modern notation.

Individualism, nationalism, program music, and virtuosity were prominent traits of instrumental music in the romantic period. Short piano miniatures and lengthy symphonic works were examples of the romantic extreme. The piano and orchestra were the principal media. After Bach, the organ was neglected during the classical and most of the romantic period.

The piano provided both the composer and performer with possibilities for emotional expression. The addition of a damper pedal enabled composers to experiment with new harmonic effects. Piano composers of the 19th century were less concerned with form than content. Chopin was a specialist in piano composition. His melodic and harmonic ingenuity and delicacy of style made him the leading composer of piano literature of his day. Other composers who contributed to the medium as well were Mendelssohn, Liszt, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms.

The orchestra, one of the great mediums of the romantic period, expanded in size, resonance, tone color, and range of sonorities. Each of the five instrumental families added instruments beyond those of the classical orchestra. More than two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons were used. Additional woodwinds were piccolo, bass clarinet, English horn, and contrabassoon. The brass choir usually included four horns along with trumpets, trombones, and tubas. The introduction of valves into the construction of brass instruments gave them more versatility and melodic potential. To the classical timpani were added many new percussion instruments: the bass and side drums (snare drum) and a large assortment of “color” instruments such as harp, triangle, and celesta. No new instruments were added to the string choir, but its numbers were expanded to balance the larger woodwind and brass choirs. Composers experimented with new effects for expressive purposes. There was more use of solo passages for individual woodwind instruments and horn, and special string effects of pizzicato double stopping, mutes, tremolo, and harmonics were included to create mood in an orchestra composition.

New concepts in symphonic forms were added to the basic classical symphony and concerto forms. Most major romantic composers entitled their works “Symphony,” but the medium was
altered. Composers varied the number of movements, used more contrasting keys, used freer form for the internal structure of the movements, and in general made the symphony a vehicle for expression.

The romantic concerto retained the original three-movement plan of the classical era, but, in general, became a brilliant show piece for the soloist. The piano and violin were the chief solo instruments employed in the concerto.

A new symphonic form, called the symphonic poem, was introduced around the middle of the 19th century by Franz Liszt. A one-movement programmatic work with a descriptive title, it was based on a literary work or legend.

German composers led field in symphonic composition, but as nationalism arose, more composers from other countries contributed to the literature. Leading composers of orchestral music during the romantic period were Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Berlioz, and Beethoven, who is seen as a bridge between the classical and romantic periods.

Chamber music was one of the least favored media of the romantic era. The string quartet continued to be the favored chamber music medium. There was an appreciable increase in the number of chamber works using the piano in trios, quartets, and quintets.

All aspects of romanticism permeated 19th century opera. Especially characteristic were the rise of nationalism and the use of romantic subjects and their emotional treatment.

It Italy, opera was more conservative and less subject to romantic innovations. Composers generally avoided plots based on supernatural or bizarre subjects. The melody was the important vehicle for dramatic and romantic expression. Composers of Italian romantic opera were Rossini, Verdi, and Donizetti. Comic opera, grand opera, and lyric opera were the types of opera being composed in France during the romantic period. Comic opera was a form continued from the classical period. Grand opera was a new style built around grandiose plots. Lyric opera emerged in the second half of the 19th century and combined the melodic appeal of comic opera with some of the large scale aspects of grand opera. Gounod, Bizet, and Offenbach are the main composers of French opera.

Germany rose to prominence in opera during the 19th century. The first half of the century was dominated by German romantic opera, the second half by Wagner’s music dramas. In romantic opera, subject material was drawn from legends, folk tales, or fairy stories. Their plots leaned heavily on the supernatural and wild aspects of nature. In addition to Italian-style arias, German composers used folk tunes and melodies in folk style, and made greater use of harmonic and orchestral color to heighten dramatic interest. German composers of this style were von Weber and Beethoven. German opera in the second half of the romantic period was completely dominated by the creative genius of Richard Wagner. More than any other composer, Wagner departed from operatic tradition. His concept was to fuse stagecraft, literature, and music into the music drama. Wagner wrote his own librettos and developed leitmotifs, musical themes used to represent characters, objects, situations, and emotions. He increased the size of the orchestra and gave it a more prominent and dramatic function.
During the romantic period, art song came to prominence as the most important form of vocal music. Composers took great pains with musical expression of the poetic text. Vocal melody was lyric rather than dramatic and enhanced the mood of the poetry. The piano accompaniment provided harmonic support to the voice and heightened the mood and meaning of the text with harmonic, rhythmic, and even melodic material independent of the voice part. The form of the art song was determined by the structure of the poem.

The 19th century produced a new form known as the song cycle, a group of poems by one poet set to music by one composer. German composers such as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf dominated romantic song literature.

The romantic era was not one of the great periods in church music. Oratorio did not attract romantic composers to the extent that opera and solo songs did. Exceptions include Mendelssohn’s “St Paul” and “Elijah” and Berlioz’ “The Childhood of Christ.”

**TWENTIETH-CENTURY: 1900 – present day**

Events and developments in political, social, scientific, and cultural history have inevitably and profoundly influenced the course of musical history since 1900. The impact of World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam conflict, the rise of independent governments throughout the world, general economic depression and population growth, racial and student unrest and violence, monetary inflation and environmental pollution have vastly changed world socioeconomic status. Tremendous advances in science and engineering and their application to industry have affected history. And, as in all past history, the spirit of the times is reflected in the fine arts.

No satisfactory designation comparable to Renaissance or baroque has yet been devised for 20th century music. “Modern music,” “new music,” and “contemporary period” have all been suggested, but are misleading.

Whereas we can view each past era more or less as a whole, we are too close to the 20th century to acquire such a perspective. We cannot group modern music objectively because it is still in the present.

Enormous amounts of music have been composed since 1900. No single trend represents the century or even a major portion of it, and, in time sequence, these developments overlap.

In the 20th century, music is especially noted for acceleration in frequency and rapidity of change. Musical elements have become far more complex and the means of musical transmission greatly expanded. The modern individual is constantly bombarded with musical sounds of all types and quality. Music has become big business, supported by a large body of consumers.

Prior to 1900, music education was almost entirely limited to training professional performers and composers by private instruction in conservatories. Today, it is a part of education at all levels. Scholarly research in all aspects of music has made tremendous strides. Ethnomusicology,
concerned mostly with the music of non-European systems, has gained momentum, while recording and studying the folk music of worldwide culture is reflected in books, periodicals, and recordings in the field of ethnic music.

Musical trends since 1900 do not follow a neat, chronological sequence, but are overlapping developments. More than one trend is often absorbed in the individual style of a single composer. The emotionalism, programmatic bases and large orchestras of the romantic era have persisted even in compositions where new harmonics, rhythms, and tonalities were used.

The first important trend in modern music was impressionism, and paralleled movements in French painting, sculpture, and poetry. As a reaction to German romanticism, it developed its own style and techniques that reflected refinement, delicacy, vagueness of form, and a sort of “luminous fog” atmosphere. Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel were its central composers.

Expressionism was less significant and a Germanic/Austrian reaction to French impressionism. This style is harshly dissonant and atonal and most closely identified with composers Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg.

Neoclassicism is a very extensive and pervasive trend that began about 1920 and continues to be dominant today. It implies a return to the objectivity and clarity of the classical period, and includes revival of counterpoint while using modern harmony, rhythm, tonality, melody, and tone color. Representative composers of this style are Igor Stravinsky, Sergey Prokofiev, Paul Hindemith, Anton Webern, and Bella Bartok.

Jazz is a distinctly 20th century phenomenon and an essentially popular American art that has influenced all branches of serious composition. Ragtime originated in minstrel shows and was usually music for solo piano. Blues songs dealt with melancholy subjects and probably began as work songs and Negro spirituals. Concurrent with these was Dixieland jazz, a dance-band style that first centered around New Orleans. At the beginning, it was music played by black people in the form of lively processions leaving the cemetery after funerals, but later jazz musicians, most of whom could not read musical scores, started improvising on a specific tune. Leading jazz composers include Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Dave Brubeck, and Thelonious Monk.

Aleatory music, or chance music, is one of the most radical trends of the 20th century. It is based on random selection of musical materials by the composer, performers or both, with no law or limits imposed on the procedure. In general, the composer selects, often by chance throwing of dice or computer programming, certain basic elements as ideas which are notated either in conventional score or by a set of symbols. One or more performers then improvise on these ideas. John Cage and Karlheintz Stockhausen are primary composers of aleatoric music.

Serial music is constructed on the basis of a recurring series of tones, rhythm, dynamics, or timbre. Schoenberg’s 12-tone or tone row music has been the pattern for much of the atonal music and some electronic music composed in this century.

Changes in the musical medium have not been as radical as the materials, forms, and techniques they use. The symphony remains one of the most important media, but music is written for a
smaller orchestra than that of the romantic period. The concert band began to receive attention from composers around mid-century, and more sophisticated original music has been written for band since that time. Although the piano is important in ensembles, music for piano solo does not hold the place it once did in the 19th century.

In the 20th century, composers have not only sought new effects with conventional instruments, but have also invented new sound generators. Shortly before 1950, the magnetic tape recorder became a medium for composition. Called “musique concrete,” its greatest significance is that the function of the performer is diminished or totally eliminated, for the music is both created on and heard through tape itself.

The most recent and radical departures from conventional media are in electronic music. Unlike taped music, which takes live sound from the air, electronic music begins with electronically generated sounds, and recognizes four musical properties: pitch, amplitude, duration, and tone quality. Five kinds of sound waves can be produced electronically at any level of pitch and dynamics, and for any duration.

An important instrument used to produce electronic music is the synthesizer. First developed by RCA in 1955, in 1969 a still more complex keyboard machine was invented by Robert Moog. The digital computer has also been added to the resources of electronic music. All aspects of sound production can be programmed into the computer, including the factor of chance. Recent trends in electronic music have been toward combining conventional voices and instruments with electronic media and improving on existing electronic instruments to reproduce both distinct human and conventional instrumental sounds.

Not every piece of 20th century music is a manifestation of radical change in all respects. All elements have changed to some degree. Polymeters and multi-meters as well as asymmetrical groupings of beats and new time signatures have become common. Melodies of wide leaps and dissonant skips are often combined with unconventional scales that may include microtones. In harmony, clusters of tones support the melody with dissonance as the accepted norm. The simultaneous use of two or more keys, called polytonality, was a 20th century innovation leading to the ultimate development of atonality, the absence of any key center.

As the 20th century draws to a close and our rapidly growing world ushers in the next century, music will surely retain its important place in the lives of the peoples that it uplifts and enriches. But who can foresee the musical changes to come? Perhaps we will all be a part of music history that is yet to be written.