

# Classical Music Appreciation (Grades 5-6 / Lesson 5)

## Summary

Using excerpts from Palestrina's 'Kyrie' and Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus', students explore the concepts of timbre and polyphony.

## Materials

Music Start-up Kit CD 1 and CD player with timer; cassette tape and tape recorder; transparency or copies of w -14

## Background for Teachers

### Composer Profile

#### **Composer**

Giovanni da Palestrina / George Frederic Handel

#### **Nationality**

Italian / German & English

#### **Birth - Death**

1525 - 1594 / 1685 - 1759

#### **Excerpt**

Excerpt kyrie from Pope Marcellus Mass / 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Messiah

#### **Era**

Renaissance Baroque

Giovanni da Palestrina was the most prolific and consistent composer of the sixteenth century. His use of polyphony remains the standard by which other composers are judged. The Pope Marcellus Mass is believed to have had a direct influence on the Church's policy regarding types of music acceptable for use in Catholic services. This composition, which is surrounded by legend (see Palestrina's biography in Section V), is a wonderful use of imitative polyphony, where one voice follows what the other has just sung.

After enjoying great success early in his career, George Frederic Handel's fortunes took a turn for the worse when his London Opera House went bankrupt. He was thrown into debtor's prison, and while there suffered a stroke. Upon his release, Handel needed money to regain his health and his reputation, so he began to write religious oratorios, hoping to capitalize on the Church of England's tremendous influence. Handel's career was revived as a result of this decision and the beautiful music of Messiah came out of this bleak time in his life. The piece may have been composed for money, but Handel did say that while writing it he had a vision of 'the great God himself upon his throne, and all his company of angels.' The 'Hallelujah Chorus' is one of the most well-known pieces of choral music ever written. Its power lies in its grand simplicity, but an 1857 performance of the work was anything but simple; it was sung by a choir of 2,000, backed up by an orchestra of 400 and a 204 ton, four-person organ. People more than half a mile away could hear Handel's masterpiece.

#### **commission**

- a payment given to a musician or artist to create a work for a certain purpose.

**beat**

- the basic pulse underlying a piece of music.

**stretto**

- A musical technique in which one instrument or group of instruments, the first 'voice, 'plays the melody line, and before the first voice has finished, a second voice begins.

**rest**

- an interval of silence in music.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will explore the concepts of timbre and polyphony.

Instructional Procedures

See CMA Table of Contents See composers' profiles and pictures:

**Listen**

Listen to the kyrie (KEER-ee-ay) from Palestrina's Pope Marceliris Mass (selection 2) as an example of this musical style. Palestrina was a master of this technique, called polyphony, and the beauty of his compositions helped polyphonic music gain the acceptance of church authorities for its use in religious services.

**Activity**

Point out to the students how easy it is to tell that there is more than one set of voices singing this work. Why is that? It might be because of the staggered timing of their singing of the melody, but the most basic reason is because the different voices have different timbres. To help the students understand the concept of timbre, play the cassette tape you've prepared for them. Have them try to identify the speakers on the tape. For the voices with which they are not familiar let the students make guesses about the speaker's gender, age, and anything else they can come up with Now ask them how they recognize the voices. What qualities of the voices make them identifiable? The pitch (highness or lowness), nasality, scratchiness, or resonance are all qualities that determine the timbre of a given voice, the things that make it different from any other The term can also be used to describe the different qualities of sound that are created by different instruments playing the same note.

**Close**

Now talk a bit about how the different parts in a chorus take advantage of differences in timbre to create a rich blend of sound. Sopranos are the highest female voice, altos the lower female voices, tenors the higher male voice, and basses have the lowest voices. Display W -14 on the overhead projector or pass out copies to the students. It is a portion of the score for Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus.' Point out how each line of music corresponds to a different voice in the piece. Listen to a portion of Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus' (selection 11, 1:03 - 2:36). Can the students identify the different voices? The part of the piece shown on W -14 is heard from 1:33 to 1:57 on the CD. Help them follow the score as each part joins in or drops out. Divide the class into four groups--soprano, alto, tenor, and bass--and have them raise their hands when they hear their part singing as they listen to the two pieces again, in their entirety.

Extensions

## Beyond

### Related topics

the influence of religion music, art, and culture topics  
instrument sounds

### Extension Ideas

Listen to some 'chant' music to get an idea of how sacred music sounded before polyphony became popular

Read the book *Cathedral* with the students, and talk about how important religion must have been in early European society.

Explore the role of religion in early classical music and art during the Renaissance.

Try some polyphonic poetry by doing the activities Joyful Noise Noise.

### Additional Resources

Macauley David. *Cathedral*. New York: Alfred Knopf. 1994.

Cole, Alison. *The Renaissance*. London: Dorling Kindersley 1994.

Fleischman, Paul. *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. New York: Harper & Row. 1988.

G.E Handel. *The Messiah: An Oratorio*. New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1912.

Easter Chants; The Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos; Milan 73138 35745-2

Handel: Messiah Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus I Robert Shaw Telarc 80093-2

Palestrina: Pope Marcellus Mass Oxford Camerata / Jeremy Summerly Naxos 8.550573

### Authors

[KEENAN HART](#)