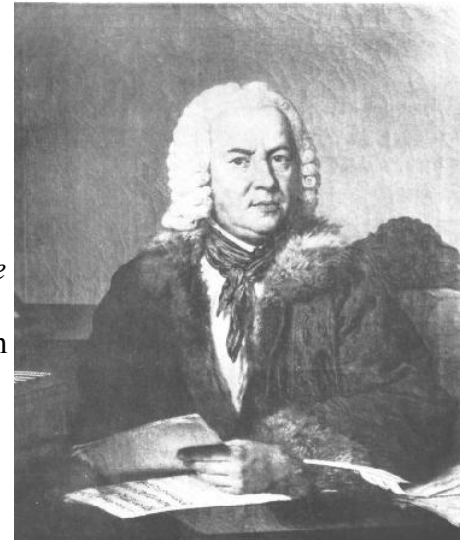


Johann Sebastian Bach

Life Dates: 1685-1750

Country of Origin: Germany

Musical Era: Baroque



"The aim and final reason of all music should be nothing else but the Glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit."

J. S. Bach

J. S. Bach was born in 1685 in what is now Germany. His family was rather large; he was the youngest of eight children. Because so many of his brothers had the first name Johann, he was called by his middle name Sebastian. His parents died when he was nine and an older brother took him in. Bach paid for his early schooling by singing in a boys' choir.

Bach came from a long line of musically talented people. His father was a respected professional musician who encouraged Sebastian and his siblings to study music. His early musical training started when his brother gave him lessons. However, Bach basically taught himself how to compose. He studied by copying music from the workbooks of older composers and went out of his way to listen to important musicians of the day. In one case, he walked 200 miles to see the famous organist and composer Buxtehude.

Sebastian married twice and had many children (by some accounts he had 20!). Many of his children died at an early age but a few of his sons did survive and became important composers in their own right.

Bach was employed by churches and royal courts and was required to compose new music on a weekly basis. He also wrote books for teaching music, which he dedicated to his wives and children.

In the last year of his life, Bach began to lose his sight. He had an operation to fix his eyes, but it was not successful and he went completely blind. In spite of this, he did not stop composing. He dictated, or sang his music to his students, who wrote the notes on paper for him. He died in 1750.

He was not well appreciated when he was living. In fact, his own son CPE Bach criticized him for being old-fashioned for the time. However, many people now consider him to be the greatest composer who ever lived.

Questions from the reading: How did Bach teach himself to compose?
Why did Bach become blind?
What made Bach different from other composers at the time?

Questions for research: What were the German lands called in Bach's time?
When did the country of Germany form?
Who was Buxtehude?

Lesson Plan for “Ricercare” from *Musical Offering* by J.S. Bach

Standards: Music Standards Intermediate

Performance Indicators for Students:

- Listen for one melody in a polyphonic texture.

Materials:

- Rounds or partner songs
- Pencil/pens and paper
- Colored pencils, pastels, crayons



Vocabulary:

- *Ricercare*: An instrumental piece in which a melody (theme) is developed imitatively.
- *Polyphony*: Many melodies played at once.

Listening Repertoire:

- “Ricercare” from *Musical Offering*

Procedure:

- Begin by teaching your class the two new vocabulary words listed above.
- Then have them either sing a round (like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”) or a partner song.
- Listen to the main theme of “Ricercare.”
- Listen to the main theme again, this time “hand shaping” the melody to create a visual impression of the shape. Encourage your students to imitate you.
- Listen to the main theme again. Hand shape and sing the melody. Students can try doing both. Take a short break from listening and discuss the shape of the melody. Does it go mostly up or down or does it “snake” around?
- Now, listen one more time to the theme and on a piece of paper, using a pencil to make dashes, “draw” the shape of the melody. They can then join the dashes, like connect-the-dots, and have a curvy line that is a visual representation of the melody. They can also use this curvy line as the basis for an art work that they create using colored pencils, pastels or crayons.

The next time your class meets, review the vocabulary words and listen to the theme of “Ricercare,” singing and hand shaping the melody. Now, listen to the entire piece, focusing on the theme at the beginning and when it enters each time. Perhaps they can raise their hand everytime they hear the theme enter. Or they can try drawing the different sounds that they hear, a single line for one voice or weaving lines for the places where the texture gets thicker.

Indicators of success:

- Students can sing main theme
- Students can hear the main theme enter at various points in the piece

Follow up by listening to various other polyphonic pieces like Bach’s “Little Fugue in G Minor.” Students can use the same procedure for learning main theme.