

Our Musical Heritage

For 5th-8th grades



Lesson 2 — Cultural Influence & Musical Expression

Objective

Students will identify and understand ways in which composers use music to express meaning and convey emotion. They will explore how music is shaped by culture and how composers' artistic choices are influenced by their own cultural heritage, using selections by Agnes Bashir, Ary Barroso, Huang Ruo and William Grant Still.

Suggested Materials

- Recordings of Agnes Bashir's "Feast" from *Arabic Suite*, Ary Barroso's *Brasil*, Huang Ruo's Flower Drum Song from *Feng Yang*, and William Grant Still's *Africa*, Movement 3. (audio links can be found at <https://bpo.org/music-for-youth-hub/>)
- Composer Fact Sheets (provided)

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Re7.1.5a-8a
MU:Re7.2.5a-8a
MU:Re8.1.5a-8a

New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Reading, Standard 1, 2 & 4
Speaking & Listening, Standard 1, 2, 4 & 6
Language, Standard 1, 3, 4 & 6

New York State Social Studies Standards

Standard 1: History of the United States and New York
Standard 2: World History

Procedure

- 1) Music is often reflective of a composer's own heritage. Composers are influenced by their environment and personal experiences and make artistic choices that reflect their background. In this lesson, we will explore how music by four different composers reflects each of their unique heritages and how each individual's culture influenced the musical choices they made.
- 2) Have students read through the Composer Fact Sheet for Agnes Bashir and listen to the recording of "Feast" from her *Arabic Suite*. How did the instrument(s) support the steady beat and rhythm throughout the music? How is the tempo used to encourage dancing? See if the students can feel the macro and micro beat.
- 3) Have students read through the Composer Fact Sheet for Huang Ruo and listen to Flower Drum Song from *Feng Yang*. Discuss with students the influence of Chinese folk songs on Huang Ruo's composition. How are instruments used in place of traditional song lyrics to convey meaning? How does Ruo make use of percussion instruments to reflect the traditional drum song?
- 4) Play Ary Barroso's *Brasil* for students. After listening for a while, ask them to describe the music. Have they heard it before? How might they move to this music? Have students read through the Composer Fact Sheet for Ary Barroso. What rhythmic elements reflect the traditional samba dance beat? How does *Brasil* highlight the cultural importance of music and dance in Brazil?
- 5) Have students read through the Composer Fact Sheet for William Grant Still. Then have students listen to the recording of *Africa*, Movement 3 "Land of Superstition" and ask them to describe the music. What musical choices did Still make to create the mood? What role does rhythm play in the movement? How are the rhythms and melodies reflective of African culture?



Lesson 2 — Cultural Influence & Musical Expression (continued)

Agnes Bashir



Agnes Bashir was born in Tbilisi Georgia. She possessed an innate talent for music beginning at a very young age, having won first prize in a 20th century music competition at age 14.

She studied composition and piano at the Russian Academy of Music. After marrying fellow Iraqi musician, Fikri Bashir, Agnes moved to Iraq and has since worked as a concert pianist, composer, and music teacher at the Music and Ballet School and the Fine Arts Institute. Along with her husband, she is one of the founding members of the Music and Ballet School and the Baghdad Chamber Ensemble and was involved in the reorganization of the Symphonic Orchestra.

Since 1992, Bashir has lived in Jordan where she worked with the National Music Conservatory and performed her own compositions in festivals, including the Spring Festival in Paris and the 10th International Congress for "Women in Music" in Los Angeles.

In 1998 she was awarded the Medal of Recognition from the Italian Prime Minister for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women. Bashir also established the Arab Alliance of Women in Music (AAWM) in 2000, dedicated to fostering creativity and communication in music. In 2009, the AAWM established the Open Jordanian Youth Orchestra, a summer program where students ages 10-22 have the chance to study music free of charge.

"Feast" from *Arabic Suite*

Arabic Suite was written in Iraq and evokes traditional Arabic music sounds. "Feast" incorporates the traditional rhythms and tune of the *chobi* dance. The music represents a celebratory feast in the streets with food and lots of dancing. The *chobi* is a traditional Iraqi dance performed at festive occasions, such as weddings and holidays. The focus of the dance is footwork, and it is important for dancers to synchronize movement with their partners. It is performed in a long line (or circle) while holding hands and is traditionally danced with the two people at the ends of the line with swords. In this dance, women and men are permitted to dance together. Musical accompaniment typically includes a *qanun*, a zither-like string instrument, as well as traditional Iraqi drums.



Lesson 2 — *Cultural Influence & Musical Expression* (continued)

Huang Ruo

Huang Ruo was born in Hainan Island, China in 1976, the year the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended. His father, who is also a composer, began teaching him composition and piano when he was six years old. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, when China was opening up to the Western world, Ruo received both traditional Chinese and Western education at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. As a result of the dramatic cultural and economic changes in China following the Cultural Revolution, his education expanded from studying Classical composers to include the Beatles, rock and roll, heavy metal, and jazz.



After winning the Henry Mancini Award at the 1995 International Film and Music Festival in Switzerland, Ruo moved to the United States to further his education. He earned a Bachelor of Music from Oberlin Conservatory of Music and both a Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts in composition from The Juilliard School.

Huang Ruo's diverse compositional works span from orchestra, chamber music, opera, theater, and dance to cross-genre, sound installation, multi-media, experimental improvisation, folk rock, and film. He currently teaches composition at the Mannes College of Music in New York and was selected as a Young Leader Fellow by the National Committee on United States-China Relations in 2006.

Flower Drum Song from Feng Yang

Folk songs reflect the life, culture, and soul of a civilization. Fengyang Flower Drum is a traditional Chinese folk song. Originally, the song was sorrowful, as it was used by the Chinese people to beg in the streets after a plague of droughts and floods devastated their region. Traditionally, the song is sung with drum accompaniment. As the song grew in popularity, it evolved to include dance and other forms of theatrical performance and became a symbol of Chinese culture.



Lesson 2 — *Cultural Influence & Musical Expression* (continued)

Ary Barroso

Composer and Brazilian songwriter Ary Barroso was one of the most influential writers of samba music. He played piano for silent films in movie theaters, and later became a successful composer of hit songs for Carnival, the annual celebratory Brazilian festival.

In addition to his music career, Ary Barroso also trained to be a lawyer and worked as a radio announcer, writer, comic, reporter, producer, TV show host and soccer commentator. During the 1930s he wrote many of samba singer Carmen Miranda's best-known songs.

Barroso helped create a new genre of samba music that emphasized melody more than rhythm and featured more complex harmonies. This style of samba can be found in his "Aquarela do Brasil" ("Watercolor of Brazil"), better known around the world as, "Brazil." The 1942 Disney film *Saludos Amigos* made the song an international hit and it is widely recognized today.



Brasil

Ary Barroso wrote "Aquarela do Brasil" one night when a heavy rainstorm prevented him from leaving his home. The title translates "Watercolor of Brazil," a reference to the rain and watercolor painting. Composed in 1939, it is one of the works most representative of Brazil, which brings together musical elements of the genre of samba called *exaltação* (exaltation samba) characterized by a broad melody and large orchestration. The song marked the creation of a new genre within samba music. Today, the song has been recorded by countless artists around the world and used in several movies.



Lesson 2 — Cultural Influence & Musical Expression (continued)

William Grant Still

William Grant Still was an African American composer that lived from 1895 to 1978. He was born into a musical “golden era,” where jazz, pop, classical, and even film music overlapped as never before. Still’s early childhood years were also during a time of racial segregation.



He enjoyed great success during his lifetime as a composer and a conductor, and he achieved many firsts for African Americans – he was the first to conduct a major American symphony orchestra (Los Angeles Philharmonic), the first to have a symphony he wrote performed by a leading orchestra (Rochester Philharmonic), the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company (New York City Opera), and the first to have an opera performed on national television (PBS).

Still grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas and was encouraged in his interest in music by his mother and his stepfather. He listened to classical records, went to concerts, listened to his grandmother sing spirituals, and learned to play violin. When he went to college, he first studied medicine, but while he was there, he learned to play several instruments. He also conducted the school band, organized concerts featuring his compositions, and began considering a career as a classical composer. This was at a time when there were no professional African American classical composers in America.

After serving in the military during World War I, he ended up following his love for music into a career composing and arranging it. He worked for the great jazz and blues musician and composer, W.C. Handy, and ended up in Harlem where he connected with the Harlem Renaissance, a period of flourishing African American culture in literature, art, theater, and music.

Africa

Still finished his piece titled *Africa* around 1927. He wanted to write a piece that reflected his African heritage and the cultural connection he felt to Africa as an African American. He studied African music and African culture for many, many years before writing this piece. *Africa* is a depiction of the African American experience. The piece is in the form of a symphonic poem. A symphonic poem is a piece of orchestral music which illustrates or evokes the content of a poem, short story, novel, painting, or landscape.



The third movement is titled, “Land of Superstition,” and it celebrates the importance of stories, myths, and folklore in African cultures. This movement uses some melodies that are inspired by African songs, and rhythm is central in driving the steady beat. Rhythm is very important in African music, which is reflected in the vast number of drums and percussion instruments found in African cultures. There are as many different rhythms played in African music as there are drums. But even through all the complex rhythms, you can usually find a very steady beat.

