Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Identify key terms and figures in the history of pop music.
2. Identify and define popular musical styles and their cultural beginnings.
3. Illustrate the importance of film music and its role in movies and television.
4. Identify and explain the rise in popularity of Musical Theater as compared to the operatic styles of the past.

Written Lecture

Unit VII Popular Music of the Twentieth Century

The classification of Popular music encompasses a huge amount of musical styles. In fact one of the only reasons to break down each style is to aid in the selling of recordings. Every popular musical style (not genre) from jazz to rock and even rap comes from the same place. African American work songs of the nineteenth century evolved into the styles that almost every culture on Earth enjoys today.

Scott Joplin’s piano rags used syncopated rhythms that engaged the audiences of the early United States. Due to health problems and an untimely death, Joplin did not live to see his prodigious influence on music that would follow. The melodies and formal structure heard in Joplin’s music were easy to follow and inspired the beginnings of jazz and blues. Differing from most classical music, repetitive styles of music do not take much mental focus to enjoy, we easily know what to expect throughout a pop song. These unifying formal elements place all popular music in one category, while almost everything else discussed in this course is under another category, classical music.

New Orleans is credited as the birthplace of jazz, and has been home to some of the most influential musicians in the twentieth century. The mighty Mississippi river connects many cities and made possible the early transportations of musical styles. Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis, as well as New Orleans are all close to the banks of this early musical highway.

The many different styles of jazz music are connected with the musicians who performed it, the audiences who listened, and political or racial attitudes towards the music. Music of classical composers did have an influence on jazz, though not on style. Just as in previous musical periods, jazz musicians could take a popular melody and modify it into there own compositions. Arrangements that expanded to larger forces, say for a big band, the technique of writing for a wind ensemble was necessary. The evolution of jazz styles is as important to popular music as is the evolution of classical music. Jazz is a truly American art form, and during the early twentieth century when it began, as well as today, it has influenced musical creations all across the world.
Opera, which in previous style periods was the pinnacle of entertainment, became less popular because of popular music that was more accessible to the early twentieth century ear. Though operas were still written, a new simpler style that reflected the lives and subject matter preferred by modern citizens began to take over the spotlight. The operetta, and later the musical, is now preferred by the majority of the public. The style of singing is quite a bit different, and sometimes more intimate than the boisterous expressivity of operas in the past. The single biggest influence on this change of singing style is the microphone. With the microphone, singers can almost whisper into the device and be heard. In opera, a singer must be heard above a full orchestra, in very large rooms sometimes seating hundreds of guests. Electronic technology allows for a much more personal style. Do not think that because of this change in style that opera has been placed into a museum, it is still incredibly important today, and the classics as well as new pieces still are enjoyed by audiences all over the planet.

When movies began appearing in the late nineteenth century, music was needed to accompany the visual medium just as music is used in opera and musical theater. The composers discussed in previous units paved the way for modern film composers to represent movies characters, scenes, and ideas through musical sound. The leitmotif was first used by Richard Wagner and is composed of short bits of melodic material used to exemplify a literary or pictorial subject. In the Symphonie Fantastique by Hector Berlioz, we hear his idée fixe that represents his beloved. In Star Wars John Williams uses unifying themes to represent things such as the Empire, the Rebels, and even a theme to represent hope. The influence of earlier composers is incredibly clear in film music. Think about some of your favorite movies. Do you only remember the story, or the characters? Probably not. Music in most films is almost as important as the visual effects and the story along with its characters.

Most popular music is so engrained in our lives that it seemingly does not need to be explained in any academic context. The breakdown of popular styles, especially rock and roll, may be surprising to most students. It is important to remember that most pop music comes from a common origin. The musical material, the formal elements are mostly the same. The major differences are in cultural aspects of the music such as race, regional speaking accents, dress, and political opinions. Almost everyone is not afraid to have an opinion, or a favorite. The single most important thing is to know why you have these favorites and opinions, and how it effects, or reflects your own life.

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Listening Activities: Listen to the musical examples using both the Interactive Listening Guides in StudySpace, as well as the listening guides in the textbook. The musical examples will need to be heard multiple times.

- Scott Joplin: Maple Leaf Rag
- Billie Holiday: Billie’s Blues
- Strayhorn: Take the A Train
- Gershwin: Summertime, from Porgy and Bess
- Bernstein: West Side Story, excerpts
- John Williams: Raiders March, from Raiders of the Lost Ark

There are listening examples included in almost every chapter of the textbook. Though they are all not required, it is strongly suggested that you listen to as much music as possible to gain a true appreciation for music.