

Saturday August 4, 7:30pm  
Beaver Island Community School  
*Baroque in Blue*

Program Notes

The Blues and Jazz are both influenced by innovative and progressive advancements credited to the Baroque era. Baroque music pushed musical instruments to their limit for the first time in history, and composers wrote pieces utilizing the full range of instruments. In similar fashion, Blues music and Jazz tested the limits of modern-day instruments, and pushed players to technical and expressive extremes never heard before. Baroque music also made advancements in the structure of music, influencing every genre of music following the Baroque era. An untrained ear may think Blues and Jazz music contain no structure, but both styles have a very clear rhythmic and harmonic structure and follow specific blues chord progressions.

The Blues are a musical genre created by African Americans in the Deep South of the United States at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Blues music is built on the roots of African work songs and spirituals, and continued the tradition of using music to pass down stories from generation to generation. Often polyrhythmic (playing different rhythms against another), traditional African music was not composed with the purpose of pleasing the listener's ear. Rather, African music was intended to express all aspects of life through sound, and traditionally features improvisation and a call-and-response structure. Blues music in the Deep South grew out of these African traditions and became known as the sounds of African-American spirituals. *Down to the River to Pray* is a spiritual thought to have been composed by an African-American slave.

Spirituals from the Deep South were based on melodies containing only a handful of notes. These melodies were called tetratonic (three-note), pentatonic (five-note), hexatonic (six-note), or heptatonic (seven-note) melodies, and contained "odd-sounding" notes and intervals not considered standard in Western music. As composers began to notate Blues music and melodies, the term "blues scales" emerged. Blues scales most commonly included hexatonic (six-note), heptatonic (seven-note), and nonatonic (nine-note) scales, with some of the notes raised or lowered to create larger or smaller intervals between pitches to depict the traditional sounds of African-American songs. Another characteristic feature of Blues music is the twelve-bar blues chord progression. This chord progression was based on the I, IV, and V chords of a key, and became the structural foundation for much of the music composed in the Blues era.

Jazz emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and is thought to have developed out of Blues music. Jazz is a distinctly American music form originating in the African-American communities of New Orleans, Louisiana, and it is often called "America's classical music". Similar to Blues, Jazz is characterized by blues notes, call and response vocals, polyrhythms, and improvisation. As Jazz evolved and traveled around

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the world, new jazz styles emerged with distinctive national and local musical influences, and the result is what we now know as swing, bebop, ragtime, and Dixieland. George Gershwin (1898-1937) entered the jazz scene as Jazz was emerging from Blues, and he quickly became a success and composed many pieces now considered jazz standards. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) was commissioned to be a "jazz concerto". Composed for solo piano and jazz band (it wasn't until later that the orchestration was expanded to include a full orchestra), *Rhapsody in Blue* features many elements of Jazz and Blues including blues notes, blues scales, and dynamic rhythms while also keeping the romantic and free-flowing feel of a rhapsody (a musical form originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with free-flowing structures and highly contrasting color and tonality).

Similar to Gershwin, Irving Berlin (1888-1989) lived during the height of Blues and Jazz music. Much of his music is influenced by these musical genres, but Berlin was unique in his ability to add lyrics to his music to reflect the heart and soul of the American people. Gershwin called Berlin "the greatest songwriter that has ever lived". One of Berlin's most famous compositions is *God Bless America*, showing Berlin's ability to compose across many musical styles. *Rags to Ritz* is a collection of several songs written by Berlin for motion pictures and stage productions, each with an undeniable Blues and Jazz sound.

~ *Laura Schipper*