CHAPTER GOALS

- To demonstrate how the ideas introduced in Chapter 2 apply to musical examples from three different musical traditions.

CHAPTER THREE

Three Listening Examples

In Chapter 2 we undertook a general overview of musical terminology. Now we apply these tools by studying three compositions. Each is from a different time and culture; each has a different social purpose. As you listen to the examples, keep in mind the various musical elements and how they express meaning.

> "When I don't like a piece of music, I make a point of listening to it more closely."
>
> —Florent Schmitt (1879–1958)

"Bourrée" by J.S. Bach

If during a eulogy for German Baroque-era composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) someone had stated that 250 years after his death the composer would be considered one of a handful of giants in Western art music, the Protestant mourners, though sure to remain respectful, would have found the idea incomprehensible. Bach was a skilled musician to be sure, but others, now mostly forgotten, were more highly regarded. Nevertheless, the eulogist's words would have been true. Few composers have cast a shadow as broad and enduring as J.S. Bach.

Bach lived his life within a limited geographical area.  3.1 He was born in the town of Eisenach, spent most of his life in small towns, and never left Germany. Large in creative spirit, but humble in ego, Bach was content to labor in the background. He considered himself a craftsman and a hard worker. Neither fame nor fortune interested him. In their own lives (and even that of their father's), four of his sons were far more prominent composers than he.

Bach was best known as a skilled improviser and keyboardist. As a Lutheran church organist, he was accustomed to extemporizing preludes and elaborating on hymn tunes for church services. These, however, were skills expected of any reasonably accomplished church musician.

How good an improviser was Bach? Indicative is a story from May 1747 when he visited the Potsdam court of Frederick II of Prussia (Frederick the Great, 1712–1786), who was himself an accomplished amateur musician. During an evening of chamber music, the king presented Bach with a melody that he had composed. Bach took the melody, sat down at the keyboard, and effortlessly improvised an intricate polyphonic composition called a fugue. The melody continued to hold Bach's attention. He went on to write thirteen pieces, each a complex elaboration of the original melody. Bach dedicated the collection, known as *The Musical Offering*, to Frederick II.  3.2

Bach's compositional output was extraordinary. His catalog of works (*Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, or BWV) lists over 1000 compositions; the complete recorded set fills 153 CDs. Bach wrote for nearly every imaginable combination of instruments and voices. From works for solo violin to pieces for chorus and orchestra, Bach's output was of universally high quality. Many of his compositions—such as his sonatas and partitas for violin solo, a collection of pieces for harpsichord called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the *Brandenburg Concertos*, to name just a few—are considered among Western art music's greatest achievements.

Bach's first important job came in 1708 when the Duke of Weimar hired him as organist, chamber musician, and eventually as first violinist in the court orchestra. Six of his twenty children were born in Weimar. It was there that Bach wrote the first of his didactic works, the *Little Organ Book*, for his eldest son and future composer, Wilhelm Friedemann

Bach (1710–1784).

Bach left Weimar in 1717 to accept a position in the court of Prince Leopold of Cöthen. The transition was not easy, however. At first the Duke of Weimar refused Bach's resignation and even imprisoned him for "too stubbornly forcing the issue of his dismissal." After nearly four weeks in detention, Bach was granted an "unfavorable discharge" and allowed to move his family to Cöthen.

Once there, work went well. The prince was an amateur musician who enjoyed having music at court, but he was also a Calvinist, with little use for music in worship. Therefore, Bach's Cöthen output was mainly secular. He wrote mostly instrumental works for members of the court orchestra, including his six Brandenburg concertos.

Portrait of J.S. Bach seated at the organ, 1725.

In 1723 Bach moved his family to Leipzig, a cosmopolitan city of 30,000. Bach spent the last twenty-seven years of his life there, serving as music director at the St. Thomas Church and as the city's director of music. Those duties included composing, rehearsing, and performing music for the city's four main churches; overseeing music for the town council and university; and providing musical training for the fifty to sixty boys at the boarding school attached to St. Thomas Church.

As much as we revere Bach's music today, it was rarely performed in the years immediately following his death. Bach lived at a time when audiences were more interested in what was new; the past was invariably out of fashion. That attitude took a seismic shift in 1829 when 20-year-old German composer and conductor Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) put together a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, one of Bach's most important

works (see Chapter 7: Music and Spirituality). The audience was moved and intrigued by what it heard. Thus began not only the reintroduction of Bach's music to the public but also an interest in historical music in general.

"[illegible] Suite in E minor, by Johann Sebastian Bach

LISTENING 3.1 GUIDE

Texture: Polyphonic
Meter: Duple
Form: Binary

Though the bourrée originated as a 17th-century French folk dance, by the mid-18th century it was commonly danced by the nobility. Bourrées were cheerful and lively, used both as a social courtship dance and in theatrical entertainments. They were in duple meter and usually began with a pickup beat. The dance began with a plié (a slight bending of the knees), which provided the impetus to rise gracefully onto the balls of the feet and flow into a variety of gliding steps. Gentle leaps and hops often separated the steps. 3.3

Bach and other composers of the Baroque period wrote bourrées (as well as other popular dances) and included them in instrumental suites. Comprising four to six different dances, a suite was meant for listening only. Even so, each dance retained its representative meter and character, thus reminding listeners of the social dances they knew so well.

PART 1 (A)	0:00	Phrase one (a)
	0:06	Phrase two (b)
PART 1 (A) Repetition	0:12	Phrase one (a)
	0:17	Phrase two (b)

Part 1 (A) consists of two angular phrases. Both begin in the upper register on "do," ascend to "me" and then meander up and down, eventually heading toward the bottom of the melody's range. The first phrase ends on "do," an octave below the first note of the phrase. Notice the octave leap that results when moving to phrase two. The second phrase begins like the first, but ends on "me," which briefly becomes the new home tone, or tonic of a parallel major scale. This momentary "home away from home" pivots the listener either back to the beginning (for the repeat) or on to the next section.

Try conducting the beat. Or better yet (since this is a stylized dance), walk to the beat so that you can feel the rhythm in your entire body. How quickly should you step? Let your body and intuition tell you which rate is most appropriate. Perhaps you have

noticed that the rhythm is extremely repetitive—short–short–long, short–short–long, etc.—and also extremely propulsive. Notice how the two quick tones push the melody (and your stepping body) forward.

PART 2 (B)	0:23	Phrase one (c)
	0:29	Phrase two (d)
	0:35	Phrase three (e)
	0:41	Phrase four (f)

The B section is longer, with four separate phrases whose melodies differ from those in the A section. The short–short–long rhythmic motive carries over from the first section, but here the melodic contours are more jagged, or disjunct. The harmonies are also less stable than in the A section, creating a unified drive to the end of the last phrase. This section is then repeated.

PART 2 (B) Repetition	0:47	Phrase one repeated (c)
	0:53	Phrase two repeated (d)
	0:59	Phrase three repeated (e)
	1:04	Phrase four repeated (f)

The overall form of this piece is AABB, or more simply, AB, known as binary form. There are many ways form can be delineated, but usually it is based on the concept of "same" and "different." Our brief example above is organized according to same/different melodies. In the case of large-scale works, many more musical elements would work together to delineate the different sections.

So far we have concentrated on the music's melody, rhythm, and form. What else is happening? You may have noticed another line of music below the melody. It has less rhythmic interest than the top part, mostly moving along by keeping a steady beat. However, it has its own melodic character and could function independently as a separate tune, albeit a less interesting one. As we have learned, when two or more independent lines sound together, the resulting texture is polyphonic.

Finally let's return to the social context of Bach's "Bourrée." How might this piece remind listeners of the dance? Can you envision the steps and hops? Why did Bach choose to emphasize the short–short–long rhythmic pattern? And considering that the bourrée was a cheerful dance, why did Bach write this work in a minor key? Here is a case where the minor scale does not correspond to its oft-associated "sad" affect. Perhaps Bach was trying to portray a more serious bourrée, one befitting the dignified expressions expected of the nobility. Or perhaps Bach's bourrée is simply more reflective than cheerful—evoking the reminiscence of the dance, rather than the dance itself.

Our example features a guitar, but Bach actually wrote the piece for a keyboard instrument. Today, one can hear this piece on almost any instrument and in a variety of styles. It was a favorite of Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page (b. 1944), who often attached it to his improvised solo in the song "Heartbreaker." It was also a favorite of Ian Anderson (b. 1947), flutist in the 1960s rock group Jethro Tull. This bourrée remains one of Bach's most recognized pieces.  3.4

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- Why do you think the A section is shorter than the B section?
- Notice that each phrase becomes less active at its end, as if it ran out of energy. Why might this be?
- Where does the bottom line play faster notes than the top line? How would the piece feel different if the bottom line kept its regular pace?
- What do you imagine the dance to look like? Many performances can be found on the internet. Do they meet your expectations?
- Any thoughts as to why this music is still so well known?

ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

- Notice that some phrases of the "Bourrée" do not feel quite complete, as if they end with a comma or question mark. Others end more definitively, with the musical equivalent of a period, sometimes even an exclamation point. Make a diagram of where these different endings occur.
- Look up Bach's "Bourrée" on the internet. How many performances can you find? How do different performances affect the emotional quality of the piece? (A few of them may surprise you.)

Music from Japan

Our discussion of the "Bourrée" demonstrated some basic principles in the composition of Western art music. Many of those principles are employed in traditions around the world. But not all, of course. Our next example, a composition for the Japanese *shakuhachi*, a five-tone-hole bamboo flute, offers a different set of compositional principles and aesthetics.

Japanese musicians, attributed to Kusakabe Kimbei, 1870s–1890s.
Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum

First, however, some history. Though long associated with Japan, the shakuhachi may have been invented in China (where it was known as the *chiba*) or perhaps in the Middle East. What is certain is that the instrument was brought from China to the Japanese islands in the 8th century as part of a mixed instrumental ensemble used to accompany the courtly music and dance genre *gagaku*. 3.5

Though gagaku has continuously thrived in Japan, the shakuhachi apparently did not. The marriage of instrument to genre ended by the 10th century. At that point, the shakuhachi mostly disappeared from the historical record until the 14th century.

During the late 17th and 18th centuries, however, the shakuhachi again rose to prominence when it became associated with the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism. Apparently, the instrument was used to facilitate *suizen*, or blowing meditation. It was also during this time that it attained its contemporary physical form. The modified instrument was thicker

and heavier than earlier versions and had a slightly flared end.

"Nezasa Shirabe," performed by Tadashi Tajima

LISTENING 3.2 GUIDE

Texture: Monophonic
Meter: Unmetered, breath governs phrase length
Form: No set form; this work relies on melodic expansion and contraction to give it shape.

"Nezasa Shirabe," like nearly all traditional shakuhachi music, is built on a pentatonic (five-tone) scale: do–re–me–sol–ley, which, to the Western ear, gives the impression of a minor tonality.

As you listen to the piece, try to breathe in sync with the musician. Notice how long your breaths become, perhaps how time itself seems to expand. The music has no rhythmic pulse, no meter. Instead time seems to float alongside the slow rhythm of the breath.

Nezasa is a branch of northern Japan's Kinpû sect; a shirabe is a short introductory piece, generally of a meditative character. Sometimes a shirabe stands alone; other times it may be attached to the beginnings of longer compositions. The music is designed to warm up both shakuhachi and performer. A particular trait of this piece is the *komibuki* (pulsating breath), a technique designed to focus the mind.

0:00	The opening gesture is a downward movement: a short upper grace note followed by a long held tone (sol–re). We cannot know it yet, but the gesture lands on the lowest pitch in the composition. It will also be the tone on which the music concludes. Notice how Tajima colors the tone by constantly changing its inflections through komibuki, vibrato, dynamics, and subtle pitch bending.
0:11	The second gesture is more or less opposite the first in that it leaps up to, and then sustains, the same tone that served as the grace note at the music's beginning (sol–re–sol).
0:20	A movement to "ley" (though only the third of five possible pitches) gives complete shape to the pentatonic scale, which an experienced listener will now hear in his inner musical road map. "Do," a new high point in the melody, is briefly sounded, then a return down to "sol."
0:37	As Tajima continues his slow upward exploration, it seems as if every movement upward is followed by another small one in the opposite direction. He reaches a new high pitch, "re," then settles back down to "do" before continuing to move upward to "me" at 0:54, "sol" at 1:12, and "ley" at 1:20.
1:25	The composition, just short of halfway complete, reaches its upper limit sitting on the tones "do" and then "re" at 1:35. This is the music's climax, which is followed by a meandering descent to the original pitch area.
2:33–2:42	Finally, repeating the gestures with which the composition began, the melody returns to its opening tones. The return signals the music's end.

Perhaps these were aesthetic choices. Equally possible was that the changes accommodated the instrument's secondary use as a defensive weapon. Wearing basket-like hats (*tengai*) over their heads to hide their identities, Komoso (Fuke) monks (many had once been samurai warriors) walked the dangerous countryside playing their shakuhachis and begging for alms. Also, or so it is speculated, some worked as spies on behalf of the government.

Whatever the monks' political motives, they apparently became formidable instrumentalists. It was also during this time that a standard repertoire developed. Many of these compositions were written down and preserved. They are still taught today.

Following the end of feudalism with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a wave of modernization spread across Japan. One consequence was the banishment of the Fuke sect and a proscription against using the shakuhachi for religious purposes. Once again, the instrument was adapted to fit new interests. The repertoire was secularized and music notation improved. New theoretical ideas were developed. Compositions began to be written for ensembles of different-sized instruments.

This last development might seem strange, since the word shakuhachi (taken from *i shaku ha sun*) specifically refers to the instrument's size. A *shaku* is a little less than one foot in length; *hachi* stands for 8/10 of a shaku. Thus, a shakuhachi equals a length of just under 1.8 feet. Today, while this size remains common, a shakuhahi may come in a variety of lengths, ranging from just over one foot to more than three feet.

The shakuhachi proves that simplicity of design is no guarantee of ease of performance. It is notoriously difficult to play. Breath control can take years to master. Pitch inflection, which is achieved by changing the angle of the breath or by partially uncovering any of the five finger holes, is a subtle and essential aspect of performance.

Japan today has a number of shakuhachi playing schools. Each is associated with a characteristic style and a particular lineage of teachers. Although the instrument has lost many of its sacred connotations, links to Zen Buddhism remain. This can be heard in the slow unfolding tempo of performance and the common practice of focusing on just a single extended tone, despite the instrument's range of about three octaves.

We have heard that the piece unfolds along an undulating arc moving generally from low to high and back down again. We have also noticed that the same melodic and rhythmic gestures open and close the composition. How else might you describe the music? Meditative? Austere?

Finally, notice that many of the skills used to understand Bach's "Bourrée" are useful in understanding "Nezasa Shirabe." In both we hear the outlines of organized form, the use of repeated melodic gestures, and applications of rhythmic gestures. Despite the many obvious differences in mechanical application, social use, and emotional focus, the pieces also have much in common.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- ”Nezasa Shirabe” ends where it began. What might be the symbolism behind this choice?
- Why might monks choose a wind instrument to play rather than a stringed instrument?
- What is the emotional effect of the music’s lack of metric pulse?

ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

- There are many recordings of "Nezasa Shirabe" (though the spelling varies slightly). Find another recording to compare and contrast.
- Construct a shakuhachi from PVC pipe.