



**From the Top at Carnegie Hall**  
**Episode 12: "Bach to the Future"**

Airing on PBS (check local TV listings)  
Available online at [pbs.org](http://pbs.org)

## Learning Activity

### **Title: *Round and Round (and Round)***

**Description:** In this activity, students will learn about the *canon* as a compositional form and connect what they know about singing rounds to the classical canon form.

**Grade Level:** 5-8

**National Music Standards:** **4** Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines,  
**6** Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

### **Background**

Eleven-year-old pianist Hilda Huang loves Johann Sebastian Bach. She has learned many of his complex keyboard pieces, including all of the two-part inventions and several suites, and is making a video about Bach. In memory of one of her favorite pianists, Glenn Gould, she plans to record a work called *Canon in Hypodiapason* for her video. This is the piece she plays on this episode.

In Western classical music, the *canon* is an old and specific form whose name comes from a word that means "rule" in Greek. While there are many variations on the basic form, a canon always includes at least two parts, one that leads and another that follows and imitates it note for note. The distance in time between the parts is measured in bars or fractions of bars, and the tonal distance between the voices (parts) is measured in intervals such as octaves, fourths, and fifths. The simplest kind of canon is a *round* – something almost everyone knows through children's songs like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "Frère Jacques." A very famous classical canon is Johan Pachelbel's *Canon in D*, which has been used in everything from ringtones to television commercials.



Hilda Huang plays Bach in Carnegie Hall

## Materials

Computer with media player; speaker and projector if needed, paper and pencils

## Activity Instructions

1) **Tell students** that they will hear a canon by J. S. Bach performed by a young girl who is a great fan of Bach. (She even has her teddy bears dance to Bach!) A round is one type of canon – ask students to **name some rounds** they know and list these on the board.

2) **Now pick a simple round and sing it together a few times.** “Row, Row” is a good example because it’s a simple duple meter (with a few “merrily” triplets thrown in for fun!). With students, establish the meter and time signature, and then ask them to do some counting. For example, how many measures are there in the whole song? How many measures does the lead part sing before the following part comes in? How many parts or voices can join before they start to double (sing the same line as) each other? What happens if you enter in the middle of a measure? What happens if the “followers” start the song on a different pitch than the leader?

3) Tell the students that Hilda will play a piece in compound triple meter and have them clap this rhythm a few times. You may also want to note that the time signature is 9/16. Then **play the video of her performance.** See if students can **identify the two voices** (one in the left hand and one in the right) and **count the number of measures between the leader and the follower** (it’s 4 throughout). Ask them how far apart the voices are in pitch (it’s an octave). What do they like about this piece of music? What don’t they like? How is it like the round they sang earlier?

4) **Have students experiment** further with different singing rounds by varying the entry points and the pitches of the voices.

**Extra Credit!** Do you think you could **write a canon**? Ask students, working alone or in small groups, to compose a short canon of their own. Explain that the rules require the follower(s) to imitate the leader and that the finished piece must “work” harmonically and rhythmically. They can use a familiar round or canon, like Pachelbel’s, as a starting point if they wish.

## Find out more!

### About rounds and canons

Wikipedia has a good article on canons, with audio examples:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canon\\_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canon_(music))

The Los Angeles Guitar Quartet plays Pachelbel with some nice modern twists:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfIWG-e38OU>

## **About J.S. Bach**

Bach was a famously prolific composer and a genius of counterpoint. His music remains fresh, challenging, and exciting more than 350 years after his death in 1650. Bach and his second wife Anna Magdalena, both musicians, played together at home with their children and friends, and he wrote two well-known books of keyboard pieces for her, known as the *Notebooks for Anna Magdalena Bach*.



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