

*The Life and Music of*

# *Karl King*



## **Karl L. King, American Composer**

Karl King entertained thousands of Americans through his contributions of circus band music. King was born February 21, 1891 in Paintersville, Ohio, and was a self-taught musician with little formal musical training. In fact, his formal training involved only four piano lessons. His instrument was the baritone horn, which is commonly used in marching bands. It is a member of the low brass family. At the age of nineteen, King began directing and playing in circus bands. He was affiliated with many circuses including *Robinson's Famous, Barnum and Bailey, The Buffalo Bill, and the Sells-Floto*. During his life, King wrote over 300 pieces of music. He was considered a master at composing music to match the rhythm of the circus acts, and quickly rose to positions of leadership in these groups. Karl King contributed more circus marches than any other composer.

In 1920, King and his wife, Ruth, settled down in Fort Dodge, Iowa where he directed the city's municipal band for 51 years. This band provided music for state and regional fairs, rodeos, and concerts. During that time, he continued to write music for bands all over the country. He and his wife had one son, Karl King, Jr. King also wrote a great deal of music especially intended for school bands, and was one of the first composers to do this to help the growing school band programs in America. He composed marches, waltzes, gallops, and overtures, and was in wide demand as a special conductor and contest judge. King once said "I've sung my song. It was a rather simple one; it wasn't too involved; I'm happy about it." Karl King died in Iowa in 1971 leaving behind a large collection of music for band

musicians of all ages, and will be remembered as the "Circus March King".



### **Karl King Compositions**

King began composing music for bands at the age of eighteen; particularly for circuses. Throughout his career as a bandmaster and composer in popular circuses, and as the conductor of the Fort Dodge Municipal Band, he wrote and published over 300 pieces of music. These included marches, waltzes, gallops, overtures, serenades, rags, and "screamers". In all, he wrote 188 marches which are still performed today. Perhaps his most famous piece is "Barnum and Bailey's Favorite", but many of his other pieces are famous as well. Some of his other popular pieces include "Emblem of Freedom", "Circus Days", and "Liberty Fleet". King was a baritone player, and he often featured this instrument in his compositions. King was also known for writing many of his compositions in tents with a flashlight or kerosene lantern. He also said his best music was written at a moment's notice.

## Spotlight on the Baritone and Euphonium

The baritone and the euphonium horn are very similar instruments. They are both members of the low brass family, and have been in existence since the 1800's. The instrument similar to what we know as the euphonium and the baritone horn was invented around 1840 by a German, Sommer of Weimer.

These instruments are made of brass tubing which is wound and shaped with a large bell at the top of the instrument. The mouthpiece on the baritone or euphonium is cup shaped and looks like the mouthpiece of a trumpet, but larger. In order to play a brass instrument, players need to "buzz" the mouthpiece which means to vibrate the lips together while blowing into the instrument in order to create sound. Sound is produced on the baritone and euphonium by "buzzing" the lips and using valves to play notes. Euphoniums typically have four valves while baritones have three. The baritone and euphonium are very important in march music, and are also used in jazz ensembles, brass groups, chamber ensembles, and more modern bands. It serves as a solo instrument as well as a rhythmic or harmonic foundation instrument.



## Circus Music

Karl King was known for composing music to fit circus acts. Circuses are shows with various acts that travel and perform for people under a large tent. Circuses often involved wild animal acts, trapeze artists, jugglers, and clowns. He wrote music that fit the **choreography** (planned movement) for each different part of the circus. The music was meant to build up excitement in the audience as well as provide entertainment. In Karl King's day, each circus had a large band of musicians that played live at every show. Today, while the circus still exists, people now use pre-recorded music to go along with each of the circus acts. Circuses first became popular nearly 2,000 years ago in Rome, Italy. After the dark ages, the circus began to resurface in England, and was brought to America in 1840 by a cousin of George Washington. Circuses are still popular today and still involve talents of many different people.





## **“Barnum and Bailey’s Favorite” by Karl King**

**You will be listening to a piece of music written for a specific purpose. In the space provided below, write a story about what you think is happening in the music. Once you have written your story, create a picture to go along with what you wrote keeping in mind what you are hearing in the music. Can you name some of the instruments you hear?**

## Form and Movement

In order to teach the different sections of a traditional march, allow students a listening of “Barnum and Bailey’s Favorite” and ask them to create a movement to go with each section. As the sections change, the movements should also be different. The movements should be on the beat and fit with the music. Once a specific movement is assigned to each section, you can go back and define different sections of a march as well as the overall form. You can then draw a listening map of the song form as a class.

### Definitions

**Introduction-** a short opening theme that sets up the first or main melody

**First Strain-** First section of musical ideas, can be any length, but is usually 16 or 32 measures long.

**Repeat-** A section or strain that is played again, almost identically.

**Second Strain-** Second section of musical ideas that is different from the first section. This is usually repeated as well.

**Transition-** A few measures that provide a way to connect different sections of music.

**Dogfight-** A shorter section of music than the strains that is very boisterous and exciting. It is meant to provide contrast before going into the trio section.

**Trio-** A more relaxed, melodic section of the march. It is usually played by some part of the band toward the end of the march.

## Composition Project

After studying the work of Karl King, you can introduce the idea of the class coming up with their own composition and/or improvisation to go with a particular type of event as King did. In this project, students will work in small groups given the topic, and will create one section of a march using classroom instruments. Anything they create must be written down on paper using correct notation. Once rhythms are written, the students could also add a simple melody to be played on an Orff instrument. Students will use the March form, and eventually each section will be compiled by the teacher and put together as a class. Students can play their own parts of the composition as well as different groups’ work.

## Instrument History Research Project

This unit discusses a brief history and description of the euphonium and baritone. To extend this further, assign students a specific band instrument to research its history. Students can create a project with pictures, text, and a timeline to show how the instrument has changed since its invention. Students should also include various places you might hear this instrument.

**March vs. Waltz  
Compare and Contrast**

**Directions: As you listen to these examples, fill in the information below to describe what you're hearing. How are these pieces the same? How are they different?**

**"The Melody Shop" K.King**

**"On the Blue Danube" J. Strauss**

**Instruments:**

**Form:**

**Rhythm:**

**Style:**

## Contents and Acknowledgements

### ***Study Guide Contents:***

Information about the life and music of Karl King  
Information about the history of the circus  
Instrument history on the euphonium and trombone  
Lesson Activities and worksheets  
Additional suggestions to extend learning throughout the unit

### **National Standards for Music Education**

The activities in this unit were designed with the National Standards for Music Education as well as the New York State Learning Standards in the Arts. These activities use several standards including: 3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments, 5. Reading and notating music, 6. Listening to and analyzing music, 8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts, 9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture. NYS Standards used are *Standard 1: Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts*, *Standard 3: Responding to and analyzing Works of Art*.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study guide was compiled and created by Andrea Del Piano for the Rome Community Concert Band. Teachers receiving this guide may reproduce any part of it for educational purposes. This guide was written using the following resources:

Bachelder, D., Hunt, N. *Guide to Teaching Brass: 6<sup>th</sup> Edition*.  
McGraw Hill. 2002. 121-123.

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

<http://karlking.us/kingbio2.htm>

[www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org)

[www.britanica.com](http://www.britanica.com)

[www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org)

## **KING STUDY GUIDE ACTIVITIES**

### **SPOTLIGHT ON EUPHONIUM/BARITONE**

Try to bring in a guest euphonium or baritone player to demonstrate the instrument for students. It might be good to bring both instruments to explain the similarities and differences as well. This might also be an excellent way to recruit some low brass students for the school band.

### **FREE WRITE AND DRAW**

Students can use this time to focus their listening and draw and write what they feel the music is conveying. This is an excellent way to combine literacy and art skills into the music classroom. Students can also share their ideas with the class to act as an introduction to this unit. Students could work individually on this assignment or in small collaborative groups.

### **FORM/MOVEMENT**

As an extension of the introduction to the “Barnum and Bailey’s Favorite,” you might ask students to come up with movements to fit with the differing sections of the music. This will help students to have a physical response to changes in form. You might also want to include some information about the history of the circus to further explain the form of the piece and how it functioned within the structure of the circus.

### **COMPOSITION**

Using classroom instruments, students can create their own music to fit an event. Perhaps you could come up with a topic as a class and then have students write or improvise music that would best illustrate those actions as King did with his circus compositions.

### **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

This listening activity allows students to think critically about similarities and differences between “The Melody Shop”, and “On the Blue Danube,” written by Johann Strauss around the same time period. This will allow students to hear two different kinds of instrumental works that were performed during that time period. You could then discuss the different musical elements such as form, instrumentation, style, and tempo.