

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO BAROQUE MUSIC



For European music, the years between 1600 and 1750 are designated as the Baroque period; the year 1750 marks the

death of J. S. Bach, generally considered the greatest of the Baroque composers. The term “baroque” originally had negative connotations suggesting poor taste; the word itself derives from a term meaning “of irregular shape.” The negative view of the Baroque musical sensibility has changed in modern times, and today there are many advocates of the diverse styles and genres that characterize the music of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Italy was the original site of the principal Baroque innovations, but by 1750 most of Europe was very much involved in the new formal and stylistic developments of the era. Most Baroque music belonged to one of three categories: chamber music that was commissioned by and for an aristocratic audience; religious music; and opera, which began as court entertainment but developed into a public art form.

Generally when we think about Baroque music today, we divide the period into three smaller periods, the early (1600 – 1640), middle (1640 – 1680), and late (1680 – 1750). The early Baroque was the era of Italian opera; it was a time when the homophony introduced during the Renaissance was in favor. During the middle period, the major and minor modes we recognize as so familiar today were used extensively, and

instrumental music became increasingly important. The late period, which is the one most often listened to today, saw the return of polyphony, now understood differently from the way it had been utilized during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

One of the outgrowths of the Renaissance was the tendency in Baroque music for a piece or a **MOVEMENT** or discrete section of a piece to express a single mood or **AFFECTION**. Other common characteristics of Baroque music include continuity of rhythmic ideas, emphasis on beat or meter, attention to the development of melodic ideas, increased importance of chords as fundamental structural components, and the use of **TERRACED DYNAMICS**, dynamic shifts that are sudden rather than gradual. Another important stylistic device in Baroque music is the use of contrast, whether involving musical ideas themselves or the alternation between groups of instruments. Individual virtuosity was also prized in both vocal and instrumental music.

The Baroque period saw the popularization of **OPERA**, an art form that unites vocal and instrumental music and drama. Claudio Monteverdi (pictured right) is considered by many music historians to be the first great opera composer; his first opera, *L'Orfeo* (1607) is an innovative masterpiece that helped to determine the form opera was

to take for a considerable time.

The first opera house was opened in Venice in 1637, and opera soon became a principal form of entertainment in Italy. By the end of the century, there were many opera houses, and the form



*A page from Monteverdi's manuscript for his opera, The Coronation of Pomea.*

had established itself throughout Europe. The two most popular genres of opera were **OPERA SERIA**, which usually had plots based on ancient history, and comic opera, **OPERA BUFFA**. Henry Purcell's (*pictured right*) *Dido and Aeneas* (first known performance 1689) is a short opera of the first type. Mozart's famous *Don Giovanni* (1787), while not representative of early opera, is an outgrowth of Baroque **opera buffa**; it is perhaps the most well known opera of this kind to have ever been written (see the music module on classical style for more on this opera).



An opera is composed to suit a **LIBRETTO**, a dramatic rendering of a narrative intended for musical setting. Most operas open with a **PRELUDE** or instrumental **OVERTURE**. Generally, the action of the plot of the drama is furthered by **RECITATIVE**, a kind of intoned speech that often involves dialogue. Recitative can be either accompanied only by a keyboard instrument (**recitativo secco**), or it can have full orchestral accompaniment (**recitativo accompagnato**). The Baroque interest in expression of single affections has its place in the opera **ARIA**, a set piece which allows a performer to explore an emotion or idea at length; one can imagine the aria as the musical equivalent of a dramatic soliloquy. Arias tend to be elaborate solo moments intended both highlight a particular emotional moment and to showcase the performer. Orpheus's [aria and the recitative messenger scene after it](#) from Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* are examples of these two types of scenes. The **DA CAPO ARIA** is common in Baroque music; it is ternary in form (ABA), with the return to A being ornamented. Operas also

tend to have choruses to complement the solo singing and to assist in the plot development and commentary on the action.

Another important form from the period is the **ORATORIO**, which, like an opera, has recitatives, arias, and a chorus. Oratorios deal with religious (usually biblical) subjects, however, and oratorios are presented in concert form, i.e., without acting, scenery, or costumes. Originally such pieces were performed in prayer halls called **ORATORIOS**, hence the name of the musical form. G. F. Handel wrote both operas and oratorios (he averaged one opera each year); his most famous



*The castrato Farinelli was one of the most famous opera performers of the Baroque period.*

oratorio is the well-known *Messiah* (1741), a work still performed every year around Christmas time. [The Hallelujah Chorus](#) from *Messiah* will be familiar to many listeners.

Religious vocal music also saw the innovations of the **CHORALE**, a hymn set to a German text (often preceded by a keyboard **PRELUDE**), and the **CANTATA**, a multi-movement work for some arrangement of voices and instruments. The cantata developed in Italy, originally as a secular composition—Scarlatti wrote over 600 of them—but by the time of J. S. Bach, it had also taken on a religious function. Bach's duties as choirmaster required that he compose a great number of these kinds of pieces, such as [Cantata 26](#), "Oh how fleeting, how futile is our existence." Bach also wrote secular cantatas and organ chorales based on Lutheran hymns.

There were many pieces written for keyboard instruments, the most important of these being the harpsichord and the organ. During this period, the so-called **TEMPERED SCALE** was introduced which allowed for tuning a keyboard to allow it to play all the major and minor keys; this led to the immense popularity of keyboard instruments. Baroque composers also wrote for other solo instruments, small instrumental ensembles, and for the Baroque orchestra, which was smaller than a modern orchestra and composed



*A Baroque violinmaker's workshop*

primarily of string instruments. Much of the **CHAMBER MUSIC** (music for small groups of performers) involved a fair amount of **IMPROVISATION** since soloists were expected to embellish the written page and accompanists usually performed the **BASSO CONTINUO** part from a **FIGURED BASS**, a skeletal indication of the primary melodic and harmonic ideas of a composition. This harmonic underpinning was considered extremely important in Baroque music; indeed, some pieces even feature a **BASSO OSTINATO** or short figure that repeats in the bass line for the duration of the work. For an example of this, listen to Monteverdi's [Chiome d'oro](#) (1619).

One of the most important types of orchestral music was the **CONCERTO GROSSO**, a work that usually had three small movements (fast / slow / fast) that contrasted in character. These concertos were written for a small group of soloists that played in alternation with the larger orchestral ensemble (the so-called **TUTTI** section). Many concerto grosso compositions utilize the **RITORNELLO** or "little returning idea,"



an opening theme that returns in various keys and often in fragments over the course of the piece to provide melodic unity. It is often the case that the tutti sections play the ritornello while the soloists add new material.

Perhaps one of the best known concerto composers is the Venetian Antonio Vivaldi; the [first movement](#) from “Spring” from his *Four Seasons* illustrates many of the basic concerto themes. (To hear a full concerto, J. S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, [click here](#).) The *Four Seasons* also provides an example of another Baroque idea in action, the effort to use music to illustrate abstract concepts such as seasons or moods – “Spring,” for example, captures the excitement of nature’s stirrings in that season. Vivaldi spent much of his career as the music teacher at the Ospedale della Pieta, an orphanage for the illegitimate daughters of Venice’s aristocrats, and the two concertos a month he wrote for his students there make up most of his 400 concerto compositions. They would have been performed in a concert salon such as the one pictured below in a



drawing of a performance at a similar institution. Note that the girls perform in the galleries on the upper left side, presumably to

prevent them from coming into contact with any male audience members.

An extremely important genre that was used widely in different types of composition was the **FUGUE**, a polyphonic form that is organized around imitation of an initial **SUBJECT**. While the form is quite flexible, often a fugue presents the statement in unaccompanied form after an opening **PRELUDE**. Fugues typically also include **countersubjects** and transitional **episodes**. An effect known as **STRETTO** can be heard in many fugues; this occurs when imitations of the subject begin before the initial statement is complete. A good example of the form is J. S. Bach's (*pictured below*)

[Prelude and Fugue No. 2 in C Minor](#) from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. A **CANON**, like a fugue, involves imitation; a canon can exist within a piece, in which case it involves imitation of more than one phrase. The German composer Pachelbel's [canon](#) is actually part of a six-movement work. The term can also be applied to an entire piece in which imitation is used; the common name for an entire piece that uses exact imitation is a **ROUND**.



Another important Baroque form was the **SONATA**, a work in several movements that could involve only one instrument or as many as eight. Very popular was the **TRIO SONATA**, a musical form which involves two instruments playing high melodic lines and a basso continuo played by a keyboard instrument and either cello (viola da gamba) or bassoon. Handel's Trio sonata No. 5 in G Major ([part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#)) uses oboe and violin over a harpsichord.

The Baroque **SUITE** was also important; this usually contained many movements in the same key (or related keys) inspired by dances such as the French [gavotte](#), a

folkdance evoked here in Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3. Suites are characterized by variations in meter, tempo, and general character. Sometimes suites begin with a movement that is not dance-related such as the **FRENCH OVERTURE**. Suites were written for solo instruments, but also for orchestra. Click here to hear the [Overture](#) to Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3.

In short, the Baroque period gave us many of our most revered and prolific composers of secular and religious music. It saw a flowering of styles and a movement toward popular music written by the most skilled composers of the day.



The Baroque saw many developments of both genre and style, and the formality and precision of the pieces of the period both borrowed from Renaissance developments and paved the way for the interest in large-scale composition and emphasis on melody that characterized the Classical period that was to follow.



*Harpsichords, like the one pictured left, were popular Baroque keyboard instruments. Because the strings are plucked and not struck (as the strings of a piano are), they give a distinctive “tinkling” sound. The pianoforte (piano) replaced the harpsichord as the most popular keyboard instrument during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*