Yiyun (Leo) Yao

Professor Brian Culver

ACC-UF 102 037

May 11th, 2022

The Distinct Style of Baroque Music and Its Representation in Other Mediums

The term “baroque” originally implied poor taste as it derived from a term that meant “irregular shape.” However, people’s understanding of the Baroque style of arts had changed. The Baroque period saw the major and minor modes that are mostly used today and a return of polyphony later. During this period, inventions of new instruments made instrumental music prosper as well, such as the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, usually considered the greatest of all Baroque composers. Regardless of categories, all Baroque arts shared the common theme of intense emotions. The Baroque music was usually sad, complex, emotional, and dramatic. Some might even argue that it was overly done.

The Baroque period also saw the popularization of opera, a form of music that combined vocal and instrumental music and drama.[[1]](#footnote-0) Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* was a short opera seria, which contained plots based on ancient history, mythology, and epics. Baroque operas were split into recitative and aria. The recitative was relatively plain, while the aria had the freedom for an exploration of an emotion or idea at length. Arias were elaborate solo moments intended to both highlight a particular emotional moment and to showcase the performer. Operas also tended to have choruses to complement the solo singing and to assist in the plot development.

In Baroque operas, great sadness was expressed through a very slow tempo, a regular beat, as well as plaintive harmonies that lingered and repeated themselves. For example, in Act III, Scene 2, *Thy hand, Belinda*, and *When I am Laid on Earth*, the recitative began with an instrumental overture in a descending passage. The rhythm was slow and the tempo was mild around words like “darkness”(0:06) and “death”(death). Cellos and bass viols together played slowly descending notes that were known as the ground bass. The ground bass was repeated multiple times in between the lines. It helped intensify the sadness in the harmonies played and made the rhythm of the aria even slower and more dramatic, like a soliloquy. For example, in 1:00, the passage was descending on the word “laid in earth”, followed by repetition of ground bass. The word “remember’ in 2:08 and “forget” in 2:22 saw a contrast in rhythm that showed sadness. The repitition of “remember” and “forget” helped emphasize the contrast, with repetition of ground bass. And it ended in slow, quiet repetition of ground bass after the end of singing, creating a hollowness in the audience.

In comparison to *Thy Hand, Belinda* and *When I am Laid in Earth*, *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* was a madrigal written by Thomas Weelkes to honor the Queen of England, Elizabeth I during the Renaissance. A madrigal was a very popular form of music in 16th century Italy for aristocratic audiences. It was set to a one-stanza secular poem, typically about love and crowded with poetic images and conceits, highly conceptual, often oblique metaphors.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Admittedly, *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* and *Thy Hand Belinda Why I Am Laid* were both vocal music and not purely instrumental, meaning that both required a group of people singing for the audience. However, *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* did not contain many of the Baroque traits of *Thy Hand, Belinda* and *Why I am Laid in Earth*. For example, it was not as much like an opera not only because opera prospered in the Baroque time period and did not quite exist prior but also because it was not as overly emotional as Baroque music. Nor did it have any extravagant uses of tempo to intensify the emotion and express it in a concentrated way.

Although *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* was not as emotional as Baroque music, it did contain emotion but in a different way and at a level that cannot be compared with Baroque music. The madrigals focused on the idea of humanism and intended to express that through music. In fact, Renaissance composers tried to express emotions through words when writing a madrigal. They believed that emotions could be expressed through words when sung. This technique of expression was called text declamation, or word painting. It was similar to the use of recitative secco in *Thy Hand, Belinda* and *Why I am Laid in Earth*. It involved intentionally choosing the words to fit into both the rhythm of the text as well as the pitches and harmonies of the music. This way, the words were combined with the music to reflect the textual meaning of the music so that the audience better understood it. Therefore, they would be able to see a clearer image that the composer intended to depict.

For example, in the opening, the passage descended with the word “descending” after a quick leap in the pitch on the word “Hill” to imitate the nymphs going down a hill, leaving fewer and fewer voices and eventually one. It then had a fast ascending scale on the word “ascending” in 0:12. Similarly, in 0:49, the passage descended again but faster with the words “running down amain,” which, from a textual perspective, sounded indeed like a much faster pace. There was a slight pause after the word “all alone” in 1:21, but a harsh increase in rhythm immediately following the word “hasted thither.” In 1:40, the passage had a faster rhythm on “mirthful tunes.” The final words were sung in imitative polyphony. As is typical of most Renaissance music, madrigals use imitative polyphony extensively, but the imitation is freer. In this case, the bass held especially long notes that suggested a sense of endlessness. This part was probably the closest to a Baroque style in terms of expression of emotions. However, the emotions were not sad or as extravagantly expressed. Although the meter of *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* was duple, the same as *When I am Laid in Earth*, the time it took to sing one stanza in *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending* is less than half of the time it took to sing one stanza in *When I am Laid in Earth*, due to the vast use of repetition of ground bass in between.

The distinctive characteristics of extravagant emotions not only belonged to Baroque music. It also existed or appeared in some ways in other mediums of arts from the Baroque period. For example, *Paradise Lost* was an epic poem with blank verse by John Milton. It retold the biblical story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. It shared numerous traits of Baroque art styles. Extravagant practices of language and depiction could be found everywhere in the book: the teeming scenes of fallen angels at the opening of Paradise Lost, the dramatic landscapes of Paradise, the depth of space from the description of Heaven and Hell, and so forth. These depictions of space were full evidence of decorative, splendor, technical, and intellectual virtuosity[[3]](#footnote-2), that fascinated and overloaded the audience with Milton’s expression of Satan and his fellow fallen angel’s determination.

With an opening soliloquy of Satan in Book IV, Milton was able to present Satan as a character deeply affected by so many kinds of emotions. This is like an aria in a typical Baroque opera. However, instead of using repetition of ground bass and rhythms, John Milton used repetition of words and echo between lines to show these intensified emotions. Satan, first rebellious and determinant, now envious and desperate, questioned himself.

“Me miserable! Which way shall I flie infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire? Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell; And in the lowest deep a lower deep still threatening to devour me opens wide, to which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav’n”(IV.73).

“This knows my punisher; therefore as farr from granting hee, as I from begging peace: all hope excluded thus, behold in stead of us out-cast, exil’d, his new delight, mankind created, and for him this World. So farewel Hope, and with Hope farewel Fear, farewel Remorse: all Good to me is lost; Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least divided Empire with Heav’ns King I hold by thee, and more then half perhaps will reigne; as Man ere long, and this new World shall know”(IV. 103).

Even someone with no prior knowledge of Satan’s background and the context of the story could be moved by his soliloquy. Such a thirst for vengeance and lament full of sorrows was so strong that it empathized the audience at ease. Besides the intensified emotions that symbolized Baroque art, Milton also used extravagant languages in *Paradise Lost* with frequent uses of epic similes and allusions to ancient classics from biblical masterpieces like the Exodus to Greek mythology such as Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Homer’s *Odyssey*.

“He scarce had ceased when the superior fiend was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield etheral temper, massy, large and round, behind him cast; the broad circumference hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb through optic glass the Tuscan artist views at evening from the top of Fesole, or in valdarno, to descry new lands, rivers or mountains in her spotty globe”(I. 283).

John Milton made allusions to his contemporaries as well. In this excerpt above, the “Tuscan artist” referred to Milton’s contemporary astronomer Galileo Galilei, and this was actually the only time that Milton made a straight allusion. “Artist” meant someone who mastered science, not actual art. Milton used “the broad circumference hung on his shoulders” as an analogy to the moon. This was such a subtle simile because Galileo was once involved in a similar situation as Satan. His theory was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, which resembled God. It was opposed by his fellow physicists as well, who resembled Satan’s fellow angels who stayed loyal as servants of God. Milton made an analogy between Galileo’s spirit of seeking the truth of science to Satan’s spirit of seeking independence and true justice. Like the circumference as Galileo’s tool for scientific discoveries, the shield symbolized Satan’s mind and intellect as weapons for his war. The moon represented the ultimate goal of the journey. Not only was Galileo finally able to make his telescope and observe the moon, but he was also able to make it possible for everyone to do the same thing at ease. By this allusion, John Milton implied that Satan would eventually achieve his goal as well. His inducing Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit could be seen as his success because, by doing so, he allowed humans to seek truth and gain true intellect. Similarly, the rivers and mountains that Galileo saw on the moon represented what true knowledge humans gained and described how beautiful such knowledge was. All the extravagant practices of language techniques caused the audience difficulties when reading *Paradise Lost*, especially for someone who was not familiar with either the ancient classics or John Milton’s time.

Throughout the Baroque period, the distinct focus on intense, complex, and dramatic emotions existed in all different mediums of arts through extravagant expressions from repetition and diction. In music, Baroque composers made operas and especially emphasized the emotions in arias. Meanwhile, such a preference for expression of emotion might as well exist in or share some similarities with the Renaissance arts since the Baroque period immediately followed the Renaissance chronologically and might have inherited some traits thereafter.

1. *A Short Introduction to Baroque Music* [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *A Short Introduction to Renaissance Music* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *Baroque Art and John Milton’s Paradise Lost* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)