Baroque Music

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How to Cite This Article

Baroque is the term used to describe the music of the period extending roughly from 1600 to 1750. The baroque era includes all the music from the time of Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi in the late 1500’s to German composers Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel in the 1700’s. Many of the most important musical forms were developed during this period, including the sonata, symphony, concerto, suite, opera, oratorio, and many others.

The composers of the baroque era tried to use their music to express intense emotions. As a result, music became much more dramatic than it had ever been before. Further, secular (nonreligious) music was considered to be as important as sacred music in the baroque era. While most of the best music of earlier times was composed for the church, much baroque music was written for other purposes.

In baroque music we can see the beginnings and early development of modern harmony. Before the beginning of the baroque period, the most common type of music was polyphonic music, in which two or more melodies are sounded together. Baroque composers developed a style of vocal music, called monody, with only one melody and a supporting harmony. This innovation encouraged composers to invent new and interesting harmonies.

The importance of harmony led to a new kind of musical notation called the figured bass. It was used so widely during the baroque era that the period is sometimes called the figured-bass period. Only the melody line and a simple bass part were written out in the musical score. The composer indicated the harmony by writing figures—numbers and symbols—under the bass part below the staff. The performer playing accompaniment (usually the keyboardist) filled in the harmony according to the figures. The figures suggested a general harmonic outline but allowed room for improvisation by the performer. Figured bass was used first in vocal music and later spread to instrumental music.

Vocal Music

Opera was developed in Florence, Italy, near the end of the 1500’s. A group of amateur poets, musicians, and painters, known as the Florentine Camerata,
wanted to revive ancient classical Greek drama, which they knew had been accompanied by music. They decided to write plays based on classical subjects and to set the plays to music. But instead of reproducing the drama of ancient Greece, they invented something new—the opera.

New vocal forms were invented for this new kind of music. **Recitative** imitates the inflections of speech. It consists of a single melodic line for solo voice with a simple instrumental accompaniment. With recitative, words could be clearly expressed and the story could be easily followed. The **aria** is a more lyrical form for solo voice, used to show the emotional state of a character rather than to move the story along. Arias are usually in A-B-A form; that is, the first part is repeated after the end of the contrasting second, or middle, part. These are called *da capo* arias, a form that became very popular in baroque vocal music. *Da capo* means to repeat from the beginning of a piece. In the *da capo* aria, singers often have an opportunity to show off their vocal skills.

The world's first opera was *Dafne*, which had its premiere performance in 1598. It was the work of two members of the Florentine Camerata, the poet Ottavio Rinuccini and the composer Jacopo Peri. Most of the music for *Dafne* has been lost, but all of Peri's second opera, *Euridice* (1600), still exists. Both operas were popular successes.

In 1607, ten years after the first performance of *Dafne*, Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi wrote *Orfeo*, an opera that is still performed today. Monteverdi was the first to write ensemble numbers such as duets and trios, and to give an important role to the orchestra. He made expressive use of colorful orchestral effects. He enlarged the orchestra and developed new performance techniques. For this reason many people consider Monteverdi the father of the symphony orchestra.

The opera developed rapidly. In Naples, Italy, Alessandro Scarlatti established many of the traditions of Italian opera that later composers followed. In France, Jean-Baptiste Lully laid the foundations of French opera. Lully emphasized the drama in his operas and gave the orchestra a more important role. He also established the ballet in French opera. In England, Henry Purcell composed *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), which has remained one of the most important English operas.

**The Oratorio and the Passion**

Baroque musicians also enriched church music with new vocal forms such as the oratorio and the Passion. These required choruses, recitatives, solo and ensemble numbers, and orchestral interludes and accompaniment. Both the
oratorio and the Passion were dramatizations of Bible stories. They were usually meant to be performed without scenery or costumes.

The first composer to write a fully developed oratorio was Italy's Giacomo Carissimi. His oratorio *Jephte* (before 1649) established some of the traditions that later oratorio composers followed: It was one of the first to leave out scenery and costumes; it had a narrator, who kept the story moving; and it had dramatic and expressive choruses. For these reasons, Carissimi's *Jephte* is considered the first modern oratorio.

The Passion was a musical setting of the suffering and death of Christ. It had been used occasionally by Renaissance composers as a piece for unaccompanied chorus, but it underwent great change in the baroque era. The baroque Passion added solo voices and orchestra. It also added a chorale, a four-part setting of a hymn tune, which the church congregation joined in singing. Germany's Heinrich Schütz was the first important composer of Passions. Schütz studied in Italy, and he was strongly influenced by the Italian composers, especially Monteverdi.

The Cantata

The cantata was another major musical form that developed in the baroque era. It began as a secular form of music and later was introduced into the church. The cantata was a small composition that required fewer musicians than large works like the oratorio. Cantatas were composed for one or two solo voices accompanied by a small instrumental group. They usually began with an introduction for instruments alone, followed by contrasting sections of recitatives and arias.

Church cantatas were based on biblical texts and became very popular in the 1600's and 1700's. The form was perfected by German composer Dietrich Buxtehude. Many of Buxtehude's cantatas use chorale melodies of the Lutheran Church. The most famous Italian composer of cantatas was Alessandro Scarlatti, who is better known for his operas. Scarlatti wrote some 600 cantatas in addition to more than 100 operas and about 35 oratorios.

Instrumental Music

Probably nothing else in the baroque period has had more far-reaching effects than the development of instrumental music. For the first time, instrumental music was regarded as equal in importance to vocal music. As in vocal music, many baroque instrumental forms began in Italy.
Renaissance composers had written many pieces for the organ. But they wrote them in the polyphonic vocal style, as though the organ were a combination of human voices rather than an instrument. Baroque composers of organ music, on the other hand, began to develop a distinctly instrumental style of writing. They emphasized the tonal qualities for which the organ was best suited. Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi perfected some of the chief forms of organ music. These included the organ toccata, fugue, and partita. Dietrich Buxtehude was another important composer of organ music. With Buxtehude, organ music reached a stage of development that remained unsurpassed until Johann Sebastian Bach.

Music for instruments other than the organ also had to develop a nonvocal style before it became independent from vocal music. Instrumental music developed rapidly because brilliant new stringed instruments were being made by the famous violin-making families of Cremona, Italy. First the Amati family and later the Guarneri and Stradivari families made wonderful new violins, violas, and cellos. These instruments have never been surpassed for their beautiful rich tone and finely crafted construction.

The Sonata and the Concerto

Early in the baroque era, a new musical idea emerged for which a new term was invented—sonata. A sonata was a composition that could be performed only on an instrument, just as the cantata was a piece of music that was meant only to be sung. Once composers started making this distinction, they began to develop a strictly instrumental style that was completely different from vocal music.

The first master to do so was Italy's Arcangelo Corelli. Corelli was the foremost violin virtuoso of his time and the first important composer of violin music. He produced two landmark works. One of these consisted of twelve sonatas for violin and keyboard accompaniment. In these sonatas a new style of violin performance was demonstrated fully for the first time. His second great contribution was a set of twelve concerti grossi (grand concertos) for a combination of instruments. Corelli's violin sonatas and concertos were the ancestors of the later solo sonata and the classical concerto.

The practice of contrasting the tone color, or timbre, of instruments with each other was a baroque invention. For the first time on a large scale, the special tone quality of individual instruments was fully used. This formed the basis on which modern orchestral writing was built. Baroque composers wrote many concertos for violin, flute, cello, and keyboard. Later in the period, concertos for other instruments such as the horn and the oboe also became popular.
The sonata and the concerto developed rapidly. The leading composers were Italy's Antonio Vivaldi, Giuseppe Tartini, and Domenico Scarlatti, the son of Alessandro. Scarlatti was the first important composer in Italy to write sonatas for a keyboard instrument. He also created a brilliant new style of keyboard writing and perfected a new technique of performing on the harpsichord.

**The Dance Suite**

Outside Italy, too, great advances were being made in instrumental music. Composers were creating a treasury of smaller pieces for keyboard instruments. These pieces often were based on dances. Composers began to arrange them in groups called suites. The dance suite consisted of several dance movements contrasting in mood, tempo, and rhythm. The basic arrangement consisted of four dances: an allemande in moderate tempo; a courante, or running dance; a slow and stately sarabande; and a quick and lively gigue, or jig. Composers often added dances between the sarabande and gigue, such as the minuet or gavotte. Outstanding composers of dance suites and other beautiful keyboard pieces were Germany's Johann Froberger, England's Henry Purcell, and France's François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau.

**Handel and Bach**

**Baroque music** reached a climax with two of the greatest composers who ever lived: George Frederick Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach. With these creative giants, baroque music came to its final fulfillment. With Handel, opera in the old Italian tradition reached its highest development. Henceforth opera would develop in completely new directions. With Handel, too, the oratorio—and with Bach, the Passion—reached a stage of near perfection. See the biographies of Bach and Handel.

Few composers before Bach and Handel wrote instrumental music with such expressiveness, emotion, and beauty. Both of these masters composed sonatas, concertos, suites, and solo instrumental music that fully achieved all the possibilities of the baroque style. They also pointed the way for the future. The works of Bach and Handel not only represent the end of the baroque era, they look forward to the beginnings of the classical period that followed.

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