

Baroque Music

1600 ~ 1750

What is “Baroque”?

- Derived from the Portuguese *barroco*, or “oddly shaped pearl,” the term “baroque” has been widely used since the nineteenth century to describe the period in Western European art music from about 1600 to 1750.
- Comparing some of music history’s greatest masterpieces to a misshapen pearl might seem strange to us today, but to the nineteenth century critics who applied the term, the music of Bach and Handel’s era sounded overly ornamented and exaggerated. Having long since shed its derogatory connotations, “baroque” is now simply a convenient catch-all for one of the richest and most diverse periods in music history.

What is “Baroque”?

- In addition to producing the earliest European music familiar to most of us, including Pachelbel’s Canon and Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*, the baroque era also greatly expanded our horizons.
- The acceptance of Copernicus’s 16th century theory that the planets didn’t revolve around the earth made the universe a much larger place, while Galileo’s work helped us get better acquainted with the cosmos. Advances in technology such as the invention of the telescope made what was believed to be finite seem infinite.
- Great thinkers like Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke tackled the big questions of existence. Geniuses like Rubens, Rembrandt and Shakespeare offered unique perspectives through their art. (cont...)

What is “Baroque”?

- European nations grew more and more involved with foreign trade and colonization, bringing us into direct contact with parts of the globe that were previously unfamiliar.
- And the growth of a new middle class breathed life into an artistic culture long dependent on the whims of church and court.

Major Baroque Composers

- Many of the well known personalities from the first part of the baroque period hail from Italy, including [Monteverdi](#), [Corelli](#) and [Vivaldi](#).
- By the mid eighteenth century, our focus shifts to the German composers [Bach](#) and [Handel](#).
- Many of the forms identified with baroque music originated in Italy, including the cantata, concerto, sonata, oratorio and opera. Although Italy played a vital role in the development of these genres, however, new concepts of what it meant to be a nation increased the imperative of a “national style.”
- As musicians and composers traveled all over Europe and heard each other’s music, the new conventions they encountered made subtle impressions on them.

Major Baroque Composers

- **Italy:** Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, Corelli, Vivaldi, Domenico and Alessandro Scarlatti
- **France:** Couperin, Lully, Charpentier and Rameau
- **Germany:** Praetorius, Schein, Scheidt, Schutz, Telemann, Handel and Bach
- **England:** Purcell

The Philosophy of Baroque Music

➤ **A belief in music as a potent tool of communication**

One of the major philosophical currents in baroque music comes from the Renaissance interest in ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. The Greeks and Romans believed that music was a powerful tool of communication and could arouse any emotion in its listeners.

➤ As a result of the revival of these ideas, composers became increasingly aware of music's potential power, and cultivated the belief that their own compositions could have similar effects if they correctly emulated ancient music.

The Philosophy of Baroque Music

- In 1605, the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi actually defined a “first” and “second” practice
- In the first, harmony and counterpoint took precedence over the text
- In the second, the need to express the meaning of the words surpassed any other concern. In the baroque, it is the spirit of the second practice—using the power of music to communicate—that came to dominate the era.

The Realities of Patronage

- Any discussion of a baroque composer's artistic philosophy should be tempered, at least slightly, by the reality of their lives. In modern times, artists frequently earn a living producing exactly the kind of art they are moved to create. Accordingly, we often think of the artist—and the degree of his or her artistic inspiration—as the starting point for a work of art.
- Throughout much of the baroque era, however, composers only earned a living writing music if they were fortunate enough to be on the payroll of a political or religious institution. The musical needs of that institution, therefore, dictated the music the composer produced. Bach wrote the number of cantatas he did, for example, not necessarily because he found the form inspirational, but because of the liturgical demands of the Leipzig church that employed him. When viewed in this light, baroque music can provide a fascinating window into history.

Characteristics of Baroque Music

The new interest in music's dramatic and rhetorical possibilities gave rise to a wealth of new sound ideals in the baroque period.

Characteristics of Baroque Music

➤ Contrast as a dramatic element

- Contrast is an important ingredient in the drama of a baroque composition. The differences between loud and soft, solo and ensemble (as in the concerto), different instruments and timbres all play an important role in many baroque compositions.
- Composers also began to be more precise about instrumentation, often specifying the instruments on which a piece should be played instead of allowing the performer to choose. Brilliant instruments like the trumpet and violin also grew in popularity.

Characteristics of Baroque Music

➤ Monody and the advent of the basso continuo

➤ In previous musical eras, a piece of music tended to consist of a single melody, perhaps with an improvised accompaniment, or several melodies played simultaneously. Not until the baroque period did the concept of “melody” and “harmony” truly begin to be articulated. As part of the effort to imitate ancient music, composers started focusing less on the complicated polyphony that dominated the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and more on a single voice with a simplified accompaniment, or monody. (cont...)

Characteristics of Baroque Music

➤ Monody and the advent of the basso continuo

➤ If music was a form of rhetoric, as the writings of the Greeks and Romans indicate, a powerful orator is necessary—and who better for the job than a vocal soloist? The new merger between the expression of feeling and the solo singer come through loud and clear in **Monteverdi's** preface to the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from his Eighth Book of Madrigals (1638), in which he writes: “It has seemed to me that the chief passions or affections of our mind are three in number, namely anger, equanimity and humility. The best philosophers agree, and the very nature of our voice, with its high, low and middle ranges, would indicate as much.” The earliest **operas** are an excellent illustration of this new aesthetic. (cont...)

Characteristics of Baroque Music

- Along with the emphasis on a single melody and bass line came the practice of *basso continuo*, a method of musical notation in which the melody and bass line are written out and the harmonic filler indicated in a type of shorthand.
- Because basso continuo, or thorough bass, remained standard practice until the end of the baroque period, the era is sometimes known as the “age of the thorough bass.”

Instrumental Sounds

➤ Pitch:

- In 1939, modern orchestras agreed to tune to $a' = 440\text{hz}$, which replaced a previously lower pitch ($a' = 435\text{hz}$) adopted in 1859.
- Before 1859, however, there was no pitch standard. The note to which baroque ensembles tuned, therefore, varied widely at different times and in different places. As a result, the music notated on a score might have sounded as much as a half tone lower than how it would traditionally be performed today.
- In an effort to allow for this discrepancy, many baroque ensembles adjust their tuning to the repertoire being performed: $a' = 415\text{hz}$ for late baroque music, $a' = 392\text{hz}$ for French music, $a' = 440\text{hz}$ for early Italian music and $a' = 430\text{hz}$ for classical repertoire.

Instrumental Sounds

➤ Timbre:

- While most of the instruments in a baroque ensemble are familiar, there are several prominent members no longer featured in modern ensembles. The **harpsichord** was the primary keyboard instrument (and an important member of the continuo group), and instruments important in the 16th and 17th centuries like the **lute** and **viol**, still continued to be used.
- Variations in instruments still popular today also gave the baroque ensemble a different sound. String instruments like the violin, viola and cello used gut strings rather than the strings wrapped in metal with which they are strung today, for example, giving them a mellower, sweeter tone.

Instrumental Sounds

➤ Performance technique:

- A baroque score contains little (if any) information about elements like articulation, ornamentation or dynamics, and so modern ensembles need to make their own *informed* choices for each performance. Mechanical differences between baroque and modern instruments also suggest that the older instruments would have sounded differently, so ensembles like Music of the Baroque often adjust their technique to allow for this. Because baroque and modern bows are structurally different, for example, string players using modern bows often use a gentler attack on the string and crescendos and diminuendos on longer notes. 17th and 18th century performance treatises also imply that finger vibrato (a technique in which a string player rocks his or her fingertip on the string to enrich the tone) was used sparingly for expressive moments, while bow vibrato (an undulating movement of the bow) was generally preferred.

Musical Forms

- While forms from earlier eras continued to be used, such as the motet or particular dances, the interest in music as a form of rhetoric sparked the development of new genres, particularly in the area of vocal music.
- Many of the forms associated with the baroque era come directly out of this new dramatic impulse, particularly *opera*, the *oratorio* and the *cantata*. In the realm of instrumental music, the notion of contrast and the desire to create large-scale forms gave rise to the *concerto*, *sonata* and *suite*.

Vocal Musical Forms

➤ Opera:

- A drama that is primarily sung, accompanied by instruments, and presented on stage. Operas typically alternate between *recitative*, speech-like song that advances the plot, and arias, songs in which characters express feelings at particular points in the action. Choruses and dances are also frequently included.
- The subjects of the first operas are all taken from Greek myth, reflecting the genre's close alliances with attempts to recreate the music and drama of ancient cultures, and were performed solely in aristocratic circles for invited guests. (cont...)

Vocal Musical Forms

➤ Opera:

- When the first public opera houses opened in Venice in 1637, the genre was altered to suit the preferences of the audience. Solo singers took on a sort of celebrity status, and greater emphasis was placed on the aria as a result. Recitative grew less important, and choruses and dances virtually disappeared from Italian opera.
- The financial realities of staging frequent opera productions also had an effect. The spectacular stage effects associated with opera at court were greatly downplayed, and librettos were constructed to take advantage of stock scenic devices.

Vocal Musical Forms

➤ Oratorio:

- An extended musical drama with a text based on religious subject matter, intended for performance without scenery, costume or action. Oratorio originally meant prayer hall, a building located adjacent to a church that was designed as a place for religious experiences distinct from the liturgy.
- The oratorio as a distinct musical genre emerged amidst the excellent acoustics of these spaces in the early 1600s. By the middle of the 17th century, oratorios were performed in palaces and public theaters and were growing increasingly similar to operas, although the subject matter, division into two parts (rather than three acts) and absence of staged action still set it apart.
- Works such as *Messiah*, *Israel in Egypt* and *Judas Maccabeus* remain audience favorites to this day.

Vocal Musical Forms

➤ Cantata:

➤ An extended piece consisting of a succession of recitatives and set pieces such as arias, duets and choruses. Originating in early 17th century Italy, the cantata began as a secular work composed for solo voice and basso continuo, most likely intended for performance at private social gatherings.

Instrumental Musical Forms

➤ Sonata:

- Used to describe several types of pieces in the baroque era, the term sonata most commonly designated a work in several movements for one or more instruments (most frequently violins) and bassocontinuo; a sonata for two violins or other treble instruments plus bass was usually called a trio sonata. By the 1650s, sonatas were often classified either as *sonatas da chiesa* (“church sonatas”), usually comprised of four movements alternating between slow and fast tempos and performed in church, or *sonatas da camera* (“chamber sonata”), which consisted of a series of dances akin to the suite.
- The rise to prominence of solo sonatas for keyboard instruments begins late in the baroque period, including those for organ (Bach) and harpsichord (Handel, [Domenico Scarlatti](#)). Other famous examples of solo sonatas include Bach’s works for unaccompanied violin and cello.

Instrumental Musical Forms

➤ Concerto:

- Derived from the Italian *concertare* (to join together, unite), the concerto took several forms during the baroque era. Until the early 18th century, a concerto was simply a composition that united a diverse ensemble consisting of voices, instruments or both.
- Later in the seventeenth century, the concerto began to assume its modern definition: a multi-movement work for instrumental soloist (or group of soloists) and orchestra. Taking its cue from the canzonas and sonatas of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which used contrasting groups of instruments to great effect, the concerto grosso alternates a small group of soloists with a larger ensemble (cont...)

Instrumental Musical Forms

➤ The most dominant type of concerto in the 18th century was the solo concerto, which featured a single instrument in contrast with an ensemble. The most prolific composer of the solo concerto was [Antonio Vivaldi](#), who wrote approximately 350 and established the concerto's standard three-movement form (two fast outer movements, one middle movement in a slower tempo). While most solo concertos were written for violin, trumpet concertos were also popular, and concertos were also composed for cello, oboe, flute and bassoon. In the 1730s, Handel wrote 16 organ concertos, and Bach also composed several concertos for harpsichord around the same time (most of these are arrangements of preexistent works).

Instrumental Musical Forms

➤ Suite:

- Based on the traditional pairing of dances in the Renaissance, the suite was the first multi-movement work for instruments. The suite was essentially a series of dances in the same key, most or all of them in two-part form. Around the middle of the 17th century in Germany the sequence of **allemande**, **courante**, **sarabande** and **gigue** became relatively standard, although other dance movements, such as additional allemandes or courantes, **bourreés**, **gavottes** and **minuets**, were often inserted. Most suites also began with an introductory movement such as a prelude, overture or **fantasia**. To many baroque composers, the different dances embodied specific characters. In his *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (The Complete Music Director), 1739, German theorist Johann Mattheson gave a list of each dance's character: the minuet was "moderate gaiety," the gavotte "jubilant joy," the bourrée "contentedness," the courante "hope," the sarabande "ambition" and the gigue could signify a number of emotions ranging from anger to flightiness. Baroque suites were scored for solo instruments as well as orchestra.

Baroque Concerts

- In modern times, going to a concert is an event. We hear an ad on the radio or see a listing in the newspaper; we purchase tickets; we go to a concert hall and sit quietly until it is time to applaud. In the baroque era, this kind of public concert was rare. Many of the most famous baroque compositions were performed in churches for a service, or as part of a private concert or celebration in the home of a wealthy patron.
- During the course of the baroque, however, public performances became more common, particularly in the genres of opera and oratorio, and our modern concert tradition began to coalesce in many European cities. As Roger North described a performance in one of the earliest concert series, organized in London in the 1670s:

Baroque Concerts

The first attempt was low: a project of old John Banister, who was a good violin, and a theatrical composer. He opened an obscure room in a public house in White friars; filled it with tables and seats, and made a side box with curtains for the music. Sometimes consort, sometimes solos, of the violin, flageolet, bass viol, lute and song all' Italiana, and such varieties diverted the company, who paid at coming in. One shilling a piece, call for what you please, pay the reckoning, and Welcome gentlemen.

Baroque Concerts

- The advent of the public concert made the growing middle class an important source of income for musicians. By the end of the baroque, this social subset had become a musical patron almost as powerful as the church or court.

And Beyond...

➤ By the middle of the eighteenth century, the baroque idea of music as a form of rhetoric was under attack. Music had a marvelously potent power to express even the most difficult concepts —but only in its most “natural” form, which the baroque era had ostensibly muddled. As Johann Adolph Scheibe said of J. S. Bach in 1737,

This great man would be the admiration of whole nations if he made more amenity, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art. Since he judges according to his own fingers, his pieces are extremely difficult to play; for he demands that singers and instrumentalists should be able to do with their throats and instruments whatever he can play on the clavier, but this is impossible... Turgidity has led [him] from the natural to the artificial, and from the lofty to the somber; and... one admires the onerous labor and uncommon effort — which, however, are vainly employed, since they conflict with Nature.)

And Beyond...

➤ Scheibe's insistence on clarity and ease of performance hints at a major change in musical aesthetics: throughout his diatribe, the final arbiter of taste is not Plato or Aristotle, but ultimately the listeners and performers themselves. This new emphasis on direct melodic expression and clear musical architecture points the way to the classical period, the age of Mozart and Haydn.

Taken from
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