

## The Baroque Period.

### Background:

The word Baroque comes from a Portuguese word describing a pearl of irregular shape - this word's meaning gives the sense of something in bad taste or grotesque. It refers to a period in music history approximately 1600-1750 - corresponding with the Baroque period for art and architecture. The term "Baroque" was applied by a music critic in 1733 to Rameau's music which he found noisy, unmelodious, capricious, extravagant in modulations, repetitions and metrical changes. The term Baroque was also applied in a derogatory way to architecture of the time. However, in the 19th century, the meaning changed to be a more favourable general meaning that described the flamboyant, decorative and expressionistic tendencies of 17th century painting and architecture. From the 1920s, the term was also applied to this period in music. See page 102 Kerman for ornate ceiling.

Italian attitudes dominated the musical thinking of this period. Venice was a leading musical city (see pages 83-85 Kerman), Rome was a centre for opera and cantata and sacred music and Florence also became a musical centre. Although other countries made their contributions to this period, such as England, France and Germany, they could not escape the Italian influence. By the end of the Baroque period, the music of Europe had become an international language with Italian roots. During the Baroque period, European courts were important centres of musical culture, with kings, nobles, emperors and rulers being patrons of music. The Church also continued to support music. "Academies" (that is organisations of private persons) in many cities also supported musical activities. Public concerts that consisted of paying an admission fee were rare. Public operas were put on in Venice from 1637. The first public concert was in England in 1672. Germany and France followed suit in 1722 and 1725, respectively but this practise didn't become widespread until the middle of the 18th century.

### Features of the music:

We need to realise that composers didn't suddenly wake up and want to compose in a Baroque manner. Some composers still composed using ideas from the previous period (Renaissance) while some experimented, particularly through the early Baroque period, up to about 1650. By the middle of the 17th century, new resources of harmony, colour and form are solidified. During the Baroque period, there was a distinction drawn between older and newer practices. Monteverdi in 1605 distinguished between a *prima prattica* and a *seconda prattica* or first and second practices. By the first practise he was referring to music where music dominated text and the second practice was where text dominated the music. This meant that music was written to conform to the text, so that dissonances were more readily used to show expression and feeling in the text. Many

composers from this period made a lot of effort to express or represent a wide range of ideas and feelings in a generic sense rather than the feelings of the individual artist.

Rhythm in the Baroque period was employed in two ways. One way was using a regular metrical barline rhythm and the other way was to use free unmetrical rhythm. These were often placed next to each other, for example aria and recitative, toccata and fugue. Regular dance rhythms that were popular in the Renaissance period but it wasn't until the 17th century that measures could be heard - that is definite patterns of regular recurring strong and weak beats. The use of barlines wasn't popular until after 1650. See page 86 Kerman.

The Basso Continuo was used throughout the Baroque period. The Basso Continuo is also known as a thoroughbass. In scores it is represented by a bass line with a figured bass. The bass was played by one or more continuo instruments such as lute, clavier, organ and reinforced by a sustaining instrument such as a bass gamba or violoncello or bassoon. Above the bass notes, the keyboard or lute player filled in the required chords which weren't written out. Doing this is called realisation and relied on the keyboard player or lutist to improvise a tasteful line either using chords or incorporating melodic motives, depending on the piece. Basso Continuo was used in vocal and instrumental pieces. See page 87 Kerman.

Due to the melding of Basso Continuo and regular rhythm, a new counterpoint appeared, consisting of chord progressions. This new harmony consisted of major-minor tonalities, rather than the use of medieval modes. Conventions for dissonance and chromaticism were agreed upon by about the end of the 17th century. In 1722, Rameau's *Treatise on Harmony* demonstrates the theoretical formulation of this system of major and minor tonalities, with primary and secondary triads. See page 87 Kerman.

Dynamics were presented in Baroque music as sections of piano or forte, often based on harmony, rather than gradual dynamics in phrasing. Ornamentation was popular for adding embellishment to melodic material. Ornamentation was different in Baroque period eg goats bleat in vocal lines etc. Tend to occur on the beat. Vibrato rarely used, more as a rare embellishment.

Forms:

Opera was the dominant art of the Baroque period and reflected many of the philosophies that affected art at this time. The composers of this time (1580-1645) in Florence looked back to Greek humanist ideas about music as they revered Greek ideas on music. Many aspects of Greek drama and music such as pastoral scenes, choral songs and dramatic recitatives were brought into early opera. Opera at first was an exclusive spectacle held in courts for the nobility, but in 1637 public opera began in Venice with the first opera theatre being built.

Towards the end of the Renaissance period, many composers and other artists looked to Greek classical teaching to learn about their philosophies on art. They found evidence that Greek art could convey more emotion than the current Renaissance art could. These artists of the late Renaissance were looking to grab audience's attention through their work and to leave an emotional imprint on people. They wished to overwhelm with their art and leave people with a sense of awe. Greek teachings were about the importance of emotion in art. Although no Greek music notation survived, many writings about how Greek music sounded were recorded. This idea of grabbing an audience's attention and entertaining them was a big contrast to the early Renaissance ideas and this is what these artists reacted against. Greek drama is particularly important because it was the model from which the creators of opera (at the end of the 16th century) based their own works. Choral songs and solemn figured choral dances had an important place in the Greek tragedies. The role of the chorus in these works were to voice the audience's response to the tragedies and characters. Some examples of chorus in Greek drama can be seen in the tragedies of Sophocles (495-406 BC) and Euripides (484-407 BC). These choruses were alternated with spoken drama, dividing the plays into acts and scenes. This clear distinction between dramatic action (recitative or spoken dialogue) and the decorative scenes (arias, choruses and dance) was brought into early Baroque opera<sup>1</sup>.

Like these Greek dramas, the artworks that took place in the late Renaissance combined different aspects of art to make a powerful singular spectacle to impress people. These spectacles combined drama, singing, dancing, musical playing, scenery and costumes. The dramatic spectacles were shown by courts trying to make a powerful, showy impression on the nobility. The Medici family of Florence was one such family who encouraged the Cammerata to write these big shows for festivities. The Cammerata were a group of artists (writers and musicians) who combined their talents to use in such a fashion as the courts wanted.

In 1589 as a celebration of a Medici family wedding, a play with five intermedio was displayed. Cavalieri (a member of the Cammerata) was in charge of the celebrations. The intermedio, consisting of dancing and singing, were related to some event in the plays and served the audience as a welcome break in the play. The intermedio became so big that it outdid the drama, so both intermedio and drama were combined to become opera.

The first operas borrowed Greek legends as their stories, particularly legends set in pastorale scenes. The first surviving opera was Peri's 'Euridice', written for a Medici marriage in 1600. The Greek legend of Euridice and Orfeo was one that initially began in a pastorale scene. Although the original Greek legend of Euridice ended in tragedy, Peri changed the ending to a happy one. This was because the opera 'Euridice' was written for

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<sup>1</sup> Grout, Donald J. A Short History of Opera. 2nd ed., New York: Columbia UP, 1965. pg. 11

a joyous occasion, for a patron's marriage. The poem of Orfeo and Euridice satisfied Baroque requirements because the mythical hero of Orfeo was a singer. Through this popular legend, early Baroque opera composers could portray the emotion of music impacting on love and death and the power that music had over these aspects of life. By combining Greek pastoral legends with drama, early Baroque composers gave us the beginnings of opera containing choral and dance scenes.

Early Baroque artists sought to revive Greek philosophies and wanted to equal the Greeks in trying to create an emotional reaction. The Renaissance music didn't stir emotion due to the overlapping of parts (polyphony). The audiences couldn't understand the words because of the polyphony, so they couldn't react to what events were happening in the piece of music. A lot of Renaissance music was in Latin which made the words even more difficult to understand. Greek classicism only perceived music with words as being important. Vincenzo Galilei (a member of the Florence Cammerata) published his ideas on this subject: "the correct way to set words ... was to use a solo melody which would merely enhance the natural speech inflections of a good orator"<sup>5</sup>. This idea was taken up by the Cammerata and this became the dramatic or monodic recitative. The dramatic recitative was used to convey the emotion felt by a main character in the early Baroque operas. The arias at this time were usually left to a lesser character to sing. The dramatic recitative worked well because of its monodic texture. A solo voice was able to convey much emotion and the words, now in Italian, were easier to understand because of the omission of polyphony. The solo voice was usually accompanied by a lute or harpsichord or reed organ with an uncomplicated figured bass. In keeping the music less complicated, the audience were able to focus their attention on the main character's emotions.

Henry Purcell: See page 93. Born in London in 1658 or 1659, died in 1695 (London). Son of a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal and later became a boy of that Chapel. At the age of 14 (probably when his voice broke) he became a repairer, tuner and maker of instruments. He also tuned the organ at Westminster Abbey and was a music copyist. He was appointed organist at the Westminster Abbey in 1679, where he also was employed as a composer. He wrote theatrical works, sacred works and pieces for royal occasions. Listen to Dido and Aeneas: Dido's Lament. See page 94 Kerman and 71 in exercise book.

Other vocal forms that were used in the Baroque period include oratorios, such as Handel's *Messiah*. An oratorio was basically a religious substitute for opera and followed opera format. The cantata was a form of vocal music written for churches which was a singing sermon, usually following the text or feast for the day.

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<sup>5</sup> Grout, Donald J. A History of Western Music. London: J. M. Dent, 1962. pg. 278.

Instrumental music also became popular during the Baroque period and was influenced by vocal music such as the aria and recitative. During this period, instrumental forms were not definite, and changed, so definitions can't be fixed. However, we can break instrumental music up into groups:

1. Fugal - these are pieces that are continuous (non section) using imitative counterpoint. These pieces are given names such as *fantasia, fancy, capriccio, fuga*.
2. Canzona types pieces which are discontinuous (sectionalised) imitative counterpoint, sometimes containing other styles also. For example *sonata* (Basically a madrigal with movements). This was usually written for one or two instruments (violins) with a basso continuo. Sonatas were also written for solo instruments.
3. Pieces which vary a given melody or bass for example *partita, passacaglia*.
4. Dances and other pieces in more or less stylised dance rhythms, for example *suite*.
5. Pieces in improvisatory style such as *tocatta, prelude*.

Instruments that were used in the Baroque period can be classed under two types - keyboard instruments and ensemble instruments.

Keyboard instruments consisted of the organ, harpsichord and clavichord. The term *clavier* referred to keyboard instrument, and it is difficult sometimes to tell whether a piece for *clavier* was intended for organ, harpsichord or clavichord. One of the greatest Baroque composers for keyboard instruments was JS Bach. Look at fugue or prelude on harpsichord. Bach also wrote the 48 Preludes and Fugues known as the Well Tempered Clavier, which probably refers to equal temperament, going through all the keys. Equal temperament became standard by the end of the Baroque period - it is a tuning system where all semitones are equal and all intervals are less than true but acceptable, unlike the pure fifths and fourths of the Pythagorean tuning.

In ensemble playing, stringed instruments were popular, due to the great string instrument makers such as Antonio Stradivari. Ensembles consisted of mainly stringed instruments such as violins, violas, cellos or viol da gamba, bass viols and sometimes oboes or bassoons or trumpets and percussion. (But mainly just strings). If woodwinds were included, the strings would play the main melodic material and woodwinds would fill out harmony. See page 113 Kerman for picture of baroque instruments and page 115.

The main forms of ensemble music was the Concerto (one soloist) and Concerto Grosso (a group of soloists). This was where a soloist was contrasted against an orchestra. The music would be divided up into contrasting movements, typically 3 movements towards the end of the Baroque period. Ritornello form was used typically in Concertos, where a

motive would return, played by the orchestra (ripieno), with the soloist playing inbetween.

The dance suite was also an important form of instrumental music - this didn't have a set number of movements but the types of movements were set eg an Allemande was always a steady 4/4 dance.

Composers: mentioned in Kerman

Claudio Monteverdi: Page 90. Born in Cremona in 1567 and died in Venice in 1643. He travelled throughout Hungary, Flanders and elsewhere in Europe. For eleven years he worked at the court of Mantua where he composed operas such as *Orpheus* and *The Coronation of Poppaea*. In his last 30 years, he directed the music of St Mark's at Venice. LISTEN

Arcangelo Corelli: See page 96. Born near Imola in 1653 and died in Rome 1713. Corelli became one of the first great violinists, violin teacher and composer. Most of his life was spent in Rome in the palace of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni whose concerts he directed. He wrote five books of twelve sonatas each and one of concerti grossi. LISTEN

Antonio Vivaldi: See page 119 Kerman. Born in Venice in 1678 and died in Vienna in 1741 (although some places say 1743). He was a noted violinist and prolific composer, was Bach's contemporary. Vivaldi wrote almost 400 concertos, mostly for string. He also wrote over 40 operas and an oratorio titled *Juditha*. Vivaldi had a musical father who taught him music. He later became a priest and was known as *il prete rosso* (the red headed priest). For 36 years he was in charge of music at a famous Venetian orphanage for girls, where he composed works for the school. His most famous work is *The Four Seasons* - a set of four concertos.  
LISTEN

Johann Sebastian Bach: Page 123 The family of Bachs were actively musical for seven generations, of which JS was in the 5th generation. Born at Eisenach in 1685 and died at Leipzig in 1750. Living in Protestant Germany, he was a choir boy, violinist in the orchestra of a prince, organist of town churches, chief musician in a court and cantor of a municipal school with charge of the music in its associated churches. This last position was at Leipzig with the St Thomas Church, where he remained for the last 30 years of his life. He married twice and was the father of 20 children, 5 of who became composers. He wrote many works for keyboard instruments, religious works, chorales, concertos etc etc.LISTEN

George Frederic Handel: Page 139. Born at Halle, Germany in 1685, died in London 1759. Handel's father didn't approve of following a career in music, but after Handel

studied law for a year at university, he then joined an orchestra at Hamburg (violinist). He went to Italy age 21 where he acquired a high reputation as a performer on harpsichord and organ. On his return to Hamburg, he became director of music to the Elector of Hanover, but soon left for England, of which a few years later his Elector became King. Handel wrote many operas for London audiences, and then when these became unpopular, he wrote oratorios. He wrote operas, oratorios, concertos (organ music) and pieces such as *Water Music* and *Fireworks Music* for occasions. LISTEN

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