The Baroque Period: c. 1600-1750

Historical & Social Perspectives

The Baroque period extended across a tumultuous century and a half of European history. The convenience of dates are coincidental; the year 1600 is more or less an approximation and most historians agree that it closed with the death of its greatest compositional figure, Johann Sebastian Bach. The term "baroque" is most likely a derivation of the Portuguese barroco, a pearl of irregular shape. It was used in a derogatory fashion at first, and then, through the criticism of Jacob Burckhardt and Karl Baedeker, it gained a more complimentary meaning that described the flamboyant, decorative and expressionistic tendencies of 17th century painting and architecture.

Religious Contexts

The rising conflict between the schisms of Christianity provided the primary religious backdrop as this age developed. Religion served as a rallying cry on the field of battle as the Bourbon family of France subdued the Spanish-Hapsburg empire that stretched across Europe. As the latter empire was broken, France emerged as the leading continental power. In the era of absolute monarchy rule, religion was a source of empowerment for the rising bourgeois. After several switches to and from Catholicism and Anglicanism, Queen Elizabeth I allowed the open worship of both Catholics and Protestants of any denomination. Under Elizabeth’s reign, Sir Horatio Nelson and the British fleet defeated the Spanish Armada at Trafalgar and England rose to prominence.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation continued throughout this period including a sensory appeal to Mass. Sound (music) now was joined with the other four senses to create an appealing service to the congregation. Church music now included rich harmonies in voice, keyboard and other instruments along with tolling church bells. Visual stimulation manifested itself through ornately decorated statues and altars, stained-glass windows, elaborate paintings and frescoes, bejeweled vestments, enormous candles and precision choreography by clergy, altar servants, choristers and congregation. An appeal to the taste buds was made through the ritual of Holy Communion. The sense of touch was attended to with rosary beads, contact with holy water, the rigid benches and
stone floors. Lastly, smells of burning incense and scented candles filled the sanctuaries of cathedrals across Europe.

Protestant reform gained significant foothold in northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, northern Germany and England. Martin Luther’s greatest reform was undoubtedly translating the service into the language of the congregants from the scholarly Latin text. Additionally, Luther instituted the use of hymnals in the church to allow parishioners to participate in the singing during the service. Another significant occurrence is the publication of the King James Bible in 1611, another of the unanticipated outcome by the Reformation led by Martin Luther.

Artistic & Scientific Contexts

Artists played a variety of roles in the Baroque society. They served as political figures, as Dutch painter Peter Paul Rubens and Englishman John Milton were; or priests, as was Italy’s Antonio Vivaldi; as a servant to aristocracy or the church as was the case of the great German organist and composer Johann Sebastian Bach.

Scientific and philosophical boundaries were broadened during the Baroque era, with each European nation having noteworthy contributors. Sir Isaac Newton of England and René Descartes of France revealed a universe based upon law and order through the theory of gravitation and the concept of calculus. The later work of Copernicus, a Pole, and Galileo, an Italian, as well as the labors of German native Johannes Kepler set the first milestones in the world of physics and astronomy. The English philosopher John Locke perhaps expressed the spirit of the age when he wrote, “To love truth for truth’s sake is the principal part of human perfection in the world.” However, England truly came of age during this period in an artistic, scientific and philosophical fashion. John Milton wrote his poetic Protestant classic Paradise Lost in the same manner as Dante’s had produced his Catholic-rooted epic The Divine Comedy nearly 350 years previous. William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and Christopher Marlowe all made remarkable contributions to literature, whether through the use of allegory, drama, poetry or prose.
Music in the Baroque Period

Symbolism is always an important part of religion, and much of Christianity’s symbolism revolves around the concept of the trinity. It is only fitting that this era, filled with religious quarrels and quests, be divided into three time segments of approximately fifty years: Early, Middle and Late.

Early Baroque

In the early Baroque period, two scholarly attitudes towards music composition and performance prevailed. The church conservative style, known as Stile Antico or “old style,” was a continuation of the traditions set forth by Palestrina of overlaid voices. The second, Stile Moderno, was a progressive sound championed by Claudio Monteverdi, relying more upon instrumental or chamber groups and had a much more ornamented style of writing and performance. Vocal music still dominated during this period with text that was melodramatic and possessed a distinct steady pulse.

Perhaps one of the defining moments that musicologists use as the beginning of the Baroque period is the figure of Claudio Monteverdi. His redefining work on vocal and instrumental music created a powerful force that would influence and absorb numerous composers that followed: opera. This is not to say that opera did not exist in some form before the production of Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo in 1607 in Mantua, Italy. In fact, Monteverdi built upon the traditions of the Florentine Camerata, a group of philosopher-musicians from Florence, Italy. Whereas the productions of the Florentine Camerata were modest, Monteverdi employed a forty-piece orchestra; expanded a brief three-part poem into a five-act, 30 minute production; developed the first use of aria and recitative; and fused the genres into a combination of vocal solos, choral story-telling and plot movement and many brief orchestral selections, including a short overture.

Music of the Renaissance was still written primarily for voice, although instrumental music, and its notation, became more popular. Popular instruments in use during the Renaissance were guitar, recorder, flute, rudimentary trumpet, horn and sackbut (trombone), viol, lute and percussion. New instruments that emerged were the violin family, large copper timpani, the harpsichord and clavichord. The texture of this music was two-part, basso continuo and the
melodic line; any three-part music had harmony based in sixths or thirds with the melodic line over the bass line. Terraced dynamics, or loud and soft, were customary as the nuances of gradation had not been explored.

**Middle Baroque**

If the early Baroque period saw the development of opera, the middle Baroque witnessed the maturation of instrumental music. Several important forms of music developed, including the sonata, suite and overture. The overture itself had spawned two distinct types: the Italian, which had three sections; and the French, which had two sections each of which repeated.

Music written strictly for dance and specific styles thereof grew in popularity, resulting in the development of the suite. Courante, allemande, sarabande, gigue and minuet were styles of dance that were popularized and collected into suites by Bach and Handel.

**Late Baroque**

Instrumental music truly began to overshadow vocal music during this period, especially as the orchestra developed. Trumpets and timpani were now commonplace instruments joining horns, flute, strings and keyboard in the growing orchestra. Melodic lines increased in length; extended continuous lines resulted with incomplete thematic statements that allowed for imitation, sequence and development in a variety of manners. Whereas before this time harmonic movement was slow, chords changed frequently each measure resulting in faster harmonic rhythm. Consistent texture (instrumentation) was employed throughout a piece.

**Important Composers**

**Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612)** Along with his uncle, Andrea, Giovanni Gabrieli was best known as organists and teachers at Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. Giovanni Gabrieli is perhaps best remembered as the father of music terminology. European composers who came to Venice to study with brought these new terms back to their native countries. Italian, through instruction by Gabrieli, became the international language of music.
**Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)** Monteverdi was born in Cremona, Italy, a famous violin-making center. Not coincidentally, he began his career as a string player, later becoming maestro di capella (music director) at the court of Mantua. His earliest opera, L’Orfeo, premiered in Mantua, then played Venice. Monteverdi replaced Giovanni Gabrieli at the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. Once there, he quickly established his reputation in opera as well as religious music. His last opera, L’incoronazione di Poppea (The Coronation of Poppea), which premiered in 1642, is still performed regularly by today’s opera companies.

**Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)** Native of Saxony, Germany, Schütz exhibited talent as a singer. Schütz was invited by to the Kassel court choir at thirteen by Prince Moritz of Hesse-Kassel. Prince Moritz, a amateur composer himself, subsidized young Heinrich’s travels to Italy to study with Giovanni Gabrieli.

**Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687)** An Italian who immigrated to Paris at an early age, Lully was an accomplished violinist and composer who served the court of French King Louis XIV. He was appointed the director of a special collection of court musicians and fashioned himself to be the musical dictator of France. Lully is responsible for establishing the French overture form; composed ballets with Molière and set incidental music for his plays; Composed numerous works for the church and the opera.

**Henry Purcell (1659-1695)** Born into musical family employed in the Chapel Royal, Purcell was an accomplished composer and organist, serving the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey in those capacity by the age of 21. Much of his output was church music with some incidental harpsichord and chamber music. Perhaps best known for his opera Dido and Aeneas, which dramatized Vergil’s familiar story from his Æneid. Written for a London girls’ boarding school upon a libretto by Nahum Tate, Purcell’s score is a masterpiece in miniature; exceptionally small orchestra with only strings and continuo bass, only four principal roles, and three acts including dance sequences and choruses totaling about an hour of performance.

**Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)** Born into the musical center of Europe, Antonio Vivaldi began studying music early in his youth with his father, a prominent violinist at the Basilica of St. Mark. While
music was his first love, Vivaldi studied for the priesthood and was ordained in 1703 at age 25. That same year, *Il prete rosso* (the red-headed priest as he became known) was appointed teacher of violin and orchestra at Pio Ospedale della Pietà, a girls’ orphanage. Vivaldi discovered this was an excellent appointment due to the school’s exceptional orchestra and outstanding soloists. As the school’s teacher, he single-handedly popularized the form for which this period is known, the concerto. Vivaldi composed numerous concertos, about 450 of his more than 700 existing works. Highlighting a soloist with orchestra, these works featured his most outstanding soloists on whichever instrument they played – violin, cello, oboe, flute, piccolo, bassoon, trumpet, guitar, and mandolin. His best-known concerto is the programmatic *The Four Seasons* – a series of four violin concertos, each depicting a different season of the year.

**Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** Born into a distinguished family of professional musicians, Johann Sebastian Bach lived and worked throughout his life within a 100-mile radius of his birthplace. At age eighteen, Bach received his first appointment as a violinist in Weimar. After several subsequent positions, Bach returned to Weimar as court organist. Duke Wilhelm Ernst encouraged Bach’s performance. During his time in Weimar, Bach composed hundreds of organ works for performance. Additionally, the duke acquired a trove of Italian works for his orchestra, including works by Vivaldi, with which Bach was duly impressed. Bach fell from favor in Weimar and found a new position as Kapellmeister (music director) in Cöthen with Prince Leopold. During this period, Bach wrote *The Well-Tempered Clavier* for harpsichord, secular cantatas, orchestral music, concertos, and duo and trio sonatas. Bach openly applied for a new position in the of Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, sending him six concertos for the court orchestra – the famous *Brandenburg* concertos. Finally, Bach arrived in Leipzig, assuming the post of Kantor of the St. Thomas School. During this period, Bach wrote much of his sacred works during this period. The *St. Matthew Passion* and the *Mass in b minor* were landmark achievements during this time. Johann Sebastian Bach, survived by 17 children and his second wife, Anna Magdalena, composed and performed through blindness until his death at age 65.
George Frederic Handel (1685-1759) Although born in Halle, Germany, George Frederic Handel found his greatest success in England, albeit a rather complicated journey. Formally educated at the University of Halle, Handel studied composition in Florence and orchestration from Arcangelo Corelli in Rome. Handel was already a successful opera composer, but under the patronage of Machese Ruspoli, he composed one of his first oratorios, The Resurrection, which received numerous compliments. Following his stay in Italy, Handel was appointed Kapellmeister at the court of George, Elector of Hanover. This turned out to be his most prosperous appointment, despite Hanover’s lack of musical offerings. Obtaining a leave of absence from Hanover, Handel traveled to London. In late 1710, his music received its first local performance at the famous Haymarket Theater. In February 1711, his opera Rinaldo successfully premiered at the Queen’s Theater. Handel returned to Hanover reluctantly, but took serious study of English. In the autumn of 1712, he received another leave, this time for two years, to London. This time however, Handel ignored the term of his leave. Then an awkward yet auspicious circumstance occurred. Following the death of England’s Queen Anne in 1714, King George I ascended to the throne – the same George, Elector of Hanover. Rather than creating confrontation, apologies were accepted and Handel’s salary was doubled and quickly became the director of the new Royal Academy of Music. During his time in London, Handel composed his most famous works; operas including Giulio Cesare (1724) and Alcina (1735), court instrumental music including Water Music (1714) and Music for the Royal Fireworks (1749), and his most well known genre, oratorios including Israel in Egypt (1739), the Messiah (1742), and Judas Maccabæus (1747). His health declined in his later years, eventually losing his eyesight. Much like his contemporary, J.S. Bach, Handel performed around London until his death at age 74.

Advances Related to Instrumental Music

Four principal types of instrumental music emerged during the Baroque period: Dance music, quasi-improvisatory pieces, variations and contrapuntal works (fugues, ensemble canzona and ricercar). Dance music usually had specific titles such as sarabande, gigue, courante, gavotte and allemande. These selections were written for a wide variety of instruments due to the nature of performance, venue and instrumentation available. Organ music predominated the quasi-improvisatory works with titles like toccata (from Latin ‘to touch’), chorale prelude, fantasia and partita. Other than Johann Sebastian Bach, famous Italian composers of organ music were Girolamo Frescobaldi and Bernardo Pasquini, while Dietrich Buxtehude composed in northern
Germany. Concertos became the compositional vehicle in which solo performance was enhanced. Vivaldi and his Italian contemporaries found this to be a very rewarding compositional genre. However elsewhere in Europe, the *sonata da chiesa* (church sonata) and the *sonata da camera* (chamber sonata) became popular in Germany, France and Austria. During this time, the violin family began to replace the viol family of stringed instruments – through the famous makers, the Amati, Guarneri and Stradivarius families.

**References**


