

# Music in the Baroque Period (1600 – 1750)

The Renaissance period ushered in the rebirth and rediscovery of the arts such as music, painting, sculpture, and poetry and also saw the beginning of some scientific discoveries. The Baroque period saw a refinement of science and further advances in that field. These advances helped to pave the way for new inventions and, gradually, the improvement of medicine, mining, navigation, and industry.



An early eighteenth-century orchestra

Music history in the Baroque period has many fine composers. Four of the best know composers of the Baroque period are George Frideric Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi, and Claudio Monteverdi. The music written by these composers was written largely on commission, meaning that the composers were asked to write a certain piece for a specific occasion. The courts of the aristocracy, churches, opera houses, and municipalities commissioned music. They employed musicians and required new music for each occasion. Composers of this period tended to use a more *homophonic* texture in their music (one main melody accompanied by either other voices or instruments) in contrast to the polyphonic style of the Renaissance age. They stressed the contrasts of sound, such as solo singers against a chorus or voices against instruments.

Music in the Baroque period also had several distinct characteristics. *Unity of mood* meant that a Baroque piece usually expressed one basic emotion. Rhythmic patterns that were heard again and again in the course of a piece was called *continuity of melody*. *Terraced dynamics* meant that the volume tended to stay constant for a period of time, and that when the dynamics did shift, it was sudden, as if stepping from dynamic level to another. Gradual changes in dynamics were not typical of Baroque music. The words and meanings of the words were depicted vividly in the music. This was called *word painting*. For example, the word *heaven* might be set to a high tone or to notes moving upward and the word *hell* to a lower tone or a descending scale.

Also in the Baroque period, there were two very important developments in the use of musical groups. One was the beginning of the orchestra. The orchestra evolved into a performing group that was based on instruments from the violin family. Certain woodwind and brass instruments were added as the Baroque period progressed. The other new form was opera. Up to the beginning of the Baroque period, opera hadn't existed. At the very beginning of the Baroque period, opera developed as an important art form. Perhaps the most important to help develop opera was the great composer Claudio Monteverdi.

1. List two composers of the Baroque period.
2. When a composer wrote a piece of music for a certain occasion, what was that called?
3. Who typically commissioned music during the Baroque?
4. Define *homophonic* texture.
5. What contrasts of sound did composers stress?
6. When a piece of music expresses one basic emotion, what is it called?
7. What is unity of rhythm?
8. What is continuity of melody?
9. What are terraced dynamics?
10. What are the two important developments in the use of musical groups during the Baroque period?

## Claudio Monteverdi

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) is credited as being the first major composer of opera. Indeed, his opera *Orfeo* (1607) is viewed as the first modern opera. Simply defined, an opera is a drama that is sung. It combines several different elements of music such as soloists, ensembles, chorus, orchestra, and sometimes ballet, with poetry and drama, acting, scenery, and costumes.

In the sixteenth century there were many musical experiments combining drama with music. The idea was not new. A story that was told through music had been used in a much simpler fashion in ancient Greek culture. The new name that was given to this style was called *monody* – a single vocal line accompanied by a few inconspicuous chords. However, with the tremendous musical developments that had been taking place throughout the Renaissance and toward the beginning of the Baroque period, a simple melody accompanied by a few inconspicuous chords could not hold the attention nor the interest of either the composer, the performer, or the listener. It was not until the compositions of Jacopo Peri and, a few years later, Claudio Monteverdi that musicians realized there were many exciting ways in which this newly rediscovered style of monody could be used effectively to portray the drama of opera.

In Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* there are numerous *arias* (solo pieces for a singer), chorus pieces, and orchestral preludes and interludes. Monteverdi's treatment of each of these types or aspects of the opera is what helped launch opera as a new and exciting art form.

## Instruments

Throughout the Renaissance period, an ongoing development of instrumental music as a valid and useful art form can be seen. Instruments began to find their way into more and more types of music. Toward the end of the Renaissance, instrumental music began to find its way into church music as well, at first as accompaniment. In the Baroque period, instrumental music became one of the main forms of music and of composition. The orchestra became an extremely important musical entity. It was used for accompaniment in operas and later in sacred choral music. It also came to be seen as a group that performed music written specifically for the orchestra.

The organ, through the playing of virtuosi (highly skilled musicians) such as Johann Sebastian Bach, became an important instrument in the Baroque music repertoire. Most solo music, particularly the early Baroque, was written for keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord, clavichord, and organ. Later in the Baroque period other instruments such as the violin, the oboe, and the trumpet received solo treatment. Listed below are some of the important instrumental forms of the Baroque period.



**Solo instruments: harpsichord, violin, trumpet, and oboe**

- The *chamber sonata* was written and designed to be played outside of the church, generally in a small parlor setting in a person's home. It usually had one to six or eight instruments – often string instruments – accompanied keyboard.
- The *church sonata* was similar in instrumentation to the chamber sonata but was designed primarily for performance in the church. The church sonata had a more serious tone and did not use the popular dance rhythms of the chamber sonata.
- *French and Italian overtures* were used as overtures, or preludes, to operas and sacred choral works, such as the *oratorio* (a type of sacred opera). The French overture generally began with a slow section and moved to a faster section, while the Italian overture consisted of three sections: Fast, slow, and fast.
- *The Baroque suite* was a series of dance movements all in the same key. Unlike the dance music of the Renaissance period, however, the Baroque suite was generally used or performed in concert settings rather than in social settings where people might dance.

## Bach and Handel

Two of history's greatest composers came from the Baroque period: Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. These two great composers epitomized the music of the Baroque period. Drawing on all of the tools and developments in music up to their time, they developed two of the most important musical forms still used today: the *oratorio* and the *cantata*.



J.S. Bach (1685-1750) was born in Eisenach, Germany to a family of musicians who had supplied musicians to churches and town bands in that area for a century and a half. Early in his career it was evident that he was destined for greatness. He became one of the first great organ *virtuosi* (the plural of a performer who has great technical ability on an instrument). During his lifetime, he would be invited to cities throughout Europe to both perform on and try out new organs in churches.

The cantata is a work for vocalists, chorus, and instrumentalists based on a poetic narrative of a dramatic nature. While cantatas may be based on either secular or sacred themes, all of Bach's cantatas were on sacred themes. The difference between a cantata and an opera is that the cantata is not dramatized. There is no action put to the musical words. It is generally to be performed in a church service. Bach's cantatas generally had anywhere from five to eight movements that could be made up of solos, arias, choruses, or a combination of the two.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) was born in Halle, Germany. He was a violinist by trade. He wrote numerous operas, orchestral works, and chamber pieces. As well as keyboard music and secular vocal music, but he was best known for his twelve oratorios.

An oratorio is a large-scale musical work for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, and it is based, as a rule, on a story from the Bible. The first oratorios were sacred operas and were produced as operas, complete with scenery and drama. Later, however, toward the middle of the seventeenth century, the oratorio ceased to be staged and became a work to be performed in a church or concert hall.

Perhaps the most famous oratorio is Handel's *Messiah*, written in 1742, near the end of the Baroque period. This work, like all the oratorios, had numerous movements for soloists, duets, quartets, chorus, and orchestra. Oratorios often have as many as 40-plus movements.

The works of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel embody all of the elements of music that culminated in the end of the Baroque period.

1. Who were two of the greatest composers of the Baroque period?
2. Where was Johann Sebastian Bach born?

3. This word describes a performer who has great technical ability on an instrument.
4. What is the name of a work for vocalists, chorus, and instrumentalists based on a poetic narrative of a dramatic nature?
5. What is the difference between a cantata and an opera?
6. Where was George Frideric Handel born?
7. Define the term *oratorio*.
8. Where were cantatas and oratorios generally performed?
9. What was Handel's most famous oratorio?
10. How many oratorios did Handel write?