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THE BAROQUE SPIRIT

1600–1750

A period of unprecedented musical creativity, the 17th and 18th centuries saw the dominance of counterpoint – music that used multiple lines or voices – and the creation of the most dramatic musical form yet – opera. Royal courts vied with the Church to have the most glorious music. Handel’s operas portrayed drama on a human scale while the Church stormed the heavens with the sacred oratorios and masses of Bach.

« Five-course guitar made by Matteo Sellas in 1640 and decorated with ivory and ebony.

BEFORE

The main musical style of the Renaissance was polyphony, in which several independent musical lines were blended together.

MUSICAL REBIRTH

In the 15th century, John Dunstable and Guillaume Dufay << 46–47 developed a new style of a polyphony, characterized by a sense of forward momentum. Gifted musicians travelling throughout Europe helped to spread a degree of stylistic uniformity.

MUSIC TO ENHANCE WORDS

Medieval scholars argued that music was interlinked with mathematics, as the Ancient Greeks believed << 18–19, but Renaissance scholars thought music was closer to language in its ability to move listeners. Finding a musical style that increased the intelligibility of the words being sung began to drive musical innovation.

Pegs, used to loosen or tighten strings for tuning

Baroque lute

Plucked instruments, such as the lute and the theorbo, which were often used to fill in the chords of a continuo part, were gradually superseded in this role by the harpsichord.

Rose (decorated sound hole)

Wooden body



The Baroque Style

The term “baroque”, from the Portuguese name for a misshapen pearl, was first used to describe something elaborate or unnatural. Now it refers to a period and style in which the arts displayed a new-found exuberance and theatricality that appealed directly to the emotions.

For music, the Baroque era began in Italy in around 1600, when progressive composers attempted to make songs more expressive and better able to enhance the meaning of the words. Monody, in which a single line of melody is accompanied by one or two instruments, was considered better at communicating the text than polyphony (see pp.46–47), in which several, independent melodic lines were sung (or played) simultaneously.

This monodic style, which imitated the rhythms of speech, developed into two new forms of vocal music: recitative, a kind of speech-like, conversational singing; and the aria, an extended expressive song in which the music mirrors the emotions of the text. Both could be freely embellished by the singer and became the central elements of opera, oratorio, and cantata. Claudio Monteverdi was their first great exponent (see pp.80–83).

Support from below

The music that accompanied the soloist is called the “basso continuo”, or “figured bass”. As the name suggests, it is a continuous bass accompaniment to the solo melody, and is one of the hallmarks of the Baroque style.

In a written piece of music, the bass line was marked with numbers set above the notes. These “figures” indicated which chords were to be played to fill out the music between the top melodic line and the bass line. The translation of the numbers into notes – called realization – allows for a degree of flexibility in interpretation,



Sculptural dynamic

This 1652 sculpture of St Teresa of Ávila by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) portrays the saint experiencing a vision. Set in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, it displays the theatricality and sensuousness that is typical of Baroque art.

depending on the ability of the player. The instruments that played this accompanying role were collectively known as the “continuo”, and usually consisted of either a plucked string instrument, such as a lute or theorbo (see pp.90–91), or a keyboard, such as a harpsichord or small organ (see pp.106–07). The bass line was reinforced by a low instrument, such as a bass viol, cello, or bassoon.

Continuo players could also accompany instrumental music, and more than one line of melody – as in a trio sonata, where the melody is shared by two instruments, accompanied by the continuo.

Composers also began to exploit the unique sound qualities of specific instruments, and became more interested in writing music for particular instruments – rather than music that could be picked up and played by any combination of instruments or voices that happened to be available. At the same time, technical advances

by instrument-makers helped increase the expressive power of instruments. Harpsichords and violins became especially popular, and there was a corresponding development of new musical forms such as sonatas, partitas, and suites (see pp.104–05).

Emotional response

Baroque artists wanted, above all, to move their listeners. Composers borrowed ideas from the art of rhetoric – the way a skilled speaker could manipulate and direct the emotions of the listeners – and transferred them to music. Composers sought to express love, hatred, sadness, or despair, as described in the words, directly through the music.

This emphasis on the emotions did not apply only to secular music. The Catholic Church too made use of it, in an attempt to win back the hearts and minds of believers who had abandoned Roman Catholicism for Protestantism in the early 1500s (see pp. 58–59). Church authorities encouraged composers to write music that would stir up an emotional response to their religious teachings.

However, as the new musical forms spread across Europe, the same approach was used for Protestant church music. One of the main theorists of this movement, which became known as “the doctrine of affections”, was German composer and theorist Johann Mattheson (1681–1764).

In 1739, he wrote *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* (The Perfect Chapelmaster), in which he outlines the correct way for a musician to perform a basso continuo, with advice on ornamentation. On the subject of the role of music itself, he declares that

Instead of the more conventional scroll, instruments of the viol and violin families often had peg boxes with carved figurative heads at the top, either of people or animals.

Head of a bass viol

Instead of the more conventional scroll, instruments of the viol and violin families often had peg boxes with carved figurative heads at the top, either of people or animals.

UNDERSTANDING MUSIC

ORNAMENTATION IN MUSIC

To vary a written piece of music, particularly when a passage was repeated, embellishments, also called ornaments, were added to individual notes, or even sequences of notes. This is known as ornamentation and, in the Baroque era, it

was either left to the performer to improvise or marked on the music by the composer. One of the most common types of ornament is the trill, which is the name for a rapid alternation between two adjacent notes.



KEY WORKS

Claudio Monteverdi *Orfeo* (Orpheus)

Antonio Vivaldi *L'estro armonico*
(Harmonic Inspiration), Op. 3

J.S. Bach Brandenburg Concertos (BWV 1046–1051); Cantata No.140 (BWV 140);
The Art of Fugue (BWV 1080)

English double-manual harpsichord, 1700

The harpsichord was used both a continuo and a solo instrument. This one, built by Frenchman Joseph Tisseran in London, is exquisitely painted to imitate panels with gold spangles that resemble Chinese lacquer.

Lid, raised to help the sound travel

Strings

Stops

Manual (keyboard)

**“Baroque...
meaning irregular,
bizarre, uneven.”**

DICTIONAIRE DE L'ACADÉMIE, 3RD EDITION, 1740

In the 18th century, as the Age of Enlightenment championed reason over superstition, musical complexity gave way to order and clarity.

MOVING AWAY FROM COMPLEXITY

The Baroque era ended in the 1750s with the deaths of **J.S. Bach 102–03** and **G.F. Handel 110–11**. While both continued to be admired, the music of the next generation was in the *galant* style – simpler, more elegant, and less demanding to listen to.

THE CLASSICAL STYLE

A **new clarity 118–19** emerged with the works of **Joseph Haydn 128–29** and **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 138–39**. Both wrote music in which order and balance were given equal importance to beauty. New forms, such as the **symphony** and **string quartet**, replaced the **concerto grosso** and **trio sonata**.

Gabrieli (see pp.72–73), dramatically exploited the acoustics of St Mark's Basilica by placing different musical groups around the church to perform.

By the 18th century, the word “concerto” was used in two ways. A *concerto grosso* (large concerto), such as the Brandenburg Concertos by J.S. Bach (see pp.102–03), divided the players between the full orchestra and a smaller solo group. In a solo concerto, the full orchestra was contrasted with an individual solo instrument, as in the many violin concertos of Antonio Vivaldi (see pp.92–93).

Counterpoint

The new *stile concertato* combined with the basso continuo to create a melody-led music with a strong sense of forward momentum. At the same time, Western music was moving towards the system of major-minor tonality, in which a key note, called the tonic, acted as the gravitational centre around which a composition revolved.

1733 The year the word “Baroque” was first applied – as a criticism – in relation to Rameau's opera *Hippolyte et Aricie*.

All of these developments led composers to produce ever more complex works in which

several independent melodic lines were woven together in a dynamic whole – a technique known as counterpoint (see pp.100–01). J.S. Bach was the outstanding exponent of Baroque counterpoint – whether writing elaborate, multi-voiced fugues, or works in which just one melody is set against another, as in his Cantata No.140, “*Wachet Auf*” (Sleepers, Wake).

“Everything [in music] that occurs without praiseworthy Affections, is nothing, does nothing, is worth nothing.”

Harmony from diversity

Another defining musical characteristic of the Baroque era is the use of contrasting groups in the same work, by alternating either singers and instrumentalists or a large group of musicians and a smaller one.

The idea was to produce a harmonious whole out of diverse elements and it was called the *stile concertato* (concerto style), from the Italian *concertare*, meaning to agree or come together. The *stile concertato* originated in the mid- to late 16th century in Venice where Andrea Gabrieli and his nephew, Giovanni

BEFORE

There are many examples of extended storytelling through song prior to the Baroque era. Sacred and secular texts had been set to music since the Middle Ages.

LITURGICAL DRAMAS

Easter week – during which Christians remember the events of Christ’s crucifixion and death, followed by his resurrection – is the most important event in the Christian calendar. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the Gospel accounts of Christ’s suffering (referred to as **The Passion of Christ**) were set to music and, eventually, dramatized, with individual singers enacting certain roles and a chorus representing the crowd. Other Bible stories were also dramatized and set to music.

L’AMFIPARNASO

At the same time that opera was emerging in the late 16th century, a new genre, called **madrigal comedy**, also appeared. These were comic narratives created by combining a sequence of **madrigals** 66–67. The most famous example, entitled *L’Amfiparnaso* (The Slopes of Parnassus) was composed by Orazio Vecchi (1550–1605). The plot tells how an elderly character called Pantalone attempts to marry off his young daughter to the pompous Dr Gratiano.

Cultural capital

Rome was a flourishing centre of art and music during the Baroque era. Wealthy aristocrats founded artistic academies and acted as patrons supporting artists of all kinds. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church employed many of the same artists to build and decorate churches, and compose music for church services.

Oratorios and Cantatas

In addition to the music that was being composed for the motet and the mass, two new types of sacred vocal music emerged during the first half of the 17th century – the oratorio and the cantata. Both employed the new solo style of singing and were influenced by opera.

An early example of the oratorio, a musical form that originated in Rome, was *La rappresentazione di anima et di corpo* (The Representation of the Soul and Body). A morality play with music, it was a kind of sacred opera with solo singers and instrumentalists. It was produced in February 1600 with music by Emilio de’ Cavalieri (c.1550–1602), a Roman nobleman, and was intended to be performed as part of the religious services during the weeks leading up to Easter (known as Lent).



Sacred singing

In Domenico Zampieri’s 16th-century oil painting, St Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, accompanies a choir of angels. In reality, church music was performed only by men.

performance itself eventually became known as an oratorio.

Oratorios were almost identical to operas, apart from having a narrator, and were intended to make the same emotional impact. Their aim was to strengthen the faith of the audience. Texts were usually derived from the Bible and were written either in Latin or – in order that more people could understand the words – Italian.

Emotional impact

The oratorio was performed at the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella in Rome. This was the headquarters of a community of priests founded by St Philip Neri (1550–95). In his

lifetime, Neri wanted to use a form of worship involving not only the usual prayers and a sermon but also a musical performance on a sacred subject. This type of service took place in an oratory – another name for a chapel – and the musical

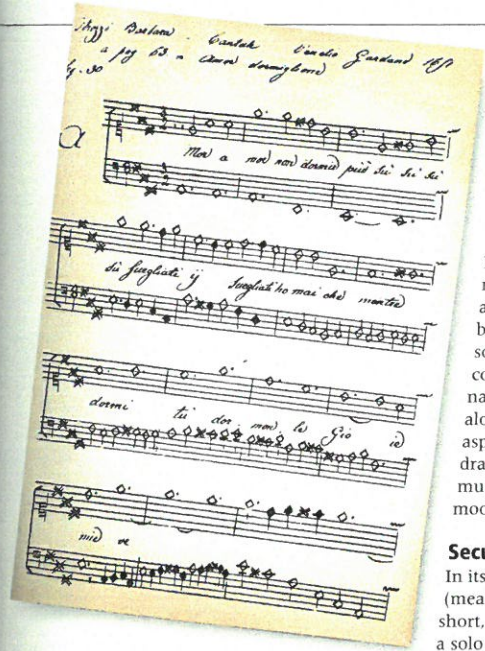
“His compositions are truly imbued with the essence and life of the spirit.”

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER, 17TH-CENTURY SCHOLAR AND “MASTER OF A HUNDRED ARTS”, ON GIACOMO CARISSIMI, 1650

Carissimi’s Jephtha

By the middle of the 17th century, the most celebrated composer working in Rome was Giacomo Carissimi (1605–74). His best-known work was an oratorio entitled *Jephtha* (1648). The oratorio retells the Old Testament story of how Jephtha promises God that he will sacrifice the first person to greet him on his return home if he is granted victory in battle. He triumphs





Strozzi manuscript
A cantata by Barbara Strozzi. Strozzi was a singer and prolific composer of solo cantatas, most of which were published in Venice during her lifetime.

Baptist, 1675) is his masterpiece. The characters, and the relationships between them, are now so highly developed that the composer no longer needs a narrator to move the story along. But the most striking aspect of the work is the dramatic intensity of the music, with swift changes of mood within the same aria.

Secular entertainment

In its early form, the *cantata* (meaning "to be sung") was a short, dramatic vocal work for a solo voice and an instrument, with several sections that included arias and recitatives. Sometimes the subject was dramatic, but it was always secular. The cantata took over the pastoral and romantic themes of the madrigals, which had by now largely disappeared. Cantatas were mostly performed at private gatherings of cultured aristocrats and patrons of the arts, rather

- KEY WORKS**
- Giacomo Carissimi *Jephtha*
 - Alessandro Stradella *San Giovanni Battista*
 - Barbara Strozzi *L'astratto* (The Abstract)
 - Alessandro Scarlatti *Nel silenzio comune* (As One In Silence)
 - Agostino Steffani *Placidissime catene* (Such Gentle Chains)

than in public theatres, and Carissimi produced many of his cantatas for this type of venue in Rome. In Venice, the composer and singer Barbara Strozzi (1619–77) wrote and performed many cantatas, mostly for soprano soloists, like herself, for the same kind of select audience.

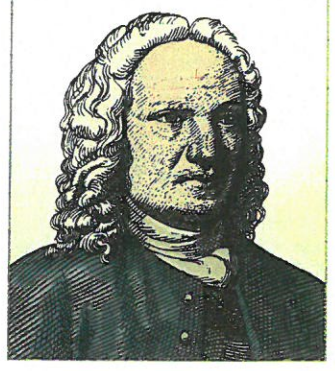
The most prolific Italian cantata composer was Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725). He wrote about 600 cantatas, as well as serenatas, which were extended cantatas composed in honour of major events.

Cantatas written for two voices were known as *duetti di camera* (chamber duets).

Strozzi wrote some cantatas for two voices, as did the Venetian composer Agostino Steffani (1654–1728), who was, in fact, largely known for them.

COMPOSER (1605–74)
GIACOMO CARISSIMI

Highly regarded by his contemporaries, Carissimi was offered several prestigious posts during his lifetime. One of these came from the St Mark's Basilica in Venice, which asked him to take over as music director – a highly prestigious position in charge of music. However, Carissimi preferred to stay in Rome. Here, from the age of 23 until he died 46 years later, he held the post of chapel master at Saint Apollinare, the church of the Jesuit Collegio Germanico. In 1637, he was ordained a priest. He was described as "tall, slender, and inclined to melancholy". Little else is known of his life.



but, tragically, when he arrives home he is met by his daughter. The story is largely told through a narrator, but soloists are given different roles; for example, *Jephtha* is sung by a tenor, and the music is written to portray the emotions of the soloist. Carissimi's colleagues were deeply moved by the final chorus, a lamentation written for six voices.

Dramatic intensity

Alessandro Stradella (1639–82), who also worked in Rome, was an outstanding composer of the second half of the 17th century. His oratorio *San Giovanni Battista* (St John the



AFTER

As the 17th century progressed, oratorios spread beyond Rome and became more operatic in style. Oratorios continued to evolve to reflect different musical tastes.

HANDELIAN ORATORIO

The greatest composer of oratorios in the 18th century was German-born **George Frideric Handel 110–11**. He began to compose oratorios when opera writing was no longer profitable. Handel's texts were mostly taken from the Old Testament. He became a British citizen in 1727 and wrote his oratorios in English. His **Messiah** (1741) is the most famous oratorio ever.

SACRED CANTATAS

In Germany, the cantata was usually a sacred composition with a chorus as well as soloists. It was performed as part of the main Sunday service in Lutheran churches, and the words were based on that day's Gospel reading. During his 27 years as cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, **Johann Sebastian Bach 102–03** wrote the music for more than 200 cantatas.