

Baroque Era (1600 - 1750)

During the 17th century the system of modes finally crumbled away. From the *Ionian* (doh) and *Aeolian* (lah) modes grew the major and minor key system upon which harmony was based for the next 2 hundred years. This era also saw the invention of several new forms including *opera*, *oratorio*, *cantata*, *fugue*, the *suite*, *sonata*, and *concerto*.

The violin family replaced the *viols*, and the orchestra had a strong string section as its foundation, with organ or harpsichord continuo. The other sections weren't yet fully developed. These changes paved the way for the two musical giants of later Baroque music - *J. S. Bach* and *Handel*.

In opera, elaborate scenic effects were often more of an attraction than the music or the story. The ideal of the early Florentine opera composers had been to unite poetry and music to express emotion. Their operas were given mainly for the intellectual aristocracy who understood their ideal. During the Baroque era, opera became public entertainment whose ideals were dramatic spectacle and virtuoso singing. Soon a popular craze for opera started in Italy, especially in Venice. Before the end of the century Venice had 16 opera houses. These early operas were based on Greek legends.

The great *Claudio Monteverdi* contributed operas to the Venetian theatres. The most important was '*The Coronation of Poppea*'. He poured all his musical resources into portraying the individual personalities and emotions of the characters. The craze for opera spread to Rome, Naples, Dresden, Vienna and the rest of Europe. Magnificent opera houses were built for magnificent performances. The form of entertainment was above all showy. All sorts of ingenious machinery was used to show moving clouds with cherubs and gods or angels moving among them.

In '*opera seria*', the actors carried on their dialogue in recitative and expressed inner thoughts and emotions in *arias*. During the arias, singers were expected to show off their astounding techniques. They rarely sang a composer's melody as written, but ornamented it extensively, adding difficult runs and trills. By the beginning of the 18th century, the dramatic aspect of 'opera seria' had become so monotonous that managers offered short comedies with music in the intermissions. '*La Serva Padrona*' by *Pergolesi* was one of these. The French were unable to adapt the Italian style of singing to the French language, so they devised their own kind of opera. They incorporated elaborate spectacle, including ballet interspersed with singing.

The Italian - born *Jean Baptiste Lully*, a violin virtuoso and dancer, was the first major composer of French opera. He was the court composer and conductor of *Louis XIV* and wrote incidental music for *Moliere*'s plays as well as dance music for the court ballet. Lully's operas started with a *French Overture*: a majestic, slow opening with crisp dotted rhythms, leading to a quicker section using imitation. This was sometimes followed by one or more dances, or a repeat of the slow section. *Jean -Philippe Rameau* also wrote operas in the tradition begun by Lully.

The operas of *Alessandro Scarlatti* began with an overture in three sections: quick, slow, quick. This plan became known as the *Italian Overture* and is important in that it was the seed from which the Classical Symphony was to grow later on. Scarlatti designed his arias in *Da Capo* form - ternary form -A B A. The singer was expected to add his or her own vocal decorations to the printed melody.

Henry Purcell was the most important English Baroque composer. He wrote chamber music, sacred music, music for the stage, and is best known today for his opera '*Dido and Aeneas*' and '*Ode for St' Cecilia*'.

Handel settled in England in 1712. His thirty operas were in the Italian style, he later turned to *Oratorio* which started around the same time as opera. At first they were similar to operas except they were based on sacred scriptures. In time they ceased to be acted and were given musical presentation only with soloists, chorus and orchestra. Handel's most popular oratorio was '*The Messiah*'. He also composed orchestral music, including '*The Water Music*'.

J. S Bach composed '*The Christmas Oratorio*' and three setting of the 'Passion'. Besides recitatives, arias and choruses, he included settings of *chorales*. He also wrote over 200 church cantatas (like a miniature oratorio), and a number of secular cantatas. Bach spent his life in Germany and was a great virtuoso on the organ and composed a vast amount of beautiful music for it. He composed the '*48 preludes and fugues*' for keyboard. The last 27 years of his life were spent in Leipzig as cantor of St. Thomas' Church, one of the most important musical posts in Germany. Here he composed '*The St. Matthew Passion*' and the *b minor mass*.

In Florence near the end of the 16th century a group of composers and writers who called themselves the '*Camerata*' believed that the elaborate weaving of counterpoint in vocal music obscured the meaning of the words. The words they thought should be more important than the music, and the music should interpret the words. They experimented with a simpler style which they called *monody*. This voice line rose and fell according to the meaning of the text, and followed the natural speech - rhythms of the text. This style of writing for the voice, half singing , half reciting, came to be known as *recitative*. The accompaniment was simple. The composer wrote the bass line below the melody known as *basso continuo* to be played by the low strings and the organ or harpsichord, who built up chords on the bass line. The composer often wrote figures under the bass line to indicate the chords. This is called a *figured bass*. Later 17th century composers continued to use recitative as a means of swiftly telling a story, while giving greater importance to arias (solo songs) which portrayed the character's thoughts and emotions as they were effected by events in the story.

The orchestra first started to take shape during the Baroque era. At first it was a haphazard collection of whatever instruments were at hand. As the 17th century progressed the perfection of string instruments (the violin in particular) by superb craftsmen such as the *Amati*, *Guarnari*, and *Stradivari* families led to the establishing of the string section. This became the basis of the orchestra to which composers would add other instruments as occasion offered - flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets and kettledrums. One constant feature of the Baroque orchestra was the *harpsichord or organ continuo*, holding the ensemble together. The harpsichord was often decorated with paintings and used as a solo instrument also. *Francois Couperin*'s harpsichord music is full of baroque ornamentation. *Domenico Scarlatti* composed 600 sonatas for the instrument. Scarlatti was born in 1685, the same year as J.S. Bach and Handel.

Archangelo Corelli made important innovations in violin technique which influenced later generations of composers and performers. He also composed some of the earliest examples of concerto grosso. At the beginning of the 18th century, the leading composer - violinist in Italy was *Antonio Vivaldi*.

During the Baroque era, instrumental music became for the first time equal in importance to vocal music. The forms used were: *toccata, fantasia, variations, passacaglia, fugue, suite, sonata, concerto*.

A *Fugue* is an contrapuntal piece based on the idea of *imitation*. It is usually written in 3 or 4 parts called 'voices', Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass. The entire piece grows from one single fairly brief tune of strong musical character. This tune is called the subject. The subject is first heard in one voice only, then it is imitated by the other voices in turn. Throughout the fugue, (the subject) enters in new keys. These entries are separated by sections of music called episodes (new material). The form was brought to perfection by Handel and J. S. Bach who composed many fine fugues for organ and '48 preludes and fugues for harpsichord or clavichord.

The Suite : a collection of dances in the same key, and in binary form.

The most common plan was 4 dances from different countries:

1. A *German Allemande*, 4/4 time, moderate speed
2. A *French Courante*, 3/2 or 6/4, moderately fast
3. A *Spanish Sarabande*, triple time, with the 2nd beat emphasised, slow
4. An *English Gigue*, 6/8 time, lively

Some composers also included, before the gigue, one or more dances such as the *Minuet*, *Bouree*, *Gavotte*.

Sonata : consisted of four movements, usually in the same key, but contrasted in speed (slow, fast, slow, fast). *Domenico Scarlatti* wrote about 600 one - movement sonatas for the harpsichord.

Concerto Grosso : In this composers contrasted two groups of instruments : a small group of soloists called the *concertino* against an orchestra for strings. A harpsichord or organ filled out the texture. From the concerto grosso grew the *solo concerto*, in which a single instrument was pitted against the orchestra. The idea of contrast became stronger still, and the composer often gave the soloist some difficult and exciting passages to play. These concertos were in three movements, quick, slow, quick. The quick movements were in

Ritornello form :

A	B	A	C	A
Tutti	Solo	Tutti	Solo	Tutti
Ritornello		Ritornello		Ritornello

Antonio Vivaldi wrote both types of concerto.