

The Baroque Era

Composers

Bach, Johann Sebastian (1685-1750)

Johann Sebastian Bach was known as "Old Bach", a name given to him by King Frederick of Prussia. This title was given to him because of his reputation as a very serious person.

Bach had an innate musical talent. As a child, he learned to play the organ and the clavichord and sang in a choir. He was able to support himself by his music at the age of fifteen and held several organist positions in nearby towns.

He was a master at composing concertos, *cantatas*, *oratorios*, chorales, piano inventions, and other religious music. The *F Major* and *A Minor* piano inventions are very well known. For most of his life, the organ and clavichord were his instruments of choice. He is considered the father of counterpoint.

Bach was not introduced to the piano until he was sixty years old. Once he discovered the instrument, Bach wrote a six-part *fugue* for King Frederick as a "musical offering". Today that fugue is considered one of the most remarkable fugues in all of music history.

Later on in life Bach was stricken with blindness. He underwent an operation to try to correct the blindness, but it was unsuccessful and only aggravated his condition. As a result, he suffered a paralytic stroke and died. He is considered one of the most influential composers of all time.

Corelli, Archangelo (1653-1713)

Archangelo Corelli was born in Fusignano, Italy in 1653. He was a violinist who composed *concerti grossi* and *trio* sonatas. His composition style is considered very typical of the Baroque period. A distinguishing feature of Corelli is that he only composed music for instrumentalists. His compositions were among some of the most popular pieces of the time period. His music was richly spirited and had a touching and refined melodic sense.

Handel, Georg Friedrich (1685-1759)

Born in the year 1685, George Friedrich Handel became the second most prominent composer of the High Baroque era. He was second only to J.S. Bach.

Handel composed sonatas, concertos, operas, and modern oratorios. He helped develop the modern opera and modern oratorio form further, while his sonatas and concertos made great use of his melodic techniques. A famous song from the oratorio *Judas Maccabeus*, is "Sing Unto God." Another famous work that is recognized world wide is the "Hallelujah Chorus" (from the *Messiah*) which is also written in oratorio form.

Monteverdi, Claudio (1567-1643)

Claudio Monteverdi was born in Italy in 1567. Monteverdi is most famous for his contributions to the early operatic form. He was an Italian composer of opera, *sacred*, and *secular* music who was ahead of his time in musical technique. As the Medieval era was a very conservative time in music, Monteverdi went against the grain. He felt that rules should be broken when they had to be, especially if it was in the interests of meaning and expressiveness.

Monteverdi was very interested in new musical techniques. Far advanced for his time, he employed a complete orchestra as opposed to using a few instruments which played the same part. This yielded a crude *polyphony*, much unlike the typical sound of the time. Monteverdi taught the viol section of the orchestra to play with bows instead of plucking strings. He further introduced *tremelo* and *pizzicato* to the strings. Monteverdi had a hard time explaining to the violists that they had to play a single note sixteen times in rapid succession. When he suggested plucking strings pizzicato to the violists, they almost revolted against him.

At age forty, Monteverdi composed his first opera, called *Orfeo*. This was an instant success, as it was written expressively and dramatically. His second opera, *Arianna*, received just as much, if not more, praise for being emotionally overwhelming. A lament in *Arianna*, called "Lasciatemi Morir" often moved the audience to tears. Other famous works of Monteverdi's are his operas *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patri*, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*,

and *Il Combattimento di Clorinda*. He died at the age of seventy-six but left a lasting impression on the musical world, one that would change the face of music forever.

Purcell, Henry 1659-1695

Throughout his life, English born Henry Purcell composed music in all forms and styles. He is most known for his lively trumpet voluntaries and sweet vocal airs. He was also a composer of multiple forms, such as court, church, stage, and chamber music. At age six he became a choirboy in the Chapel Royal. When his voice changed at age fourteen, he then became the "keeper, maker, mender, repairer and tuner of the regalls, organs, virginals, flutes, and recorders and all other kind of wind instruments, in ordinary, without fee, to His Majesty (Kaufmann, 103)."

By the time Purcell was fifteen years old, he was paid two pounds (or ten dollars) a year to tune the organ in Westminster Abbey. By age twenty, he became organist of Westminster Abbey. Additionally, it was his job to compose music for the King's violins. This task helped him to attain an audience for his organ works, songs, and instrumental compositions.

Some of Henry Purcell's more famous works are *A Song to Welcome Home His Majesty from Windsor* and *They That Go Down to the Sea in Ships*. *Dido and Aenas* is his only surviving opera. This opera contains the powerful musical pieces "Lament" and "When I Am Laid in Earth." It is still performed often today. His last anthem, *Thou Knowest Lord, the Secrets of our Hearts*, was so emotionally written that it was played at the funeral of Queen Mary. Six months later, this piece was performed in Westminster Abbey at Purcell's own funeral. Today he is remembered as one of the greatest composers who ever lived and is known for his exceptional and pleasant use of harmonies.

Rameau, Jean-Philippe (1683-1764)

Born in 1683, Jean Philippe Rameau became one of the greatest French theoreticians of all time. He broke the rules on harmonic practice of the time, and suggested new forms through his music. The *Nouvelles Suites Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gavotte* written for the *clavecen* display some of these new principles. He was courageous in his philosophies, inventive in terms of harmony, and had an extreme command of orchestration. He was always interested in adding new effects, such as storm scenes, and choruses into his music.

Vivaldi, Antonio (1680-1743)

Antonio Vivaldi was an Italian composer who was well known as a violinist and composer of solo violin concertos. He had a different musical philosophy regarding composition. He felt that the soloist and orchestra should be in musical conflict with one another, (similar to the give and take that happens when two people are speaking to one another). He is believed to have composed over 750 works of music. He set precedence by adding drama and strong rhythm to basic harmonies. Vivaldi previewed what was to become the sonata-allegro form and the typical sound of the 18th century. One of Vivaldi's most famous works is the *Four Seasons*, a four part concerto. Each section is named after a season. "La Primavera", "L'estate", "L'inverno", and "L'Autunno".