

# The Baroque Era

(1600-1750 C.E.)

The term Baroque era describes the style or period of European music between the years of 1600 and 1750. The term Baroque was derived from a Portuguese word meaning "a pearl of irregular shape." The word Baroque was initially used to imply strangeness, abnormality and extravagance, applying more to art than music. It is only in the 20th century that this term has been employed to refer to a period in music history.

When compared with its predecessors, Baroque music can be seen as being highly ornate, lavishly texturized, and intense. The music of this time period was characterized by rich counterpoint and a highly decorated melodic line. The music of this period has a number of defining characteristics including the use of the basso continuo and the belief in the doctrine of the affections. The doctrine of affections allowed composers to express emotions and feelings in their compositions. Another distinguishing characteristic of the Baroque era was the emphasis on contrast of volume, texture, and pace in the music, as compared to music of the late Renaissance which did not concentrate on these elements. In addition, Baroque music broke away from the harshness of the Medieval and early Renaissance style with new emphasis on the use of vocal and instrumental color. Secular types of music were now in abundance and used as widely as those of the liturgical musical styles. Imitative polyphony (more than one line of music) still was an extremely important factor in writing and playing music, while the homophonic method (a musical technique that displays a vast separation amongst the melody line and the accompaniment) was gaining acceptance and use quite rapidly. This homophonic style eventually became dominant in instrumental forms of music as well. Musical works containing a continuo part in which a keyboard (usually an organ or harpsichord) and a bass instrument (usually a bassoon or a cello) helped to convey the harmonic support of chords under the melodic lines.

Although homophonic music was becoming increasingly popular during this time in music history, new forms of *polyphonic* music were also developing simultaneously. Similar to composers during the Renaissance, composers during this period felt that the art of counterpoint was essential to their artistry. Two extremely strict forms of imitative polyphony, *cannons* and *fugues*, were very popular at the time of the Baroque era. To prove their very expertise, composers were sometimes expected to improvise complex fugues at a moment's notice.

It is also important to note that opera and the orchestra were both conceived during the Baroque era as well. Around 1600, opera came about because Italian intellectuals wanted to recapture the spirit of ancient Greek drama in which music played a key role. Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), was the first great opera. The homophonic musical style played a significant role in opera and solo vocal music because it focused the listener's concentration on the poetic melody of the singer.

During the beginning of the Baroque period, as a companion for operatic and vocal music, the orchestra evolved. By the mid-1600s the orchestra was growing into its own entity and the concerto was one of the most popular forms of music performed. The concerto featured a solo instrumentalist, or small ensemble of soloists, playing in opposition to the orchestra, thus creating an interesting contrast of texture and volume. In addition, during the Baroque period composers began exploring music's ability to express the human spirit and to depict natural phenomena. Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* was the most famous set of concertos that typified this.