

The Baroque Era

Instrumental

The Baroque Era brought monumental changes to instrumental music. During this time, instrumental music became just as important as vocal music both in quality and quantity, as many new developments occurred in the instrumental world.

General Characteristics

During the Baroque Era, the use of improvisation increased. This change was most important in instrumental music. However, as important as it was, improvisation caused problems when musicians attempted to understand and perform Baroque music accurately.

Basso continuo, or figured bass, was purely an instrumental concept. It is music that is played by one or more bass instruments and a keyboard instrument. Basso continuo gave bass parts an importance of their own in all areas of ensemble music. It is one of the most distinct features of the Baroque Era as a whole.

Thematic variation occurred in all aspects of instrumental music, during this time period. In addition to thematic variation, sequencing was also used. This was a repetition of melody patterns on successively higher or lower pitches. It became a typical part of instrumental music during the mid-Baroque period.

Another characteristic of the Baroque Era was the distinction between the chamber ensemble and the orchestra. This started to take place around the late 1600s. Equal tempered tuning of keyboard instruments was now commonplace. The old method of tuning, which was called *intonation* was no longer practiced. Bach's *The Well Tempered Clavier* was composed to show equality of keys in the new tuning system.

INSTRUMENTS OF THE BAROQUE ERA

The Baroque Era saw the continuation of all the instruments that were used during the Renaissance. During this period, there were mechanical and technological improvements to the instruments, and they started to develop into the instruments that we know today. Another important development of the Baroque Era was the development of the violin family, which occurred at the end of the 1600s.

Keyboard Instruments

Keyboard instruments were used for basso continuo parts and solo music. They were involved in a major portion of the instrumental literature of the time. During this era, three types of keyboards existed; the clavichord, the organ, and the harpsichord.

Clavichord

The clavichord produced sound by striking a metal wedge against a string when a key was pressed. The sound quality was weak, but the instrument was able to produce some dynamics. It was mainly used in Germany and usually played as a solo instrument or in a small ensemble.

Organ

The Baroque organ was more powerful than its predecessor, the Renaissance organ. Organs were mostly associated with church music and used as solo instruments or accompaniment instruments. A vast growth in organ literature took place during this period.

Harpsichord

The Harpsichord was very popular and was known by various names in different parts of Europe. In Italy, it was called a *clavicembalo*. In England, it was referred to as a virginal. In France it was termed a *clavecin*, and in Germany, it was named *klavier*. The harpsichord usually had two manuals or keyboards. Its tone was produced with quills which plucked the strings mechanically every time a key was pressed. The tone of the harpsichord was stronger than the clavichord but it could not produce dynamics. The harpsichord was the main

instrument employed in the basso continuo. It is one of the most distinctive sounds of the Baroque Era and was the most favored instrument in solo music.

String Instruments

The principal string instruments of the 1600s were the viol family. The new violin family of instruments slowly replaced them. The violin soon became the new leader of the stringed instruments, and its sound became the dominant timbre in late Baroque ensemble music. The bass viol commonly known as the contrabass, or double bass was still utilized, even though the other viols died out. During the 1600s, the lute started to lose its dominance in the music world. A few pieces of lute music were still being produced, mainly in France and Germany.

Wind Instruments

During the Baroque era the principal woodwind instruments used were the bassoon, flute, and oboe. Older end-blown recorders were still in use during the late Baroque period. The transverse flute started to become a common solo and ensemble instrument. Brass instruments such as horns, trumpets, and trombones were used in large ensembles, but rarely as solo instruments.

Percussion Instruments

Timpani were the only percussion instruments in common use at this time. They were used sparingly in the orchestra.

FORM

During the beginning of the Baroque Era, the Renaissance forms continued to dominate the musical world. During the second half of the century, there were distinct changes, as new musical forms appeared.

Fugal Forms

The early fugal forms were carried over from the Renaissance Era. They included the *fantasia* , *canzona* (which was the forerunner precursor of the sonata), and the capriccio. These were all written for keyboard instruments. By the mid 1600's, these forms were replaced by the *fugue* . The Fugue of the 1600's was *monothematic* . Each voice stated the theme. The subject was played in the *tonic key* and answered in the dominant key. Fugues were composed for all media, including choral ensembles. They were also written as independent pieces and as movements in larger works.

Variation Forms

Thematic *variations* were used in various forms such as *cantus firmus* , canzona, and dance suites. Keyboard instruments mainly carried out these variation forms.

Ground, which was a type of variation used in England, had a short recurrent theme in the bass line and a continually changing *counterpoint* . Improvised variations on a ground are called divisions. Variations were also called passacaglia and chaconne. Cantus firmus variations were important in Germany. They restated the chorale melody completely and had a different contrapuntal setting each time.

Dance Suite

Dance music retained its importance from past musical eras. Suites or partitas were the main dance forms. Harpsichords, chamber ensembles, and orchestras all played dance music. There was no standard number or order for the movements in the suites, and usually the movements were in the same key.

The form for each dance movement was binary, meaning it had two sections that were repeated. The first section modulated to the dominant key and the second section began in a contrasting key and then moved back to tonic key at the conclusion.

Common dance movements that were specific to the Baroque Era were the *courante* , *gigue* , *allemande* , and sarabande. Every now and then, other forms of nondance movements appeared in suites such as airs, fugues, and variations.

Chorale Prelude

This was the most important category of Baroque organ music and was used primarily in church music. The *cantus firmus* was the most common chorale prelude. It had longer note values and a fast moving counterpoint. The cantus firmus could show up in any part of the piece. Sometimes it would appear in the pedals, while at other times each phrase of the chorale would appear in imitative counterpoint preceding the cantus firmus in longer notes.

A coloration chorale stated the chorale melody in the top part as a cantus firmus and disguised the original melody by using ornamentation.

The *chorale partita* was a set of variations on a chorale tune. Each variation was called a verse. The chorale melody was modified but otherwise kept intact as cantus firmus. Only the accompanying counterpoint changed.

Improvisatory Forms

Certain keyboard forms such as the *prelude*, fantasia, and *tocatta* appeared regularly during the Baroque Era. There were no specific rules for these improvisatory forms. They shared some common items such as *contrapuntal* textures, rapid scales, sustained chords, and figuration. Improvisation lacked distinct thematic material and formal unity.

Sonata

The *sonata* was a multi-movement work that was composed for various solo instruments and for small chamber groups during the Baroque era. The term sonata appeared in the early 1500s in Italy. There were three types of sonatas: an unaccompanied solo sonata that was written for the violin or cello; an accompanied solo sonata that was written for different instruments with basso continuo; and a trio sonata that was written for two solo instruments and basso continuo played by a keyboard instrument or cello.

The church sonata evolved in Italy after 1650. It had a number of movements that contrasted in tempo and texture. By the end of the Baroque Era, church sonatas were written in four movements. The tempo of the movements followed a slow-fast-slow-fast plan. They were meant to be played in parts of a church service and used the organ to perform the continuo parts.

The chamber sonata or sonata da camera was a suite of dance movements. They were named corrente, giga, sarabanda, and allemanda. Harpsichords were used to play the continuo in a chamber sonata. By the late Baroque era, there were few distinctions between church and chamber sonatas. They both included dance names for some movements and only had tempo indications on some of the sonatas.

Tower sonatas or *turmsonaten* were composed for a small group of wind instruments. They were meant to be played at certain times of the day from church steeples or towers.

Keyboard sonatas were solo sonatas for the harpsichord and appeared at the end of the 1600s. These sonatas represented a very small percentage of Baroque instrumental compositions.

Orchestral Music

The Baroque orchestra did not have standardization. It was composed mainly of strings, while wind instruments and percussion instruments were used less frequently. The bass part of the orchestra played the basso continuo. Instruments of different kinds doubled on each part as there was not much color definition to the Baroque era's orchestration.

The solo concerto was fully developed towards the end of the Baroque Era. It was a concerto for one instrument and an orchestra. It was written in three movements using a fast-slow-fast plan.

The concerto grosso was an important form of Baroque orchestral literature. It consisted of a group of two or three solo instruments (concertino) playing in opposition to the orchestra as a whole (tutti). It was often played in alternating and contrasting sections.