

The Renaissance

Instrumental

Even though the instrumental music of the Renaissance period did not equal the vocal music, in terms of quality and quantity, it still played an integral part of the era. Instrumental music gained in popularity and developed a musical form that was distinct from vocal music.

During the Renaissance era, instrumental music was written according to specific rules.

1. Improvisation was very important in performance and for melodic ornamentation.
2. Transcriptions of vocal music for instrumental performance were numerous.
3. Instruments were freely employed in the performance of vocal music.
4. Some instrumental forms were borrowed from vocal forms, while others were instrumentally invented.

Instrumental music also had specific characteristics during the Renaissance Era. The instrumental style of the Renaissance time period was also distinct.

1. Melodic range was wider than vocal limitations.
2. There was extensive ornamentation including coloration, embellishment, and figuration.
3. There was a much freer treatment of dissonance.
4. In lute and keyboard music *contrapuntal* parts were freely added or dropped without indicating rests.
5. There were exceedingly long and rapid scale passages.
6. There were numerous wide skips.

During this era, the instruments on which musicians played from day to day also improved. The instruments most commonly used were of keyboards, strings, and winds.

STRING INSTRUMENTS

Bowed Strings

Ancestors of the 17th century violin family, Renaissance viols, were fretted instruments with six strings tuned in fourths, with a third in the middle (A d g b e' a'). They were used in various ensembles called consorts (consisting entirely of viols) or in mixed consorts, which had recorders and other instruments in it.

Plucked Strings

The most popular solo instrument of the Renaissance was the lute. It had an angled neck and pear shaped body. Lutes were fretted instruments. It had six strings tuned, as did viols, in fourths with a third in the middle (G c f a d' g'). Lute music was often written in tablature, a special kind of musical notation that indicates the fret and string for a given note. Being extremely versatile, the lute was used for solo, accompaniment and for ensemble music purposes.

WIND INSTRUMENTS

The most important wind instrument of the Renaissance era was the recorder. The recorder was a hollow, end-blown wooden flute. The recorder was also a very versatile instrument and it was used in many different types of ensemble music. It ranged in size from treble to bass. Other notable wind instruments were the shawm and the cromorn (double reed woodwinds), coronets (soft toned instruments made out of wood or ivory), and early trumpets and trombones (restricted to the natural tone of the harmonic series). These instruments were first emerging and were confined to fanfares or to outdoor music festivals.

KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS

Organs and keyboards were the primary keyboard instruments used during the Renaissance era. They were commonly found in churches. In their earliest form, pedalboards were not built into such organs (except in Germany). Regals, or positive organs, were in wide use since the medieval period, while the portative organ died out during the latter 1600s.

Additionally, there were two other types of keyboard instruments now present in the musical world. They were the clavichord and the harpsichord.

Keyboard instruments were mainly used for solo purposes during the Renaissance, and rarely accompanied vocal *polyphony*. It was an even rarer occurrence that a vocal or ensemble piece to be accompanied by a clavichord or harpsichord.

ENSEMBLES

The term Renaissance ensemble is meant to be used in a simplistic, un-evolved form. Rarely did an ensemble match what we would today call an orchestra. Instead, ensembles were basically small chamber groups. Seldom was specific instrumentation for ensembles declared in a score.

FORMS OF MUSIC

Renaissance composers did not give much thought to whether their pieces would be vocal or instrumental. Most pieces of the time were written “per cantar e sonar”, which means “for singing and playing”. Composers wrote their works so that either the voice or instruments could be used to convey the message of their work. There was still a distinction between sacred and secular music during the 1700s.

Dance Music

In its beginning stages, dance music was written to accompany social gatherings. Later on, during the 1700s, a more structured and specifically styled dance form was developed. Dance music became popular and its form was filled with strong rhythm and repeating sections. The dances of the time were usually arranged in groups of 2 or 3 movements. In the typical dance pair, both sections had the same tune; the first dance was in slow tempo while the following one was faster with a change of meter. The lute, which was popular, helped to play dance music, while the harpsichord and small ensembles also contributed to this art form.

Cantus Firmus Forms

The *cantus firmus* musical form was basically for use in the Church, as it was liturgical music. Usually, this type of music was played by an organist between verses of a hymn sung by the congregation or choir. Stylistically, a cantus firmus piece was based on simplistic *plainsong* or secular song, which was meant to be played by a harpsichord, organ, or an ensemble of viols.

Improvisational Forms

The *prelude* was the main improvisational form during the Renaissance. Usually composed for keyboard or lute instruments, it was an instrumental type which made use of a collection of materials in order to give the listener a feeling of improvisation.

Variation Forms

Variations were written in many different ways. Theme and variation form was based on a popular tune which itself was modified with each restatement. Another variation was called ground, which used short themes of four to eight measures in the bass and had a changing *counterpoint* played above it. A cantus firmus variation used a single melody which was repeated a number of times. Each time the melody was repeated it was accompanied by a different counterpoint and in a different voice. English hexachord variations used as a theme the first 6 notes of a scale. This was most common in virginal music.