

## THE BAROQUE PERIOD OF WESTERN MUSIC (1600-1750)

**Baroque** originates from a Portuguese word *barocco* that means an irregular pearl. Originally, it was a derogatory term suggesting something overly, elaborate or strange, but later became a neutral or even positive label for the style. Baroque music had highly ornamented and decorated style, similar to the architecture, art and literature of that time. Again, the dates are only but approximation.

### Characteristics of Baroque music

- Use of **basso continuo** – a continuous bass line that runs throughout a piece, played by one or more instruments, providing harmonic and rhythmic support.
  - Basso continuo was usually performed by two instruments: a keyboard instrument like harpsichord or organ and a bass melody instrument like cello or bassoon.
  - Keyboard instruments filled in required chords that were not written out. If the chords were not common triads in root position, **figured bass** was used.
  - **Figured bass** – consisted of numbers/figures written below the bass notes, showing the intervals that should be played above that note to form the desired harmony.
- There was unity of mood (**one mood persisting throughout a piece of music**)
- **Regular rhythmic patterns in both instrumental and vocal music.** Irregular rhythms could be used when writing vocal recitatives and improvisatory solo instrumental pieces.
- **Major and minor key systems were developed as basis of tonal harmony**
- **Violin family replaced viols used in previous period**
- **Rise in virtuosity and improvisation.** A **virtuoso** is a skilled performer in their instrument or voice.
- **Terraced dynamics** - (sharp contrasts between loud and soft sections of music) were common.
- **Long melodies decorated with ornaments**

### Which are the vocal forms of music in baroque period?

- **Opera** – a drama set to music, to be sung, accompanied by instruments.
- Music here was not incidental as in musicals or plays with music. Normally, **incidental music** (*also known as underscoring*), is music used in a play, film, radio program or other dramatic work as a background to create or enhance emotional impact and particular atmosphere. It can be background music, transition piece or music that highlights specific moments in a story but it is not the main focus. Its purpose is to enhance the mood, setting or action of the scene without drawing too much attention to itself. So, when we say that music in baroque opera was not



- incidental, **we mean that music was the drama** – *not just background support*. It played a primary role in telling the story, expressing emotions and advancing the plot.
- Singers were usually in costume
  - Stage performance involved use of stage effects such as lighting.
  - Singers are divided into chorus, duets, trios, quartets, etc
  - Solo parts are either **aria** based or **recitative** based.
  - Performance of operas alternated between recitatives, arias, choruses and instrumental interludes.
  - The text of opera was secular.
  - Apart from accompanying singers, orchestra also had pieces of its own to play. One of them was **overture** – an introductory piece to an opera.

### Brief explanation of terms related to baroque opera

- ❖ **Aria** – a musical piece written for a solo voice with orchestral accompaniment in an opera.
- ❖ **Recitative** – speech-like singing that advances the plot / dialogue in an opera, that rather than being sung as an aria, is reproduced with the rhythms of normal speech, often with simple musical accompaniment, serving to expound the plot.
- ❖ **Overture** – introductory piece to an opera

### What are the differences between aria and recitative?

- Arias are solo, melodic pieces that express a character's emotions, while recitatives serve to advance the plot through dialogue-like speech.
- Arias focus on emotional impact of a character's inner state, while recitatives focus on conveying information and moving the story forward.

### Prominent composers of opera in baroque period.

- ✓ Claudio Monteverdi – Italy
- ✓ Alessandro Scarlatti – Italy
- ✓ Jean-Baptiste Lully – France
- ✓ Jean-Philippe Rameau- France
- ✓ George Friderick Handel – Germany
- ✓ Henry Purcell – England.
- **Oratorio** – a large scale composition for voices and instruments that tells a sacred or biblical story, similar to opera but without acting, costumes or scenery.
- Oratorios were based on sacred stories, usually taken from the Bible
- No acting is involved



- Singers do not wear costume
- Oratorios are performed in concert halls and churches rather than theatres

#### Prominent composers of oratorio

- ✓ Giacomo Carrissimi – Italy
- ✓ Handel
- ✓ Heinrich Schutz – Germany
  - **Passion** – a special type of oratorio telling the story of Jesus Christs crucifixion. The most prominent composer of these was J.S Bach, who included chorales (German hymn-tunes), to intensify the most solemn, and deeply moving parts of the story.
  - **Cantata** (meaning ‘sung’) – a vocal work for soloists and chorus accompanied by orchestra. It was sometimes called miniature oratorio.
- *Cantata da chiesa* (church cantata) developed by Carrissimi was sacred.
- *Cantata da camera* (chamber cantata) was secular.
- Popular exponents of cantata were Allesandro Scarlatti, J.S Bach and Giacomo Carrissimi.

#### Which were the differences between opera and oratorio?

- ✓ Operas were fully staged with costumes, acting and scenery while oratorios were performed with no acting or costumes.
- ✓ Operas were performed in theatres while oratorios were performed in concert halls and churches
- ✓ Operas were often secular, with secular themes like love, politics and mythology while oratorios contained sacred stories.

#### Which are the instrumental forms of music in baroque period?

- **The suite** - a Baroque suite is a collection of instrumental dances, popular during the Baroque period (c. 1600–1750). Each movement is usually in the same key but features a different dance rhythm and character. Suites were written for solo instruments (like keyboard or lute), chamber ensembles, or orchestras.

Typical Baroque suites include the following standard dances, often in this order:

1. **Allemande** – a moderate German dance in duple time.
2. **Courante** – a faster, flowing dance (French) or a lively triple-meter (Italian).
3. **Sarabande** – a slow, stately dance in triple time. (Spain)



4. **Gigue** – quick and gay, often in compound meter (England)

Optional dances such as **Minuet** in triple time, **Bourée** in duple time, **Gavotte** in duple time, or **Passepied** in triple time could be inserted between the Sarabande and Gigue.

Composers like Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel were famous for their suites. Bach's "French Suites," "English Suites," and "Orchestral Suites" are excellent examples. These works highlight the Baroque ideals of order, ornamentation, and contrasting moods.

- **Baroque sonata**- is a type of instrumental composition from the Baroque period (c. 1600–1750), typically written for one or more solo instruments with continuo accompaniment (like harpsichord and cello). The word "sonata" comes from the Italian "*sonare*," meaning "to sound," indicating music that is played (instrumental), not sung.

There are two main types of Baroque sonatas:

1. **Sonata da chiesa** (Church Sonata)

Intended for performance in sacred settings.

Usually has 4 or 5 movements. The basic scheme was fast, slow, fast.

Was intended to be played in church during the silent parts of the mass

More serious in tone, often contrapuntal.

Example: Corelli's Sonata da chiesa Op. 3.

2. **Sonata da camera** (Chamber Sonata)

Performed in secular settings (in a room of a home), usually in 4 movements

More like a suite of dance movements (e.g., allemande, courante, sarabande).

Lighter and more rhythmic.

Example: Corelli's Sonata da camera Op. 2.

Instrumentation:

Often written for solo violin and continuo, or trio sonata format (two melody instruments + continuo).



Famous composers: Arcangelo Corelli, Domenico Scarlatti, J.S. Bach, Handel.

The Baroque sonata helped develop instrumental music's independence from vocal forms, and laid the foundation for Classical sonata forms later on.

What is a **trio sonata**?

In baroque, it was music written for two violins and continuo (cello and harpsichord).

**Trio** here refers to the number of parts in which the music is written, it does not refer to the number of people required to play it.

-  **The Baroque Concerto:** 

The Baroque period (c. 1600–1750) gave rise to some of the most dramatic and dynamic forms in Western music—and at the heart of this evolution was the Baroque concerto. This genre didn't just entertain; it shaped how musicians and audiences thought about contrast, expression, and instrumental brilliance.


### What Is a Baroque Concerto?

A **concerto** during the Baroque era is **a musical work that features a contrast between a soloist (or group of soloists) and the full orchestra (called the ripieno or tutti)**. This back-and-forth creates a musical “conversation,” filled with tension, energy, and resolution.

There are two main types of Baroque concerto:

#### 1. Solo Concerto

One solo instrument—often violin, flute, or harpsichord—against the orchestra. The soloist displays technical skill and expressive phrasing.

 **Structure:** Usually in three movements — Fast–Slow–Fast. Fast movements were in ritornello form (return).

**What was ritornello?** It was the main theme, which was played by the orchestra at the beginning of the movement, then returned after every lightly accompanied solo section. Every ritornello section was marked **tutti** meaning *(all play)*.

 **Famous Example:** Violin Concerto in E major by J.S. Bach.

#### 2. Concerto Grosso



Small group of soloists (*concertino*) in contrast with the full ensemble (*ripieno*). When both groups play together, the term **tutti** (everyone) is used.

A harpsichord continuo is used throughout. The first movement (*allegro*) began with an opening **tutti** passage, which returned at intervals throughout the movement in different keys, and was contrasted with quieter solo passages. This plan of **repeating the tutti passage** is called **ritornello form**. Movements of concerto grosso were usually headed with tempo markings.

 Developed by Arcangelo Corelli, perfected by George Frideric Handel and Bach.

 Example: Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, especially No. 5 and No. 3.

### Characteristics of the Baroque Concerto

- Contrast: Between loud and soft (dynamics), solo and group, fast and slow.
- Ritornello Form: Common in the first movements, where a recurring theme (ritornello) alternates with contrasting solo episodes.
- Ornamentation: Solo parts were richly decorated with trills, runs, and improvisation.
- Unity of Mood: Each movement typically focuses on a single emotional character or affect.

