Music in the Baroque Period  
c. 1600-1750  
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Like the term “Renaissance”, when used in the context of the Renaissance Period, the so-called “Baroque” Era was also named rather inaccurately, as the term was applied to music that sounded “irregular and unnatural”. To our ears in the 21st century, music composed during the years between 1600 – 1750 sounds anything but unnatural, or at least in our modern context of the word. The Renaissance, in particular, was not necessarily a “rebirth” of classical ideals, but a return to the study of Greek philosophy mixed with the ideals of humanism and a desire to understand the human condition. The word “baroque”, meaning a “deformed pearl”, became the one word summary of a period that offers so much more than a simple and concise classification. A great many styles and compositional techniques were developed during these years, which mirrors the innovations in art, architecture, and literature. But as with the other disciplines of the fine arts, music of the Baroque Era was designed to move the emotions and sway the senses, no more than the previous Renaissance Age was motivated to accomplish.

“When in Rome . . .”

Before composers of the 17th century began to experiment with changing meters, uncommon key changes, and relationships between consonances and dissonances, music remained primarily under the control of the reigning royal and nobility classes. Any religious or political statement the composer wished to make must have been granted permission by the composer’s patron or lord first (or risk getting fired, or even beheaded!). Since the monarchy had been the dominant governmental structure since the fall of ancient Rome, not much had changed in terms of how music was controlled, censored, and published for over a thousand years. However, higher levels in education in the beginning of the 17th century did allow more access for the enjoyment of music and the other arts, though it was still limited to the aristocracy. Music was also used as propaganda during the religious strife between Catholicism and Lutheranism. While both religions recognized music as divine, the way in which music was composed for these services was clearly divided. Those of the Catholic faith continued their belief that music should be written completely in Latin, while the Lutherans preferred music in their own language in order to make the words understandable so as to bring people closer to God. Whatever rhetoric was used to convey God’s message through music, Italy was the dominant region where musical innovation was made in the early 17th century.
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Italy in the 1600’s was not the united country it now has become. Parts of the peninsula were ruled by Spain or Austria, and many were small, independent states that constantly warred against each other for power and influence. The major power centers of Italy each specialized in a different aspect of musical innovation, including Rome, Naples, Venice, and Florence. Even France and Germany displayed Italian musical techniques which continued to hold influence through the time of J.S. Bach and Handel. Many of the outdated techniques of the 16th century were beginning to coalesce into a single, common language spread throughout Europe.

In 1605, Claudio Monteverdi wrote of what he termed a “second practice” of musical composition, as opposed to the “first practice” as originally outlined by the leading musical theorist Giuseppe Zarlino. Monteverdi’s style was based on the earlier work of Renaissance composers such as Cipriano de Rore, Claudio Merulo, and himself. His primary difference lay in his emphasis of where the text would dominate the music, unlike the music dominated practice of Zarlino and his contemporaries. In Monteverdi’s view, Zarlino’s “rules” could be abandoned and the use of dissonances and changing meters could be part of the structural core of the music. Other theorists called the two the stile antico (antique) and stile moderno (modern). These new innovations could be used in the compositions of music for the church, the theatre, and chamber music.

Some of the major changes in music of the early 17th century included composing to fit the needs of the specific instrument. In the Renaissance, vocal and instrumental parts were interchangeable based on the needs and availability of the ensemble. Baroque music is characterized by more idiomatic writing, which contributed to the rise of the concert soloist. Pieces for harpsichord, lute, singer, trumpeter, or violin became more prominent, as did the popularity of instrumental ensembles. Writing music in measures separated by bar lines also began in the 17th century. The use of basso continuo was a typical staple of the Baroque period. Basso continuo, also known as thoroughbass, placed emphasis on highlighting the bass and treble voices as the dominant lines of the music. The inner lines were not even written in, giving the individual lute or keyboard player the task of filling in the remaining notes of the chord. Depending on the quality of the chord, the composer would write in figures below the bass note, a technique called figured bass. This is very similar to our modern system of guitar tabulature.

Other techniques that composers employed included the recognition of dissonance as less of an interval between two voices but as an individual tone that did not fit into the chord. Composers could now use dissonances more freely, and though it was considered experimental at the time, by the mid-century rules and guidelines had been put in place governing the use of such dissonances in defining the tonal direction of a piece. Chromaticism, which Renaissance composers such as Carlo Gesualdo wrote freely, also became more mainstreamed in the hands of organ composers Girolamo Frescobaldi and his student Johann Jakob Froberger. The rules of
tonality were beginning to approach what would become familiar to us as modern tonality. Because of this, composers and theorists of today have labeled the musical theory practices of the Baroque Era as “the common-practice period”.

“What’s Opera, Doc?”

The musical style that is known in the present day as opera was born in Florence, Italy, under the auspices of the wealthy and influential Medici family. The Medici’s were much like the modern day Mafia; they had no “official” royal titles aside from noblemen, but they governed Florence and exhibited complete control over its businesses and citizens. This is not to say that the Medici’s were tyrannical; under their patronage, business flourished, architectural achievements were pronounced, and the fine arts were lavishly supported. In fact, huge galas were created for Medici family events, such as in their weddings. Theatrical stage productions were designed to symbolize the Medici’s as mythological figures, such as Reason and Justice. Between acts of comedy and tragedy, intermedi were performed consisting of a short play in which all the words were sung, not spoken. Depending on the occasion, these intermedi could feature a soloist, choir, or a large group accompanied by instruments. The Medici wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinand de’ Medici of Tuscany and Christine of Lorraine features five intermedi, with subjects taken from Greek mythology. In the production, the characters of the Graces, Cupid, and the Muses all proclaim a new “Golden Age”, which symbolized the union of the bride and groom. This and future intermedi were performed by a group of composers and musicians who called themselves the Camerata.

The earliest known act of combining dance, acting, and music in a theatrical production was the composer Jacopo Peri’s work Dafne. Peri, a member of the Camerata, created the earliest example of an entirely sung stage work with a plot. Unfortunately, Dafne in its entirety does not survive; only about six fragments remain. Other composers of the Camerata that experimented with the forerunners of opera included Giulio Caccini and Emilio de’ Cavalieri, both singers by profession who often performed in their own productions. Two forms of expression came out of these early operas: the aria, or solo song, and the singing representation of dialogue, known as recitative. It was Claudio Monteverdi who would write the first stage production which would be called “opera”, meaning the plural of opus, or “work”. Monteverdi’s opera, entitled Orfeo, would be the first opera to be regularly performed even to this day. Soon afterward, opera became a defining style of Italy, written and performed in Rome, Naples and Venice by composers such as Luigi Rossi, Antonio Cesti, and Francesco Cavalli.
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Vocal and Instrumental Chamber Music

While opera was to become a main source of artistic entertainment in the later Baroque Period, chamber music was the norm when it came to the center of musical life. Chamber music, so named because it performed in the home, was constantly evolving with new inventions and techniques. Vocal music was still based on poetical meter and biblical texts, though the strophic aria form gave composers the ability to create multiple verses on a single melody. Music was also written on separate staves for vocal and instrumental parts. During the Renaissance, vocal and instrumental parts were interchangeable, but during the Baroque Era, music was specifically crafted to meet the needs of the individual performer. Instrumental musical forms were based on folk dances and included the chaconne and the passacaglia, both originating from Spain. Vocal forms designed on poetical meter included the cantata and romanesca from Italy. Instrumental composers attempted to re-create the effect of improvisational performance in notation. The primary composer of keyboard music that achieved this improvisational quality was Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643). Under Frescobaldi and his contemporaries, the form of the toccata would flourish in the hands of later Baroque composers such as J.S. Bach and into the 18th century. 17th century instruments included the violin, organ, lute, sackbut (modern trombone), the natural trumpet, the recorder, and the shawm (modern oboe), pictured below.

Instrumental music in the church of the 17th century was centered in the grand Church of St. Mark’s, located in Venice. Illustrious composers such as Adrien Willaert, Andrea Gabrieli and his nephew Giovanni, and Claudio Monteverdi all enjoyed positions as primary composer and music director at St. Mark’s. Because of their prodigious skills not only as composers, but organ players, the style of keyboard music in the 17th century gradually transformed from a general common-place practice to a more virtuoso practice. No longer could talented amateurs perform at the church or at court; professionals now dominated in ensembles specifically designed for them. In turn, their artistic and social prestige started to spread throughout Italy and the rest of Europe. In Italy in particular, churches were more numerous throughout the country than in any other time in European history. The most important church in a given region was called the basilica, which had several salaried musicians, both vocal and instrumental, in an ensemble called a capella (literally, “chapel”). These musicians were always men; women would have to wait
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Another 250 years to be able to perform with men in the church. However, convents for women had already been established, giving women the ability to cultivate their musical talents. Though plainchant was still in use, organ accompaniment was now added to give an extra dimension to the church offices. One type of polyphony that was added to plainchant was called falsobordone, which was an uncomplicated method of singing psalms in harmony by using a chord instead of a psalm tone and adding cadences during the midway and final resolutions. Though falsobordone was a common practice from the late Renaissance, it virtually disappeared near 1650.

Large scale church forms included the grand concerto, which involved at least a full choir and instrumental accompaniment, as well as concertos for choir and organ accompaniment. Another lasting genre was the oratorio, named because they were most performed in the oratory of the church, where devotional songs were normally sung. The oratorio developed out of the intent to combine narrative, dialogue, and meditation in the church service.

Music in Lutheran Germany

While Italy was the driving force behind many of the musical advancements during the 17th century, the war between Roman Catholicism and Lutheran Protestants was still raging across the continent. However, music in the German-speaking lands in the Holy Roman Empire still brought in an influx of Italian composers, most of who lived in Catholic-centered regions of the Empire. Lutheran church music was mostly in strophic form, rhymed, and used simple, vernacular language. Melodies were usually set to several texts; the focus being to divert the attention of the faithful away from ritualized ceremony and more toward inspiration through instruction. One of the first Lutheran composers to assimilate Italian musical tradition, such as the basso continuo while studying works by Lasso and Palestrina was Michael Pretorius (1571-1621). Pretorius (pictured left) served under the household of Duke Heinrich Julius of the Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel family and wrote many Italian-style madrigals with German or Latin religious texts. Others composers who followed in Pretorius’s footsteps were Johann Hermann Schein (1586-1630) and Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654). The most prolific and greatest composer of Lutheran Germany in the mid-17th century was Heinrich Schütz (see Composer Profiles).

An early follower of Martin Luther, Jean Calvin (1509-1564), took Luther’s teachings to a new level as religious leader of the Swiss town of Geneva. Calvin possessed a near-puritan view of pleasure and enjoyment, and subsequently attempted to eliminate all aspects of music that did not conform to anything except monophonic plainchant translated into the local language. The major composer of Calvinist music during the 17th century was Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621). Modeled on the works of Renaissance composers such as Claudio Merulo and Andrea Gabrieli, Sweelinck’s keyboard works are monothemematic, with one subject for each imitative statement.
Outside the church, music in the German-speaking lands expanded to instrumental groups that did not include singers. These wind bands, called Stadtpfeifern (“town pipers”), began a distinctive Germanic tradition of music for civic and local bands. Usually five to ten musicians were part of a group that played mostly dance pieces that outside of Italian musical influence. Solo instruments, such as the organ and violin, played existing forms such as the fantasia and ricercare, composed by Frescobaldi and Sweelinck, among others. In Vienna, Austria, the reign of Emperor Leopold I (1658-1705), gave music a decidedly productive period. The emperor was not only a trained musician and composer, but he also expanded the number of musicians in his royal court and fostered a new generation of composers. During the last quarter of the 17th century, instrumental music in particular experienced a consolidation of style, allowing for composers to create specific states of emotion without the necessity for text. The principal styles of keyboard and organ music at the time included the prelude, toccata, and chorale settings. The toccata, a piece suggesting improvisation through the development of short melodic motifs, in particular became a favorite tool for composers leading up to J.S. Bach. The most prolific keyboard composer during the mid 17th century was Johann Pachelbel (pictured right). Pachelbel (1653-1706), most famous for his Canon in D, also wrote a number of organ chorale settings and fugues, or virtuosic variations on a short theme. Most instrumental music was performed in streets and plazas where most public congregations took place. Music composed for outdoor festivals could be used for sacred purposes at the church, or even at the king’s royal court. This began an overlap between church and secular instrumental music, which completely changed the old idea of using a composition for a single venue.

In Germany, music theory was also taking a historical turn. During the previous century, three styles of musical composition were in use: the stylus gravis (“Serious Style”), in which the music is more important than the text, the styles luxurians (“Common Embellished Style”), where the words and music are equal in importance, and the styles luxurians theatralis (“Theatrical Embellished Style”), where the words were significantly more important than the music. German composers were still using the church modes, in use since the Middle Ages. Most music theory books of the 17th century used the church modes as the primary keys, though several German theorists began to classify the modes as either naturalior (“natural”) or mollior (“soft”). These two terms correspond to our modern terminology of major and minor. A radical German theorist, Andreas Werckmeister (1645-1706), proposed to get rid of the church modes entirely and replace them with just two: the “natural” mode and the “less perfect” mode. He theorized that all twelve transpositions could be used, and that their key signatures should be placed at the beginning of the piece, as opposed to using them every time a note required a flat, sharp, or natural. In his treatise Hypmnemata musica, written in 1697, he writes of a “musical circle” of chords, that if you
begin at one particular chord and play through each chord in the interval of a fourth or a fifth, you will eventually return to the original chord through all twelve transpositions. This theory of remodeling the modes into major and minor keys gave rise to the modern system of musical theory that we work with today.

**Baroque Music in France**

Unlike Italy and Germany, music in 17th century France contained more obvious political propaganda in its stage and church performances. The main type of musical form was the **ballet de cour**, or court ballet, where performers would dress up as figures from mythology to represent the nobility. Dancers would have to be highly skilled to enter the ballet, which was expected of all noblemen. Even several kings were considered great dancers, and would freely join the court in performances. Some dance forms included the pavanne, the passemezze, and the allemande, the last of which was from Germany. Other dance forms included the courante, the sarabande, and the volta, which was a lively dance in triple meter. Increased social status would be given to an expert dancer if they were a member of the royal court.

While Italy had many churches and basilicas scattered across its lands, France’s main musical activity was centered at its capital, Paris. The musical advancements made in Paris spread out throughout the rest of the country, so the royal court at Paris was the center of musical life in all of France. During the reign of Louis XIV, the Palace of Versailles became the heart of national focus. Louis was an absolute ruler in both law and divine issues. After the death of Louis XIII, Louis XIV expanded the palace to further glorify himself in the eyes of his subjects. Taking a personal interest in music, Louis created several organizations, including the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal Chapel, the Music of the Chamber, and the Music of the Royal Stables, all of which were designed to create inferences of pride, glory, and the military strength of France under Louis XIV. Through Italian nobles at the French court, including Maria de’ Medici, opera was gradually introduced in Paris. Louis (pictured right) used the spectacle of opera to further glorify his reign by even participating as allegorical symbols of power, such as Hercules and Apollo. Louis also initiated a system of royal musical academies to heighten the quality of the arts, and to give France a national identity through the coordination of language and musical style. The greatest composer of French opera during this time was **Jean-Baptiste Lully** (see Composer Profiles). Lully’s monopoly on French opera gave him the opportunity to compose directly for the king and enjoy the rewards of his work.
England after Elizabeth

When Elizabeth I died in 1603 at the age of 69, her successor, James I (1566-1625), continued the tradition of a flourishing arts community. Known as the “Golden Age” of Elizabeth, literary and artistic figures such as William Shakespeare, Sir Francis Bacon, and John Donne continued to play a major role in the development of England as a cultural center of Europe. Before his coronation, James Stuart VI had become King of Scotland at the age of 13 months, following the execution of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, at the age of 44. England by the beginning of the 17th century already had a sizable Puritan population, who were completely opposed to music in church and the theatre. Though England in the Renaissance had remained relatively separate from the musical happenings on the continent, German, Italian, and French influences were now beginning to combine with native English traditions that weaved in and out of the musical scene. Like the German counterpart of Stadtpfeifern, English wind ensembles called “waits” were also present in common society. The name originated from town watchmen, in which civic wind performers would signal the hour or play music from the watchtower. A typical English musical form of the early Baroque Period was called the fantasia-suite, possibly from Italian influences. The fantasia-suite was a work in three movements, consisting of a fantasia (fantasy-piece), followed by an alamaine, or duple meter dance, and ending with a galliard, or triple meter dance with a duple meter closing section, called a “close”.

John Dowland was still the pre-eminent lute composer in England during the first quarter of the 17th century. Though he served in many courts on the continent during the end of the Renaissance, including the King of Denmark among others, he was unable to obtain a post at the court of Elizabeth I (he claimed it was because of his Roman Catholic religion, in which Elizabeth was strictly Protestant). When James VI, now King James I, ascended to the throne, Dowland was able to secure a position as lute player in 1612, which he maintained until his death in 1626. His music, along with many of his fellow musicians, reflects the three basic forms of lute music at the time: fantasias, dances, and arrangements of popular and traditional songs. After Dowland’s death, the French lutenist Jacques Gautier was given a post at Prince Charles I’s court. This brought an influx of popularity for French lute music, although no such change took place in the keyboard genres.

The Church of England, created when Henry VIII declared the Act of Supremacy in 1534, established English as the official language of worship. Henry had become “the Only Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England” and the following Treason Act of 1534 subjected the punishment of death to any English subject who refused to acknowledge the king as ruler of the
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church as well as the state. The vocal music portion of the English Mass still consisted of the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei, but was now performed exclusively in English.

During the reign of James I, several church composers after Thomas Tallis used Italian influences in “full” anthems alternating between congregation and choir, including Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Tomkins, and Walter Porter, who studied with Claudio Monteverdi.

Canterbury Cathedral, left

Other Italian influences on English music include the polyphonic madrigal, though they fell out of popularity around the early 1600’s in favor of the lute song. Music in the theatre, however, was adapted to accommodate a new type of entertainment, known as the masque. Under James I, the court masque combined aspects of theater and social gathering in places like large banquet halls or the royal court, as opposed to the theater. The events of the masque included dances, singing, pantomime, scenes, and acting, which mirrored the genre of the Italian mascherata, which was very similar to the masque. A new and spacious hall was built in the king’s residence, Whitehall Palace, specifically for the masque. Scenes glorifying the king and the greatness of England were performed using mythological characters from both Greek and English sources, including King Arthur and Merlin.

Formed shortly after the coronation of Elizabeth I in 1559, the Puritans represented an extremist group of English Protestants who felt that the English Reformation did not go far enough. They called for greater “purity” of worship and religious doctrine, and became a major political force around the mid-17th century. While James I was a Calvinist and held similar views, he had no love for the Puritans, as they were against the authority of monarchy as the sole path to God. In fact, when the Puritan author William Prynne wrote an attack on female performers in the masque, calling them “notorious whores”, he was convicted of treason, imprisoned, had his ears cut off, and fined five thousand pounds. In reaction to the king’s strong persecution of all dissenters, the Puritans had already fled to countries like Holland, Ireland, and to the Plymouth Colony in America on the Mayflower in 1620.

The Puritans completely objected to the arts as part of the worship service in favor of ritual ceremony. With the onset of the English Civil War in 1642, Puritan influence became more pronounced. James I’s son and successor, Charles I, became entrenched in wars between France and Spain, and dissolved Parliament while raising taxes in 1629. When he reconvened Parliament in 1640, Parliament raised its own militia, and rebelled against the forces of the king. In 1649, Charles I was executed in front of his own palace and the army became under the control of Oliver Cromwell, who became Lord Protector of England. After Cromwell’s death in 1658, warring factions continued to rage on until the re-establishment of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660. The Civil War had enormous consequences for music history. When Charles I was arrested for
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treason, all the musicians of the royal court lost their positions. In 1642, Parliament closed all theaters and cathedral chapels. Under the strong Puritan authority, organs were considered “superstitious monuments to be demolished”, and in 1644, nearly all of them were destroyed. Music making in this time was mainly centered in private homes on a very small scale, and development of English music as a whole came to a complete halt. These events would make music in England radically different at the coming of the Restoration.

During his exile in Paris, Charles II absorbed the musical culture of France and its grand architect of opera, Jean-Baptiste Lully. When at the age of 30 he would ascend to the throne after the end of the English Civil War in 1660, Charles revitalized his royal musical court in the style of Louis XIV’s musical academies. He appointed Captain Henry Cooke as Master of the Children of the Royal Choir, a position that involved performing, composing, and teaching music in the royal court. The major composers that arose out of this academy included Matthew Locke, John Blow, and Pelham Humphrey, who succeeded Cooke as Master of the Children. Humphrey’s student, Henry Purcell (pictured right), became one of the most well known English composers of the Baroque Era, and wrote for every genre of the age. Though English music would retain French influence until about 1680, Purcell (1659-1695) was among the first English composers to write violin sonatas in the Italian style, which held enormous popularity in Italy and other parts of the continent. Purcell served as organist of Westminster Abbey, though his operas are just as well known as his instrumental works, including Dido and Aeneas, The Fairy Queen, King Arthur, The Tempest, and The Indian Queen.

Though there were many English composers after the death of Purcell, none of the Baroque Era seems to compare with him or the composers of his generation. By the turn of the century into the 1800’s, English audiences were more interested in Italian opera. Indeed, the Italian style would soon dominate the European musical landscape through to the end of the Baroque period, especially in the works of George Frideric Handel.

Anyone up for a Roman Holiday?

Many of the musical achievements of the second half of the 17th century revolved around the spread of opera throughout Italy and beyond. It occurred quickly in the development of opera that the central focus would no longer be the plot or the drama itself, but the primary singer, or prima donna. Composers would write arias, or solo songs, specifically for certain singers, who would perform the same aria for different operas, even those that had completely opposite plotlines! These arias came to be known as “suitcase” arias. Arias became the central showcase of an opera, with some operas having as many as sixty! The aria featured two main characteristics: first, the solo voice would normally sing a short musical subject, or motif, which would be
developed throughout the aria; and second, the soloist would be accompanied by a running-bass line. Italian opera of the late 17th century would focus mostly on a relatively simple musical texture to compliment the clarity of the solo voice. As discussed earlier, the French national opera style, pioneered by Jean-Baptiste Lully, was achieved in the 1670's and included ballet, tragedy, and the overture. In Germany, Hamburg became the center of operatic life. The German *singspiel* ("sing-play") opera, consisted of interspersed singing and spoken dialogue, not far detached from modern day musical theater. Two major forms of opera were used to distinguish between the plot and general mood of the production: *opera seria* and *opera buffa*, both which originated in Venice, which was the center of Italian opera productions. *Opera buffa* was used to distinguish the more lighthearted, comedic productions, while *opera seria* excluded comic characters entirely. The more common term for this type of opera was *melodrama*. Another feature of opera seria was the idea that composers could elicit a wide range of emotions through musical invention; the aria being the primary vehicle for these expressions. Specific musical features such as wide leaps, fast rhythms, loud dynamics, and a rapid tempo were all techniques to portray action and emotions such as anger, pleasure, and joy. Emotions such as pain, sadness, and remorse could be expressed by musical techniques such as chromaticism, change of key (usually in minor), dissonance, and a slower tempo. This was a significant point in music history as composers would now use specific compositional techniques to portray emotion in both dramatic and non-dramatic styles.

Out of the many vocal styles of the later Baroque Era, the *cantata* would be the most influential in both theatrical and church music. The cantata consisted of a pattern of alternating *recitative*, or singing composed to imitate speech, and aria, normally around two or three of each. The entire performance of a single cantata took around 10-15 minutes, resembling an actual dramatic scene. Cantatas could be performed with a full orchestra and choir, or it could be reduced to a single soloist with harpsichord or organ accompaniment. Composers who would advance the cantata to a dominant vocal form included the Italian composer *Alessandro Scarlatti* (1660-1725), who wrote more than six hundred cantatas during his lifetime, and would inspire J.S. Bach and George Frederic Handel’s future vocal works. Other vocal forms that closely resembled the cantata included the *oratorio*, which could also be performed in both sacred and secular settings. Most oratorios were in two parts, usually divided by a sermon or intermission. Another form that was particularly popular in Germany was the *chorale*, which at the hands of German composers such as Johann Pachelbel and *Georg Philipp Telemann* (1681-1767) would become the dominant church form of vocal music. Chorales encouraged the growing practice of having the church congregation singing with organ accompaniment during the service. This practice would continue through to the present day in most church-based religions. Sometimes a short instrumental prelude would be performed before the chorale, known as a *sinfonia*. 

*Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725)*
**Instrumental Music in the Late Baroque**

Like vocal works, music composed solely for instrumental ensembles challenged the imaginations of late Baroque composers. The principal types or genres of music were mostly toccatas, fugues, and preludes for organ or harpsichord solo compositions, and the sonata and concerto forms for instrumental groups. German organists and composers such as Johann Pachelbel, Johann Froberger, Dieterich Buxtehude, and Johann Sebastian Bach gave Germany a new golden age of organ works between 1650 and 1750. The toccata, mentioned earlier, was designed with a series of fugal and non-fugal sections that simulated improvisation in many ways. Free rhythm was contrasted with a heavy drive of sixteenth notes with sharp changes in musical texture. Imitative counterpoint was also widely used in addition to fugues made up of a short musical idea and developed throughout the piece. Fugues could be part of the toccata or stand alone as a separate piece entirely. Other notable genres included the theme and variations, which stated an original theme followed by permutations of that theme, and the suite, which included several pieces (usually dances), performed in several sections, or movements.

The most widely known genre of ensemble music in the late Baroque was the sonata. A typical sonata piece is a work consisting of several sections in contrasting tempos and moods. The Italian trio sonata, made up of two violins and basso continuo played on a harpsichord or organ, was the preferred instrumentation. Most trio sonatas followed a specific formula of a three-movement format, a fast first movement in duple meter, a slow second movement (usually in triple meter), and a dance-like third movement in duple meter that was structurally and sometimes thematically related to the first movement. The most significant contributions to the Italian trio sonata in the late Baroque were by Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Corelli’s (see Composer Profiles) sonatas soon became the standard by which all others were judged for the next half-century. He is best remembered today by popularizing the harmonic practice of music theory that is currently in use by modern students and composers.

The other major form of ensemble music was the concerto. The concerto appeared around the 1680’s and began with the practice of a larger ensemble doubling or accompanying a smaller group, such as a trio or quartet, at certain times during the piece. During a concerto, the composer would mark the parts “solo”, meaning “alone”, or “tutti”, meaning that the entire ensemble was to play. Exchanges between the two groups were also common, as was opposing a smaller group against a larger one. The practice of contrasting multiple solo instruments with a larger orchestral accompaniment was known as a concerto grosso. The solo concerto, normally performed with a solo violin against a small or large ensemble, quickly spread in popularity throughout Europe, of which the most influential of these composers of both solo concerto and concerto grosso was Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). Vivaldi’s (see Composer Profiles) influence on instrumental music equaled Corelli’s more than thirty years earlier. Even J.S. Bach transcribed several of Vivaldi’s violin concertos for keyboard instruments. Between 1713 and 1719, Vivaldi’s works were performed more than any other composer of his generation, and his twenty-three sinfonias are credited by scholars to have directly influenced the symphonies of the Classical period. Because of Vivaldi and his followers, the violin concerto spread to all corners of Europe, and composers of many nationalities wrote them for both chamber settings and church services.
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The enormous popularity of the violin concerto marks a turning point in music composition, as consumers of music would no longer be limited to the aristocracy and nobility, but an emerging merchant class that would assert itself in both numbers and influence. Indeed, the end of absolute monarchy, where the king would control all aspects of life in his country, began a more modern age, which also marked a progressive turn toward science, trade and commercialism, and the development of middle-class influence in matters of culture and artistic taste. The world of Bach and Handel after the beginning of 1700 would become a transition point between the Baroque and what is referred to by scholars as the Classical Period.

Bach, Handel, and the end of an Era

The last two major genres to come out of the Baroque Era were the German Lutheran cantata and oratorio, both of which were perfected mostly in the hands of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). The cantata, as described above, was largely music taken from the operatic style, though it was designed for the church rather than the theater. The oratorio consisted of Biblical passages interspersed with arias and recitative, and arose out of an older Lutheran tradition known as the historia. The oratorio differs from the cantata in its greater length and usually presented entire stories, such as the Passions. Bach’s famous St. Matthew Passion lasts for more than two hours in modern performances. The purpose of incorporating these new, more theatrical styles of church music was so to move the emotions of worshippers so as to better praise God. J.S. Bach (see Composer Profiles for both Bach and Handel) in particular emphasized the emotional content of each text he set in his cantatas, as he explains: “With devotional music, God is always present in his Grace.” The defining features of Bach’s cantatas include strict counterpoint, elaboration of the motive material, and exaggerated recitatives.

Bach's oratorios share his stylistic innovations with his cantatas, only differing from them by containing dialogue or narration to advance the story. Both were intended for use in the church service, such as the Passions, and they are also comparable in length. During his lifetime, Bach was widely known and highly respected, though he would not be recognized as an icon of Baroque music until long after his death. His music would lose popularity near the end of his life, in favor of the clarity, moderation, and more “natural” ideals that would come to define the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Handel, on the other hand, enjoyed the adulation of the public during his entire career, mostly in his adoptive city of London, where he spent the remainder of his life. Unlike Bach, who never composed opera, Handel earned his popularity through his many operatic works when traveling through Germany and Italy. When opera in London began to decline, Handel adapted to the changing tastes of the public and began composing oratorios. His most famous works, including Solomon, Saul, and The
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_Messiah_, were presented in concert form to paying audiences in addition to church services. This changing trend reflects the transition to the cultural features of the Classical Period, including subscription-based performances, music of the past preserved in a national repertoire, and the enshrining of a composer as a genius even before his death.

The shift from the period known as the Baroque Era and the Classical Period is marked by radical changes in the European cultural and political landscape. With the rise of the merchant class, the authoritarian rule of the monarchy was beginning to weaken. The nobility had started to conform to the demands of the middle class, and even church music quickly faded from prominence. Music became the center of attention in public concerts, presented for a paying audience and designed solely for the music to be performed for its own sake, not attached to a grand spectacle, court function, or worship service. Music printed and composed for both virtuosic performers and musical amateurs illustrates another change associated with the end of the Baroque. Even the status of the composer changed with Handel regarded as a celebrity and a living national symbol. Future composers of the Classical Era such as Mozart and Beethoven would enjoy celebrity status based on their compositional output and extraordinary playing ability. Because these composers would become known outside of their country of origin, a new, more international style began to be created and be associated with the concept of “Western Music”.

As for music itself, the creation of Baroque styles such as the sonata and concerto form gave rise to the enduring Classical forms of the symphony and keyboard concerto. Indeed, it was the Baroque styles that were the first to stand the test of time and be continued into the modern age, which is why the Baroque is also known by scholars and musicians as the “common practice period.” At the end of the Baroque, music was to become more melody-based, designed primarily to sustain interest for an audience of consumers, not kings or magistrates. However, those musical forms that composers of the Baroque Period developed have become steadfast genres of the European musical tradition. It is that tradition that remains to modern musicians and audiences now as the legacy of the Baroque.
For Review:

- Music in the early Baroque Period was controlled mostly through the autocratic rule of the royal and aristocratic circles, and was often used as religious or political propaganda.
- Many of the early musical achievements were made in Italy, including the beginnings of European music having an international identity.
- Early Baroque music including more idiomatic writing, in addition to the practice of writing figured bass and basso continuo.
- The beginnings of opera were born as intermedi in Florence, Italy, under a group of artists, writers, poets, and composers called the Camerata.
- Opera in the early Baroque consisted of two main aspects: the recitative, or music resembling dialogue, and the aria, or solo song.
- Instrumental solo and chamber music was composed to achieve an improvisational quality, such as in the toccata, and was usually performed by a professional.
- Church music also began to include orchestral accompaniment, called a capella. Early forms that began to gain influence with composers included the oratorio and the grand concerto.
- Composers in Lutheran Germany used the strophic form in their works, which was setting multiple verses to the same music. In addition, composers began to reorganize the former church modes into the system of major and minor keys currently used by today’s composers and musicians.
- Baroque music in France was most influential at its capital, Paris, under the rule of Louis XIV. Music was composed to portray the king as a mythological and grandiose figure, mostly through the operas of France’s main composer, Jean-Baptiste Lully.
- When James I became King of England in 1603, English music absorbed more French and Italian influences, including the form of the fantasia-suite and the masque.
- After the Restoration of the monarchy with Charles II, music in England retained a distinctive French and Italian influence. Opera also became popular, particularly with the works of the English composer Henry Purcell.
- Opera in Italy during the early 18th century revolved around the solo singer and the aria. Two kinds of opera emerged during this time: opera seria, or “serious opera”, and opera buffa, or comedic opera.
- Major church styles in the early 18th century included the cantata and the chorale, perfected by composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti and George Philipp Telemann.
- Music of the early 18th century included new forms such as the fugue, concerto, and sonata by major composers such as Arcangelo Corelli and Antonio Vivaldi.
- The last two major genres of the Baroque Era were the German Lutheran cantata and the oratorio, perfected in the hands of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel.
- The emergence of the merchant class, consumerism, and the advent of music composed specifically for concerts attending by paying subscribers reflected the ideals of the new Enlightenment and the beginnings of the Classical Period.
Suggested Listening:

Jacopo Peri: *Euridice*
Claudio Monteverdi: *Cruda Amarilli, Orfeo, L'incoronazione Di Poppea*
Girolamo Frescobaldi: *Toccata No. 3, Toccata No. 9*
Heinrich Schütz: *Saul, Was Verfolgst Du Mich*
Jean-Baptiste Lully: *Armide, Alceste*
Henry Purcell: *The Fairy Queen, Dido and Aeneas*
Dieterich Buxtehude: *Praeludium in E Major, Buxwv 141*
Arcangelo Corelli: *Trio Sonata, Op. 3, No. 2*
Johann Pachelbel: *Canon in D Major*
Antonio Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons, Concerto Grosso in D minor, RV 578*
George Frideric Handel: *The Messiah, Water Music, Music for the Royal Fireworks*

Sources: