

Baroque Era 1600-1750

The term "baroque," meaning an extravagant style, was originally applied to the architecture of the period 1600-1750. But like the term Renaissance, the term Baroque is used to define a period of music.

In the Renaissance era (1450-1600), vocal music was the dominant type of music. While sacred vocal music continued to develop in the Baroque era, both secular (non-sacred) and instrumental music became much more important. In fact, the Baroque era was the first period in which instrumental music was as important as vocal music.

In the polyphonic music of the Renaissance era, all of the voice parts were equally important. In the Baroque era, one voice, usually the highest voice part (the soprano voice), was given the melody while the other lower voices harmonized the melody. So the soprano voice part became the most important part because it sang the melody.

But polyphonic music continued to develop, in both vocal and instrumental music, too. For example, the fugue in Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, the Listening Example for **Johann Sebastian Bach**, is a fine example of Baroque polyphonic music.

In the Renaissance era, a piece of music sounded pretty much the same from start to finish. But in the Baroque era, composers began to write contrasting sections within a piece. A slow section (or movement) would follow a fast section. Or a soft section would follow a loud one. The best example of this is the **sonata**, a new musical form developed in the Baroque era. A sonata is an instrumental work for a solo instrument performing alone or with accompaniment, in three contrasting movements, such as fast-slow-fast or loud-soft-loud.

Other new musical forms included **cantatas** and **oratorios**, multi-movement vocal works with instrumental accompaniment. Oratorios were more likely to be sacred, and were frequently based on verses from the Bible. Cantatas could be sacred or secular. Neither cantatas nor oratorios used staging, scenery, or costumes.

The **opera**, which did use staging, scenery, costumes, and action, also developed during the Baroque era. An opera is a play, usually secular, set to music and staged, with orchestral accompaniment.

When instruments accompanied singers in the Renaissance era, they usually doubled the voices. But in the Baroque era, the instruments which accompanied singers in oratorios, cantatas, and operas, had their own parts; they truly accompanied the singers.

The orchestras which accompanied singers in the Baroque era were different from today's orchestras. Today the instruments of the orchestra are established

Baroque Era 1600-1750

by centuries of tradition. A composer writing for orchestra knows what instruments will be available. In the Baroque era, however, an "orchestra" was likely to be whatever musicians were available at the time. Eventually, composers began to specify which instruments should play which parts. This began the development of the modern orchestra.

The instruments were developing, too. The viols of the Renaissance era became violins, violas, cellos, and bass violins. Flutes and oboes became more like today's instruments, and around 1700, the first clarinets were used. Trombones were similar to today's instruments, but trumpets had no valves and were difficult to play. Some had slides, like miniature trombones! Music notation in the Baroque era looked pretty much as it does today.

In previous eras, music was written for specific purposes, most often as part of a church service. During the Baroque era, music became more expressive. For the first time, people went to vocal and orchestral concerts for the sole purpose of hearing the music.

Composers of the Baroque era

Jean-Baptist Lully (1632-1687)
Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713)
Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)
George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)
Giovanni Pergolesi (1710-1736)

Some famous people of the Baroque era

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Dutch artist
John Milton (1608-1674), British poet
Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), Dutch artist
Isaac Newton (1642-1727), British scientist, philosopher
René de La Salle (1643-1687), French explorer of North America
William Penn (1644-1718), British church leader, founded Pennsylvania
Peter the Great (1672-1725), Russian czar
Gabriel Fahrenheit (1686-1736), German physicist, improved thermometers