

MUSIC IN THE BAROQUE PERIOD (1600–1750)

The Renaissance period ushered in the rebirth and rediscovery of the arts such as music, painting, sculpture, and poetry and also saw the beginning of some scientific discoveries. The Baroque period saw a refinement of science and further advances in that field. These advances helped to pave the way for new inventions and, gradually, the improvement of medicine, mining, navigation, and industry.



An early eighteenth-century orchestra

Music history in the Baroque period has many fine composers. Four of the best-known composers of the Baroque period are George Frideric Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi, and Claudio Monteverdi. The music written by these composers was written largely on commission, meaning that the composers were asked to write a certain piece for a specific occasion. The courts of the aristocracy, churches, opera houses, and municipalities commissioned music. They employed musicians and required new music for each occasion. Composers of this period tended to use a more *homophonic* texture in their music (one main melody accompanied by either other voices or instruments) in contrast to the polyphonic style of the Renaissance age. They stressed the contrasts of sound, such as solo singers against a chorus or voices against instruments.

Music in the Baroque period also had several distinct characteristics. *Unity of mood* meant that a Baroque piece usually expressed one basic emotion. Rhythmic patterns that were heard at the beginning of the piece and repeated throughout were referred to as *unity of rhythm*. An opening melody that was heard again and again in the course of a piece was called *continuity of melody*. *Terraced dynamics* meant that the volume tended to stay constant for a period of time, and that when the dynamics did shift, it was sudden, as if stepping from one dynamic level to another. Gradual changes in dynamics were not typical of Baroque music. The words and meanings of the words were depicted vividly in the music. This was called *word painting*. For example, the word *heaven* might be set to a high tone or to notes moving upward and the word *hell* to a lower tone or a descending scale.

Also in the Baroque period, there were two very important developments in the use of musical groups. One was the beginning of the orchestra. The orchestra evolved into a performing group that was based on instruments from the violin family. Certain woodwind and brass instruments were added as the Baroque period progressed. The other new form was opera. Up to the beginning of the Baroque period, opera hadn't existed. At the very beginning of the Baroque period, opera developed as an important art form. Perhaps the most important composer to help develop opera was the great composer Claudio Monteverdi.

Activity:

1. Find a short poem. How would you compose a piece of music to fit this poem that would use the principles of word painting?