

Student : Lee-Doo Kim

Teacher : Dr. Julian Langford

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The development of instrumental music in Baroque era

The Baroque period of music started dramatically, with the performance of the world's first opera, Jacopo Peri's *Defne*, staged in Florence in 1598. The opera illustrates the dramatic change in musical style from polyphony to something more expressive—a change exploited to great effect in Monteverdi's *Vespers*, which contrasts sections in the old and new styles.

One of the main features of the Early Baroque period, and one that must have been startling at the time, was a rejection of polyphony in favor of a single line of melody with a simple accomplishment.

This "monody", as it was called, was an attempt to reproduce the style of Classical Greek drama. The accompaniment was of particular significance: in the recitative sections of early opera—the freely composed expositions of the plot that connected the arias—the voice was accompanied by single bass instrument, such as a cello, and an instrument capable of playing chords, such as a harpsichord or lute. This accompaniment, known as the "basso continuo", or simply continuo, became a key feature of music in the Early Baroque period. The importance of the continuo was that it provided a harmonic base for the melody. While Renaissance music had been characterized by polyphony, the new style was defined by harmony. In place of interweaving melodies based on the ancient Greek scales or modes, early Baroque composers built their music on major and minor chords. Dramatic and contrasting effects were achieved by varying the loudness and tempo moving the music between keys and instruments, and sometimes adding embellishments such as trills.

The revolutionary new style and the idea of a drama set to music proved very popular, especially among the aristocracy in Italy and France, who employed a staff of musicians and resident composer to provide entertainment in the courts. In addition to opera they performed instrumental music, and in the royal court at Versailles, Jean-Baptiste Lully assembled an orchestra to provide incidental music and dances for the performance of the latest comedies by playwrights such as Moliere. This form of light entertainment caught on elsewhere and influenced the development of the musical drama known as a "masque" in England.

The Late Baroque period was dominated by three composers born in Germany in 1685. The first, Georg Philipp Telemann is often overshadowed by his contemporaries but was by far the most prolific. The second was Georg Frideric Handel, a populist who

made his name in England with his oratorios and orchestral music. The third, regarded by musicians as the greatest of the three, was Johann Sebastian Bach: a conservative composer but a consummate craftsman. During a lifetime of employment by courts and the Church, Bach's sacred and secular music represented the high point of the Baroque period.