

The Enjoyment of **MUSIC**

SHORTER VERSION

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Music as Exploration and Drama

"These harmonic notes are the language of the soul and the instruments of the heart."

—Barbara Strozzi (1619–1677)

Music intensifies emotion. This may seem self-evident to us in the twenty-first century, but it was in the period that we are about to explore—the 1600s and early 1700s—that Europeans set out to develop musical approaches designed to “ramp up” various emotional states and help listeners experience their diversity more deeply.

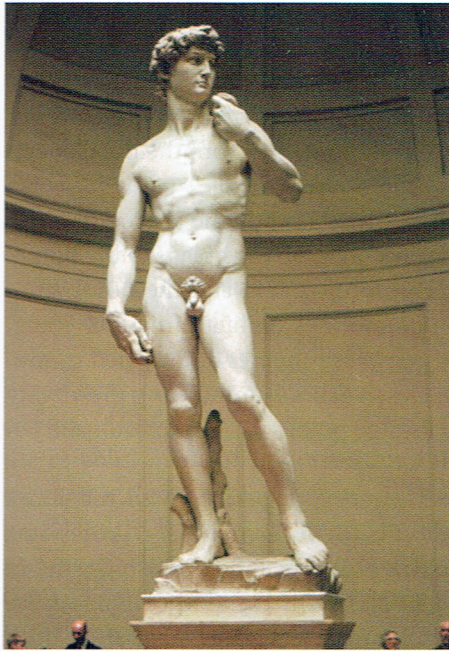
Virtuosity

Composers and performers became increasingly interested in how music could enhance the expression of words—most prominently through the development of a kind of musical theater called opera, but also through the training of specialized singers whose **virtuosity** (remarkable technical skill) made the amateur singing tradition of the Renaissance seem outdated and bland. Even more novel was a significant focus on the expressive power of musical instruments—not only in conjunction with voices, but on their own. While purely instrumental music existed before the 1600s, in the Baroque era it became much more prominent with the development of several new genres and the refinement of instrumental building and performance techniques.

During the early part of this period, musicians seemed almost giddy with the possibilities for intense expression, creating works that appear designed to swing

The Flemish painter **Peter Paul Rubens** (1577–1640) instills his paintings with high energy and drama. His voluptuous nudes, as in *Diana and Her Nymphs*, established the seventeenth-century ideal of feminine beauty.





Renaissance and Baroque sculptural approaches. LEFT: Michelangelo shows us David in contemplation (1501–04). RIGHT: In contrast, Bernini captures David in mid-slingshot (1623).

between musical extremes. As time passed, such experimentation gave way to a more standardized approach: the later Baroque is characterized by a greater interest in predictable musical forms and procedures.

“Baroque” Art and Culture

The years between 1600 and 1750 represent a period of change, adventure, and discovery. The conquest of the New World stirred the imagination and filled the treasuries of Western Europe. The ideas of Galileo and Copernicus in physics and astronomy, of René Descartes in mathematics, and of Spinoza in philosophy were milestones in the intellectual history of Europe. The English physician William Harvey explained the circulation of the blood, and Sir Isaac Newton formulated the theory of gravity. Empires clashed for control of the globe.

There was appalling poverty and wasteful luxury, magnificent idealism and savage oppression. Baroque art—with its vigor, elaborate decoration, and grandeur—projected the pomp and splendor of the era. Indeed, the term “baroque” (applied in retrospect by later writers who saw this period as excessively extravagant) derives from a Portuguese word that originally meant “misshapen” or “distorted.”

A comparison between the two depictions of the biblical figure David above, one by Renaissance artist Michelangelo (1475–1564) and the other by Bernini (1598–1680), clearly reveals the Baroque love of the dramatic. The earlier sculpture is balanced, calm, reflective; on his shoulder is the sling with which he has just slain the giant Goliath, but the overall effect is static, poised. The Baroque David shows the young man in motion, every muscle in his body tensed in the act that will save his people. In like fashion, the Venetian school of painters and Northern masters such as Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens captured the dynamic spirit of the new age, producing canvases ablaze in color and movement (see illustration opposite).

The Baroque was an era of absolute monarchy. Rulers throughout Europe modeled their courts on Versailles, a sumptuous palace on the outskirts of Paris. Louis

In His Own Words

“I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore . . . whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

—Isaac Newton (1643–1727)



Jan Vermeer is well known for his painting of bourgeois (middle-class) Dutch women playing keyboard instruments. *A Young Lady Seated at a Virginal*, c. 1670.

In His Own Words

“Music must be supported by the King and the princes.”

—Martin Luther

XIV's famous statement “I am the State” summed up a way of life in which all art and culture served the ruler. Courts large and small maintained elaborate musical establishments, including opera troupes, chapel choirs, and orchestras. Baroque opera, the favorite diversion of the aristocracy, told stories of the gods and heroes of antiquity, in whom the nobility and courtiers saw flattering likenesses of themselves.

The middle classes, excluded from the salons of the aristocracy, created a culture of their own. Their music-making took place in the home. It was for the middle classes that the comic opera and the novel, both genres filled with keen and witty observations on life, came into being. For them, painting abandoned its grandiose themes and turned to intimate scenes of bourgeois life. The Dutch School, embodying the vitality of a new middle-class art, reached its high point with Rembrandt and Jan Vermeer (see illustration at left).

The Baroque was also an intensely devout period, with religion a rallying cry on some of the bloodiest battlefields in history. Protestants were centered in England, Scandinavia, Holland, and northern Germany, all strongholds of the rising middle class. On the Catholic side were two powerful dynasties: the French Bourbons and the Austrian-Spanish Hapsburgs, who fought one another as fiercely as they did their Protestant foes. Religion was an equally important part of life in the New World as well, both in the colonies of Protestant refugees who settled on the East Coast of North America and in the fervently Catholic Spanish and French colonies (Spanish in what is now Mexico, Central America, and the southwestern United States; French in Canada, the Mississippi valley, and the Gulf Coast).

England's John Milton produced the poetic epic of Protestantism (*Paradise Lost*), just as Dante had expressed the Catholic point of view in *The Divine Comedy* three and a half centuries earlier. The Catholic world answered Martin Luther's call for reforms with the Counter-Reformation (see Chapter 18), whose rapturous mysticism found expression in the canvases of El Greco (see illustration, p. 106). These paintings were the creations of a visionary mind that distorted the real in its search for a reality beyond.

Creative artists played a variety of roles in Baroque society. Rubens was not only a famous painter but also an ambassador and friend of princes. The composer Antonio Vivaldi was also a priest, and George Frideric Handel an opera impresario. Artists usually functioned under royal or princely patronage, or, like Johann Sebastian Bach, they might be employed by a church or city administration. In all cases, artists were in direct contact with their public. Many musical works were created for specific occasions—an opera for a royal wedding, a dance suite for a court festivity, a cantata for a religious service—and for immediate use.

Main Currents in Baroque Music

“The end of all good music is to affect the soul.”

—Claudio Monteverdi

One of the most significant characteristics of the early Baroque style was a shift from a texture of several independent parts (polyphony) to one in which a single melody stood out (homophony).

A group of Florentine writers, artists, and musicians known as the *Camerata* (a name derived from the Italian word for “salon”) first cultivated this approach, which they called “the new style,” around 1600. The members of the *Camerata* were aristocratic humanists who aimed to resurrect the musical-dramatic art of ancient Greece. Although little was known of ancient music, the *Camerata* deduced that it must have heightened the emotional power of the text. Thus their “new style” consisted of a melody that moved freely over a foundation of simple chords.

A new kind of notation accompanied the “new style”: since musicians were familiar with the basic harmonies, the composer put a numeral above or below the bass note, indicating the chord required (a kind of notation called **figured bass**), and the performer filled in the necessary harmony. This system, known as **basso continuo**, provided a foundation over which a vocal or instrumental melody could unfold. It led to one of the most significant changes in all music history: the establishment of **major-minor tonality** (see Chapter 4). With this development, the thrust to the key note, or tonic, became the most powerful force in music. Each chord could assume its function in relation to the key center; and the movement between keys, governed by tonality, helped shape a musical structure. Composers were able to develop forms of instrumental music larger than had ever before been known.

The transition to major-minor tonality was marked by a significant technical advance: a new tuning system that allowed instruments to play in any key. Called **equal temperament**, this tuning adjusted (or tempered) the mathematically “pure” intervals within the octave to equalize the distance between adjacent tones, making it possible to play in every major and minor key without producing

Florentine *Camerata*

Basso continuo

Major-minor tonality

The Hall of Mirrors in the French Royal Palace of Versailles exemplifies the Baroque love for elaborate decorations.





The rapturous mysticism of the Counter-Reformation found expression in this eerie landscape of El Greco (1541–1614), *View of Toledo*.

Expressive devices

that helped capture the movement of this dynamic age. In vocal music, wide leaps and chromatic tones helped create melodies that were highly expressive of the text.

Baroque musicians used dissonant chords more freely, for emotional intensity and color. In setting poetry, for example, a composer might choose a dissonance to heighten the impact of a particularly meaningful word. The dynamic contrasts achieved in Renaissance music through varied imitative voicings gave way to a more nuanced treatment in the Baroque, allowing for a more precise expression of emotions, especially of the text. Dramatic *forte/piano* contrasts and echo effects were also typical of the era.

Finally, the Baroque inherited from the Renaissance an impressive technique of text painting, in which the music vividly mirrored the words. It was generally accepted that music ought to arouse the emotions, or “affections”—joy, anger, love, fear. By the late seventeenth century, an entire piece or movement was normally built on a single affection: the opening musical idea established the mood of the piece, which prevailed until the end. This procedure differs markedly from the practice of later eras, when music was based on two or more contrasting emotions.

The Rise of the Virtuoso Musician

As the great musical instrument builders in Italy and Germany improved and refined their instruments, Baroque performers responded with more virtuosic (remarkably skilled) playing. Composers in turn wrote works demanding even more advanced playing techniques. Out of these developments came the virtuosic violin works of Antonio Vivaldi (see Chapter 26).

Castrato

Instrumental virtuosity had its counterpart in the vocal sphere. The rise of opera brought with it the development of a phenomenal vocal technique, exemplified in the early eighteenth century by the **castrato**, a male singer who was castrated during boyhood in order to preserve the soprano or alto register of his

unpleasant sounds, and greatly increasing the range of harmonic possibilities available to the composer. J. S. Bach demonstrated this range in his two-volume keyboard collection *The Well-Tempered Clavier*: each volume contains twenty-four preludes and fugues, one in every possible major and minor key. Today, our ears are conditioned to the equal tempered system, since this is how pianos are now tuned.

The Camerata’s members engaged in excited discussions about their new homophonic music, which they also proudly named the “expressive style.” The group soon realized that their approach could be applied not only to a short poem but also to an entire drama, fostering the most notable Baroque innovation: “drama through music,” or what we now call **opera**.

The elaborate scrollwork of Baroque architecture found its musical equivalent in the principle of continuous expansion of melody. A movement might start with a striking musical figure that would then be repeated and varied with seemingly infinite modifications, driven by rhythms

voice for the rest of his life. What resulted, after years of training, was an incredibly agile voice of enormous range, powered by breath control unrivaled by most singers today. The castrato's voice combined the lung power of the male with the brilliance of the female upper register. Strange as it may seem to us, Baroque audiences associated this voice with heroic male roles. When castrato roles are performed today, they are usually sung in a lower register by a tenor or baritone, or in the original register by a countertenor or a woman singer in male costume.

Women, particularly singers, began to expand their role in music. Two early seventeenth-century Italian singers, Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi, were among the earliest female composers to publish their works. Caccini stands out as the first woman to write an opera, and Strozzi was a prolific composer of both secular and sacred music. Some opera singers reached the level of superstars, such as the Italian sopranos Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, who engaged in a bitter rivalry. As we will see, another, perhaps less expected venue for women was the cloister, or convent.

Improvisation played a significant role in Baroque music. In addition to elaborating on the simple harmonic foundation that was part of almost every musical work, musicians were expected to be able to improvise and add embellishments to what was written on the score, much like jazz or pop musicians today. Baroque music sounded quite different in performance from what was on the page.

Women in music

Improvisation

An All-European Art

As great voyages of exploration opened up unknown regions of the globe, exoticism became a discernible element of Baroque music. A number of operas looked to faraway lands for their settings—Persia, India, Turkey, the Near East, Peru, and the Americas—offering picturesque scenes and dances that may not have been authentic but that delighted audiences through their appeal to the imagination.

Paradoxically, alongside the interest in exotic locales and regional traditions, the Baroque was a period in which there was significant exchange among national cultures. The sensuous beauty of Italian melody, the pointed precision of French dance rhythm, the luxuriance of German polyphony, the freshness of English choral song—these characteristic local traditions eventually blended into an all-European art that absorbed the best of each national style. For example, we will see how Handel, a German, wrote Italian opera for English audiences and gave England the oratorio. And it was precisely through this internationalization that, in the end, the Baroque gave way to a new set of stylistic priorities. An era of discovery and experimentation in which diversity and variety of musical expression was the ultimate goal eventually resulted in commonality of purpose and style, as Europeans became more and more interested in the elements that made humans equal rather than different.

In His Own Words

“Music is the universal language of mankind.”

—Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow (1807–1882)

CRITICAL THINKING

1. How did Baroque artists and composers bring drama to their works?
2. What was new about the so-called new music at the beginning of the Baroque period?