The Baroque Period (1600–1750 C.E.)

ABOUT THE BAROQUE PERIOD . . .
Baroque painting, architecture, music, literature, and fashion were fancy and highly embellished. Opera stars sang arias filled with trills and ornaments. Buildings adorned with arches and domes were filled with elaborately carved ceilings and elegant chairs painted white and gold. Paintings featured rich colors and voluptuous human figures. Men wore carefully curled white wigs and coats trimmed with lace. Women had long dresses with intricate designs, pleats, and buttons. The splendor of Baroque styles was largely influenced by the wealth and splendor of kingdoms in Europe.

BAROQUE MUSIC
Music of the Baroque Period was primarily composed and performed for three cultural institutions: the Church, the opera house, and the courts of the nobility. During the Baroque Era, the Church was the primary outlet for serious music in Europe. Church music (sacred music) was written primarily for organ, voice, or a combination of the two. The use of other instruments in the church grew throughout the Baroque Period, beginning with the brass music of Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, and continuing with the inclusion of strings and winds in cantatas and oratorios (music dramas based on religious subjects). The Gabriels' music was particularly unique because it was antiphonal (an-TI-fo-nal), meaning that they placed different groups of brass instruments in various parts of the church to create an unusual musical experience.

Opera combined elaborate sets and costumes with musical performances by virtuosos—extremely skilled singers and instrumentalists. The dramatic productions of the opera had their origins in the music dramas of the Church. Opera was attended by all classes of people from peasants to royalty. Important Baroque composers include Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frederic Handel, Arcangelo Corelli, Georg Philipp Telemann, and Antonio Vivaldi.

BAROQUE MUSICAL STYLE
Stylistically, music changed from the Renaissance to the Baroque Period in several ways. During the Baroque Period, the written melody, whether sung or performed instrumentally, was used primarily as a guideline for the performer, who was expected to improvise and ornament freely. Rapid scale passages, ornaments, and chord figuration in a free, fantasy-like style were written to display brilliant technique. One such place for these flourishes is in the cadenza, an unaccompanied passage before the end of a piece.

Contrasting texture within a piece of music became increasingly important and was achieved through concertato (kohn-sair-TAH-toh) style. Concertato style required that large and small groups of instruments alternately play sections of the music in contrasting styles. Polyphonic music continued to develop during the Baroque Period. One of the most sophisticated polyphonic types of composition was the fugue, which featured imitative counterpoint in which a single theme is layered on top of itself in many different manners. Written dynamics were introduced into music for the first time during the 17th century, but they were used sparingly. The terms piano (soft) and forte (loud) came into general use in new Italian music, and similar markings were used in other European countries. By the 18th century, crescendo (gradually louder) and decrescendo (gradually softer) were marked using these symbols: 

INSTRUMENT UPDATE
During the Baroque Period, instrumental music started to become as important as vocal music. There was an increase in the quantity of music written for flute, oboe, bassoon, trombone, valveless trumpets and horns, harpsichord, and organ. Timpani were the only percussion instruments used in serious music. Orchestras were mainly composed of stringed instruments with a small number of woodwind instruments. Magnificent organs were being built in Baroque churches for playing the elaborate solo material. The idea of a keyboard instrument with hammers that strike the strings was just being developed—this would become the modern piano.
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SIGNS OF THE TIMES (History and Culture)
The Baroque Period, particularly at the cultural level, began with a Counter Reformation sparked by the realization that many of the idealistic theories posited during the Renaissance did not work in reality. Much of this new spirit of creativity was triggered by a number of shifting events, as well as shifting attitudes:
- The Thirty Years’ War was fought between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism during the early 1600s;
- The establishment of formal nations as various states merged, creating new and powerful monarchies that formed a lucrative patron base for the creative arts;
- Widespread colonization led to the growth of a wealthy merchant class, and a solid middle class;
- Idealistic theoretical thinking gave way to inductive reasoning in scientific fields such as physiology, astronomy, mathematics, and physics.

The successful results that arose from this new form of intellectual reasoning particularly impacted music and its creative processes.

ARTISTIC PURPOSE
Religion continued to offer a significant venue for all types of art, architecture, and music. The difference from prior historical periods is that artistic endeavors were not produced for the Church only as a commissioning institution. Rather, artists and composers were creating out of a sincerity of personal religious experience. This focus on sincerity versus superficiality (the latter seen in the Renaissance Period) was a driving theme throughout the Baroque Period.

Art and music also received considerable attention from the common man, or the middle class, who was taking a much more important place in society. With the advent of new forms of entertainment, such as ballet and opera, the public had many more opportunities to experience the cultural arts. Both vocal and instrumental music became a mainstay for special celebratory occasions. The cantata, particularly in the secular venue, was a favorite for recognizing and conveying the spirit of a particular event or holiday.

Interestingly, there were no formal schools that taught music, despite the prominent position it held in society. Music education and training came from within wealthy families, where young boys who expressed an aptitude were taught by either their fathers or other relatives.

CREATIVE CHARACTERISTICS
Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the Baroque Period was the emphasis on flamboyance at every level and in every area of creativity. Emotional, ornamental, and dramatic are words used frequently to describe Baroque painting, sculpture, architecture, and music. Artists also began combining multiple art forms in many different settings. Opera became a venue to combine every creative art form, including music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature.

The Baroque Period reflected the organization of thought seen in the scientific realms as well. Music became very structured, using a contrapuntal (or counterpoint) development in which two or more independent musical themes are woven together. This counterpoint was frequently found in fugues and toccatas. The variation principle was also highly used, where a musical theme is varied with harmony, counterpoint, and structure within the piece. Some of the most well-known composers from this era are Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frederic Handel, and Antonio Vivaldi.

INSTRUMENT UPDATE
One of the greatest changes in instrumental music transitioning into the Baroque Period was the evolution of some instruments while others fell out of use. The popular recorder and cornetto sections began fading as the oboe and bassoon became extremely popular. The trumpet entered into what has been referred to as the “golden age” of the instrument as the level of virtuosity peaked among guild players.
SIGN OF THE TIMES (History and Culture)
The 17th century marked many changes at multiple levels, particularly in Europe and the Americas—the Protestant Reformation, with the rising merchant/capitalism economic system, the rise of monarchy forms of government, and significant scientific developments and discoveries. All these elements blended into the growth of the new attitude or spirit being reflected in the Baroque cultural movement. The most identifying characteristics of the Baroque Period were the interesting combination of strong energy and strong emotion paired with the use of imagery and subtlety. Music resonated with new melody structure, harmony, and texture.

The development of music during the Baroque Era was not merely limited to the differences between religious and secular music. A secondary line of growth occurred with vocal music and its new forms of opera, oratorio, and the cantata. Instrumental music took on a new role apart from the primary use as accompaniment for vocal performances. This expansion in the application and appreciation of instrumental music performance led to its prominence over other musical art forms by the end of this period.

ARTISTIC PURPOSE
Just as in the earlier part of the Baroque Period, the latter half (the beginning of the 18th century) categorized its music by its use—theater, church, or chamber music. During this time, composers turned to a more personal emotional expression, illustrating a wide variety of sentiments.

Opera, a new form of composition developed in the 17th century, combined every artistic form available, including both vocal and instrumental music, art, architecture, and literature. Opera evolved from a desire to revive the ideals of classic antiquity that began in the Renaissance. Born in Italy, the early operas immediately began using a new style of music—the recitative, or musically reciting of the text (or libretto) of the drama. Recitatives were mingled with arias, melodic songs which were very expressive and frequently written to highlight the vocal skills of the performer. The recitative's purpose was to tell what was happening in the story; the aria's purpose was to comment on the story's events.

Another new phenomenon during these years was the gradual development of the orchestra into a form much as we see it today. The backbone of the Baroque orchestra was the string choir (or section), and though the orchestra contained woodwinds and brass instruments, the distinction of separate sections would not yet occur until the latter half of the 18th century.

CREATIVE CHARACTERISTICS
As stated previously, music of the Baroque Era was very emotionally charged and expressed a very personal side of the composer. In order to achieve this expressive nature of the music, the use of dissonance and chromatic styles became widely used. Arbitrary and changing rhythms also created a whimsical mood. Dynamics became very important to the expressiveness of the music. Performers played a greater creative role as they were allowed more leeway to improvise and ornament on the written notes as long as they used good taste and judgment.

Harmonic style grew as major and minor harmonies developed out of a tonal center with a strong bass line supporting the harmonies above. This bass line, marked to indicate harmonies to be played with each note, was known as the "figured bass" and became a strong, primary characteristic in Baroque music.

INSTRUMENT UPDATE
Throughout the Baroque Period, instruments continued to develop and evolve, allowing for a player to achieve new and better results in tone, range, keys, etc. The horn was one instrument that underwent significant changes during the 17th century, growing in lengths up to twelve feet. The shape of the horn also changed from a multi-coil style to an open hoop shape, allowing the player to change key centers when needed by using different sized crooks or tubing extenstions.