Chapter 16 – Sacred and Secular Baroque Music

BAROQUE SACRED MUSIC

Looking back from our own modern viewpoint, of the great pieces of music from the Baroque era, there is a pretty even split between the sacred and the secular.

Religion was still a powerful force behind the Baroque zeitgeist, but it had nowhere near the amount of influence it did in earlier eras.

In the early Renaissance we saw the rise of a wealthy merchant class and the new importance of the middle class. The Reformation, undermining the power of the Catholic Church (especially in Germany), shifted political power and influence to the monarchy.

Illustration 1: Excerpt from "Kyrie" of the B Minor Mass by J. S. Bach--felt by many music historians to be the greatest piece of music written in the West (courtesy of the Petrucci Music Library)
J.S. Bach, one of the greatest composers of all time, spent much of his life alternating between working for the nobility and the church. Nonetheless, there was a great deal of sacred music still being written.

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**THE CANTATA**

The cantata (derived from a Latin word describing singing) was a common musical medium. It took advantage of the Lutheran tradition of the congregation being more involved in church services.

Both Protestant and Catholic churches have a cycle of readings from the Bible that cover the liturgical year. The lyrics of many hymns are deliberately written around one of these readings.

A composer such as Bach would take one of these hymns and build what is almost a mini-opera around it. There were often multiple movements, starting with an overture. This would be followed by solos, duets, choruses, recitatives and arias dramatizing the message or the lesson. The melody of the hymn was often woven into various movements of the cantata. The final movement was a four-part setting of the hymn where the congregation would join in the singing.

Bach composed nearly 300 of them, each one close to a half hour of music. Only 200 or so are known to have survived: the rest are lost.

While there were a much smaller number of them, Bach and Handel (among others) composed *secular* cantatas as well.

*RECOMMENDED MUSIC:* *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, BWV 140 by J.S. Bach; *Christ lag in Todes Banden*, BWV 4 by J.S. Bach

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**THE MASS**

Masses--settings of the parts of the traditional Catholic ordinary--are also an important part of Baroque music, although much less so than in the Renaissance. The greatest setting of the ordinary is the *B Minor Mass* by J.S. Bach, a gigantic, complex, and powerful work lasting over two hours. Ironically, the Lutheran Bach would not have
been able to use this distinctly Catholic setting in a Protestant church. Music historians are somewhat puzzled over the reason for the composition or that it was even composed all at the same time. Many of them do, however, agree that his *B Minor Mass* is one the greatest musical achievements in Western history.

One of Antonio Vivaldi’s best known choral/instrumental pieces is his setting of the *Gloria* from the Latin Mass Ordinary.

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**THE ORATORIO**

There are many similarities between an oratorio and an opera. Both usually begin with an overture, both have arias, recitatives, and choruses. Both involve the telling of a large scale story and create a sense of drama.

One major difference between the two are that while opera is intended to be acted with all the trappings of staging, the oratorio is not. An oratorio is a simple concert setting with singers standing only when they need to perform their parts. There is no action or movement outside of that necessary to have the musicians move to the optimal position to perform their music.

Historians believe that they came about as a way to get around the prohibition of elaborate operas during Lent.

Another major difference is that most of the early oratorios were on religious themes. The most famous is *Messiah* by Handel.

The first pieces of music that could be called oratorios date from the early Baroque era. They became a more popular medium during Handel's time. Because the church prohibited opera during Lent, composers were able to find a loophole and create large scale pieces of music permissible to the times.

While they are not strictly oratorios, similar *Passions* were composed by numerous Baroque composers, the greatest examples being those of J.S. Bach.

*RECOMMENDED COMPOSITIONS:* *Messiah* by G. F. Handel; *Judas Maccabeus* by G.F. Handel


**SACRED INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC**

We can now use the topic heading *Sacred Instrumental Music*. As you may recall, throughout much of early Western music there was a general frown on using instruments in church. The term *a capella* is used by modern musicians to describe a vocal performance unaccompanied by instruments. It literally means "from the chapel" and is an artifact from the days when only voices were acceptable for use in church.

The Baroque era had no such ban. Instruments were commonly used in Baroque church services, such as accompaniment for cantatas, etc. Early four movement compositions for strings and keyboard called a *sonata da chiesa* were performed in church (as well as in secular settings).

If the Renaissance gave us the finest sacred vocal music ever written, the Baroque era has given us the finest organ music. Pipe organs became a fixture in many churches and many composers composed a great deal of music for this instrument capable of an amazingly wide range of tone colors. Johann Pachelbel composed a lot of fine sacred organ music. Dietrich Buxtehude was also a composer with a large output of organ music.

Buxtehude was so influential that people came from great distances to hear him. One who walked 250 miles to hear him was another young organist by the name of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The musical form *the fugue* (a descendant of an earlier imitative structure called a *ricercar*) reached a high point in the Baroque Era. In the hands of Bach, it became a highly developed structure with very complex rules depending on the equally complex rules of tonal harmony. Fugues often followed a prelude, a toccata, or a fantasia and were played during church services.

*RECOMMENDED COMPOSITIONS:* Fugues on the Magnificat by Johann Pachelbel; Organ music by Dietrich Buxtehude; Organ Music by J.S. Bach
BAROQUE SECULAR MUSIC

The explosion of instrumental music was again a sign of the increasing power of the court and the middle class. Paintings of the era frequently show a harpsichord (or a similar keyboard instrument called a virginal) as a fixture in middle class homes.

Collections of music for these instruments were published. Many of them were in the form of a suite. A suite is a collection of dances generally lasting a few minutes each. Suites would contain a mixture of fast and slow dances not unlike many modern popular music CDs.

Sonatas (the word sonata is derived from an early word meaning "to be played") were a common form. In addition to the sonata da chiesa mentioned above, there was also a sonata da camera (chamber sonata), various trio sonatas, solo sonatas, etc.

Note that these are not the same fairly rigid sonatas found in the Classical and Romantic Eras, but they have some of the same basic characteristics. The sonata form had not quite formed yet, but again the basic structure was in place.

The concerto as we know it developed in this era, Archangelo Corelli usually being credited with the development of this form. Through his hundreds of concerti, Antonio Vivaldi refined the form into a three movement fast-slow-fast structure with a defined role pitting the soloist against the rest of the ensemble for a competition in sound.

The practice of creating a concerto with more than one soloist was also common: this
type of music is known as a *concerto grosso* and the finest examples are the six *Brandenburg Concertos* by J.S. Bach.

The structure of a concerto movement is typically in *ritornello* form. Less formally structured than a sonata form, it had many of the same basic elements: stating a theme, getting away from it, coming back to it as a teaser, a development of sorts, and then a final return to the main theme.

**RECOMMENDED COMPOSITIONS** – *Concerti Grossi*: 6 Brandenburg Concerti by J.S. Bach; Concerti Grossi by Archangelo Corelli; Concerti Grossi by G.F. Handel. *Solo Concerti* – The Four Seasons by Antonio Vivaldi (as well as several hundred others); Harpsichord Concerti by J.S. Bach; Violin Concerti by J.S. Bach. *Suites*: 4 Orchestral Suites by J. S. Bach; English Suites for Keyboard by J.S. Bach; Water Music Suite by G. F. Handel; Royal Fireworks Music by G. F. Handel

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**OPERA**

As we noted earlier, historians cite the invention of opera to mark the beginning point of the Baroque Era. Rejecting the long long flowing lines in the counterpoint of the late Renaissance composers, the early composers of opera chose a declamatory style, one that focused much more on the importance of the words and emphasized clarity in the presentation of the text.

The first operas were based on Greek mythology. The earliest one that is performed with any regularity is *L’Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi. Early operas were for the benefit of the nobility but soon became popular entertainment.

By the end of the Baroque Era, opera had changed greatly to the benefit of the musical line. They typically started with an Overture (a short instrumental piece to set the mood and probably quiet the audience down), and consisted of a series of *arias* (well developed melodies usually using only a few phrases of lyrics repeated), duets, and choruses, interspersed with *recitatives* (sections in a declamatory style almost half spoken) to advance the plot.

Vivaldi composed nearly 50 of them (many are lost), Handel composed almost as many.

Modern performances frequently have a minor dilemma—many of these opera roles were written for (and performed by) castrati, a voice that is fortunately hard to find in the modern era. Many times they are performed by women in men’s dress and costumes. Other performances use countertenors (men singing falsetto).
RECOMMENDED COMPOSITIONS: Orlando Furioso by Antonio Vivaldi; Giulio Caesare by G. F. Handel.

J.S. Bach doesn’t have any operas on this list—it was the only major musical medium he didn’t compose in. The closest he came were several secular cantatas which had some of the same elements.

Among the most important Baroque composers were Georg Frederic Handel, J.S. Bach, Dietrich Buxtehude, Jean Baptiste Lully, Claudio Monteverdi, Henry Purcell, Andrea Scarlatti, Domenico Scarlatti, Archangelo Corelli, Georg Phillippe Telemann, and Antonio Vivaldi, Claudio Monteverdi.
A couple of centuries later, especially in the Romantic Era, there was a large body of secular organ music composed, but as most organs were found in churches in the Baroque Era, there was a practical reason as to why most organ music from the era is sacred. Bach, however, did compose some organ music not for church.