

Study Guide – Baroque History

Terminology & Definitions

- *Barroco*: A Portuguese word meaning 'a misshapen pearl' that was originally used to denigrate something for being too excessive and overwrought; eventually came to describe the artistic output of the whole era
- *Imitation*: A composition technique wherein a short melodic fragment – called a subject – is introduced in one voice, then imitated in the other voices, starting on different notes, to create harmony
- *Counterpoint*: The art of combining several different musical lines in order to create harmony
- *Fugue*: A type of composition that's built out of a series of melodic subjects, each imitated in different voices
- *Opera*: An art form combining drama and music; actors/ singers are accompanied by an orchestra; three types of singing: *aria*, *recitative* and *choral*
- *Basso Continuo*: A system of musical notation in which only a melody and a bass line are written out. All of the harmony was represented by numbers, which indicated which notes and chords should be included. Orchestras and chamber ensembles in the Baroque always included at least one *basso continuo* instrument, usually a harpsichord and/or a lute
- *Ornament*: a note (or group of notes) that embellishes the melody
- *Ritornello*: a repeated refrain for the ensemble in a *concerto*
- *Sinfonia*: When opera spread from Italy to France, the French added a short, energetic piece of instrumental music called an *ouverture* to the beginning (before the opera starts); the Italian composers eventually started doing this too and renamed it the *sinfonia*

General Characteristics

- *Melody*: one or two melodic ideas are repeated, developed and imitated, moving through a variety of tonal centers (keys)
- *Harmony*: Diatonic (major and minor scale) but no clear phrasing or cadences yet; pieces of music tended to rapidly move through several keys before returning to the tonic key
- *Texture*: mostly polyphonic (fugue, counterpoint) with some homophonic textures emerging (opera, especially *recitative*)
- *Timbre*: small orchestras and chamber ensembles (mostly strings, some woodwinds and a *basso continuo* instrument, like the harpsichord); very little percussion
- *Form*: Predictable patterns and structures, including binary (two parts) and ternary (three parts); important forms included the *sonata*, the *concerto*, the *toccata & fugue*, the
- *Dynamics*: Terraced dynamics (sudden changes) are created mostly by the addition or subtraction of instruments; *forte* and *piano* only
- *Rhythm*: Alternates between extremely rigid and driving (like in a concerto) and very free and undefined (like recitative)

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Important Forms

- *Sonata*: a type of chamber work that includes several short, contrasting melodies; 2–4 instruments and *basso continuo*
- *Concerto*: a type of chamber work which features a soloist (or soloists, in a *concerto grosso*) alternating with the rest of the ensemble
- *Toccatà & Fugue*: a type of organ work which combines two elements: *the toccatà*, a virtuosic piece that's meant to sound improvised (like the earlier *prelude* was) and *the fugue*, a form that is built using imitation of one or two melodic subjects

Important Composers

- Claudio Monteverdi
 - One of the composers who helped to transition the world out of the Renaissance and into the Baroque
 - Used a lot of cutting-edge Baroque techniques, while still appealing to the prevailing Renaissance sensibilities of his time
- Antonio Vivaldi
 - The master of the concerto
 - A violin virtuoso himself, Vivaldi's most famous work is a series of violin concertos collectively referred to as *The Four Seasons*
 - A heavy influence on Bach
- Johann Sebastian Bach
 - Master of counterpoint
 - Forced other composers to abandon the *basso continuo* style and start writing in four voices (*concertare*), by doing it so well that his work set the new standard
 - Left an enormous body of work that would eventually become the basis of the rules of contrapuntal writing and harmony for hundreds of years to come

Historical Implications, Sample Questions & Other Important Stuff

- *Describe some of the important developments that happened as opera spread throughout and beyond Italy*
 - The addition of the *ouverture* (later called a *sinfonia*) by French composers
 - Much larger and more diverse orchestras
 - Operas got longer and longer, as composers added more *arias* to satisfy the public's (and the *impresarios*) insatiable demand for more of the most famous singers of the day