Baroque Music

**Baroque music** describes an era and a set of styles of European classical music which were in widespread use between approximately 1600 and 1750. This era is said to begin in music after the Renaissance and was followed by the Classical music era.

Baroque music forms a major portion of the classical music canon, being widely studied, performed, and listened to. It is associated with composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, Antonio Vivaldi, George Frideric Handel, and Johann Sebastian Bach. During the period composers and performers used more elaborate musical ornamentation, made changes in musical notation, and developed new instrumental playing techniques. Baroque music expanded the size, range and complexity of instrumental performance, and also established opera as a musical genre. Tonality, or the idea that chords, rather than notes, created the sense of closure, became one of the fundamental ideas in musical notation.

Baroque music shares with Renaissance music a heavy use of polyphony (a texture consisting of two or more independent melodic voices, as opposed to music with just one voice (monophony) or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords (homophony), and counterpoint (the relationship between two or more voices that are independent in contour and rhythm, and interdependent in harmony). Baroque music employs a great deal of ornamentation, the improvisation of the melodic line.

**Wind and String Instruments** that can be found in a Baroque Chamber Orchestra include: violin, viola, cello, double bass, piano, flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, harpsichord, organ, recorder.

**Handel (1685-1756)**
Developed the oratorio (a musical setting of a long text, either religious or secular, for soloists, chorus, narrator, and orchestra) for the concert hall.

Handel’s *Messiah* brought scripture to life. He employed vigorous contrasts of tempo and dynamics and dramatic interaction between ensembles – solo voices, chorus, and instruments. Much of the *Messiah* is essentially homophonic; that is, its musical organization depends on the use of a dominant melody supported by musical chords.

**Bach (1685-1750)**
Luther’s teaching and Lutheran hymn tunes were Bach’s major sources of religious inspiration, and the organ, the principal instrument of Protestant Church music, was one of his favorite instruments. Bach composed cantatas (a multi-movement composition for voices and instrumental accompaniment; smaller in scale than the oratorio) as musical commentaries on the daily scriptural lessons of the Lutheran Church service. Bach drew on Protestant chorales (a hymn of the Lutheran church sung by the entire congregation) as the basis for many of his instrumental compositions, including the 170 organ preludes that he composed to precede and set the mood for congregational singing.
Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos* - a musical work in which one solo instrument is accompanied by an orchestra; this style arose in the Baroque period with the *concerto grosso*, which contrasted a small group of instruments with the rest of the orchestra.

The *Brandenburg Concertos* contained spiraling melodies and expansive rhythms, a rich contrast of tone and texture between the two “contending” groups of instruments – the massive sound of the entire ensemble versus the lighter sounds of the smaller sections playing in “dialogue,” and tightly drawn webs of counterpoint spun between upper and lower instrumental parts.

One of Bach’s monumental works was *The Art of Fugue*, a polyphonic composition in which a single musical theme (or subject) is imitated, restated, and developed by successively entering voice parts. A melody in one voice part is imitated in other voice parts, so that melody and repetition overlap. This form of imitative counterpoint wove a majestic tapestry of sound, and was a triumphant expression of the Age of Science. (*see Canon below*).

**Vivaldi (1678-1741)**
Systemized the *concerto grosso* into a three movement form (fast/slow/fast) and increased the distinctions between solo and ensemble groups in each movement.

*The Four Seasons* – a group of four violin concertos, each of which musically describes a single season. Full of vibrant rhythms, lyrical solos, exuberant “dialogues” between violin and small orchestra, *The Four Seasons* contains a *ritornello* – a recurring melody in the baroque concerto.

**Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)**
Composed a large body of sacred and secular music, and his contributions to the development of the chorale prelude and fugue have earned him a place among the most important composers of the middle Baroque era. Today, Pachelbel is best known for the *Canon in D*, the only *canon* he wrote.

A *canon* is a composition that employs a melody with one or more imitations of the melody; the initial melody is called the leader, while the imitative melody is called the follower which is played in a different voice. *Canons* where all parts sing identical music and which repeat are called *rounds*, such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat". Another example is the *round* “Three Blind Mice,” a melody in one voice part is imitated in other voice parts, so that the melody and repetitions overlap.

*Pachelbel's Canon* was written in or around 1680, during the Baroque period, as a piece of chamber music for three violins and basso continuo, but has since been arranged for a wide variety of ensembles. The basso continuo parts were played continuously throughout a piece, providing the harmonic structure of the music. The word is often shortened to *continuo*, and the instrumentalists playing the continuo part, if more than one, are called the *continuo group*. 