Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Interpret what life and society was like during the Baroque era.
2. Identify the different genres of vocal music of this era.
3. Explain the importance of instrumental music and its development.
4. Identify the major Baroque composers, their musical output, and significant details of their lives.

Written Lecture

The Baroque Era (1600-1750)

The period that begins in the seventeenth century is an exciting time of change in cultural thought, as well as music and art. The end of the Renaissance witnessed the spreading of power from the Catholic Church to its Protestant counterparts. Religion will remain influential to society, both in Western Europe, as well as the newly colonized America, though more secular art forms show the swing into the future of civilization. Through advances in commerce in Europe and the Americas, a new social class begins to emerge. The beginning of the middle class is rooted in the Baroque period. The shift in class structure did not occur over night, and this is apparent in the disparity between the very rich, and the incredibly poor. Patrons of the arts have traditionally been those belonging to the aristocracy or religious factions, and this is still true today. Slowly but surely, the less fortunate of the population will begin to influence artist and composers along with the upper class.

Just by viewing the few examples of paintings in the textbook, one can gain a sense of the love for the dramatic in the Baroque. It is suggested that students search other examples of art and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In music, this fascination with the dramatic is most apparent in opera. The madrigals of the Late Renaissance, and the use of word painting along with expressive poetry, made an impact on how Baroque composers set stories to sound.

Before any specific genres are discussed, the elements of Baroque style need to be reviewed. Too many times, music appreciation students comment that all classical music sounds the same. One of the purposes of this course is to have students gain an understanding through listening what the major differences are from one style period to the next. Different instruments are used from period to period, which can make an obvious distinction in style. For example, the harpsichord is the main keyboard instrument used in the Baroque. The tinny, almost bell-like sound of the instrument is unmistakable. In the Baroque, and very briefly in the Classical period, the harpsichord is used as an accompaniment instrument.
In nearly every piece of music in the Baroque, excluding solo music, *basso continuo* will be heard. It takes two players to accomplish this. One on a chordal instrument such as the harpsichord or lute, and a bass instrument, such as the cello, that holds sustained bass notes. The three main elements of Baroque style, vigorous rhythm, continuous melody, and terraced dynamics describe what makes the music of this period sound the way it does. The first two elements go hand in hand, melodies are driven by their rhythm. Once a rhythm is established at the beginning of a piece, it remains until the very end of the music. An example of this is can be heard in J. S. Bach’s *Brandenberg Concerto* No. 2.

Terraced dynamics can be heard in most pieces written in the Baroque, and a great example of this can be heard in the very beginning of Vivaldi’s, *Spring from the Four Seasons*. The first melody played in this work is heard twice. The first time it is heard, it is played at loud volume, the second time it is heard is almost like an echo of the first. Musicians are taught to play repeated material differently, which is much more interesting than hearing the same musical material or information the same way twice in a row.

Imagine a monotone speaker who uses no inflection or rise and fall in the voice while giving a speech. This would be incredibly boring! Terraced dynamics help add interest to already beautiful music.

Opera becomes the pinnacle of musical and visual entertainment in the Baroque. The genre can be compared to blockbuster films of today in the way they can capture the audiences’ imagination, and can put them *inside* the story. Very dramatic story lines, as well as plenty of comedy, exhilarate and entertain listeners, but the music is the key. The way in which composers set the stories to sound is what makes opera such a high art form. When you study any genre, consider each of the individual components that make the whole.

Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* is a wonderful example of an early opera whose story is taken from the ancient Roman epic, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The aristocracy, as well as anyone else who had the opportunity to attend its performances, would have enjoyed this opera. Subject matter is very important when considering opera, and its different types. *Opera seria* was liked by the upper class for a simple reason. The stories used in serious opera were usually ancient, such as the *Dido and Aeneas*. These stories have stood the test of time, they were very important in their own day and once again in the seventeenth century. The aristocracy saw themselves in the same light. They likened themselves to the classical epic tales that hold their importance through the ages. The wealthy wanted to keep their wealth and power and ensure that it would be there for exalted bloodlines for generations to come. Comic opera was much lighter and more often was appealing to the less privileged. Social class has been very influential to music, and is a very important aspect of music history to grasp. This will continue to change through each historical period studied in the class.

When listening to Purcell’s aria, *Dido’s Lament*, pay close attention to two main musical elements: the mood of the song set to music and how word painting helps bring the emotion alive, and the *ground bass* that repeats through the aria. The repeating pattern is very similar to popular songs of today. Can you think of any songs that have a repeating sound pattern such as in this aria? Does the music help get the point across of the seriousness of the text?

The next two vocal genres are similar to opera, but are sacred rather than secular. Both the *cantata*, and the *oratorio* use elements also found in opera, but religious subject matter and reverence are the driving forces here. The two
genres are represented in a musical example respectively. J. S. Bach’s *Wachet auf, or Sleepers Awake* is made up of seven movements and based on the *chorale* tune heard at the end of the entire piece. There are three movements presented by the textbook and in StudySpace. After studying the terminology associated with the cantata, try to listen and keep up with the musical elements as they are presented in the recordings.

G. F. Handel’s oratorio *Messiah* is very well known from being a holiday musical concert piece, as well as from being used in many works for film and television. The *oratorio* differs from the *cantata* in a few ways. It is just as long as an opera, (around two hours) with forty movements or so, with a narrator, or orator that helps keep the storyline organized for the audience. The solo song *Rejoice Greatly* is an aria, just as those heard in opera, and showcases the virtuosity of the singer with the fast moving notes and wide vocal range. The *Hallelujah* chorus is one of the most heard pieces written by Handel today, and sounds a bit more like a traditional “church song” with homophonic motion which is quite easy to hear, contrasted by more complex polyphonic writing. Try to hear the differences between these two textures as you listen to music.

Instrumental music begins to rise as an art form in the baroque and rivals the importance of the vocal genres already discussed in this Unit. We will see that the highpoint of instrumental music actually happens in the Classical period with the symphony. Multi-movement instrumental works are rooted in the Baroque, and will be the basis for some of the most well-known masterworks of music history that will follow. The *suite*, both for solo instruments as well as for orchestra, as heard in our listening examples for the unit, along with the *concerto* begin to standardize instrumental music forms and paves the way for the future. The collection of international dance types as heard in the *suite* marks the first time in history that we hear composers using musical style that bridges the gap between language and culture. Each dance type originates in a specific country, and adheres to specific rhythms, meter, character, and tempo. Listen to both Handel’s *Water Music*, and Mouret’s *Rondeau*, and try to hear the differences in style by keeping up with the musical form used in each piece.

Both the *solo concerto* and *concerto grosso* showcase the orchestra as a highly skilled and intellectual force in art music. The concerto is made up of three movements and focuses on contrast between a soloist and a small group of players contrasted by the entire orchestra. The *solo concerto*, which will actually remain in style to the present day, usually will have a very technically challenging solo part. This can be part of the explanation of why the genre has had lasting popularity; audiences like to be wowed! Vivaldi’s *Spring* is a perfect example of virtuosic solo playing, and the kind of “sound painting” makes the story behind the music come to life in the scenes and sounds of nature. Though the concerto grosso goes “out of style” after this era, it is an integral part of the development of instrumental music in the Baroque. Bach’s *Brandenberg Concerto* No. 2 is another great example of Baroque musical style and it shows the increasing complexity in music that influences composers of the coming periods to further perfect their craft. This concerto was such a technically challenging piece, that it was not even performed during Bach’s lifetime.

**Learning Activities (Non-Graded)**

Listening Activities: Listen to the musical examples using both the Interactive Listening Guides in StudySpace, as well as the listening guides in the textbook. The musical examples will need to be heard multiple times.
• Henry Purcell: Dido’s Lament, (opera aria) (required)
• Barbara Strozi: Amor dormiglione, or Sleepyhead, Cupid!, (monody)
• J.S. Bach: Wachet auf, or Sleepers Awake, movements I and IV, (cantata)
• G.F. Handel: Messiah Nos. 18 and 44, (oratorio) (required)
• G.F. Handel: Water Music, Alla hornpipe, (orchestral suite) (required)
• Jean-Joseph Mouret: Rondeau, (orchestral suite)
• Antonio Vivaldi: Spring from The Four Seasons, (solo concerto) required
• J.S. Bach: Contrapunctus 1, (fugue)

There are listening examples included in almost every chapter of the textbook. Though they are all not required, it is strongly suggested that you listen to as much music as possible to gain a true appreciation for music.