

Harmony and the rise of tonality

One form of ornamentation was the trill, where the musician would quickly alternate between adjacent notes.



Other ornaments included the turn, a group of four or five notes around a main note;



and the appoggiatura, a short note followed by the main note.



Musicians in the Renaissance used the old mediaeval modes, which were based on an ancient Greek system of scales. Over time, the original twelve modes were reduced to two, and from these, Baroque musicians developed the major/minor system. This system allows the music to change key, or modulate, enabling composers to write much longer work without having the music get boring. In addition, tonality, or the feeling that the music centres around one particular note, the tonic or "home note", became much stronger.

Chords began to be logically related to one another, so that each one had a specific function in comparison to the tonic chord, the one constructed around the «home» note. Therefore the chords seem to move in a coherent and satisfying way from one to another, giving a sense of direction to the piece as a whole.

Ornamentation

A very obvious feature of Baroque music is its Ornamentation. When Baroque composers wrote their music down, they left a great deal up to the performer, who was expected to decorate the piece with what are called ornaments. These additions were not written down except with a sign on the score for the performer telling him, "This is where you do your trill." This left room for the performer to improvise and show off his special skills and talents, just like modern day jazz music. Since performers were expected to embellish the music by improvising with these ornaments, Baroque music as it is written is often quite different from the way it sounded in performance.

Major-minor tonality refers to the system of major and minor scales that all young musicians learn to play on their instrument.

Rhythm

Baroque composers used a steady pulse that gives their music a driving energy similar to the controlled turbulence that we see in Baroque art and sculpture. This rhythmic vitality is one of its chief attractions. The composer generally maintained a single rhythm or very similar rhythms throughout a piece or at least within any one particular section. A related development was that meter became obvious for the first time and bar lines made their appearance in Baroque scores. Certain instruments were given the role of emphasizing the strong beats.

Basso continuo

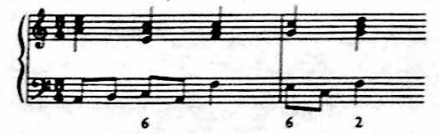
All Baroque music has a very strong bass line. It provides support for the harmonies in the music and keeps the rhythm moving. The other parts in the music may be rhythmic as well, or they may be more lyrical, but the bass is always the driving force behind everything. The part was generally played by the low instruments, either cello or bass viol, with the addition of a harpsichord or organ, which clarifies the harmony and holds the texture together by playing chords continuously along with the written bass line. These chords never stop, which is why this part is called the *basso continuo*, or continuous bass.

Another name for the continuo part is figured bass, which comes from the numerical shorthand which told the continuo players which chord to play. As you can see in the illustration, the bass notes are written on the bass clef line, but the musician could improvise the rest, by playing the appropriate chord for the right hand in at least two different ways...

Continuo part, as written: cello and harpsichord, left hand



Simple 'realization' of chords on the harpsichord



More ornate 'realization' on the harpsichord



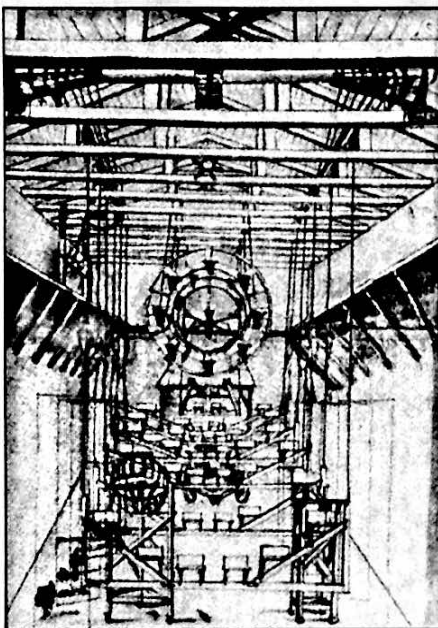
The title page illustration from one of Bach's keyboard concertos

You can see here a typical Baroque orchestra. The basso continuo players (the harpsichordist and cellist) are in the foreground, and the rest of the musicians are behind them.



Here is another illustration of a baroque orchestra, showing the basso continuo players in a central position. Notice that the cellist is supporting his instrument with his knees. Baroque cellos did not have the pin touching the floor that modern cellos do.

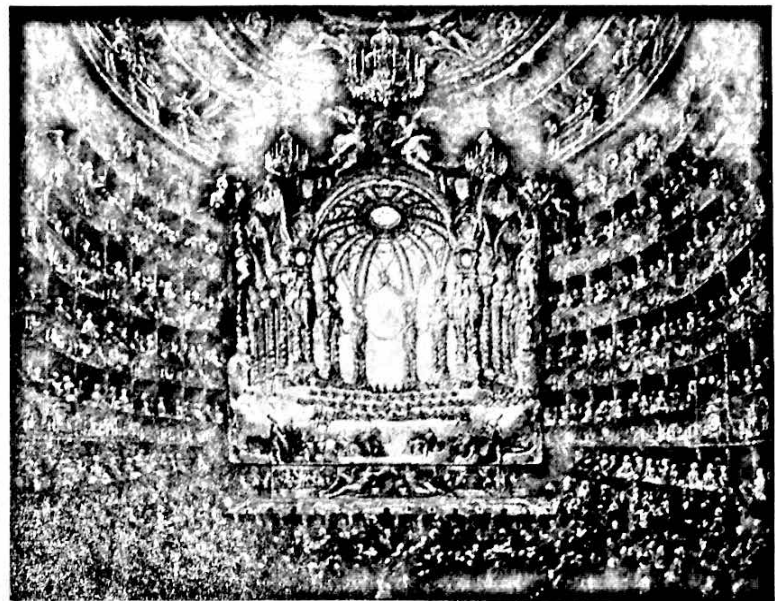
Opera



The public's desire for spectacular productions was so great that elaborate stage machinery had to be invented to achieve the desired effects. In the picture on the top, a god is descending from the heavens on his cloud; the picture below shows the machinery needed to make this happen.

Composers had to write different types of music for an Opera: arias for solo voices, choruses and ensembles for groups of voices, and recitative (pronounced *re-sih-ta-téev*), which is speech-like singing used for dialogue, or to advance the plot. Baroque composer used arias when they wanted the characters to express their feelings. Usually accompanied by orchestra, they were melodic, long, and very elaborate. They became a showcase for the virtuoso vocal talents of the singers. In contrast, recitative imitates and exaggerates the melodies of normal speech, the way the voice rises asking a question, for instance, or lowers when communicating a secret. It was used at places in the opera when the words needed to be emphasized.

Opera's combination of music and theatricality was perfect for the Baroque spirit. It immediately became popular and spread quickly across Europe. Originally an Italian art form, different kinds of opera developed in different places. Lully, at the court of Louis XIV, developed a French opera style, which stressed the orchestra and chorus, and did not lean so heavily on the soloists. In England, Henry Purcell wrote many operas for Charles II and his successors, and his *Dido and Aeneas* is still performed.



This opera is being performed at the palace of the French ambassador to Rome in 1729. Going to the opera was a regular event for the aristocracy. Notice the splendid set and the size of the decorations.