

C. Chris Erway  
Music 382  
Assignment 5

### **From the Baroque to Classical Era: 1650-1800**

The history of music from 1650 to 1800 can be described by three major periods: the middle Baroque, the late Baroque / early Classical, and Classical eras. The middle Baroque can be described as a time of developing and standardizing musical forms, styles, and conventions, and then obeying those conventions in the creation of new music. The second era found the undoing of these conventions in two important areas, prompting the end of the Baroque and beginning of the Classical era. The final era describes a period of newer conventions, built from the changes presented to Baroque music by its creators. This evolution can best be understood by careful investigation of musical conventions through these three periods.

For perspective, we begin before 1650, with Monteverdi. His opera *Orfeo* of 1607 did not redefine any new style in vocal music, but rather served to collect existing techniques and forms of the time – combining such forms as recitative, airs, madrigals, *ritornello*, and *recitativo arioso*. It also was significant for its mature use of the orchestra, bringing together instruments from all consorts – the violins, the cornets, viols, organ, trombones, and others. *Orfeo* drew from all styles of secular music at the time, achieving a unity overall through the use of *ritornello* and the orchestra (Palisca, 1991).

The 1620's and 1630's saw the reinforcement of the recitative and aria in secular music with the development of the cantata. Rossi's early cantata *Mentre sorge dal mare* serves as an excellent example of this development. The opera, being prohibitively

expensive to put on all the time, found its forms set in the cantata, a sort of “mini-opera” consisting of solo voice and figured basso continuo. The cantata contained the forms of opera – the recitative and various kinds (strophic, bipartite, ottonario) of arias – but without the stage production and orchestra. These were written for all sorts of special occasions and became quite popular.

In sacred music, a similar development further strengthened the recitative and aria’s popularity – the oratorio. These, like Carissimi’s *Jephte* of the 1640’s, similarly used devotional texts – not, however, taken straight from the Bible – for special services held in oratories outside of regular church services. These too functioned as a sort of “substitute” for opera, being put especially during the time of Lent, after end of the opera season, and also used the recitative and aria with basso.

Meanwhile, these mostly Italian developments in music found their way to France, where Lully busily set upon adapting them to French tastes. Drawing from Italian opera, Lully’s *tragédie en musique* *Armide*, in 1686, displays many changes from the Italian form. First, the popularity of ballet and dance music in France had the effect of adding a *divertissement* to each act of the opera, a throwback to the court ballet of Louis XIV. Similarly, many new, lighter dance forms – for example, that of the minuet and gavotte – were added to accommodate the dancers. And though Lully takes the recitative and its basso continuo from the Italian style, he puts a uniquely French twist on recitative by changing the meter on a per-measure basis to accommodate the text, ensuring that a downbeat occurs on the strong stresses of the French language. Lully also used for his orchestration more woodwind instruments, also showing French tastes in contrast to Italy’s preference for brasses.

These developments in vocal music in the Baroque era had their parallels in the world of instrumental music as well. In Bologna, Corelli took the sonata form, with its roots in the church (notably from Monteverdi's *Sonata sopra Sancta Maria* of 1610), and created his first trio sonatas of 1681. The structure of these sonatas apparently drew from the vocal cantatas – the separate movements (new for instrumental music then) resembled the division between recitative and aria in vocal music of the time. Corelli's sonatas were both sacred and secular, the latter consisting of dance forms as its movements – again, much like the differences between oratorio and cantata.

Corelli further changed instrumental music, adding more instruments to create his concertos. In Corelli's 1714 concerto *grosso*, Opus 6, No. 4, we see he has taken his trio – the concertino consisting of two violins and a basso continuo – and has added to it a concerto *grosso*, two more violins, viola, and additional basso continuo. Corelli's addition of the *grosso* was “optional” – but his contemporary Torelli would later use the *grosso* fully, especially in tutti sections that required the *grosso* for a full effect. Vivaldi also contributed to the concerto – his Opus 3, *L'Estro armonico* uses as many as four solo violins, furthering the idea of melodic interplay first developed in the trio sonatas. His No. 8 from this opus, in A minor, from 1711, also helps us draw another parallel to vocal music – its structure of repeated ritornello (I), episode, ritornello (V), episode, ritornello (IV), episode, and ritornello (I) reminds us of the *da capo* aria form.

Bach, in his “Brandenburg” Concertos of 1721 followed Vivaldi's example (quite literally, learning the concerto by transcribing Vivaldi's works for organ) and continued on the standard set forth by the Italians. His concertos did not particularly change the form of the concerto very much, maintaining the form and in effect strengthening it. In

No.5, movement 1, he notably added a keyboard soloist to the concerto, giving a solo *cadenza* to the piano before the final cadence and ritornello. But little else than that – some exotic key areas, perhaps – was to change the concerto in any fundamental way.

The opera, as exemplified in Handel's *Giulio Cesare* in 1724, would similarly be well defined (and repeated) in the form of *opera seria*. *Giulio Cesare* is a perfect example of the qualities characteristic of *opera seria*. Its plot, firstly, was typically drawn from classical history (in this case) or from mythological sources. The vocal writing in this style stresses vocal virtuosity, with great drawn-out solos requiring much technical skill from the performer. The *da capo* aria serves this purpose, as well, allowing the singer a chance to improvise the ornamentation of the A section the second time it occurs. The recitative, too, is developed into *secco* recitative – most familiar to us, featuring only voice and basso – and accompanied recitative – also featuring members of the orchestra for dramatic effect. These long, serious productions of Handel's for became very popular and well established in England, and Handel wrote many of them.

So by now, roughly the middle of the Baroque era, we find the main styles and forms of instrumental and vocal music fairly well defined, having been developed and effectively standardized, and used across borders by musicians to develop music fairly consistent with these rules. One can say that these standards of form and style effectively characterize the music of this period. However, we find ourselves at a turning point: the widespread standardization of these styles comes with it its undoing. With widespread use and acceptance comes the perception that these styles are too “stuffy,” too “old,” no longer in vogue. Next to emerge are two movements in vocal and instrumental music

which aim to create a “lighter” format, for easier public consumption, something different from the “Establishment” of *opera seria* and the concerto. The advent of these movements and the new developments that heralded them would signal the end of the Baroque era and the beginning of the Classical era.

The first of these small revolutions started with Gay and Pepusch’s *Beggar’s Opera* in 1728. The piece, a spoof aimed at Handel’s many popular opera productions in England, ridiculed the noble tone of *opera seria*, setting all its songs to folk tunes of the day, and featuring “common” citizens rather than dealing with mythological or historical figures. It was met with great commercial success, and spawned a number of imitation ballad operas, also taken from folk tunes. Another response to the *opera seria* was the *opera buffa*, a “lighter,” two-act comedic style of opera. With the *Beggar’s Opera* in England, Handel learned that the public was growing weary of the Italian operas he was producing, and later found it hard to keep his opera company afloat.

Handel was quick to move out of the opera business: in 1732, he debuted his first oratorio in London, *Esther*. Most of the elements of Handel’s oratorios were taken from the opera – the oratorio had an overture, recitative, arias, and ariosos – it was basically an opera without the staging. The most significant change, as well as a change from the old middle Baroque oratorio, was the addition and new importance of the choral writing. Though at first the oratorios were closer to operas, with arias as the most important element, the chorus sections of Handel’s later oratorios later overshadowed them in importance. Handel’s move from operas to oratorios was a wise one: his oratorios were very popular of in great demand in England.

The reaction to *opera seria* in England that caused Handel to stop writing operas soon had its analog in the rest of Europe, as well. European audiences soon became skeptical of the showy vocal virtuosity of the *opera seria* style, as well as the slow action of the plot. This did not discourage all composers, however. Gluck's 1762 *Orfeo ed Euridice* was the first of a new style of operas that were created in response to this: not *opera seria*, also not *opera buffa* – a hybrid crossing the short, fast-moving qualities of *buffa* with the serious subject of the *seria*. Gluck, in “lightened” *opera seria*, crafting sweet, catchy tunes for the arias, with few opportunities for the lengthy vocal fireworks and cadenzas of which European audiences had grown tired. In Act III, Gluck goes so far to “lighten” the opera as to insert a rondo – considered perhaps “too” light at the time – in for one of Orpheus's arias, *Che farò senza Euridice*. This simple form would, ten years later, be adapted by Mozart into sonata-rondo form.

A similar revolution in instrumental music – coincident with the 1728 *Beggar's Opera* – began circa 1730 with Sammartini's Sinfonia in G. The *sinfonia* – typically the name given to opera curtain-raising music – answered the popular opinion held during the 1730's that the concerto was becoming an “old” form, and that a new, lighter music was needed for public consumption. Sammartini's *sinfonia* (sometimes called sonatas, early on) consisted typically of four movements: fast, slow, fast, and a minuet. Telemann's *Tafelmusik* in 1733 also follows in this example: light, airy, sonatas with little substance, but in keeping with the trend away from the heavier concertos.

By the time of 1761, the three- or four-movement *sinfonia* had changed greatly since Sammartini's time, as we see in Haydn's sixth symphony, released in that year. The symphony, titled *Le Matin*, is similar to the form of the *sinfonia* – with two

movements somewhat resembling sonatas, and a third minuet – but set for the typical Classical orchestra, with its typical makeup of woodwinds, horns, strings, and bass. Certain terms remain: for instance, that of the middle-movement “trio,” a reference to the trio sonata settings of the *sinfonia*, but a trio in name alone, the movement contrasting with the previous one, but with added backing from the orchestra. The result is not so unmemorable as the *sinfonias* of Telemann. More experimentation was possible because of the freedom of form from the strict guidelines of the concerto.

The concerto however, had not completely disappeared. Mozart’s piano concertos were remarkable in that no concertos had been written since the Baroque era of Bach and Vivaldi. Mozart’s resurrection and hybridization of this form for Classical orchestra and piano in the 1773 *Piano concerto No. 5 in D major* was quite innovative – it provided the four ritornello sections (and intermediate episodes) typical of Baroque concertos, but also resembled a sonata with its two themes, sonata-like exposition, development and recapitulation. The piece states its exposition much like a sonata, but twice, using the first exposition as ritornello material for the concerto form. The development occurs much like the development of a sonata, between the second and third ritornellos, and the recapitulation arrives with the third ritornello and the episode following it. During the final ritornello, we find a *cadenza* typical of Bach’s piano concertos. This synthesis of sonata and concerto forms was quite clever and does not constitute a nostalgic return to the forms of old, but rather the creation of a new musical form befitting Mozart’s needs.

By tracing history, we have seen the development of Baroque musical styles and conventions, and the process of cross-pollination through which instrumental and vocal music drew from each other. We have also seen the deconstruction and reformation of Baroque convention into the Classical era by the progenitors of early Classical music. The development of these new styles prompts us to ask: to what degree was Classical music indebted to the influence of the Baroque era? To a great degree: for all its new ideals and goals, the music of the Classical era was still based on the foundation of conventions and values from the era before it. The development of new music from previous conventions is a constant throughout human history.