

Instrumental Music:

How It Started

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Introduction

The Renaissance era, specifically the late fifteenth century, saw the rise of instrumental music. Instrumental music began to increase in popularity among the different groups of musicians, including clergy, professionals, and amateurs (Burkholder et al. 254). This type of music was now seen as worthy of preservation and was beginning to be recorded via sheet music instead of improvised. Old collections were published, but newer types of music were being coined and notated as well. These new developments “set the stage for later periods” (Burkholder et al. 254). The genre of instrumental music has a rich, fertile history and an abundant tradition that has lasted for many years.

Renaissance Music

The Renaissance era was a refinement period for the fine arts. The word “Renaissance” itself was French for “rebirth,” which alludes directly to the revival of classical learning and humanism (Burkholder et al 136). The Renaissance’s attention to art promoted advancement on many fronts—especially music. With some wealthy patrons as well as other funding from the church and state, artists were able to survive while pioneering and innovating in their fields. In addition to regeneration of ancient ideas, many innovations catapulted music into novel territory. Musical notation began to change and several other developments emerged. Many of these developments affected consonance, such as a new tuning system and many different musical techniques.

A well-educated musician can hear and identify the two techniques that defined the instrumental works of the Renaissance: imitative counterpoint and homophony. Imitative counterpoint became a popular technique in the musical works of the Renaissance. Imitative counterpoint occurs when a vocal or instrumental motive (main melody or sequence of notes) is

imitated a fourth or fifth away in another voice. For example, a motive in the tenor voice might later be echoed, or imitated, in the bass voice. Homophony was also a popular Renaissance musical technique. Homophony occurs when two or more voices are sung or played in the same rhythm, but at different pitches. The majority of choral works throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods were homophonic, and even most choral music composed today is homophonically written.

Instrumental Families

From the Middle Ages into the early Renaissance, chamber groups of musical instruments were separated by volume. The “haut” instruments, with “high” volume, were put in separate groups from the “bas” instruments, or the ones with “low” volume (Burkholder et al. 128). In the late Renaissance, from the fifteenth century onward, mixed ensembles were becoming more common, and newer instruments were being invented. Musical instruments were constructed in sets known as instrumental families. The four main instrumental families in the Renaissance were woodwinds, percussion, strings, and keyboards.

The woodwinds were a very important part of instrumental music throughout the Renaissance, the majority of ensembles being wind ensembles. Instruments of this family included recorders, shawms, transverse flutes, cornetts, and trumpets. New instruments that were introduced to this family include the sackbut, which was an early form of the trombone; and the crumhorn, which was a double-reed instrument that sounded similar to a bagpipe.

The percussion family was a relatively small group, consisting of tabors, side drums, kettledrums, cymbals, triangles and bells. Percussionists never had their own written parts to play from, so they would improvise or play the rhythmic patterns from memory (Burkholder et al.

257). Although playing a valuable role musically, percussion parts were not composed; therefore, many percussion instrumentalists played diverse roles of improvisation.

The strings family consisted of two subfamilies: plucked strings and bowed strings. The most popular plucked string instrument in the Renaissance was the lute, the predecessor of today's guitar. Introduced to the Spanish by the Arabs, the Renaissance lute had a pear-shaped wooden body with a single string and five double strings attached to it (Burkholder et al, 258). The lute is still the primary instrument in many Arab countries today.

The viol was a large bowed instrument that was propped up between the legs and bowed underhanded, much like a modern cello. It was developed in Spain in the fifteenth century. Viols were built in families of three: treble, tenor and bass. The violin was a distant cousin of the viol that appeared early in the sixteenth century (Burkholder et al. 259). The violin was tuned in fifths, as opposed to fourths like the viol and the lute, and it had no frets. By the mid-sixteenth century, the violin and its relatives, the viola and cello, had displaced viols altogether.

The organ was perhaps the most prevalent keyboard instrument during the Renaissance. It evolved from its build in the Middle Ages. The addition of stops, or pipes, brought a whole new sound to the organ. The clavichord and harpsichord were invented in the sixteenth century, joining the organ in the keyboard family (Burkholder et al. 259). The clavichord was small in size and was meant for accompaniment or to be played in a consort, but the larger harpsichord offered more options. It had enough volume to be played as a solo instrument and could also accompany a vocalist or other instrumentalists. The harpsichord went by different names around the world. In England, it was known as a virginal. The Italians called it a clavicembalo, and in France it was referred to as a clavecin. It was these new inventions that paved the way for new subgenres of music to develop.

Dance Music

There were five main subgenres of instrumental music during the fifteenth century, and one of them consisted entirely of music meant for dancing. Dancing fulfilled a social function or role during the Renaissance era. Many believed one's fitness and social skill could be assessed and evaluated by a social dance. Each dance was set to specialized music that followed a particular meter and form (Burkholder et al. 262). There were four main dances that became popular during the Renaissance period.

The first of the four types of Renaissance dance was placed in the court setting. The *basse danse*, which translates to “low dance,” was a very graceful, stately, courtly dance. The accompanying music was in duple or triple meter. The music of the *basse danse* was played in four-measure phrases to suit the patterns of the dance.

Some dances were grouped in pairs or in threes. One such pairing was the *pavane* and *galliard*—both made popular in Italy (Burkholder et al. 262). The pavane was a stately dance full of gliding steps, similar to the *basse danse*. The pavane followed a pattern of three strains of steps, and each strain was repeated twice. The music followed this same pattern, making it AABBC form (Burkholder et al. 262). The galliard was a livelier dance done in either triple or 6/4 time, also with three repeated strains of steps. The dance consisted of hops, kicks and leaps. The melody of a galliard often varied on that of its corresponding pavane and vice versa.

The fourth type of Renaissance dance was the *allemande*. French for “German dance,” the *allemande* was a stately dance played in quadruple meter or 4/4 time. It consisted of either two or three repeated strains of steps. The music of the *allemande* is characterized by lots of imitation and a two-beat anacrusis (Burkholder et al. 264). Aside from being popular in France,

this dance also became popular in England, where it was known as the *almain*. Of these four types of dance, the allemande lasted longest—even into the Baroque Period.

Arrangements of Polyphonic Vocal Music

Polyphonic vocal works were another source of instrumental composition. Solo instrumentalists or instrumental ensembles would perform polyphonic vocal works from the vocal score itself. For the sake of performance, each instrumentalist would often add their own embellishments to their parts. These new instrumental arrangements were notated for other instrumentalists to replicate. Instrumental arrangements for lute were written in tablature, leading them to become known as intabulations (Burkholder et al. 264). These intabulations served as methods of recording improvisation—which became more important in later eras.

Settings of Existing Melodies

Similar to vocal compositions, instrumental music would sometimes incorporate preexisting melodies into new compositions. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, many of these melodies were from *chansons*, or French songs (Burkholder et al. 264). Such works might have been played as background music for social events or for amateurs to learn by themselves. This setting technique even extended to the clergy, as church organists incorporated melodies from Gregorian chant or hymns into their organ masses.

Variation Form

Variation form was invented in the sixteenth century. In a variation form piece, a musical motive, called a theme, was presented alongside variations on that theme. A theme and its variations were usually meant as dance music. The theme could be a preexisting motive or a newly composed theme. Multiple variations were then created from this theme by altering the rhythm, adding embellishments to the melody or bassline, or even changing the time signature.

These variations “paralleled on a orator elaborating on a theme, suggesting a link to the Renaissance interest in the ancient art of rhetoric” (Burkholder et al. 265-266). Of all the different types of variations, many were done on *ostinatos*, short repeated bass sequences (Burkholder et al. 266). Renaissance composers of Italy wrote variations that mimicked traditional pavane ostinatos, while English composers used folk dance tunes or familiar songs as their variants.

Abstract Instrumental Works

Perhaps the most diverse subgenre of instrumental music was the abstract instrumental works. Abstract instrumental music was “cultivated for its own sake,” and was not necessarily meant for dance or vocal accompaniment (Burkholder et al 274). Many were written for consorts or mixed ensembles while many others were written for the solo lutenist or keyboardist. Each abstract piece was given a name that would hint at why the piece was composed and how it would sound. For example, the *toccata*, from the Italian verb meaning “to touch,” is an improvisatory style composition written for keyboard (Burkholder et al. 266). The *toccata* was a decorative way of checking the tuning of the instrument while also providing an opportunity for the instrumentalist to exhibit his or her skills.

The *ricercare*, in a similar manner, had a name derived from the Italian verb “to seek out” and was an improvisatory piece for the lute. Later in the sixteenth century when *ricercares* were also being written for the keyboard, imitation became a defining characteristic of the piece. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the *ricercare* had evolved into a series of imitations on a main musical subject (Burkholder et al. 267). The *ricercare* proved definitive in representing improvisation for solo instruments.

A *canzona*, another Italian work, was modeled after the French chanson, adding embellishments to preexisting chanson melodies. The French chanson follows a series of themes that differ in rhythm from one another, and the canzona copies this method (Burkholder et al 271). Canzonas also follow the common chanson rhythmic pattern of a single note followed by two more notes half its value, such as a half note followed by two quarter notes or a quarter note followed by two eighth notes.

Music in Venice

Venice was an important location for art and music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The music from Venetian society at this time “exemplifies traits of the late Renaissance and also of the early Baroque, so it may serve as a point of transition between the two eras” (Burkholder et al. 271). Venice was the most important city-state in Italy at the time, second only to Rome. Venice had its own government and spent large amounts of money on art and music. Since the fourteenth century, the Venetians had seen music as important with lots of “value and power” (Kowalczyk 137). A large majority of the music composed in sixteenth-century Venice was liturgical (sacred) music meant for masses (Fenlon 604). Polychoral music was very common in Venice. The main Venetian compositions were sacred polychoral motets, which were vocal works written for two or more choirs. For the people of Venice, music and liturgy went hand in hand.

Around the year 1568, the Venetian Church assembled an “elite ensemble” of the best string and woodwind instrumentalists from all over Europe (Burkholder et al. 273). But perhaps the biggest contribution Venice gave to instrumental music was the *sonata*, a relative of the canzona. A sonata consisted of three or more sections that were each based on a subject or on variants of a subject. Both canzonas and sonatas were played during Mass as interludes or to

accompany significant rituals during the service. The sonata would go on to define instrumental compositions of future eras.

Baroque Music

The Baroque period essentially began sometime before the seventeenth century. The genre of instrumental music that had come to fruition in the Renaissance era gained full force during the Baroque era (Vaubel 291). The Renaissance had brought about a form of musical notation that could be understood by all: a universal musical language of sorts. In the Baroque era, music traveled around the world and handwritten copies of scores were exchanged (Vaubel 279). While Renaissance music had been concerned with patterns and rhetoric, Baroque music could be associated with emotion, which was referred to as “affection.” Baroque composers attempted to stir the “affections,” or emotions, in their listeners (Burkholder et al. 278). Certain instruments were associated with different affections. The recorder, for example, was associated with erotic passion or slumber. The oboe was associated with jollity and drunkenness, while the transverse flute was associated with death. The trumpet and percussion were associated with war or regal power (Kopp 266). Music was being promoted by the courts and churches of Europe.

If mixed ensembles were popular during the Renaissance era, they doubled in popularity during the Baroque era. Concerted works, or pieces for both vocals and instruments, became increasingly popular in the late sixteenth century. The Baroque style orchestra, which merges the string and woodwinds, emerged in England and France around the year 1630 (Kopp 264). However, this development posed a problem as the strings and the woodwinds were tuned at different frequencies. This complication meant that if a violin from the strings family and an oboe from the winds family were to each play a B flat on the same octave, they would produce two different pitches (Kopp 264). This issue was resolved in one of three ways.

The first resolution entailed tuning up the strings to match the pitches of the winds. This technique was common in Italian churches during the late sixteenth century (Kopp 265). The second way to resolve the pitch inconsistency was to reconstruct the wind instruments to match the pitches of the stringed instruments—a much more tedious task that became common around the mid-seventeenth century (Kopp 265). The third and final method was perhaps the simplest. It merely involved writing the strings and woodwind parts in different keys, so that their pitches would be enharmonic with each other. Baroque composer J.S. Bach used this method in a few of his ensemble works.

Conclusion

With instrumental music gaining independence at the end of the Renaissance and the start of the Baroque, significant periods of growth took place in the following eras. The sixteenth century marked both the ending and dawning of two great periods in musical development: from Renaissance to Baroque. The developments surfaced in dance and vocals, settings and variation. Even abstract music developed. The rich tradition of instrumental music and perpetual artistic evolution has continued throughout history into the present day.

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