The Baroque Period (C.1600-1750 AD)

The Renaissance period in arts and culture focused on the realism, clarity, and simplicity that had disappeared throughout the Middle Ages, but the Baroque Period went in a completely different direction. Many innovations in science, economy, and international affairs caused people to mimic those changes with the arts. The resulting period was characterized by drama, emotion, and embellishment in all artistic mediums as a response to the previous era. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, scientists and scholars were very interested in breaking away from traditional scientific theories and practices. Taking tradition as the final word was no longer useful nor beneficial for scientists. In 1609, Johannes Kepler discovered that the planets in our solar system actually revolve around the sun, not the earth. Galileo Galilei established the laws that control motion and used a telescope to observe Jupiter. In addition to these discoveries, Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes discovered and developed new approaches to science, math, logic, and reasoning, in which they determined that experiments were more beneficial in making discoveries than relying on the findings of old, outdated scientists. The 17th century in particular demonstrated a heightened interest in usefulness and effective exploration in many areas.

At the time, music was already being supported by wealthy families and royalty known as patrons. The Church also financially supported music that focused people's attention on God. Musicians who were employed by patrons played the style of music that was appropriate and enjoyable by the household, so music styles and practices varied from region to region throughout Europe. Patrons like King Louis XIV used music and the arts as a symbol of their power, wealth, and importance. Other musicians that were not supported by patronage played musical instruments and sang songs for enjoyment at home.
Around the mid-1600s, musicians began performing in public. The kind of music they performed drew inspiration from the style of art and poetry that was popular throughout Europe. While art in the Renaissance period was clean and stately, meant to be admired from a distance, Baroque-period art was significantly more dramatic and aimed to evoke some kind of emotion out of the viewer. Europeans believed that everyone had “affections”, or basic emotions, that were normally complex, but were brought into balance through music. For this reason, Baroque-era music (and art) explored the range of emotions that people could feel, through words in songs, embellishments (playing around a note instead of simply playing the note) in instrumental music, and through performing their music for the public in order to share the emotional experience. Composers like Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Frederich Handel wrote in two very different styles of music, but both composed music that used a variety of techniques and ideas to express emotions. Musicians and music theorists (people who study how music works) even changed the “rules” of music in order to draw the audience in to the emotional experience of the music, and called their new rule system seconda practica, or the Second Practice. In the new Second Practice, the power of the music controlled how the performer interpreted the text; that is, instead of the words dominating how the music should be written and played, the music itself influenced how the words were read or sung.

Musicians explored many different ways to evoke the many “affections” in a human being. They embellished melody lines in order to extend and emphasize moments when the music was particularly moving. Doing so in vocal music was especially popular. In the 17th century, opera came to prominence and remained the most popular genre of music in Europe through almost the 20th century. Opera is a musical genre in which a story is told dramatically through vocal and instrumental music. It famously featured solo pieces called arias, where a singer (normally female) would passionately embellish upon the given tune.

Although the Baroque style served a purpose, it fell out of fashion relatively quickly as people became tired of its heavy emotional aspect. For the next one hundred years, music and art transformed in style, grew in popularity, and spread all over the world.

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**Key Composers of the Romantic Period**

- Franz Schubert – songs (*lieder*)
- Richard Wagner - orchestra
- Franz Liszt - piano
- Ludwig von Beethoven - orchestra

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Opera houses from the Baroque era reflected the ornate nature of the music they feature.