

The years 1600-1750 are generally the dates given to the musical era known as the Baroque. Certainly in such a long time-span, musical ideas did not remain fixed, but the diversity of Baroque musical styles have been grouped together due to one basic commonality: the figured bass.

The idea of reducing music to a single soprano voice accompanied by a single bass voice was an attempt by musicians in the late 16th century to recreate what was then believed to be the music of the Ancient Greeks. When this new music was written down, figures (numbers and/or sharps or flats), indicating what chord was to be realized by the accompanying continuo instruments (most often organ or harpsichord with viola da gamba) were provided by the composer. The practice of using a figured bass continued throughout the Baroque era, although music quickly changed in complexity to include more and more voices and increasingly advanced harmonies until the beginnings of the symphony orchestra and the start of the Classical era.

Due to the diversity of musical styles within the Baroque, it is common to separate the era into three parts, early, middle, and high (or late.) In the early Baroque we see the development of the figured bass, but still using the melodic ideas and instruments of the late Renaissance. It is in the early Baroque, however, that instrumental music took a new direction due to emergence of the violin as the predominant solo instrument and the invention of many of the instruments still heard today, the oboe and bassoon included. Meanwhile, Renaissance instruments continued to be used and improved throughout the Baroque, with the recorder, harpsichord, and viola da gamba continuing their popularity that began in the 16th century.

In the middle Baroque, as composers realized more and more the potential of the violin and the new instruments like the oboe and bassoon, the nature of the music changed. The center of this newer style was France, especially the court of Louis XIV, where ballet, which became a prominent part in French opera at this time, was really king. The dances of the ballet became standard movements of the music of the middle Baroque, and Marin Marais is considered one of the masters of this period. Marais was immensely popular during his lifetime as a virtuoso viola da gambist and composer. Marais' compositions, tender and often serene, consist of short dance movements. His collection "Pièces en Trio pour les Flûtes, Violon et les Dessus de Viole" was published in 1692 and is regarded as the first collection of trio sonatas published in France. "Flûtes" in the title actually indicates that the music is for the recorder. "Traverso" (Italian for transverse flute) was the standard designation for what we now call the flute in the Baroque.

For much of music history, England was most influenced by the music of France, and Henry Purcell is often given as the best example of this trend. The greater part of Purcell's output was devoted to opera (and therefore, ballet, as in France), although his instrumental works include sonatas, fantasies, overtures, and pavenes. The "Fantazia: Three Parts On a Ground" is found in a manuscript by an unknown hand from the late 17th century and is now preserved in the British Library. A "ground" is a set bass line that is repeated throughout a piece, and Purcell's is considered by many to be one of the masterpieces of the genre.

The first part of Johann Pachelbel's "Kanon & Gigue" is the famous tune generally referred to as "Pachelbel's Canon" which perpetuates his name most popularly with the general public. Although the "Canon" is often used in movie soundtracks, ("Ordinary People" comes immediately to mind,) Pachelbel made his reputation in the 17th century as an organist, composer and teacher. A friend of the Bach family, he was the teacher of Johann Christoph Bach who later became one of J. S. Bach's teachers. Pachelbel's organ music and chorales make him one of the principal predecessors of the German High Baroque so exemplified by Bach.

The creativity of the composers of the middle Baroque, like Purcell, Pachelbel and Marais, laid the foundation for the music of the High Baroque, whose instrumental music is often characterized by virtuosity and musical imagery. In his day, Georg Philipp Telemann's popularity far exceeded that of Bach's. He is one of the first, great composers to forsake employment by a royal court for the life of a well-to-do, middle class businessman. He moved to Paris (hence, many of his works have titles in French) and sustained himself through the subscriptions of his musical works. The need to fulfill his subscriptions must have led him to becoming one of the most prolific composers ever to have lived, composing over 5,000 works in his life time. Telemann wrote "Canonic Duos," i.e. rounds for two instruments, for every conceivable combination of instruments, though his violin duos are especially masterful. His "Sonates Corellisantes" are in tribute to the great Italian master of the violin sonata, Arcangelo Corelli.

Long lost to western audiences was the music of Jan Dismas Zelenka, who was a prominent Czech composer of the 18th century. With 19th century Romantic composers' fascination with Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi, many wonderful musical works were dismissed until the renewed interest in Baroque music began in the early 20th century. Zelenka's trios contain some of the most virtuoso writing of the High Baroque for oboe and bassoon.

Georg Frideric Handel is now primarily known as a composer of operas and oratorios, most notably "The Messiah." However, Handel wrote for all instrumental combinations and is said to have considered the oboe as his favorite instrument in his early days. Like many works from the 18th century, Handel's authorship of the Trio Sonata No. 8 in G minor cannot be made certain since the oldest manuscript is not in the composer's hand. This sonata and two companion trios have been dubbed the 'Dresden Sonatas' since they are supposed to have been written during Handel's visit to Dresden in 1719. The trio is in the "sonata da chiesa" format with alternating slow and fast movements and Italianate in style.

Antonio Vivaldi wrote four different versions of his "La Notte" (Night) concerto, the version for solo flute being most often performed. However, the version for flute and bassoon is equally magical, with the bassoon adding a little humor in the midst of the mysterious twilight evoked by Vivaldi. Especially beautiful is the musical image of sunrise that ends the concerto.