



The Berkshire Bach Society



Glossary of Baroque Musical Terms

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Glossary of Baroque Musical Terms

- Adagio* A tempo marking for slow. An *Adagio movement* indicates a piece played at a tempo slower than *Andante*.
- Air* A short melodic instrumental or vocal piece dating from the 17th and 18th centuries that did not follow a specific structural form. While French opera of the period often used *Airs* to accompany dancing, Bach used the *Air* as a simple melodic movement in his *Partitas* and *Sonatas*.
- Allegro* A tempo marking for fast. An *Allegro movement* indicates a piece played at a fast tempo that contrasts with slower movements such as a *Sarabande* or *Loure* in a suite or an *Adagio* in a sonata.
- Allemande* A dance movement in a moderate tempo, typically used to open a Baroque suite.
- Andante* A tempo marking equivalent to a very moderate walking speed. *Andante* is slower than *Allegro* but faster than *Adagio*. By extension, an *Andante movement* indicates a piece played at a moderate, leisurely tempo.
- Anthem* In English Baroque music, a major vocal composition on a liturgical or sacred text performed during the Protestant service. Anthems can be accompanied by organ or orchestra, and served the same purpose as the *motet* in the Roman Catholic Church service.
- Aria* A florid composition typically for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment that figured prominently in cantatas, oratorios, and opera in the 17th and 18th centuries. The aria provided an opportunity for a character to reflect on the action of the plot, and to reveal the emotional impact of

events. Arias in Baroque opera provided an opportunity for virtuosic vocal display.

Arioso More correctly, *recitativo arioso*. A musical passage that is more expressive than a typical recitative with its narrative, speech-like form and function, but less florid than a full aria.

Basso Continuo Alternatively, *Continuo*, *Figured Bass*, or *Thoroughbass*. In Baroque music, *continuo* refers to the bass part that was performed by the harpsichord or organ, by the lower strings (e.g., viola da gamba or violincello), or by the lower winds (e.g., bassoon). The purpose of the continuo was to define the harmonic structure of a composition and to keep the ensemble together in an age before conductors.

BWV Abbreviation for *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, the standard catalog of the works of J.S. Bach. Edited by Wolfgang Schmieder, the Catalog was first published in 1950, with the second edition and an abbreviated version (BWV^{2a}) appearing in 1990 and 1998 respectively. The Catalog contains over 1,100 works confirmed to be by J.S. Bach, with an appendix (*Anhang*) of 200+ pieces of questionable attribution.

Cadence A musical term to describe the final notes or ending section of a musical composition. In the Baroque era, the cadence was an opportunity for a final musical flourish to enhance the importance of the close.

Canon A contrapuntal device in which a melody is played against itself exactly and in its entirety. The canon was a common compositional technique in the Baroque, and a pure expression of imitative counterpoint used by composers throughout the period in both vocal and instrumental music.

Cantata A Baroque-era vocal music form that comprises several movements—arias, recitatives, duets, choruses, instrumental pieces—that is based on a continuous narrative text. Solo

cantatas with secular themes were especially common during the 17th century in Italy, but it is with the choral cantatas on religious themes—*church cantatas*—written by J.S. Bach that the form achieved its greatest artistic distinction. Of the estimated 300 cantatas written by Bach, nearly 200 have been preserved, and many are performed regularly throughout the world. The cantata is typically shorter than an *oratorio*.

Catch An English round or *canon* in which three or more voices sing the same words and melody beginning at different times, as in the nursery rhyme *Three Blind Mice* (1609). Typically short, and written with profane, irreverent, or even (by modern standards) obscene lyrics, catches were especially popular during the reign of Charles II, and were written on current events and subjects designed to amuse.

Chorale In a Baroque context, typically the hymn tunes of the German Protestant Church, many of which form the basis for J.S. Bach's cantatas and other works.

Circle of Fifths In tonal music, the concept that it takes twelve steps to return to the starting tone when progressing by the interval of a fifth. This concept assumes equal temperament to adjust the surplus, known as the Pythagorean Comma (about an eighth of a tone), between the mathematically correct intervals and the pitch as heard by the human ear. Beginning on C, the circle of fifths is: C-G-D-A-E-B-F#-C#-G#(=A^b)-E^b-B^b-F-C, where the tone G# is enharmonically the same as A^b.

Clavecin The French term for *harpsichord*.

Clavichord A stringed keyboard instrument that produces sound by striking the strings with a brass blade and using a damping mechanism. Closely related to the monochord, the clavichord produces an intimate sound, making it the

preferred domestic instrument in the 16th through 18th centuries.

Concerto grosso An important Baroque musical form written to showcase a small group of solo instruments (*concertino* or *principale*) vs orchestral accompaniment (*tutti* or *concerto*). The soloists typically included two violins and thoroughbass (cello and harpsichord); the orchestra was typically a string ensemble, with the occasional addition of winds later in the period.

Counterpoint (Adj: *Contrapuntal*) Literally, note against note, but chiefly used to indicate polyphonic music written from 1600-1750 with two or more lines that sound simultaneously. The individual melodies form the horizontal part of the musical fabric, with the intervals between them establishing the vertical or harmonic structure. This compositional method was associated more with German than French, Italian, or English music. Bach explored and perfected the intricacies of counterpoint in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722, 1742) and *The Art of Fugue* (1740-1750), two of the most influential studies in the history of Western music. After his death, music developed in another direction.

Courante A dance movement in moderate to fast tempo, that originated in the 17th century and became a standard movement in the Baroque suite.

Fanfare A short, ceremonial tune, usually for trumpets. In the Baroque era, fanfares were usually played by natural instruments—that is, those without valves or keys—and emphasized the tones of the triad, which are the notes most easily played on such instruments.

Fantasia (Eng: *fantasy* or *fancy*) In the Baroque era, a piece of instrumental music with an improvisational character as if

written according to the way imagination (“fancy”) dictates. The *fantasie* has no prescribed formal structure.

Figured Bass Another term for *Basso Continuo* or *Thoroughbass*.

Fugue A musical texture that is created from three or more independent voices carrying a subject in imitative fashion. The fugue, usually written for keyboard, was an important Baroque compositional technique that developed from the earlier *ricercar* and was frequently preceded by a *Prelude* in the same or a related key. J.S. Bach began a monumental exploration of the technique in *Die Kunst der Fuge* (*The Art of Fugue*) in the last decade of his life, and originally planned to include pieces of increasing complexity in every key, major and minor. The work was unfinished at the time of his death, and comprises 14 fugues and 4 canons on a single theme in d minor.

Perfectured by J.S. Bach, fugue is a sophisticated compositional technique with strict rules, but it fell out of fashion after his death. Later composers including Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and others learned to write correct fugues as part of their musical education, and used the technique particularly at the conclusion of larger works to heighten emotional intensity. The strict application of the technique is comparatively rare in the music of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Gavotte A dance movement in a moderate tempo that originated in the 17th century and was used in the Baroque suite.

Gigue A dance movement in a quick tempo often in compound duple meter (6/8 or 6/4), typically used as the final movement of the Baroque suite.

Harpsichord A stringed keyboard instrument that produces sound by plucking the strings. The harpsichord was the dominant

keyboard instrument of the 18th century for secular music and was used for solo and ensemble performance. When used with orchestra, the harpsichord typically provides the harmonic progression in the continuo, its unique timbre penetrating the orchestral texture and keeping the players together in an era before conductors. The harpsichord produces sound of a uniform dynamic and quality, which could be varied by engaging different keyboard manuals or by writing music with a dense texture and faster tempo or lighter texture and slower tempo for “louder” and “softer” effects respectively.

- Interval* The difference in pitch between two notes. Intervals are named by counting from a starting tone (one) to an ending tone x number of steps away. In tonal music, the *perfect* intervals include the octave (8 steps, e.g., c-d-e-f-g-a-b-c'), fifth (5 steps, e.g., c-d-e-f-g), and fourth (e.g., c-d-e-f), represented mathematically by the ratios 2:1, 3:2, and 4:3 respectively. The intervals of the third and sixth may be either *major* or *minor*—major intervals comprise whole steps between notes; minor intervals comprise whole and half steps. Various musical traditions use smaller intervals than the Western half step, introducing an exotic sound.
- Loure* A slow dance movement also known as a *gigue lente* (*slow gigue*), typically an optional movement in a Baroque suite.
- Marche* (Eng: *March*) Music designed to accompany the movements of soldiers in formation, characterized by strong, simple rhythms and regular phrases. The earliest written musical marches date from the 16th century, with many examples in English music.
- Monody* The style of music developed in the last quarter of the 16th c based on the theories of the Florentine Camerata, and characterized by the rhythms of spoken dialog with thoroughbass accompaniment.

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- Motet* Generally, an unaccompanied polyphonic composition based on a Latin sacred text and performed in the Roman Catholic Church service, usually at Vespers. The motet is the most important form of early polyphonic music, beginning in the thirteenth century and continuing through the Baroque era. In 17th-century France, Charpentier was among the first to write a *grand motet* for soloists, chorus, orchestra, and organ. In England, the *motet* developed as the *anthem*, and similarly could be either a large or smaller-scaled work.
- Natural Trumpet* A trumpet without keys or valves. Natural instruments had a limited range, and typically emphasized the tones of the triad, which are the notes most easily played on such instruments.
- Organ* The principal keyboard instrument for church music in the Baroque era. From the 14th century, large bellows-driven organs were installed as permanent fixtures in churches and by the Baroque era had developed into sophisticated mechanical devices housed in elaborate cases—as beautiful to see as to hear. The 17th and 18th centuries were the golden age of organ construction, especially in France and the German states, seeing technical advances that transformed individual instruments into celebrities in their own right that encouraged composers to write musical repertoire to match. J.S. Bach was most known in his lifetime as an organ virtuoso, and traveled in Germany to consult on the technical aspects of many instruments.
- Oratorio* A musical composition typically on a religious theme performed by solo voices, chorus, and orchestra in a concert setting—that is, without costumes, scenery, or physical interaction among the characters. The form most recognized today as Baroque oratorio was established by Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) and Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1674) in
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the early and mid-17th century. Oratorios are similar to cantatas, but are typically longer.

Ornamentation An important element of Baroque performance practice used to intensify the emotion of a composition and to showcase the virtuosity of the performer. Originally improvised, Baroque ornamentation was indicated by standard notation in the 18th century, and even written out explicitly by various composers. French music of the period was particularly known for its embellishment, but the practice was common in all national musical traditions. J.S. Bach's son, C.P.E. Bach, included a section on ornamentation in his influential *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (c.1753) that sums up the practice of the late Baroque.

Partita By J.S. Bach's time, a suite. The term derives possibly from the French word *partie*, (part), and replaces the earlier 17th-century meaning of *partita* as a variation.

Piano-forte A stringed keyboard instrument invented c.1725 that produces sound by striking the strings with hammers, as opposed to the harpsichord, in which sound is produced by plucking. The action of the piano-forte enables the player to play soft (*piano*) or loud (*forte*), hence the name of the instrument. There is evidence that J.S. Bach first encountered the piano-forte in the late 1720s, finding the action very stiff compared to the organ and harpsichord. By the 1740's, when the piano had been improved technically, Bach may have modified his views, but never composed specifically for the instrument.

Picardy Third The major third used as the final sonority in a piece written in a minor key. Beginning c.1500, the major third was admitted to the rules of composition for the cadence, being considered more perfect than the minor third. The

Picardy Third was used throughout the Baroque, and less frequently in the later 18th century and beyond.

Polyphony (Adj: *polyphonic*) Music written with more than one voice or part. Polyphony developed in the 13th century, and although largely synonymous with *counterpoint*, typically is used to indicate music before 1600.

Prelude A piece of Baroque keyboard music written to be played as an introduction to another composition, such as a suite or a fugue (music characterized by imitative counterpoint). Bach published two set of *preludes* and *fugues* in all keys (major and minor), in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* of 1722 and 1742.

Recitative A musical passage written to emulate the pace, declamation, and natural inflections of speech. In Baroque music, passages of recitative function to describe events or advance the action of an opera, cantata, or oratorio. In contrast, the *aria* is designed for characters to pause and reflect on the action and showcase their vocal virtuosity.

Rondeau A 17th-century instrumental musical form comprising a refrain (A) and couplets (B, C, etc) in a pattern of A B A C A D...A. The couplets usually appear in different keys from the refrain.

Sarabande A slow, dignified dance in triple meter, originating in the 17th and 18th centuries and becoming a standard movement of the Baroque dance suite.

Siciliana Also *Siciliano*. A dance originating in Sicily in the 17th and 18th centuries used in sonatas, cantatas, and operas of the period. The *Siciliana* is written in 6/8 or 12/8 time and is characterized by lyrical melodies and dotted rhythms. The *Siciliana* was frequently used to evoke gentle and pastoral musical imagery.

Sonata In Bach's time, an instrumental musical form for one or more performers and with three or four movements. Sonatas were performed in the church (*sonata da Chiesa*) or chamber (*sonata di camera*), with the typical form alternating *Adagio* and *Allegro* movements.

Stile recitativo

Suite In the Baroque era, an important instrumental musical form comprising several movements or dances, all in the same key, and alternating in tempo between slow and moderate or fast. The standard Baroque suite includes the *Allemande* (moderate tempo), *Courante* (fast), *Sarabande* (slow), and *Gigue* (fast). Optional movements include the *Minuet* (moderate), *Bourrée* (fast), *Gavotte* (moderate), *Passepied* (fast), *Polonaise* (moderate), *Anglaise* (fast), *Loure* (moderate), and *Air* (moderate).

Tafelmusik Literally, *table music*—that is, music to be played during formal banquets as background entertainment.

Te Deum A song of praise and rejoicing, a hymn of thanksgiving that can be sung on any occasion. The text *Te Deum laudamus* translates to *We praise Thee, O God*. The *Te Deum* was frequently set to music by Baroque composers

Temperament A system of tuning that adjusts the acoustically or mathematically correct intervals in the circle of fifths to ensure that they sound in tune in all keys. *Equal temperament*, which adjusts the size of intervals equally across all tones and keys, is the standard tuning system in use today.

Thoroughbass Synonymous with *continuo*, also known as *figured bass*. A notational system that indicates the bassline or harmonic progression of a composition that is played or *realized* by the

continuo. The notation shows numbers written above the bass notes in each measure to indicate the chord positions or intervals to be played. Thoroughbass represents a sophisticated performance practice that developed out of 16th-century improvisational traditions, and was the subject of treatises by many prominent Baroque composers, including Michael Praetorius, Matthew Locke, J.D. Heinichen, Georg Philipp Telemann, and others. Bach's second son, C.P.E. Bach, included an influential section on ornamentation in his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1753).

Toccata A piece of Baroque keyboard music written in a free style and typically played as an introduction to another composition, such as a fugue.

Trio Sonata The most important form of Baroque chamber music, typically written for three players plus thoroughbass accompaniment. Trio sonatas were typically scored for two violins and cello, with the continuo doubling the bass part and realizing the figured bass. Most important composers of the period wrote trio sonatas, including Corelli, Buxtehude, Handel, François Couperin, Vivaldi, and J.S. Bach.

Tune A non-specific term to indicate a *voluntary* or other instrumental piece. Tunes do not have a specific musical form.

Viola da gamba In the Baroque era, the bass size of the viol family, played while held between the legs. With six vs the standard four strings of the modern violin and viola, the viola da gamba was an important Baroque continuo and solo instrument.

Voluntary A name for an English organ piece played at the church service, usually between the reading of the psalms and the

first lesson or between the end of Morning Prayer and the beginning of Communion. In the 17th and 18th centuries, voluntaries were written in a free or quasi improvisational style. The *trumpet voluntary* was so called because it was played using the trumpet stop on the organ.

