

The baroque age



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THE BAROQUE AGE Social and Cultural Background Baroque is a term borrowed from the visual arts and one that is used in many different senses. The Baroque Era applies to the years between 1600 and 1750. The most famous composers of this time were Bach, Handel, Vivaldi and Telemann. Politically it was an age of magnificent absolute Monarchs. The most magnificent of all was Louis XIV of France. Louis ruled from 1634 until 1713. During this time the need to create a national culture or a regional style that would match or surpass the elsewhere created cultural models was pressed for. When looking at Baroque architecture it is noticeable that the sculptures and paintings are never still: they are twisted, moving, struggling, and dramatically lighted. Paintings of the Baroque Era focused more on dramatic subjects and experimented with dramatic lighting. The Baroque Era was concerned with feelings, the stronger the better. This could be seen throughout the churches. In church structure the proportions are grandiose, they are designed to impress and awe the observers. Gold and rich textures and surfaces can be seen all through the churches. All of these themes that I have discussed are also clear in the music of the Baroque period. It paints pictures of vibrant colours and triggers strong emotions. The desire to discover these themes is evident in the invention of the exciting new form music, opera, and in the use of operatic techniques in dramatic music for the church. Important Musical Developments Composer-performers would strive at becoming Kapellmeisters in this Era. A Kapellmeister is a music director at one of the great courts. They were responsible for all the music performed in the court. These positions were very unstable though and composer were always on the lookout for new opportunities. The responsibilities of performers during this era was to write music at a furious pace due to the

demand. Bach, for example, was responsible for one cantata a week while he was music director at Leipzig. Due to the pace the music was written, the performers of the pieces had to fill in the details. Baroque music can therefore be classified as a type of jazz because the soloists would play their own versions of a basic melody with rhythm section improvises, based on a chord pattern. Baroque music sounds different from music of other periods due to its lack of dynamic range. The composers at this time usually did not specify dynamics on their pieces, they simply wrote " loud" or " soft." The most prominent element in Baroque music was rhythm and texture. Baroque's fast movement generally caused the feeling of rhythmic drive. Tempos were always constant. The least prominent element was melody. Gradual rise of tonality on the other hand was a great Baroque innovation. This is the major-minor system that is still used today in the twentieth century. Opera was one of the most important developments in the Baroque Era. It began in Florence in 1600. French operas featured more emphasis on the orchestra and chorus. During this time Handel invented the oratorio. An oratorio is a large work for soloists, chorus, and orchestra sung in concert format, without costumes or staging, in a concert hall rather than as part of a church service. Some other instrumentals formed during this era were: Concerto Grosso: in three movements, fast-slow-fast, and pits a large group of soloists against the larger string ensemble. Suite: a less formal structure consisting of several binary dance movements Fugue: Latin for " flight" or " chase," denotes a standard Baroque compositional process. Johann Sebastian Bach, Cantata No. 140 Bach is the giant of Western Art. Bach was born in Eisenach, North Germany, and was raised by an older brother after he was orphaned. Bach's most important position came in 1723 and lasted

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until his death which was January 28, 1750. He was the "Cantor" at the church of St. Thomas in Leipzig. He was best known as a keyboard performer. His greatest pieces though, were his organ pieces. Bach was also known for his Cantata's. The cantata was written in fairly free form. They were part of a long church service. In most cantatas the highest point is during the opening chorus, which is also usually the longest movement. Cantata no. 140 "Wachet Auf" is an excellent example of the chorale cantata form. Bach wrote it for one of the final Sunday's after Trinity. The song is broken into a five-part structure: 1) Chorus 2) Recitative and Duets-Soloists 3) Chorus 4) Recitative and Duet-Soloists 5) Choral- Chorus and Congregation Another famous piece by Johann Sebastian Bach was "Brandenburg Concerto No. 5." The Brandenburg concertos are examples of a Baroque form known as the concerto grosso that is based on the principle of contrast between two groups, or sounds of different sounds and at the same time dynamics. The first movement of this piece is in ritornello form. It is made up of three basic patterns that work well with instruments. The second movement heard contains soloists and continues without string orchestra. The third and last movement is made up of soloists and orchestra. George Friederich Handel, "For Unto Us A Child is Born" from Messiah Handel is known as the "other" Baroque composer. Handel contrasts greatly with Bach, not only in their style of music but in their personalities, lifestyles, and careers. Handel was not born into a musical family. It wasn't until the death of his father that he quite his law career to become a musician. After the genre of Italian opera faded Handel hit upon an English adaptation of the early oratorio, originally a concert setting of a biblical story in Latin. The success of his oratorios and a steady stream of new compositions made

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Handel increasingly wealthy and famous. He passed away in 1759, blind, but was still seen as a celebrity. Due to Messiah's length and its contemplative rather than dramatic approach to nature, it makes it a not typical oratorio. "For Unto Us A Child is Born" is a splendid example of Handel's choral style, an element which makes oratorios so popular. As opposed to Bach's style of writing for only small groups of boys and men, Handel was fond of grandiose effects, such as double choruses. Handel's choruses were written strong enough to impress the audience who had paid admission to hear the cantata. The oratorio is written in a three part structure. The three ideas are distinct and are always kept separate, and never combined. Out of this simple, repetitive structure comes a satisfying effect: the listener of this piece feels the triumph and joy of the text due to its easy to follow material. Antonio Vivaldi, "Spring" from The Four Seasons Bach and Handel are not the only great composer of this era. Antonio Vivaldi was another master of music during the Baroque period. Vivaldi was born in 1678 in Venice. His father too was a musician, a violinist at St. Marks's church in Venice. For thirty-six years, from 1704 until 1740, he was music director at the Ospedale della Pieta, a school for illegitimate daughters of the aristocracy. He then left his job to conduct opera in Italian cities. He eventually wrote concertos not only for violin and standard winds-oboe, flute, bassoon-but also for instruments such as the piccolo, mandolin, and guitar. One of his best known works is "the Four Seasons." It is a set of four concerti grossi which relate to nature during these seasons. The spirit of childlike playfulness can be seen throughout out this piece which is important to Baroque style. It is very easy to see why Vivaldi's pieces are still played and enjoyed to this day.