

Orchestra essay



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Even though the times have changed, many characteristics from the past still impact the world of art today. Characteristics from the Baroque period, Classical period, and Romantic period have had their share of impact on today's society. In order to fully develop an overall understanding of how defining each of these eras are, one must expose themselves to the vastly varying eras' music, and other art forms including paintings. First in chronological order of these three eras, is the Baroque Era.

The Baroque Era began roughly around the year 1600 and ended during the late 18th century. Baroque is generally characterized as an era with eccentric redundancy and also an abundance of details. Many art forms throughout this period resembled the general characterization of the period. Some characteristics in Baroque music include harmony, counterpoint, polyphony(1), strong emphasis on rhythm, and attractive melodies instead of the previous use of monophony(2). During this period, a new form of musical entertainment was born which was Opera.

Opera was a play where the text was sung rather than spoken. The creation of opera then lead to overtures(3) which are pieces of music introduce melodies from music to come in later in an opera, and is also an orchestral work. Also given birth from opera was the aria(4) which was sometimes sung monophonically without an accompaniment, but was sometimes sung with an accompaniment. Many technological and mechanical improvements were being made to the instruments of the past which developed into the instruments that most of us are familiar with today.

Originally, the main string instruments were of the viol family; however, the violin family began to replace them. Even though the violin family began to replace the viol family, the bass viol, more commonly known as the contrabass or double bass, was still used. Throughout this time period, the cores of the ensembles were string orchestras(5), orchestras consisting of only string instruments. However, ensembles including woodwind sections(6) started to come about. The sizes of many baroque orchestras were relatively small.

Each section only had a few people in them. Pianos did not exist back in this era. Instead, its predecessors, the clavichord and harpsichord were used. The harpsichord was the instrument that was a favored solo instrument. Because of this, it has one of the most distinctive sounds of the Baroque Era. Cannons, fugues and concertos were very popular forms of music. Concertos generally featured a solo(7) instrumentalist or a small ensemble of soloists playing with an orchestra. This created more texture and volume to a piece.

On February 28, 2008 I took part in the wonderful orchestra, Ivy Camerata Orchestra, to play Handel's Entrance to the Queen of Sheba, which was conducted by Mrs. Booth! The rolling melody was rather ornamental and had many melodies playing at once which alternated between the sections. The size of this orchestra was not too small, but not tremendously large which was nice because it fit perfectly for the Baroque style. The piece was played with five first violins, with a few stands of the traditional second violin each playing violin two, violin three and violin four parts.

There were five violas, eight cellos, and four double basses if I do recall. The song was played in a lively allegro(8). This refers to how fast the song is played or otherwise known as the tempo(9). Throughout the entire piece there was a reoccurring melody that was played by the mass of violin sections. This piece roughly reminded me of Hermann Schroeder's Festliche Musik due to the common melodic flow and relatively quick tempo. In my opinion, this piece was very interesting because I had not participated in an orchestra with so many violin sections at once!

The piece reminded me of how significant intonation was. Since there were only a few instruments in each section, if one instrument was out of tune then the audience would notice that because there would not be enough sound from the others in the section to cover it up. The concert itself was rather amazing in my opinion given the limited amount of rehearsals that we had as an entire orchestra. After the concert I headed downstairs for some muffins and brownies with my buddies except they were all gone by the time I got there! Following the Baroque era was the Classical Era.

Classical music often times represented complex emotional feelings in the music. The classical era brought forth a few new styles of music composition. One is known as symphony. Symphonies are normally multi movement works(10) containing four movements therefore resulting in dramatically longer pieces than the preceding era. Symphony orchestras contained the string instruments. To the strings were added wind instruments, usually the oboe and bassoon and fairly frequently the flute. The clarinet was introduced and gradually became a regular member of the orchestra.

However, the brass section(11) was not yet introduced. The only brass instrument that was normally included was the French horn. Trumpets, along with the timpani or kettle drums, were used only for reinforcing volume or rhythm. Another form that developed from this era was sonata form(12) which was structured through binary form(13). The classical suite(14) also was derived from this era. Variety of melodies, rhythms and dynamics using crescendo, diminuendo and sforzando(15) were more commonplace in the Classical period than they had been in the Baroque.

On December 13, 2008, a couple friends and I took a trip to listen to the Region XXV High School Orchestras at the Lowery Freshman Center. When we were seated, the lights dimmed down and then some info about all region orchestra was given. Afterwards, the conductor gave a quick preparatory beat(16) and the orchestra came to life. They started playing John Williams' The Cowboys Overture, and then followed up with Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, mvmt. 2 which is the piece I would like to discuss. This was composed for a full orchestra, so the spots at the region orchestra were readily filled with orchestra students and band students.

This was a nice piece to follow the fast Cowboys Overture because it starts with a drastically slower tempo and has a darker tone to it overall. This aroused the attention of many audience members around me. The symphony began with a slow tempo and was played with a very legato style. Following the brilliant display of their dynamic control, the orchestra then slowly rose up the dynamic to nice forte and then back down to a significantly lower dynamic. There were points where the conductor slowed

down a bit or took a ritardando(17) and then returned back to the previous tempo, otherwise known as a tempo(18).

This series of loud and soft repeated quite a few times. Also good to note, was the unison(19) between the string orchestra at the very beginning with the main theme of the movement. This piece reminds me of the Egmont overture (particularly the beginning) that we played not too long ago because of the somewhat similar dynamics. Also it reminds me of the Egmont because these pieces are composed by the same composer(20) after all, Beethoven. Both the Egmont and Symphony No. 7, mvmt 2, start out with a similar dark theme at the beginning in a soft dynamic.

Then it returns back to the forte and breaks down again. This piece made me want to improve my dynamic contrasts because I thought about how this piece would have sounded if the forte's and the piano's were not that far apart on the dynamic spectrum and this led to a not as exciting piece. Then I thought about how I played, and if I did not have such dynamic contrast then my playing would not be as exciting as it could possibly be. I stayed throughout this entire concert and waved at the many friends I had that managed to place themselves in the Region XXV orchestras like Melissa Kang and Justin Zhao!

The last era of music that I will be talking about in this essay is the Romantic Era. It was in the Romantic Era that the piano emerged, and became popular. Of course, Beethoven was really the one who was responsible for bridging the gap from Classical music to Romanticism. Music's texture(21) began to get much more elegant, flowing, and connected. Composers also

used strongly contrasting dynamics, like *fff* and *ppp*. This era brought forth many important composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, and many others. The sizes of ensembles around this time were fairly large to help with the strong contrast in dynamics.

The last piece that I will be talking about is the fourth movement in Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 also played by the Region XXV symphony orchestra. This piece began with an extremely fast tempo. The very first note was a very loud and then the rest of the orchestra joined in a fast unison run. Then after a couple measures of these rapid runs, the woodwinds played a beautiful melody that was accompanied by the orchestra's arpeggiated run of notes. Then came a flurry of very fast 16th notes which led to the melody being played in a detached style.

A little further into the song the orchestra was silent during a rest and then picked up a new tempo which was slower and a similar, melody played by the winds was reoccurring. The dynamic marking during the beginning was probably *fff* which is a common characteristic of the Romantic era. The dynamic level during this section was *sempre* *fff*. This song was probably one of my favorites in all time. It made me realize just how well this region orchestra really is. Hearing this piece reminds me of another Tchaikovsky piece, Serenade for Strings in C Major, Op. 48 mvmt 4 Finale because of the difficulty both of these pieces.

I remember the same sort of ebb and flow between fast tempos and melodies which occurred in this symphony as well as in Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings. As for the audience, they seemed to be astounded.

This concert was fantastic except there were a couple people sitting in the back who I could see that were not really sitting with great posture which reinforced my desire to sit up while I'm playing. The section leaders also lead their section rather well which also wants to make me improve on leading in a section. I actually got to see Raymond Hung sit up! That was pretty amazing itself!