

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Fall 2017

Prof. Smey

Session 7 (Tues Sept 19)

After we finished our first quiz we started our new historical unit.

The Baroque (1600-1750): Cultural Background

Up until now I've emphasized that political power in Medieval and Renaissance Europe is very much concentrated at the local level. Whoever you were, chances are what affected you the most was the town you live in and your local Baron who governs it. In the Seventeenth Century, however, some national governments begin to consolidate massive power. The general philosophy of the day is referred to as **absolute monarchy**, the belief that Kings receive the right to rule directly from God and cannot be challenged.

The most emblematic figure of the age is undoubtedly Louis XIV, the "Sun King," who ruled France from 1643 to 1715. He built a spectacular Court at Versailles (just outside Paris), a mini-city which employed hundreds of people.

In general, the arts were usually supported by this ruling class, who commissioned works that would flatter them and reinforce their place in society.

Incidentally, this was also a good time for science and philosophy, with major works by Galileo, Newton, Francis Bacon, and Descartes. (That doesn't result in much impact on the musical world, however.)

Baroque as a negative term

As artistic techniques became more advanced (and elite society more wealthy) the visual arts reached a peak of complexity, luxury, and emotional expressivity. However, to the generations that followed in the Eighteenth century this all seemed somewhat excessive and even "trashy." The word "Baroque" was originally coined as a negative term, to characterize this stuff as weird and overly complicated. (Now we have a more objective view of the 1600s to mid-1700s and can appreciate this era for its positive qualities as well as the negative. But people still do use the word "Baroque" to mean unnecessarily complicated, sometimes.)

The Musical Revolutions of 1600

Around 1600 we see some dramatic changes in the way music is made and how it sounds.

- the rise of instrumental music
- the development of the *basso continuo*, a new texture called monody, and a new interest in chord progressions
- a focus on just two kinds of scales, the *major* and *minor*
- the invention of opera

The Rise of Instrumental Music

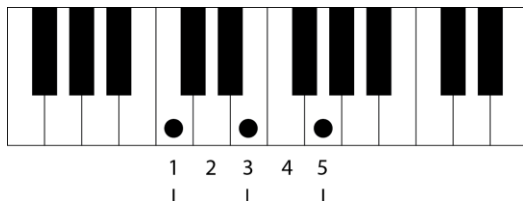
The instrumental music we've looked at from the Medieval and Renaissance periods was all written to be somewhat generic – nobody really cared what instrument you would be playing it on. The *Musicque de joye* anthology which provides our Renaissance Pavane and Galliard, for example, advertises on the cover page that the pieces will work well with any instruments or even singers.

In the Baroque era music that is written for specific instruments (especially violin and keyboard instruments) becomes very common, and the pieces are composed with features that will only work well on these instruments.

Triads

Medieval and Renaissance composers mostly thought of polyphonic music as a web of individual lines, and the task of composing was about fitting them together in an interesting way. We talked about how Medieval composers tend to put parts together to make *fifths*, and the Renaissance composers discover that they really prefer the prettier, fuller sound of *thirds*.

As composers pack more and more lines together it becomes necessary to consistently use both the fifth and the third simultaneously. People in the later Renaissance start to recognize that this combination of three different notes is a standard building block of music – most music from the Late Renaissance up to the present day tends to be based on these chords, which we call *triads*.



In the Baroque period, composers really start thinking about these chords all the time, and they change their whole approach, often planning out a *chord progression* rather than focusing on weaving lines together.

A new texture: Monody

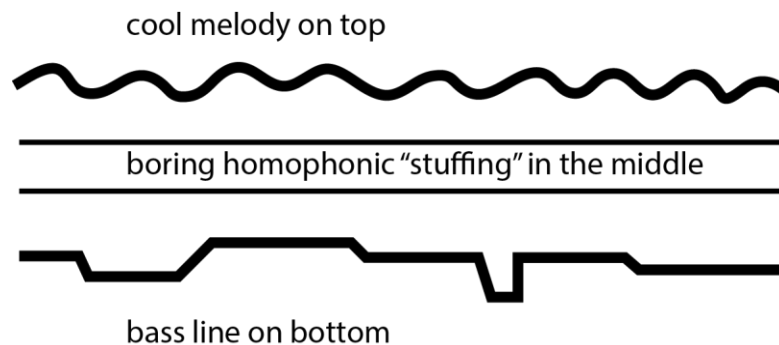
Up to this point we've learned about three basic textures, monophony, polyphony, and homophony. The Baroque sees the development of a complex hybrid of homophony and polyphony which we (somewhat annoyingly) call "monody." This is music that features an interesting melody at the top of the texture with an elaborate support structure underneath.

We can understand the evolution of monody by first thinking back to how a composer like Josquin approached music. Again, he generally wove a complex web of polyphony out of four or five equal voices. All the parts act the same way and none of them really get "top billing." Here is a frame from the Josquin animation we've watched, with four parts knit together into an imitative, polyphonic texture.



As we get into the Baroque, people started to realize that these parts were not equally perceivable (or equally "salient" as we say in psychology.) The topmost part and, to a lesser extent, the bottommost tend to "stick out." The middle parts, on the other hand, can be very difficult to pick out and follow.

Thus, Baroque composers started to spend most of their effort on the top and bottom of the texture. They realized that they could create exciting and interesting melodies in the top part. The middle parts were filled with homophonic chords as a sort of "stuffing" that doesn't necessarily call attention to itself. Finally, they realized that a strong *bass line* on the bottom could make the music sound anchored, substantial, and clear. Listening to the bass line is usually the best way to figure out what is going on with the overall chord progression.



In class I played the middle movement from [J. S. Bach's Keyboard Concerto No 4 in A Major, BWV 1055](#) as an example of a "support system" with a pretty melody on top.

Also, I noted that this is still the normal way to make music today. I played a bit of Broken Bells, "After the Disco" as an example of a pop tune with clear melody on top, strong bass line on bottom, and fairly generic "stuffing" in the middle. The basic formula for a song is still melody, chords + bass line.

The *basso continuo*

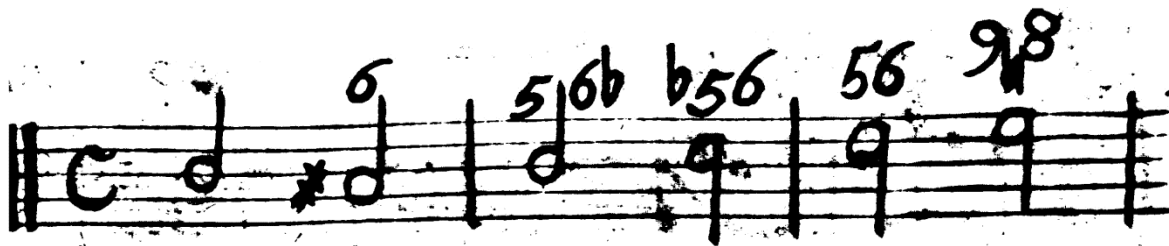
In Baroque music, this new support system is usually provided by the *basso continuo*. This is a team of two musicians: one that plays chords, and another that plays a bass line.

The chordal part is usually played on a harpsichord, but lute or organ are possible. Anything that can play chords will work.

The bass line can be covered by an old-school *viol*, by a modern cello or double bass, or by a giant bass lute called a *theorbo*.

The *basso continuo* is almost always in the background of Baroque music, plugging away. It is the "backup band" that supports the other parts. The constant presence of harpsichord is a signature sound that makes Baroque music sort of "crunchy."

I think the *basso continuo* is actually very similar to the rhythm section (piano / bass / drums) in jazz, so in class I played a clip of the Charles Mingus sextet performing "Take the A Train." We looked at how a "lead sheet" in jazz specifies what chords need to be played, and then we went back and looked at a Baroque *basso continuo* part. I'll put a fragment of *basso continuo* music here:



The bass instrument (your *viol* or cello or what-have-you) will play these notes, and the keyboard player's job is to look at the combination of the notes and the little numbers and translate that into chords. It's a pretty complicated system that requires a lot of training.

Why the *basso continuo* is important:

Again, this is evidence that Baroque composers are thinking about their music in terms of chord progressions. With Medieval and Renaissance music, any chords that are produced seem incidental, as a sort of accidental by-product of the polyphonic web. But now the chord progressions are definitely planned out.

With this kind of harmonic "padding" supporting the music Baroque composers are also free to write wilder melodies. They know that the *basso continuo* will fill out the middle and keep things grounded.

(So *monody* and *basso continuo* are related but conceptually distinct terms. Monody is an abstract texture, and you could compose monodic music using all sorts of instruments – for instance, you could write monodic music for a keyboard instrument or for an *a capella* chorus. The *basso continuo* is a specific team of players that Baroque composers often use to make monody.)