INTRODUCTION

This period in history witnessed a new exploration of ideas and innovations in the arts, literature and philosophy. Italy was at the hub of new culture and led the way when it came to exploring new ideas and fashions.

The word ‘baroque’ comes from the Portuguese barroco for ‘oddly shaped pearl’ and was used in reference to the ornate architecture and elaborate gilded paintings, frescoes and designs that covered the interior walls and ceilings of German and Italian churches of the period. One particular aspect of this style that made its way into the music was the emphasis on an ornamented or ‘decorative’ melody line.

The most well-known composers of the Baroque period were Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), George Frideric Händel (1685-1759), Henry Purcell (c. 1659-95) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). There were many others too.
A) FEATURES OF THE BAROQUE STYLE OF MUSIC:

It is important to familiarize yourself with some of the basic ‘hallmarks’ or features of music composed during the Baroque period. Some general features and developments include:

- the use of ornamented melodic parts
- the establishment of the major/minor key system, replacing the old system of modes
- the use of the diatonic chords of I, IV, V, II and II
- ‘basso continuo’ (literary continuous bass). The adoption of the ever constant keyboard instrument (harpsichord or organ) playing a chordal support with the bass line usually played by the cello
- different musical textures, such as monophonic, homophonic and polyphonic
- the use of the Baroque orchestra, based on the newly invented members of the string family with the harpsichord supplying the harmonies. Trumpets, horns and timpani drums were used. However, the use of woodwind instruments at this time was not standard and varied from piece to piece
- the prevalence of one ‘affection’ or mood
- the contrasting of dynamics on two levels – loud and soft (called terraced dynamics)

B) A ROUGH GUIDE TO BAROQUE MUSIC:

a.1) Baroque composers used major and minor scales:

- From about 1600 Western composers stopped writing modal music.
- Instead they used major and minor keys to write tonal music. This was a big change. In Western countries most music is still tonal, hundreds of years later.
- Modulating (switching between related keys) turned out to be a good way of creating contrast in music.
- Composers developed new structures for organising music using modulation and contrast, e.g. binary, ternary, rondo and variation forms.

a.2) Baroque has a recognisable sound: Baroque music is pretty easy to recognise. These are the main things to listen out for:

- The dynamics change suddenly. Each bit is either loud or soft. You won´t hear any gradual changes in volume – no crescendos or diminuendos. They are called terraced or stepped dynamics.
- The melody is built up from short musical ideas (posh name: motifs), so you get a fair bit of repetition.
- The harmonies are simple. They mainly use chords I and V. The melody is swarming with ornaments added in to make it more interesting.
- The texture is often contrapuntal (or polyphonic), and a new texture

a.3) Most Baroque music had a Basso Continuo:

- A basso continuo is a continuous bass part. It´s played throughout a piece, and the chords are based on it.
- It was often played on an organ or harpsichord. It could also be played by more than one instrument, e.g. cello, double bass and bassoon.
- Other Baroque instruments are the flute, recorder, oboe, bassoon, and orchestral strings (violins, violas, cellos and double basses).
Harpsichord in the Flemish style

Baroque organ from Monasterio de las Huelgas Reales (Valladolid), c. 1706

Display for a Baroque orchestra

A young Baroque orchestra
**C) MUSICAL FORMS IN THE BAROQUE:** In this section you will learn about the structures most often used by Baroque composers to give their melodies a shape.

**b.1) Music in Binary form has two sections: A B**

- Binary form is usually used for Baroque dances, e.g. bourrée, menuet, gavotte, sarabande and gigue.
- Each section is repeated. You play Section A, and then Section B twice – so you end up with AABB.
- Section B contrasts with Section A – the two bits should sound different. The contrast is often made by modulating to related keys.

**b.2) Ternary form has three sections: A B A**

- There are three sections in music with ternary form. Each section repeats, so it goes AABBAA.
- Section A ends in the home key, normally with a perfect cadence. This makes it sound like a complete piece in itself.
- In Section B the music modulates to a related key, like the dominant or relative minor, and then goes back to the home key before it ends.
- The last section can be exactly the same as Section A, or a slightly varied version. If it is varied, you call it A1 instead of A.
- Baroque composers used ternary form in Arias. An aria is a solo in an opera or oratorio. This type of aria in ternary form is often called ‘da capo aria’.

**D) VARIATIONS:** Variations are pieces which start one pattern or tune, and then change it in different ways. There are two main structures for variation. They are called ‘theme and variation’ and ‘ground bass’:

**c.1) Theme and Variation Form varies the melody:**

- In theme and variation form, the theme is usually a memorable tune.
- The theme´s played first. There´s a short pause between two variations. There can be as many or as few variations as the composer wants.
- Each variation should be a recognisable version of the main theme, but different from all the others.
- You can vary a tune in loads of simple ways.
- You can also change the tempo, change the key, (from major to minor or vice versa) change some or all of the chords or add a different type of accompaniment.

**c.1) Ground Bass Form varies ideas over a fixed bass part:**

- Ground bass is a continuous set of variations – there are no pauses.
- The main theme, called the ground, is a bass line which repeats throughout the piece.
- Varying melodies and harmonies which become gradually more complex are played over the ground.