

MUSIC ESSAY

Q: Discuss the main features of the baroque concerto.

During the Baroque period of music history there were huge changes in the styles of music that were being composed and the evolution of musicality began to accelerate rapidly also. For the first time composers gained extensive status for their work and it is the first era that gave birth to composers that are relevant, prolific and notable today. Probably the first notable composer of the baroque period was Montverde, who was one of the founding fathers of the trio sonata, the first new important form of the Baroque era. Of course there was also a rapid expansion of the musical devices used in order to achieve more complex effects, personally the biggest change that I notice between the renaissance and Baroque eras was the seismic shift from largely vocal music to orchestral and instrumental music. This led to the development of the baroque orchestra, the first properly structured ensemble in history.

The baroque concert was developed in the late 17th century in Italy. It was devised from a form called the trio sonata, which consisted of a violin, viola, cello and harpsichord. In the early days composers such as Gabrieli would simply arrange trio sonatas for larger ensembles, sometimes loosely defined as concerto grossi. However the first composer to write concerto grossi as pieces in their own right and with a standard formula was Corelli. With his publishing of his opus 6 (12 concerto grossi).he soon became a cult figure in both his home country in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, even after his death in 1713. Although today many would find the music of Corelli

monotonous and conservative, it is important to remember that his music was the height of innovation for his day. Features such as contrast between soloist(s) and the orchestra were previously unheard of, as was the ritornello form. He incorporated figured bass into many of his concertos, as well as innovative features such as fugal writing, pedal notes, terraced dynamics, melody based on harmony and tied rhythms. Corelli caused the popularity of the concerto to take off and resultantly inspired many of his contemporaries to follow similar forms in the future.

One of these was Antonio Vivaldi. Born in Italy 15 years after Corelli's death he began to experiment with the Corellian model of concerto. Out of this came the idea of a solo concerto where the lead violin would take on a bigger single role and would develop virtuosic qualities. During Vivaldi's time there slowly became a set number of movements in the concerto form (previously there could be as many as six). He is also attributed to releasing the virtuoso violinist from the constraints of the themes of the ritornello. Vivaldi did however stay faithful to the ritornello form in general, incorporating them into the first and third movements of concertos. The second movement was in general, slow and either in ternary or binary form. Vivaldi is responsible for the introduction of antiphony in concerto writing as well as many memorable themes. He also introduced chromaticism and clear cadence points, in anticipation of the classical era. He incorporated effects such as ornamentation and suspension along with contrapuntal textures into his music. It is generally believed that Vivaldi wrote over 500 concertos in his lifetime. Vivaldi introduced wind instruments as common denominators of the baroque orchestra.

The concertos of Bach and Handel followed the basic principal of the Vivaldi model and did not experiment with it to a major extent; in fact many of Bach's keyboard concertos were almost exact transcriptions of Vivaldi's Violin concertos! It would be wrong however to write them of as frauds as most of their work was entirely original. Many would say that Bach was the real forefather of the virtuosic cadenza and his were usually more technically demanding than Vivaldi's. His concertos are thought to be the link between the baroque and classical concertos.

In conclusion the baroque period gave birth to the concerto which was slowly evolved into what it is today. Many composers have been vital to this development. There were some distinguishing features that generally set apart the baroque concerto. One of these is the distinctive terraced dynamics and also the contrast between the soli and tutti. Basso continuo was often evident as well as contrasting textures. Antiphonal effects are also usually evident. These concertos have given the modern listener many memorable themes as well as an insight into the society of the time. The effects and features that were created by the baroque concerto have been invaluable to later composers who have expanded on them to aid the development of the genre as a whole.