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Baroque music: what is it?

The period

The term 'Baroque' is applied to other arts as well as to music. But the Baroque period of music history:

- Began around the year 1600, about 400 years ago (in other words, it came after the Renaissance)
- Ended around 1750, about 250 years ago (in other words, it was succeeded by the Classical period).

Over such a long period of time, music changed a great deal. Listen to a piece from about 1600 by Monteverdi (WEM 2: 2) or Gabrieli (WEM 2: 6 / DMBE 1: 6), then one from the first half of the 18th century by J S Bach (DMBE 2: 8) or Handel (FBC: 4). Monteverdi and Gabrieli sound different from Bach and Handel. Of course we must remember that Bach wouldn't have understood if you'd told him he was a late Baroque composer, or even a Baroque one. All these 'periods' were the later inventions of writers about music, but period labels are quite useful in helping us understand more about how music developed.

At both the beginning and the end of the Baroque period some composers, performers and audiences explored new styles well ahead of others who stuck with existing ones. So we can't set precise dates – nothing changed dramatically between 31 December 1599 and 1 January 1600, for example, or in the final hours of 1750 – that's why we frequently write 'about' and 'c.'.

The roots of Baroque music go back to the late 16th century, for example to music by Andrea Gabrieli (c.1533–1585) from Venice. This music was composed earlier than, for instance, much of the music of William Byrd (c.1540–1623), an English composer who, though later, definitely belongs to the world of the Renaissance.

Andrea was Giovanni Gabrieli's uncle and teacher; as Giovanni is the better known, references simply to 'Gabrieli' always mean him.

The reason for saying that the Baroque period ended in 1750 is largely because Bach died in that year, and while Handel lived until 1759, he composed little after 1750. Some music that sounds Baroque was written well after 1750, for example some works by William Boyce (1711–1779), including the *Twelve Overtures*, composed mainly in the 1760s. Equally, well before 1750 some composers were writing music which pointed ahead strongly to Classical styles – for example the *Prussian* and *Württemberg* sonatas for keyboard, published in the early 1740s by J S Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–1788).