

# Main Characteristics of Music Eras

## Medieval Era

1. Use of modes
2. Monophonic textures: plainsong – free flowing unaccompanied melody; secular songs and brightly rhythmic dances
3. Polyphonic textures: organum – elaboration of existing plainchant; motets – composed by adding successive layers of melody and words one above another, sometimes clashing to form strong discords
4. Many compositions based on a cantus firmus borrowed from plainsong; but some pieces freely composed
5. Rhythms based on regular patterns based on poetry
6. A tendency to contrast sounds, rather than blend them together
7. The distinctive timbres of Medieval instruments
8. Harmonic intervals most frequently heard: unison, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, octave; but 3rds and 6ths more noticeable later in the Medieval period

## Renaissance Era

1. Music still based on modes, but these gradually treated with more freedom as more accidentals creep in
2. Richer, fuller texture, in for or more voice parts; bass voice part now added below tenor
3. Blending, rather than contrasting strands in the musical texture
4. Harmony: a greater concern with the flow and progression of chords; a smoother treatment of discords
5. Church music: some pieces intended for a cappella performance, mainly contrapuntal, with much imitation weaving the strands to create a continuously flowing, seamless texture; other church music accompanied by instruments – for example, polychoral pieces in antiphonal (stereophonic) style, often involving strong musical contrasts
6. Secular music: a rich variety of vocal pieces; dances, and also instrumental pieces – many copying vocal style but others truly suited to instruments rather than voices
7. The characteristic timbres of Renaissance instruments – many forming families of the same instrument made in various sizes and pitches (string, woodwind, brass, percussion)(membranophone, Idiophones, Chordophones, Aerophones)

## Baroque Era

1. At first a switch to a lighter, homophonic texture: melody supported by simple chords; but polyphonic textures soon return; monody
2. The basso continuo, or figured bass, becomes the foundation for most types of Baroque music – providing a purposeful bass line which causes the music to press steadily forward from beginning to end
3. One affection or mood usually persists throughout an entire piece
4. Viols gradually replaced by the violin family; the string section becomes the basis of the Baroque orchestra, always with keyboard continuo (harpsichord or organ) filling out the harmonies above the figured bass and decorating the textures

5. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the system of modes replaced by the major-minor key system
6. Main forms used: binary, ternary (da capo aria), rondeau, variations including ground bass, ritornello, fugue
7. Main types of music: chorale, recitative and aria, opera, oratorio, cantata; overture, toccata, prelude, dance suite, sonata, concerto grosso, solo concerto
8. Often, an exuberance in the music: energetic rhythms drive the music forward; melodies often spun out into long, flowing lines with many ornaments (such as trills); contrasts (especially in concertos) of instrumental timbres, of few instruments against many, and of loud against soft (terraced dynamics, sometimes echo effects)

#### Classical Era

1. Lighter, clearer texture than Baroque, less complicated; mainly homophonic – melody above chordal accompaniment (but counterpoint by no means forgotten)
2. An emphasis on grace and beauty of melody and form, proportion and balance, moderation and control; polished and elegant in character with expressiveness and formal structure held in perfect balance
3. More variety and contrast within a piece; of keys, tunes, rhythms and dynamics (now using crescendo and sforzando); frequent changes of mood and timbre
4. Melodies tend to be shorter than those of Baroque, with clear cut phrases and clearly marked cadences
5. Orchestra increases in size and range; harpsichord continuo falls out of use; woodwinds become a self contained section
6. Harpsichord replaced by the piano: early piano music thinnish in texture, often with “Alberti bass” a broken chord accompaniment (Haydn and Mozart) but later becoming richer, more sonorous and powerful (Beethoven)
7. Importance given to instrumental music – main kinds: sonata, trio, string quartet, symphony, concerto, serenade, divertimento
8. Sonata form the most important design tool for form – used to build up the first movement of most large scale works, but also other movements, and single pieces (such as an overture)

#### Romantic Era

1. A greater freedom in form and design; a more intense and personal expression of emotion in which fantasy, imagination and a quest for adventure play an important part
2. Emphasis on lyrical, songlike melodies; adventurous modulations; richer harmonies, often chromatic, with striking use of discords
3. Denser textures with dramatic contrasts, exploring a wider range of pitch, dynamics and tone colors
4. Expansion of the orchestra, sometimes to gigantic proportions; the invention of the valve system leads to development of brass section whose weight and power often dominate the texture
5. rich variety of types of piece, ranging from songs and fairly short piano pieces to huge musical canvasses with lengthy time span structured with spectacular dramatic and dynamic climaxes

6. Close links with other arts lead to a keener interest in program music (program symphony, symphonic poem, concert overture).
7. Shape and unity brought to lengthy works by use of recurring themes (sometimes transformed/developed)
8. Greater technical virtuosity – especially from pianists and violinists
9. Nationalism: reaction against German influences by composers of other countries (especially Russia, Bohemia, Norway)

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Era

1. The most important trends and techniques in the 20<sup>th</sup> century include: Impressionism, Atonality Microtonality, 20<sup>th</sup> century Nationalism, Expressionism, Electronic music, Jazz influences, Serialism, Total serialism, Polytonality, and Neoclassicism
2. Not all composers used such extreme techniques. Some have continued to compose in what is basically a warm Romantic style while injecting a degree of dissonance and rhythmic vitality which clearly marks their music as belonging to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Melodies: include wide leaps, often chromatic and dissonant intervals, sliding glissandi, melody may be non-existent
4. Harmonies: extreme dissonances, greater proportion of discords to concords, which are sometimes totally avoided; note clusters (adjacent notes played together as a chord) may be used
5. Rhythms: vigorous, dynamic, strong use of syncopation, unusual metres such as five or seven, polyrhythms (rhythmic counterpoint), motor rhythms used to drive the music forward
6. Timbre: far greater concern with timbres or tone colors leading to inclusion of strange, intriguing, exotic sounds; striking, sometimes explosive, contrasts; expansion of the percussion section, and more familiar instruments, such as instruments played at the extremes of their pitch range, muted brass effects, and new effects from string instruments such as bowing behind the bridge or tapping on the body of the instrument, totally new sounds, such as electronic apparatus and magnetic tape

