

Instrumental Music of the Early Baroque

The instrumental music of the early-to-mid 17th century reflects the significant developments which occurred in vocal music of the period. This can be most clearly seen in instrumental monody. Biagio Marini (1597-1665) was a violinist at St Mark's from 1615 to 1620 (Monteverdi was Maestro there, 1613-43). Marini's op. 1, *Affetti musicali* (1617) end with miscellaneous dances, and include two *sinfonie* 'La Orlandina' and 'La Gardana' for violin or cornetto solo, with continuo. These are thought to be the earliest examples of instrumental monody.

These early monodic pieces are formally inchoate: short sections contrasted in material, pace, metre, and – so far as key is established – in key; key was still a means of diversity rather than organisation.

1) Venetian

It was the Venetians who led the way in extended instrumental composition independent of dance forms and vocal models. The keyboard and ensemble *ricercari* and the *canzoni alla francese* for 'instrumenti da tasti' of Andrea Gabrieli were nearly all published posthumously when they were probably 30 or 40 years old. The *ricercar* is a fairly short, serious composition in which one theme is continuously developed in imitation. One example is the *Ricercar dopo il Credo* by Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643).

Merulo's *Canzoni* (1592, 1606 & 1611) show a great freedom of keyboard texture: his keyboard *ricercari* are early works (1567), mostly 'instrumental motets', but in his two books of toccatas (1598 & 1604) he developed further the alternation of quasi-improvisatory and *ricercar*-like passages, and treated the material so that the two elements cohere instead of being sharply juxtaposed.

The canzona was an important keyboard form of the time. These are pieces in discontinuous (i.e. sectional) style, in imitative counterpoint, sometimes with an admixture of other styles.

2) English Music for Consort and Virginals

England ignored the canzona. At most, traces of the style can be found in one or two string fantasias by the Italianate Englishmen Thomas Lupo (d.1628) and John Coprario (c. 1575-1626). However, late Elizabethans and Jacobeans cultivated a free form of the *ricercar*, the fantasia or 'fancy', and the very English 'In nomine', as well as dance music and song arrangements, both for consort (usu. for viols) and for keyboard (usu. virginals). The fantasia was on a larger scale than the *ricercar*, and with a more complex formal organisation. The first collection printed for keyboard was the famous *Parthenia*, containing 21 short preludes and dances by Byrd, Bull and Gibbons. John Tavener's (c. 1490-1545) 'In Nomine' was the progenitor of a whole species of English music for keyboard, lute, or instrumental ensemble during the next 100 years or more. This 'In Nomine' is an almost exact transcription of the section 'In Nomine Domini' of the Benedictus of his Mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas*, and it was this segment of plainsong which served generations of English composers as a *cantus firmus* for instrumental 'fancies'.

The bass viol was the favourite solo instrument in England during the earlier part of the 17th century, especially in its smaller forms, the 'division viol' and 'lyra viol'. Like the treble viol, it was played solo with ornamental variations ('divisions') or with the harpsichord. Apart from their dance music the English composers (Orlando Gibbons, John Jenkins, Matthew Locke, William Lawes) were stylistically conservative; they still tended to think polyphonically even when they employed the fashionable Italian layout of two upper parts and bass, and were slow to adopt the term 'sonata' and its style. John Jenkins was probably the first to do so.

While the soft-voiced viol consort was suited for domestic music, there was a standard mixed consort for public occasions: lute, bandora, bass viol, cittern, treble viol and flute. A quantity of dance music is preserved in the Walsingham Consort Books of the late 16th century. The repertory consists mainly of pavaues and galliards, with a few popular songs.

Dances also figure largely in the repertory for consorts of five or six viols but fantasies were composed in quantity for viol consorts, and later, as in the case of Gibbons's nine published *Fantasies of Three Parts* (c. 1620), for consorts in which the highest or two upper instruments were violins. The English took little note of the fantasy before about 1585; the favourite form was still the 'In Nomine'.

3) Lute Songs

Compositions for solo voice and lute or other plucked stringed instruments during the 16th century were, for the most part, arrangements of vocal pieces – frottole, lieder, madrigals, chansons, psalms, and lighter Italian forms. Most ayres, however, were probably conceived in the first instance for solo voice and lute. The lute ayre is French in origin. Its composers adopted the old French practice of publishing in alternative forms: as part-songs and as solos with lute. In 1597 the *First Booke of Songes or Ayres of foure partes* by John Dowland (the most important English lutenist, 1563-1626), was printed with tablature, so that all the parts would be harmonically supported.

4) Sonatas

The sonata at the turn of the 17th century had a similar form to the canzona, but had special features. They usually had one or two melody instruments (usually violins), with a basso continuo; the ensemble canzona was traditionally written for four parts, which could almost always

be played well without a continuo. Sonatas were frequently written for a particular instrument and hence took advantage of the idiomatic possibilities of that instrument. They were likely to have a somewhat expressive character, whereas the typical canzona had more of the formal, abstract quality of instrumental polyphony in the Renaissance tradition.

5) Variations

The variation principle permeates many of the instrumental forms of the 17th century. More specifically, the theme and variations is the continuation of a favourite type of keyboard composition of the late Renaissance. A number of techniques were employed in such pieces, such as:

The melody could be repeated with little or no change, although it might be transferred from one voice to another and surrounded with different contrapuntal material in each variation. This is sometimes called the *cantus firmus variation*. The leading 17th-century composers were in addition to the English virginalists, Sweelinck and Scheidt.

The melody itself could be ornamented differently for each variation; as a rule it remained in the highest voice, with the underlying harmonies essentially unchanged.

The bass, not the melody, is the constant factor. Often, as in the case of the romanseca, a treble tune is also associated with the bass, but it is usually obscured by figuration.

6) Frescobaldi's Keyboard Music

As an outstanding keyboard composer, Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643) appears a somewhat isolated figure in 17th-century Italy where, as in

England, keyboard and lute music went into decline while ensemble music flourished. He was set apart from the most influential composers of the time, as he had little in common with the Venetians. Frescobaldi's earliest publications include the *Toccata e partite* (Rome, 1614) and the *Recercari et Canzoni Franzese* (1615). These so not differ in type from those of the Gabrieli's, but his canzoni already show his skill in theme-transformation and variation.

Frescobaldi's harmonic language is predominantly modal, but with many chromaticisms, which introduce madrigalian idioms into instrumental music. Chromaticism appears markedly in the *Fiori musicali* of 1635.

After Frescobaldi's death Italian keyboard music more or less petered out for more than half a century.