Jan Swafford

Language of the Spirit

An Introduction to Classical Music

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Introduction

This book proposes to do a number of things at once. It is an introduction to what we call classical music and its major figures, forces, and periods. It is intended to be a stimulus toward a better understanding of the music and the people who write and play it; a basic reference for facts and trends; a compendium of small biographies of important composers; and an examination of the presence of universal qualities in music: love, hope, exaltation, pain, and on through the catalog of qualities we experience and expect to be reflected in our art. After all, one of the prime functions of any art is to show ourselves to ourselves in moving and memorable ways.

Unlike my musical biographies, there are no footnotes—this is not a scholarly work. It is founded mainly on a particular motivation, which is the reason I got into classical music in the first place and the reason I'm still at it as a composer and writer: pleasure and emotion. As a teenager I took up this music because it excited me, made me *feel* more than any other kind of music, more than most other things in my life. It still does.

I got to age twelve in the 1950s listening to Elvis et al., like every other kid. Then I took up playing trombone in the school band and turned out to be good at it, which made music a more or less daily endeavor. Before long I was trying to compose, because listening to classical music gave me an almost painful yearning in the pit of my stomach that was assuaged only when I started writing it myself. In the process I lost interest in being like every other kid. I began to find that a lot of pop tunes I thought I liked got boring after a few listenings, while many classical pieces seemed to open endless vistas of sensation and mystery. So, this book is also a love song to the art I love and to which I have devoted my life. After that, for me, is the fascination of how music is made, in so many times and places. That fascination will be fundamental here, too: how sounds are organized by ear and by rule, how instruments inflect music, how forms shape it, how emotions are portrayed, and so on.

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From the book's occasional forays into musical technique I hope the reader will leave with a basic understanding of the mechanics of music, because these play into the artistry. Overall, the book forms a brisk narrative history of the music, providing an introduction for novices and a reference for the familiar repertoire. It will work best when you listen along with the reading. Essentially every work I mention can be found on Spotify or a comparable online music service; the few that aren't there are usually on YouTube (with its generally mediocre fidelity and sometimes scraggly performances). Somebody once said that writing words about music is like dancing about architecture. I think that's about half right, but the words here will at least make better sense when related to the sounds.

There will be a certain irony hanging around these pages, because I look at music with a tincture of irony, likewise the whole of human life and the great globe itself. As a writer on music I've sometimes been accused of irreverence, which I admit, and add that my larger reverence is deep and plainly in view. I believe in genius and greatness, though like love and compassion and God, those are elusive and indefinable qualities. But music is made by and for human beings, and a certain amount of human life appears to me, to put it generously, nuts. Nobody, including great geniuses, is immune to that. To mention a few examples: Isaac Newton, who founded modern science, spent much of his life involved in alchemy. Franz Schubert, one the greatest born talents in music, spent much of his short life writing operas, the one medium he wasn't all that good at. Ludwig van Beethoven, who was reliably brilliant at every aspect of music, including playing and selling it, said accurately of himself: "Outside music everything I do is badly done and stupid."

As you can see, the book will be personal to a degree, but I won't be wallowing in my own presumed wisdom. I've taught music for some thirty-seven years, to students from eleven-year-olds to conservatory grads, and this book is intended to educate. My music biographies come from years of research and thinking; this book comes from decades of teaching. Much of the wisdom here is common wisdom, both that of musicians and of audiences over centuries. I have a certain respect for common wisdom; it never goes far enough, but often it's common for good reason. Likewise, with a given composer most of the pieces I suggest you start with are familiar ones to the initiated. Beethoven's

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Fifth Symphony may be all too familiar in some respects, but there are reasons it's been loved for a long time. (Besides, as I'll get to, in its day the Fifth was one of the oddest pieces ever written.)

You may find sins of omission or commission here: "How could you have left out [ ]!" Nothing to be done about that. I will say that the recommended composers and pieces do not predictably have to do with my own enthusiasms. I can't say I'm crazy about every one of them (some I used to be crazy about but no more), but there's no piece mentioned in this book that I don't respect. You won't be crazy about them all, either. When I was young I made a point of never disliking anything, but that happy and hippie all-embracingness is long gone. Still, if I'm a bit of a snob it doesn't mean you have to be. I advise you to take in all new composers and works with absolute openness, and wait for your own taste to form as you get deeper into the territory. If something new surprises or shocks or perplexes you, I suggest going back to it. Some of those pieces will turn out to be favorites; some will upgrade your sense of what music is about; some may upgrade your sense of what *you* are about.

So while here and there I'll present a perhaps offbeat work and composer and point of view, most of the music will be from what we, with a sigh, call the standard repertoire, because many of those pieces are beloved for good reason. It's the word *standard* that rankles, because it doesn't evoke the excitement in these pieces that was manifest when they were new. A lot of today's standard was yesterday's revolutionary. At the same time, there is a body of works and composers out there who are lesser known but wonderful, and I'll dip into those. As one example, for years I've played for friends the final chorus of the oratorio *Jephte* by the relatively obscure baroque composer Giacomo Carissimi, and watched their jaws drop, and sometimes their tears flow.

I'll only suggest a few pieces for each composer, a starter package of familiar works, with a few more suggestions at the end of each essay. The idea is that when a piece or a composer grabs you, go out and look for more on your own. The Internet is a tremendous resource for finding information and further listening. If you like a piece I cite here, compare performances of it, and look for more pieces by that composer. On the whole I won't be dealing here with opera, which really requires a book of its own, though there is a chapter on Richard Wagner and his operas because he influenced music across the board. I also will not regularly be

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citing specific recordings; that would get voluminous, and there's no way to know what recordings will be available years from now. But here and there I will cite a recording for one reason or another, or because I couldn't resist. I also mention recordings sometimes to make you aware to what extent a performance can make or break a piece. Getting choosy about performers is as worthwhile as getting choosy about composers and pieces.

In the end, I believe that music is a language of the spirit—its essence can't be captured in words (though it can be useful to try). I like the conclusion of philosopher Suzanne Langer, who called instrumental music "an unconsummated symbol."

The extent of what Langer means by *symbol* is too much to get into here, but the basic idea is that a symbol is a story, painting, image, event, and so on, to which we respond in a complex emotional rather than a directly informational way. That's the difference between *denotation* and *connotation*. A stop sign at an intersection denotes that we should stop. At the same time, it may represent to us all the damn things in the world that tell us what to do, that get in our way, that mess with our lives. Or, on the other hand, it may elicit a comforting feeling of order, the social contract, the need for caution. In each of these cases we're responding to the stop sign's connotations. In other words, we're responding to it as a symbol.

Langer felt that our response to art and much of the rest of life is a texture of symbols, but that instrumental music, lacking words or clear imagery, is a kind of blank slate that we nonetheless respond to *as if* it were a tangible symbol. *What* the symbol is, in any given piece, is largely up to our own responses. So, "an unconsummated symbol."

This is an idea I subscribe to. The thing is, however, that in practice the emotional side of music is much, much more complicated than that. In most vocal music, for example, the words tell us the subject and imply feelings, and most composers want to express the emotional and even physical sense of the words (though sometimes they might write music that inflects or even contradicts the words). In a Schubert song, when the story turns sad, he usually shifts from a major to a minor key; meanwhile he jumps on every image in the text, from a spinning wheel to a tree in the wind, and paints it viscerally in the music.

So, music is expressive of emotion, sometimes in more concrete

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ways and sometimes in less concrete. Some of that response is cultural, some of it innate. After all, even one-celled animals respond to sound. I suspect that our response to music starts at the cellular level and resonates all the way through our mind up to the higher brain functions. And the most important part of our emotional response is unique to each listener. We can sometimes agree on *what* a piece expresses, but we'll each fill in the details differently. What we feel from music is like what we feel from a sunset. The sunset contains no emotion; it's a physical phenomenon that has nothing to do with us. Maybe the dinosaurs enjoyed them, too. In any case, the feelings are ours, some of them universal to humans, some individual. In the end, the source of such responses is a matter of magic and mystery, and so music echoes the magic and mystery of the universe.

All this is by way of putting gas in the tank. Let's get going on what will be an ambitious but distilled historical journey, starting more or less at the beginning.

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Part I

Music from the Beginning

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Chapter 1

THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES (UP TO 1400)

Wherever and whenever we find people, we find music. Likely an integral part of human life from the beginning, music has left its traces in instruments and in art dating back to the dawning of our species. The oldest instruments found from the cave days are flutes made from mammoth ivory and bird bones, over forty thousand years old. They have four holes, enough to provide a simple scale. Earlier bones with drilled holes that may be flutes date back over eighty thousand years; their makers were Neanderthals.

All the arts have a primeval connection to magic and mystery, and music is no exception. Animals painted on the walls of caves sanctified shrines that were in use sometimes for thousands of years. Whenever music has emerged from the obscurity of time, it has been connected to ritual, to ceremony, to what we call religion, but to ancient humanity was simply the ambience in which they lived. Instruments and song and painting and poetry and dance probably evolved together. All of them were linked to mystery, the uncanny, the holy.

Sumerian artifacts from the third millennium BC include a lyre whose body is the image of a sacred bull in gold and lapis lazuli. The walls of Egyptian tombs are full of music. In paintings and reliefs we see an array of sophisticated Egyptian instruments: harp, lyre, lute, flute, oboe, trumpet, percussion instruments. We see little bands of servants playing harp and lyre and flute for their mistress; men sitting on the ground, their arms raised in supplication, singing to the accompaniment of a harp; naked girls dancing to the music of a double flute. Singers ushered the dead into the afterlife, their lyrics sometimes written on the tomb:

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O Royal Seal-bearer, Great Steward, Nebankh!
Yours is the sweet breath of the north wind!
So says his singer who keeps his name alive,
The honorable singer Tjeniaa, whom he loved,
Who sings to his ka every day.

We don't know what the music of ancient Greeks or Romans sounded like, any more than we do Egyptian music, but again we know their instruments and the lyrics of their songs. Singers and players and dancers disport themselves around Greek pottery. Epic poetry, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was meant to be sung, often accompanied by lyre. Every ceremony from temple to marriage to Olympic games had its music, in the approved scale pattern, using the traditional instruments. The choruses of Greek drama danced and sang their poetry (millennia later, Greek theater inspired the creation of opera). There survives a story of a performer on the aulos, a double-piped oboe, who in an amphitheater played a depiction of a battle so powerful that people were still speaking of it two hundred years later.

The Greeks founded musical theory as it exists to this day. The philosopher Pythagoras was the first person we know of to define musical intervals in terms of mathematical divisions of a string: stop a string in the middle and pluck it, and you have an octave; stop it a third of the way and you have a fifth above that, and so on. In white notes on the piano, starting on C is the major scale and A the minor; *modes* are scales starting on the other notes. Greek names for various forms of scales are still with us: the Dorian mode, which Plato says inspires bravery in battle; the Phrygian, which inspires peace; the Lydian, which promotes languor so ought to be avoided. The modes, their names and connotations, survived into the sacred music of the medieval and Renaissance periods.

Later in the West, the Christian Church provided the impetus for the systematic development of music. What we call Gregorian chant, named after Pope Gregory who according to legend codified it in the sixth century, is a pure, unaccompanied repertoire of vocal melody sung in Latin that has graced religious services for over a thousand years. For a sample, look for a chant version of ***Veni sancte spiritus***. (If you hear chords in the background, find another version—authentic chant is unaccompanied.)

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In the early history of Western music, there have been two epochal developments whose reverberations continue into the present. The first was the development of the world's first effective system of musical notation. Notes finally could be written down like words, reproduced faithfully, and disseminated widely. Earlier civilizations, including the Greeks, had made efforts at notation, but the notes were skimpy and in any case now indecipherable. Around the eleventh century Christian monks developed the basics of writing down notes and rhythms; over the next centuries that evolved into the system of notation we use today.

Notation was more than a practical method for preserving an expanding repertoire of music. It changed the nature of the art itself. To write something down means that people far away in space and time can re-create it. At the same time, there are downsides. Written notes freeze the music rather than allowing it to develop in the hands of individuals, and it discourages improvisation. Partly because of notation, modern classical performance lacks the depth of nuance that is part of aural tradition. Before notation arrived, in all history music was largely carried on as an aural tradition. Most world music is still basically aural, including sophisticated musical traditions such as Indian and Balinese. Most jazz musicians can read music but often don't bother, and their art is much involved with improvisation. Many modern pop musicians, one example being Paul McCartney, can't read music at all.

As a young composer I thought about trying to notate the way jazz legend Miles Davis plays a single note: he might fuzz into it with a half-valve attack, bend the note en route, and/or inflect the pitch as a "blue note," and end with a small slide down. Soon I realized that I would need three or four levels of notation to get all that down, and somebody reading it would never have the fluidity that Davis does in playing from his head. Notes are irreplaceable in our music, but at the same time they can be an obstacle.

In the end, though, the invention of a sophisticated musical notation was a unique event in history that fundamentally changed the equation. When the West committed to notation, it made possible another fundamental development in the history of the art: the invention of counterpoint and harmony. These require a little explanation.

The most common way to understand a piece of music is as a melody with some kind of accompaniment: guy singing with a guitar, soprano with an orchestra, a tune in a string quartet, that sort of thing. This covers

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most of the music we hear, including essentially all popular music. But in fact there are three ways of presenting melody in a piece, and the name for them is *textures*.

The simplest texture, the kind of music that dominated the world for countless ages and in many places still does, is *monophony*, meaning a single melodic line with no integral accompaniment. One may add drums or a drone or the like, but no harmonies; the tune is essentially the whole thing. This covers everything from the ancient *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were sung, to Gregorian chant, including the troubadours of the Middle Ages, most world and folk music from time immemorial, and you singing in the shower (unless you have a guitar in the shower). If the tune's the thing and accompaniment is ad hoc and optional, it's monophony.

When music in more than one part began to happen—which in the West took place around the 800s, because people had only heard monophony, they first developed a new kind of music that was still basically all melody. It happened in stages. Some monasteries began singing monophonic chant in two levels: the same tune sung in parallel lines a fourth or fifth apart. This was called *organum*. An example of later and more sophisticated organum is the beautiful and otherworldly ***Winchester Troper***, from the eleventh century.

Over the next centuries these added lines gradually grew more independent. Meanwhile the art of notation became steadily more sophisticated to keep up with pieces that were getting too long and complicated to remember. Finally, music arrived at *polyphony*, meaning two or more melodies that are superimposed, all more or less equally important. The first polyphonic composer whose name we know was a monk named **Léonin**, who worked in Notre Dame in Paris in the twelfth century. In his ***Viderunt omnes*** you'll find simple but lovely proto-polyphony, much of it florid lines written above drones, those drones being stretched-out notes of a Gregorian chant. Mixed in are stretches of traditional monophonic plainchant and also simple two-part polyphony. It appears that Léonin also made some important advances in notating rhythm.

By the next century at Notre Dame, the monk **Pérotin** was writing elaborate polyphony in four parts. In many ways Pérotin set the pattern for much polyphonic music for centuries to come: you take an existing melody, in his case Gregorian chant, and compose more melodies around

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it. In Pérotin's case, the chant lines are again stretched out into long drones, over which he wove his voices. (Note that in polyphony each part is called a *voice* whether it is sung or played on an instrument.)

Like the other arts, Renaissance polyphony flourished in splendid and enormously sophisticated forms. This was the golden age of pure polyphony, most of it composed for church (though there were plenty of secular songs and dances, too).

So, that's polyphony, which is a Western invention and specialty. What, then, is *counterpoint*? Actually, sort of the same thing. The terms are often used interchangeably, but strictly speaking, polyphony is the name of a musical texture, and counterpoint is the technique of writing polyphony. In practice, many musicians tend to use *polyphony* to refer to such music written during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and *counterpoint* for the baroque period and later. That's how I'll use them here.

So, again: monophony is a single melody; polyphony/counterpoint is music made of intertwined melodic lines. The third kind of texture, *homophony*, is a single melodic line with chordal accompaniment—back to guy with guitar, leading tune in an orchestral piece, and so forth. In other words, most of the music we hear is homophonic: melody and some kind of harmonic accompaniment.

As soon as polyphony developed, composers realized that you can't just slap tunes together; the results have to sound good, the melodies complementing one another instead of getting in one another's way. Musicians began to develop rules about what kinds of sounds were desirable—in our terms, rules about harmony. In the West, at first, harmony was seen as an incidental effect of polyphony. It was hundreds of years before the kind of harmony we're familiar with had evolved. Early polyphony has an exotic, visceral sound with delicious harmonic clashes that would later be banned. For a sample, try the ***Sederunt principes*** of the aforementioned twelfth-century monk Pérotin. (One of my favorite versions is one from 1976 by David Munrow and the Early Music Consort of London.) Note that this kind of polyphony, long pieces with thousands of notes, would have been impossible to realize or even conceive of without notation. Here is sacred music joyous and dancing, as if exulting in the boundless potentials of a newly redefined art. Music has been exploring those possibilities ever since.

Again partly thanks to notation, the ensuing music of the medieval

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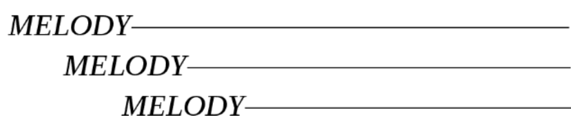
period saw an expanding repertoire, much of it with an experimental cast as composers explored techniques of organizing and rationalizing the new polyphony. One early and lasting device was *canon*, meaning a single melody sung or played in staggered entrances, so it makes polyphony with itself. Call canon a kind of grown-up round, such as “Frère Jacques”: one voice sings a melody, soon another voice starts the same melody, and in the overlap the single melody makes harmony with itself. A canon does the same thing, but without going around and around. Here’s a diagram of a three-voice canon:



This is a straightforward canon, but there are many possible variations. The echoing entries of the melody can start on the same note or on a different degree of the scale. Among the more arcane types are the *inversion canon,* which has the melody alternating right-side up and upside down. There is the odd beast called the *crab canon*, in which the second entry of the melody is backward. (For a composer, this is absurdly difficult to do well.) There are *puzzle canons*, in which a single melody is written out and you have to figure out for yourself where the later entries of the melody start, and/or on what degrees of the scale. In all cases, the result has to make coherent harmony. There are more arcana involved, but let’s leave it at that.

The Middle Ages have a reputation for general dreariness and violence, and to be sure, there was a lot of that around. If you were a serf in the fields, life could be pretty nasty, but even serfs had their bagpipes and dancing on feast days. Those with money and position, however, knew how to have a splashier good time, and music was inevitably involved. This was the time of troubadours and minstrels, wandering singers who made the rounds of town and castle and were vital to any proper whoop-de-do. We know some of their songs and dances because sometimes a monk liked one enough to write it down.

It was in the poetry and song of the Middle Ages that the modern Western idea of love developed, an almost mystical union of two lovers

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that came to be called courtly love. The highest expression of courtly love was in poetry and music. We've been singing about this stuff ever since.

It was in the context of courtly love that the greatest composer of the Middle Ages emerged: **Guillaume de Machaut**, who was born around 1300 and died much celebrated in Reims in 1377. He was a musician and composer, poet, priest, and courtier; served as secretary and chaplain for the king of Bohemia; and became canon of Reims cathedral. Machaut wrote the first integrated polyphonic setting of the Catholic Mass. My favorite performances of the result, the ***Messe de Nostre Dame*** are sung in a bright, natural style aiming at how the old monks might have sounded. (The Taverner Consort recording is in that direction, and there's a nicely reedy version by the Ensemble Organum.)

Machaut is most admired for his secular love songs both monophonic (in one voice) and polyphonic. Of his monophonic songs in the troubadour tradition, most famous is the lilting **"Douce dame jolie"** (Fair sweet lady), one of the hits of the era. Fluent in the stylized passion of courtly love poetry, Machaut was also a vital experimenter with technique, including the complex arcana of polyphony. His polyphonic music, far from the tamer and more rule-bound harmony of later centuries, sounds exotic to our ears. The text of his celebrated **"Ma fin est mon commencement"** begins, "My end is my beginning, and my beginning is my end." And indeed one of the parts is a palindrome, in which one voice goes halfway and then reverses course backward to its beginning. This kind of game is plenty hard to master, but to make it elegant and attractive, as Machaut does, is far harder. Rather than recommend particular pieces for this prolific composer, I suggest trying several recordings of his work and looking for the liveliest, most colorful, most beautiful-sounding renditions you can find. One starting place could be his enchanting collection of love songs and poems ***Le remède de fortune*** (The Cure of Ill Fortune).

How to summarize medieval music as a whole? While a crucial moment in the evolution of classical music, medieval music is much more than a stepping stone to bigger and better pieces. Whether sacred or worldly, the music has a distinctive archaic timbre, often kind of hollow in sound—in many ways the musical equivalent of medieval painting, with its stylized saints and Madonnas in primal colors. It often uses modes rather than our major and minor scales. You'll find Renaissance

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music richer in sound and more familiar in its harmonies, but if you can get on the wavelength of medieval music, it’s as compelling as any—and the dances are robust and irresistible.

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Chapter 2

The Renaissance (ca. 1400–1600)

By the fifteenth century the medieval period had given way to the Renaissance, with its revival of learning and humanism. Life in the West did not exactly get less dangerous, but it did get more colorful, maybe even more fun. Epochal developments of the time included the printing press, which revolutionized the dissemination of knowledge. There was a comparable revolution in the arts. Painting saw the development of perspective and an unprecedented realism. In music there was a flowering of magnificent polyphonic sacred works, bolstered by the continuing development of notation. Popular music burgeoned as well; often the same composers wrote both sacred and secular pieces. All composers of the Renaissance wrote music we call *modal*, that is, based on scales beyond the major and minor ones that music largely settled into after the seventeenth century. Modes tend to leave the music less tonally clear, sometimes giving it a floating quality.

The sacred choral works of the Renaissance have a distinctive purity and ethereal beauty. If you died and went to heaven and it sounded like that, it would seem just right—and that was essentially the intention of the composers. The secular music, on the other hand, the dances and love songs, have a fullness of sound that sets them off from medieval music. The work ranges from the sexy chansons of Josquin and others to the variously rowdy and tender work of the English madrigalists, who splendidly set to music some of the finest poetry in the language.

At the summit of the Renaissance musical repertoire stands the art of Franco-Flemish genius **Josquin des Prez**, whose work epitomizes these changes. Josquin absorbed the polyphonic art he inherited from the past and added his own innovations. Dazzling whether writing a traditional polyphonic sacred work or a ribald chanson, Josquin turned away from

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the exquisite but relatively impersonal church music of the time, bringing to everything he did a distinctive voice that marked him off not only as a master but as a striking personality.

Josquin was born ca. 1440 probably in Condé-sur-l'Escaut, and died there in August 1521, the most celebrated composer of his age. History first catches up with him in his early twenties, as he was beginning over three decades of wandering from one court and chapel job to another around Europe, including five years in the papal chapel in Rome. In his later years he returned to Condé and became provost of the collegiate church.

The few stories of Josquin that survive reveal him as somebody who knew his value and annoyed superiors when he did not jump as ordered. A letter putting forward another composer for a prince's chapel notes, "It is true that Josquin composes better, but he composes when he wants to and not when one wants him to, and he is asking 200 ducats in salary while Isaac will come for 120." (The prince had good taste; Josquin got the job.) Another story has him walking around his choirs as they rehearsed new pieces, making changes on the fly.

A familiar musical form in those days was the *motet*, a sacred choral work of moderate length. Josquin produced some of the greatest of the genre. For an ideal introduction to the depth and breadth of his art, begin with the exquisitely tender ***Ave Maria, gratia plena***, one of Josquin's most celebrated motets, and add the elegaic ***Absalon, fili mi***. From his secular work try the dashing little chanson **"El grillo"** (The Cricket), with its droll imitations of its subject. In another realm of feeling is the lovely love song, **"Mille regretz"**: "A thousand regrets at deserting you / and leaving behind your loving face."

On the more austere and churchly side of the Renaissance spectrum is the Franco-Flemish **Johannes Ockeghem** (1410–1497), once wrongly thought to have been a teacher of Josquin—though he was an influence on the younger man. Ockeghem was a wizard of a composer, adept in the polyphonic devices of the time, especially elaborate canons. His ***Missa prolationum*** is made entirely of mensuration canons, a difficult and esoteric technique in which the canonic answer enters faster than the original melody and catches up, so they end together. Ockeghem's ***Ave Maria*** shows the often dark and intense cast of his work, and his beautiful long-sustained melodies.

Have a listen also to the prolific Flemish master **Orlando di Lasso**,

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a.k.a. Orlande de Lassus (1530/32–1594). After various peripatetic jobs around Europe, he settled at the court of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria in Munich. Lassus was another composer equally adept at sacred and secular music. For a sample of his lighter things, try a couple of his many irresistible madrigals. **“Bonjour mon coeur”** (Good day, dear heart) is an exhilarating stretch of verbal and musical flirting. The lyric of **“Matona, mia cara”** depicts an attempt at seduction by an occupying German soldier serenading an Italian lady—“Matona” is his attempt at “Madonna.” He assures her that if she comes downstairs, he’s man enough to *ficar tutte notte*. Some performances censor this text—avoid those. Among the sacred works of Lassus is the ***Lagrime di San Pietro***, completed weeks before he died. Wielding the old polyphonic style with his customary vigor, he sets a collection of verses of eccentric religious obsession: each lyric concerns the same moment, when the disciple Peter meets the eyes of the risen Christ and feels the full weight of his betrayal. (All the aforementioned Renaissance composers and some of the noted pieces can be heard on the Hilliard Ensemble’s recorded compendium *Franco-Flemish Masterworks*.)

Finally there’s the legendary **Giovanni Perluigi da Palestrina** (1525–1594), whose sacred music is the distillation of Renaissance polyphony, the purest and most serene music of the era. In its polished perfection it became the main model for the study of writing polyphony, and it remains so today. The most famous of Palestrina’s many mass settings is the ***Missa Pappae Marcelli*** (Pope Marcellus Mass), not just because of the music but because of an old myth that the piece forestalled an edict by the Council of Trent banning polyphonic music in services. That isn’t so, but if anybody could have saved polyphony had it needed saving, Palestrina was the man.

Now we’ll move on to more familiar territory, the grand and dramatic work of the baroque, whose leading figures are two of the giants of all time: Bach and Handel.

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PART II

BAROQUE

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Chapter 3

THE BAROQUE PERIOD (CA. 1600–1750)

The word *baroque*, originally referring to a misshapen pearl, eventually became a term of derision for the florid architecture of the seventeenth century, which was out of fashion in the next generation. Among other things, the grandiose style of baroque churches, with their cloudy decoration, their painted ceilings seeming to stretch up to a heaven teeming with angels, was part of an initiative by the Catholic Church to challenge the appeal of the Protestant Revolution with grandeur to dazzle the senses. As often happens, over time baroque lost its negative connotations and simply became a label for the period.

In music, the baroque we're concerned with started in Italy around 1600, when a group of intellectuals known as the Florentine Camerata resolved to re-create ancient Greek drama—which they understood to be stories entirely sung. Their historical knowledge was dicey, so in practice they created an entirely new kind of artwork: *opera*, sung drama. Along with this new medium came a revolution in musical texture. In early opera the music was considered entirely the servant of the text and story. Declaring that Renaissance-style polyphony was not able to express concise emotions in a drama, the Camerata created a style in which a text was recited in a kind of singsong over simple harmonies, what was called *recitative*.

In terms of musical texture the result was a generally new kind of music we call *homophony*, which as previously noted refers to a single tune with chordal accompaniment—in other words, what has been the main definition of a song or instrumental piece ever since. As a result, harmony, which had always been seen as a kind of by-product of polyphony, now took on a new significance in itself. Composers began to think of harmony as a progression of chords. Often in early opera only

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the voice part and the instrumental bass line were written down; from the bass line and number symbols representing the chords, keyboard players improvised the accompaniment. This "figured bass" was much like a modern song lead sheet, which has only the tune and chord symbols.

In the seventeenth century Claudio Monteverdi called the old polyphonic style "first practice" and modern homophony "second practice." Monteverdi did not write the first operas, only the first great ones—*Orfeo* and *The Coronation of Poppea.* He began the process of moving beyond virtually all-recitative operas, in which the text was king and the music relatively simple, to richer musical fabric: songful and expressive arias, choruses, colorful instrumental accompaniments. Recitative persisted in opera into the nineteenth century, but more and more the musical elements and therefore musical interest tended to edge it out, until by the late eighteenth century Mozart declared the music in his operas more important than the words.

Still, polyphony, a.k.a. counterpoint, never died out. Both homophony and counterpoint coexisted, often in the same piece. Baroque composer Handel wrote plenty of tuneful homophonic music but was also a master of counterpoint. The supreme genius of counterpoint was a contemporary of Handel: Johann Sebastian Bach, who died in 1750. Bach's dedication to counterpoint marked him as a backward-looking composer among his colleagues, though he was also intensely aware of opera and other contemporary trends.

Bach was history's greatest writer of the contrapuntal procedure called fugue, another term that requires explanation. A *fugue* is a contrapuntal procedure/genre that was often used in the baroque, but was so effective and flexible that it lasted into the twentieth century: high-modernist Béla Bartók began his Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta with a massive fugue. A fugue can have any number of voices/lines, but usually involves three to five. It is based on a scrap of tune called the *subject*. The idea is that the subject gets passed from voice to voice, each voice picking it up like a topic in a conversation.

In practice the matter is more complicated. For one thing, in some (not all) fugues there's a *countersubject*, which is another scrap of melody that accompanies the subject throughout. Each time a new voice picks up the subject, the preceding voice continues on with the countersubject. Here's a diagram of the beginning of a three-voiced

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fugue with countersubject:

SUBJECT——————COUNTERSUBJECT——(FREE)—————————etc.
SUBJECT—————————COUNTERSUBJECT—etc.
SUBJECT————————etc.

As you see, after each voice has stated subject and countersubject, it goes on to mess around on its own. Meanwhile the entries of the subject are not all in the same key; the entries change keys as the fugue progresses. While all this pertains to the melodic lines, the whole shebang also has to make effective harmony, otherwise it would sound like random nonsense. As musicians put it, you have constantly to reconcile the demands of the *horizontal* (melody) and the *vertical* (harmony).

If all this seems complex and hard to manage for the poor composer, it bloody well is. Fugue and canon are some of the most difficult musical disciplines, which is why so many composers have been challenged and fascinated by them. And this is only the simplest form a fugue can take.

The diagram lays out what is called an *exposition* section in a fugue, which means a stretch where the subject is entering. Every fugue has several expositions, usually spaced by what are called *episodes*, which are sections of free counterpoint with no subject entries—but using material derived from the subject. So, in its large form a fugue will progress in the pattern exposition–episode–exposition–episode…, moving through various keys, for as long as you like. At the end there may be an exciting effect called a *stretto* (the Italian means "tight"), where the entries of the subject come in sooner, before each has finished, as if in its eagerness to be heard the subject steps on the heels of its twin. If a composer wants to end with a stretto, he or she has to plan it from the beginning in creating a subject that will allow for the effect. (Good counterpoint rarely happens by happy accident.)

There can also be *double fugues, triple fugues,* and so on, in which there is more than one subject in the course of the piece. All this describes a freestanding fugue. But any number of works, such as movements of symphonies and string quartets, have integrated fugal sections. Those sections often don't have complex structures involving episodes, strettos, and the like; they can be a *fughetta* (little fugue) or *fugato* (fugue-ish).

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With enough brain-breaking practice and a modicum of talent, any composer can learn to write canons and fugues. Thousands have been written over the centuries, many of them clever and technically impeccable. The trouble is, most of them are boring, because in addition to the daunting technical requirements, the piece is of little use if it doesn't also manage to be expressive—to be moving, charming, amusing, those kinds of things that we expect of music.

This is where the supremacy of J. S. Bach in contrapuntal music comes in. He seems to have had an Einsteinian sort of mind that could handle the most outlandish difficulties of fugue and canon with ease: whole fugues that are heard right-side up, then upside down; he produced fiendishly obscure puzzle canons; and so on. But as Bach told his composer sons: *never do anything, not even a little chorale harmonization, that does not say something*. In other words, that is not expressive, and in the case of a text, expressive of the feelings and images of that text.

Very few composers have had the gift of making complex counterpoint warm and human, as Bach did. A wonderful example of this is in his jazzy and dazzling ***Contrapunctus IX***, a double fugue with inversions of the subject, from ***The Art of Fugue***. That latter collection, a chain of fugues of increasing complexity all featuring the same subject, is one of the most esoteric pieces ever written, and yet it speaks to audiences in the most compelling and visceral way.

Another important formal pattern of the baroque period was the *concerto grosso* (big concerto), which sets off a small group of instruments against a larger group. The full group is called the *tutti* (meaning "everybody"); the solo group, the *soli*. The form of a concerto grosso is simple. It begins with a tutti, everybody playing an expansive tune on which the whole piece will be based; then there is a section for the soli, answered by the tutti on a bit of the opening theme; and so on: tutti–soli–tutti–soli–tutti… until you're done. Meanwhile the music changes key here and there for the sake of tonal variety, and at the end, everybody joins in on a big restatement of the full theme in the home key. Baroque concertos for solo instrument follow the same pattern. Handel and Bach wrote some supreme examples, such as the latter's six Brandenburg Concertos.

The baroque also saw a new interest in instrumental music (without vocals) and with writing music particular to the instruments that are

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playing it. In the Renaissance the instruments used in a piece tended to be somewhat ad hoc, because vocal and instrumental lines were written pretty much the same. In the baroque arrived schools of violin playing, of keyboard playing, and the like. Composers were concerned for the first time with writing, say, idiomatic fiddle music as distinct from flute music, flute music as distinct from vocal music, and so on. In a natural corollary, there was a new emphasis on instrumental and vocal virtuosity. At the same time, however, while the baroque had lots of orchestral music (and the Renaissance none) there was as yet no standard makeup of the band. You picked the instruments you wanted for a given piece and/or what instrumentalists you had at hand—music in those days was often performed as soon as the ink was dry.

This new emphasis on instrumental music led to a new concern with ways of organizing music, which is to say with "abstract" musical form. The old procedures of fugue and canon were still around, but we also see the forms and rhythms of dance music getting into big pieces, leading to such things as Bach's solo violin and cello works put together in dance genres of the time—allemande, sarabande, gigue, chaconne, and the like, each with its allied rhythms and moods.

It was the florid grandeur of composers such as Bach and Handel in their large works that allied them with the atmosphere of baroque churches. Tonally, Baroque counterpoint was distinct from the older Renaissance polyphony in being richer in sound, more concerned with harmony and concise progressions of chords. To our ears baroque harmony sounds more modern than it did in the Renaissance; it uses the familiar major and minor scales rather than modes, and in its course it changes keys more often. Meanwhile, especially in eighteenth-century Germany, composers adopted a "doctrine of the affections," in which a vocabulary of gestures in the melody, harmony, and rhythm were used to represent more or less specific emotions. Each movement of a work was founded on one basic musical idea and one expressive affect. An example is the **Crucifixus of Bach's Mass in B Minor**, with its mournful descending bass line.

Baroque music ranges from grand and magisterial to intimate, depending on the forces and the expression. How to tell a baroque piece by ear? I can't provide a handy guide to that other than to say when you've listened to some Handel and Bach and Vivaldi, you'll learn to recognize

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the sound, because among them they epitomized the period. You'll notice that, after the Renaissance, music got bigger, grander, more colorful in sound and harmony, and more expressive. The Renaissance went for an exquisite realization of something within limited means; the baroque went for lavish.

In brief, to understand the baroque you need to look at the invention of opera and the musical chain of events it unleashed. The new emphasis on a single melodic line with some kind of accompaniment, whether simple or florid, led in turn to all kinds of developments: solo song in its many manifestations, more elaborate and idiomatic instrumental music, a more harmonically controlled kind of counterpoint, and a new concern with form. What we call a *song* had been born.

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Chapter 4

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI (1567–1643)

Artistic genius comes in many flavors. Some blossom early, such as Schubert and Mozart; some late, such as Verdi and Dvořák. Some, such as Charles Ives, seem to come out of nowhere; others, such as Berlioz, are the distillation of their times. A special category belongs to the giants who bestride two ages, one foot in the past and the other in the future. One such genius was Claudio Monteverdi, who was a master of Renaissance polyphonic style he inherited from Palestrina and Josquin, but equally an innovator who brought unprecedented vitality to the revolutionary ideas of his time.

Born in Mantua in May 1567, Monteverdi began publishing his work in his teens. At twenty-three he entered the service of the splendiferous Gonzaga court in Mantua, working his way up through the ranks until he became head of court music at age thirty-five. Meanwhile he assimilated the ideas of the progressive composers around him who were moving beyond the old contrapuntal art toward a heightened emotional realism.

In 1603 and 1605 Monteverdi published two pioneering books of madrigals (small vocal pieces for usually two to five voices, intended for domestic music-making). Many of them are striking for their intense expressiveness, their angular melodies and dissonant harmonies. Their radical emotionalism famously incited a bitter attack from a conservative theorist named Artusi: "Such composers… have nothing but smoke in their heads if they are so impressed with themselves as to think they can corrupt, abolish, and ruin at will the good old rules handed down from days of old." Monteverdi, a feisty guy in the best of times, did not take the critique lying down. In 1605 he published a robust defense of himself and his fellow progressives that at once made history and cinched his fame. There are two "practices," he said: one, the old polyphonic sacred

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style of Palestrina et al., in which the music is more important than the text; the other, contemporary music that aspires to a new directness and expressiveness in expressing its text. Monteverdi himself was master of both styles, and used them all his life. He did not write the first operas, but his *Orfeo* of 1607 is the first masterpiece of the genre. He used pizzicatos (plucking the strings) to illustrate the clash of swords; he later invented the string tremolo, a twitching of the bow, to indicate trembling and intense emotion.

In listening to Monteverdi's madrigals, one can chart a path to his mature operas and other dramatic works. As an introduction, try his scintillating madrigal ***Zefiro torna*** for two voices and instruments (not to be confused with his five-voice madrigal of the same name). The text talks about summer breezes, about love and loneliness. Monteverdi set the poem in spiraling vocal lines set over a vigorous repeating bass line. The singers portray winds, longing, sex, in an impetuous and constantly changing collaboration and competition. (I recommend the ripsnorting version on YouTube by the L'Arpeggiata ensemble.)

After years of dissatisfaction in Mantua, the death of his wife, periods of depression and fitful production, in 1613 Monteverdi secured the grandest musical job in Italy, director of music at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. There, in his midforties, Monteverdi began the most remarkable and happiest phase of his life—or as happy as a depressive sort like him could manage. By then, more or less as a portfolio when he was looking for a job, he wrote the towering ***Vespers of the Blessed Virgin***, a.k.a. the Vespers of 1610. It begins with a breathtaking fanfare alternating with a dance, announcing itself not as a work of inward piety, but rather a product of the Catholic Counterreformation, to dazzle worshipers with splendor and spectacle. The Vespers is a work ranging far in emotions, but its foundation is in joy, and the prime source of its musical style the dramatic and humanistic world of his operas. Listen to the lusty, lilting **"Laudate, pueri Dominum,"** the music shifting nimbly moment to moment to capture the text. In **"Duo seraphim"** the voices weave a quietly magical, hypnotic tapestry. For me and I suspect for many, there are four supreme landmarks among major choral works: Bach's Mass in B Minor and *St. Matthew Passion*, Handel's *Messiah*, and the Monteverdi Vespers.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* of 1607 has a depth of passion and drama unprecedented in opera to that time. Here he showed his gift for painting

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