

Who's Who in Early Music

The Legacy of the Middle Ages

From the fall of the Roman Empire in the West to the time of Dante, who died in 1321 A.D., Catholic Christianity built a majestic edifice of hope and faith from the ruins of barbarism. While troubadours roamed the countryside and the Crusaders were trying to liberate Jerusalem from Islam (~1100-1300), there was a flowering of romantic poetry and a revival of classical Latin studies during the *Ars Antiqua* period. In the great French cathedrals, composers of the *Ars Antiqua* began to experiment with multiple voices singing different notes – something that had never been tried before – with some, though not unqualified, success.

As the Papal dream of a Europe united under one religion waned (~1300-1400), secular music began to compete with church music during the *Ars Nova* period. Troubadours sang songs of love and war while church composers refined *motets* based on Latin verses. New musical forms such as *madrigals* and *chansons* gained popularity as the centers of culture expanded from Rome and Paris to Burgundy and Flanders. In *Renaissance* Italy, France, and Spain, Christianity remained strong, although in Italy, the Humanists were free to pursue their work of science and philosophy without destroying the faith of the people. In contrast, the northern nations were emerging from a troubled period of political and religious conflicts, which eventually split the Catholic Church by the time of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation (1517).

We'll begin with some brief biographies of a few famous composers in the Netherlands Schools (~1400-1500). Then we'll move on to Renaissance (~1500-1600) and Baroque composers (~1600-1750), whose names – to early music aficionados – are as familiar as Beethoven and Brahms, Schubert and Schumann are to us.

Renaissance Composers

Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474) – Born near Brussels and raised in Cambrai in Picardy (northern France), he was an important early Renaissance composer whose music bridged the gap between late Medieval compositions and Renaissance polyphony. Since Cambrai is fairly near England, Dufay was influenced by the English composer, John Dunstable. Dufay followed Dunstable's lead in integrating the English style into the music of Burgundy, with its emphasis on thirds instead of parallel fifths, and more use of melody within the polyphonic texture of the music. In 1426 he moved to Bologna to serve Cardinal Louis Aleman. 1428 was a critical year for Dufay: he became a priest, moved to Rome, and became a member of the Papal Choir, serving Pope Martin V and Pope Eugene IV. Caught up in the struggle between the popes and antipopes, he traveled extensively, and eventually returned to Cambrai, where he was appointed Canon of the Cathedral. His music was frequently performed during his lifetime. He wrote several cantus firmus Masses based on popular chanson melodies.



Josquin des Préz (1450-1521) – Considered the most famous composer of the Burgundian School – the first phase of activity of the Franco-Flemish School – whose members wrote polyphonic vocal music in France, Flanders, and Picardy. Josquin lived during the era between Dufay (early Renaissance) and Giovanni Palestrina (high Renaissance). The largest collection of his manuscript works, containing no fewer than twenty Masses, is in the possession of the papal chapel in Rome. Most printed music of the 16th century used woodcuts, or later, engravings; movable type was suitable for books but not for music. In his lifetime Josquin was honored as an eminent composer, and the musicians of the 16th century praised him highly.

Adriaan Willaert (1490-1562) – Born in the Netherlands, Willaert was one of the members of the Franco-Flemish school who moved to Italy and transplanted their polyphonic music there. In 1527, he was appointed as *maestro di cappella* of St. Mark's at Venice, where he lived the rest of his life and founded the Venetian School. Composers came from all over Europe to study with him. In addition to his output of sacred music as the director of St. Mark's, he wrote numerous madrigals, motets, and chansons.

Orlando di Lasso (1530/32-1594) – Also called Roland De Lassus, he was an impressive Flemish composer whose music epitomized the late Franco-Flemish style. He was a master of both sacred and secular music. He was taken into the service of Ferdinand of Gonzaga, general to Charles V, and travelled with the imperial army in its French campaign in 1544. He accompanied Gonzaga to Italy in 1544, where he remained for ten years. He was appointed *maestro di cappella* of the papal church of St. John Lateran at Rome in 1553, a post later held by Palestrina. Later, he joined the court chapel of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria in Munich. He published books of Italian madrigals, French chansons, and German lieder. A collection of 516 Latin motets was published posthumously in 1604. His best known work is *Psalmi Davidis Poenitentiales*, a collection of penitential psalms.

Thomas Tallis (1510-1585) – Born in Greenwich, England, Tallis was sponsored by Queen Elizabeth I. One of the most important composers of English sacred music before William Byrd, he composed for both the Catholic and Protestant liturgies. He paraphrased the Mass for four voices in clear, simple, harmonic style. His style encompassed the simple Reformation service music and the great continental polyphonic schools. In 1575, Queen Elizabeth granted Tallis and Byrd the monopoly for printing music and music paper in England. Their first publication was a collection of 34 motets, 16 by Tallis and 18 by Byrd. Titled *Cantiones sacrae*, it was printed in 1575. In his *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, the words “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God,” may have had special significance for Tallis, a Catholic in a Protestant country.



William Byrd (1540-1623) – Byrd was born in Essex. He was a pupil of Thomas Tallis and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. An English organist and composer of the Shakespearean age, Byrd is best known for his development of the English madrigal. He wrote in many of the forms current in England at the time, including various types of sacred and secular polyphony, keyboard (the so-called Virginalist school), and consort music. He produced sacred music for use in Anglican services, although he himself became a Roman Catholic in later life and wrote Catholic sacred music as well. He composed extensively for every medium then available except the lute.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) – Italian Renaissance composer of more than 105 masses and 250 motets, a master of contrapuntal composition (“Old Practice”). Palestrina lived during the period of the Catholic Counter-Reformation (1560 to the close of the Thirty Years' War, 1648) and was a primary representative of the 16th-century conservative Catholic approach to church music. By 1551, he was responsible for the music at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and in 1554, he composed a Mass for Pope Julius III. In 1561, at the invitation of Cardinal Ippolito d’Este he then took charge of the music at the Villa d’Este in Tivoli, the Cardinal’s summer resort near Rome. He was in Cardinal d’Este’s service for four years. Eventually he returned to Rome. In acknowledgment of his position as the most celebrated Roman musician, he was given in 1578 the title of master of music at the Vatican Basilica.



Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590) – Venetian composer and writer on music, the most celebrated music theorist of the mid-16th century. In 1536 he was a singer at Chioggia Cathedral in the Archdiocese of Venice. By 1539 he became not only a deacon but also principal organist. He studied music under Adriaan Willaert at St. Mark’s in Venice, where in 1565 he became music director. Zarlino’s first treatise, *Istitutioni harmoniche* (1558), brought him rapid fame. It gives a shrewd account of musical thinking during the first half of the 16th century, and Zarlino’s thoughts on tuning, chords, and modes anticipate 17th- and 18th-century developments.

Giovanni Gabrieli (1556-1612) - Venetian Renaissance composer, organist, and teacher, celebrated for his sacred music, including massive choral and instrumental motets for the liturgy. He was one of the most influential musicians of his time, and represents the culmination of the style of the Venetian School, at the time of the shift from Renaissance to Baroque styles. He studied with his uncle, Andrea Gabrieli, who was well-known as a composer of madrigals and who had numerous important connections. He then went to Munich to study with the Renaissance composer, Orlando di Lasso. By 1584 he had returned to Venice, where he became principal organist at Saint Mark’s Basilica in 1585, after Claudio Merulo left the post; following his uncle's death the following year he took the post of principal composer as well. In later years Giovanni became an influential teacher; his most notable student was the German Heinrich Schütz.



Giulio Caccini (1550-1618) – Late 16th century Italian singer and composer. During his childhood in Rome, Caccini studied the lute, the viol and the harp, and began to acquire a reputation as a singer. In the 1560s, Francesco de' Medici, Grand Duke of Florence, was so impressed with Caccini’s talent that he took the boy to Florence for further study. By 1579, Caccini was singing for weddings and music dramas at the Medici court. Music dramas preceded the types of operas with which we are familiar: the music and dramatic activity are completely interrelated, and there were no arias, recitatives, or ensembles. In the last two decades of the 16th century, Caccini continued his activities as a singer, teacher and composer. His songs helped to establish and disseminate the new style of *monody* that was introduced in Italy about 1600. He wrote *Le nuove musiche* (1602; “The New Music”). This is music in which an expressive melody is accompanied by evocative chords, as opposed to the traditional polyphonic style with its complex interweaving of several melodic lines.

Jacopo Peri (1561-1633) – Italian composer and singer. In 1588, Peri entered the service of the Medici court in Florence. In the early 1600s, he entered the Gonzaga court in Mantua. He composed the first Italian operas (which were still known as musical dramas) including *Dafne* (1594-98 in collaboration with Corsi) and *Eurydice* (1600, in collaboration with his rival, Caccini). It was Peri and Caccini who set the stage for the famous operas of Claudio Monteverdi, which continue to be performed today.

Baroque Composers

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) – Venetian composer, viol player and singer who stood at the crossroads from Renaissance to Baroque music and merged “Old Practice” (polyphony) with “New Practice” (monody). He composed 40 operas, nine books of madrigals, and introduced vocal declamation (recitative marked by strong feelings) with basso continuo accompaniment. He published his first book of motets in Venice when he was only 15 years old. In 1587, he published the first of nine books of madrigals. He was eventually appointed to the Court of Mantua in 1592, initially as a viol player. He composed the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (Vespers of the Blessed Virgin) in 1610. Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*, first performed in Mantua in 1607, was a tale to which composers would return time and time again. In 1637, the first public opera houses opened in Venice. In 1642 he composed his final opera, the *Coronation of Poppea*.



Monteverdi was the first composer to identify specific instruments to accompany his operatic soloists.

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) – German composer and organist, born in Bad Köstritz, Schütz was generally regarded as the most important German composer before Johann Sebastian Bach and often considered to be one of the most important composers of the 17th century. Schütz's compositions show the influence of his teacher Gabrieli (especially his polychoral works) and of Monteverdi. Additionally, the influence of the Netherlandish composers of the 16th century is prominent in his work. His best known works are in the field of sacred music, ranging from solo voice with instrumental accompaniment to a cappella choral music.

John Playford (1623-1686) – A London bookseller, publisher, minor composer, and member of the Stationers' Company, Playford published books on music theory, instruction books for several instruments, and psalters with tunes for singing in churches. He is best known today for his publication of *The English Dancing Master* in 1651 during the period of the Puritan-dominated Commonwealth. Compiled from English ancestral country dance, the collection went through no fewer than 18 printings in 24 years. This work contains both the music and instructions for English country dances. This came about after Playford, working as a war correspondent, was captured by Cromwell's men and told that, if he valued his freedom (as a sympathizer with the King), he might consider a change of career. During the Restoration of the English Monarchy under Charles II, he turned to more serious music, and in 1662 he dedicated his *Cantica Sacra* to Queen Henrietta Maria.

Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1714) – Born in Bologna, Corelli was considered the leading violinist of his day. He regularly conducted concerts and was also Antonio Vivaldi’s teacher. After studying in Bologna during his early teens, he moved to Rome at age 19 and studied composition under Matteo Simonelli. He soon established himself as one of Rome’s leading musicians and won the patronage of Queen Christina of Sweden, who had moved to Rome following her abdication. After she died, he entered the service of Cardinal Pamphili, who paid him very well and gave him rooms at the palace. He remained in Rome for the rest of his life and died a very wealthy man. Although he didn’t invent the concerto grosso, he developed it, popularized it, taught it, and wrote 23 of them, plus 12 violin sonatas and 48 trio sonatas.



Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) - Italian composer born in Palermo, Sicily. Scarlatti was sent to Rome at about the age of 12; there he met Bernardo Pasquini, by whom he was greatly influenced. The first of his 115 operas, *Gli equivoci nel sembiante* (1679) won him the protection of Queen Christina of Sweden, for whom he wrote *L'honestà negli amori* (1680) and in whose service he remained until 1684. He traveled throughout Italy, holding many important posts. He is chiefly remembered for his operas, in which he established the form of the Italian overture (*i.e.*, the opera overture in three sections, allegro-adagio-allegro), which was a forerunner of the classical symphony. He wrote little orchestral music, but he contributed to the development of the opera orchestra.

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1787) – An Italian composer, son of Alessandro Scarlatti, Domenico was born in Naples. He began his compositional career following in the footsteps of his father Alessandro Scarlatti by writing operas, chamber cantatas, and other vocal music, but he is most remembered for his 555 keyboard sonatas, written between *approximately* 1719 and 1757. Domenico was sent to Venice in 1705, where he met Handel, and in 1708 to Rome to become *maestro di cappella* to the exiled queen of Poland, Maria Casimira, and later, head of the *Cappella Giulia*. He also became teacher to Princess Maria Barbara of Portugal. When she married the Spanish prince Ferdinando, Scarlatti followed her to Spain, writing cantatas for their singers as well as a collection of keyboard sonatas.



Antonio Lucio Vivaldi (1678-1741) – Nicknamed *il Prete Rosso* (“The Red Priest”), Vivaldi was a Venetian priest and Baroque music composer, as well as a famous virtuoso violinist. *The Four Seasons*, a series of four violin concerti, is his best-known work and a highly popular Baroque piece. Vivaldi was employed for most of his working life by the Ospedale della Pietà. Often termed an “orphanage”, this Ospedale was in fact a home for the illegitimate female offspring of noblemen and their numerous dalliances with their mistresses. The Ospedale was thus well endowed by the “anonymous” fathers. Its furnishings bordered on the opulent, the young ladies were well looked-after, and the musical standards among the highest in Venice.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) – One of the most important French composers of the Baroque era, Rameau was born in Dijon, France. He is best known today for his harpsichord music, operas, and works in other theatrical genres, but in his lifetime he was also famous as a music theorist. He attacked traditional theory on the ground that “The Ancients,” who to Rameau included such relatively recent

writers as the 16th-century Italian Gioseffo Zarlino, "...based the rules of harmony on melody, instead of beginning with harmony, which comes first." Intuitively basing his studies on the natural overtone series, he arrived at a system of harmony that is the basis of most 20th-century harmony textbooks. Moving to Paris in 1715, Rameau replaced Jean-Baptiste Lully as the dominant composer of French opera and is also considered the leading French composer for the harpsichord of his time, alongside François Couperin. In 1745 Rameau produced his most important comic opera, *Platée*, as well as two collaborations with Voltaire: the *opéra-ballet Le temple de la gloire* and the *comédie-ballet La princesse de Navarre*, which gained official recognition for Rameau. He was granted the title *Compositeur du Cabinet du Roi* and given a substantial pension.

Jean-Marie Leclair (1697-1764) – French dancer, composer, and violinist, born into a family of amateur musicians in Lyon. In 1722 he joined the Teatro Regio of Turin as premier danseur and ballet master but he found time to compose three intermezzi for *Semiramide*, an opera by Giuseppe Maria Orlandini. It was there that he made the acquaintance of Joachim Quantz. Leclair studied violin technique under Giovanni Battista Somis, a student of Corelli, an encounter which was to launch his career as a violinist. From 1728 on, during a time when the violin was not particularly popular in France, he pursued a career as a violinist both at home and abroad. In 1734 he was appointed *Premier Symphoniste du Roy*, and in gratitude to Louis XV, he dedicated his Third Book of Sonatas to the monarch.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) – Considered the finest English composer of his day. As the son of a musician at Court, a chorister at the Chapel Royal, and the holder of continuing royal appointments until his untimely death, Purcell worked in Westminster for three different kings over 25 years. In addition to his royal duties, Purcell also devoted much of his talent to writing operas and incidental stage music for plays. He was a well-known member of the London concert scene and also wrote chamber music. In 1683 a group of gentlemen amateurs, and professional musicians started a Musical Society in London to celebrate the Festival of Saint Cecilia, a great patroness of music (celebrated on November 22nd). They asked Henry Purcell, then only 24 years old, to be the first to write an Ode for their festivals; later, Purcell composed two more such Odes for the Society. Between 1680 and 1688 Purcell wrote music for seven plays; he also composed his chamber opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, during this same period. In 1685, he wrote two of his finest anthems, *I was glad* and *My heart is inditing*, for the coronation of King James II.



Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) – German composer of the late Baroque period, born in Magdeburg, Brandenburg. He wrote both sacred and secular music but was most admired for his church compositions, which ranged from small cantatas to large-scale works for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Telemann was one of the most prolific composers in history and was considered by his contemporaries to be one of the leading German composers of the time. He was compared favorably both to his friend Johann Sebastian Bach, who made Telemann the godfather and namesake of his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, and to George Frideric Handel, whom Telemann also knew personally. Telemann's music incorporated both the French and Italian styles, and was sometimes influenced by Polish popular music. He remained at the forefront of all new musical tendencies and his music is an important link between the late Baroque and early Classical styles.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) – German-born, British Baroque composer famous for his operas, oratorios, anthems and organ concertos. Born in a family indifferent to music, Handel received critical training in Halle, Hamburg and Italy before settling in London (1712), and became a naturalized British subject in 1727. He was strongly influenced both by the great composers of the Italian Baroque and the middle-German polyphonic choral tradition. Handel is regarded as one of the greatest composers of the Baroque era, with works such as *Water Music*, *Music for the Royal Fireworks* and *Messiah* remaining popular. One of his four Coronation Anthems, *Zadok the Priest* (1727), composed for the coronation of George II of Great Britain, has been performed at every subsequent British coronation.



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) – Born in Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany, on March 21, 1685, Johann



Sebastian Bach came from a family of musicians, stretching back several generations. At the age of 7, Bach went to school where he received religious instruction and studied Latin and other subjects. His Lutheran faith would influence his later musical works. From his youth, Bach had a growing reputation as a great keyboard performer, and it was his great technical skill that landed him various organist positions in Weimar, Arnstadt, Cöthen, and Leipzig during the early 18th century. He created a vast number of famous compositions like the *B Minor Mass*, *Saint Matthew* and *Saint John Passions*, *Brandenburg Concertos*, keyboard pieces, choral and solo cantatas, and pieces for solo instruments, including some of his finest violin works.

In 1717, Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen hired Bach to serve as his Kapellmeister (director of music). Himself a musician, the prince appreciated Bach's talents, paid him well, and gave him considerable latitude in composing and performing. The prince was Calvinist and did not use elaborate music in his worship; accordingly, most of Bach's work from this period was secular, including the orchestral suites, the cello suites, the sonatas and partitas for solo violin, and the Brandenburg concertos. This was the era during which Italian violin makers like Stradivarius were creating their finest instruments using better designs, carefully selected wood and new types of varnish.

Bach's cantatas are among his most significant and celebrated compositions. While many have been lost, at least 209 of the cantatas composed by Bach have survived. Especially during Bach's tenure as a cantor of the main churches of Leipzig (the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche), it was part of his job to perform a church cantata every Sunday and Holiday, related to the readings prescribed by the Lutheran liturgy for the specific occasion. In his first years in Leipzig, starting after Trinity Sunday 1723, he composed a new work every week and conducted soloists, the choir and orchestra as part of the church service. His cantatas usually require four soloists and a four-part choir singing Biblical verses, contemporary poetry and chorales, but he also wrote solo cantatas for one soloist and dialogue cantatas for two singers.