

Exploration of Ancient Keyboard Music Styles in the Baroque Period

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Abstract: This paper systematically explores the development, artistic characteristics, and performance techniques of Baroque keyboard music. By analyzing the social and cultural background of the period, it delves into the technical evolution of keyboard instruments and their impact on musical style. The article focuses on the characteristics of Baroque keyboard music in emotional expression, musical structure, and the use of ornamentation. It also discusses in detail the application of counterpoint techniques and harmonic language. Furthermore, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of the performance techniques required for Baroque keyboard music, its improvisational style, and artistic expressiveness, offering theoretical support and practical guidance for the understanding and interpretation of Baroque keyboard music.

Keywords: Baroque Music; Early Keyboard Instruments; Musical Style

Introduction

The Baroque period was a significant developmental stage in Western music history, with its music achieving a high level of excellence in form, content, and expressive techniques^[1]. As an important component of music during this period, Baroque keyboard music not only inherited and developed the musical traditions of the Renaissance but also created a unique artistic style and expressive methods. This paper aims to explore the development, stylistic features, and performance techniques of Baroque keyboard music in depth, with the goal of offering a deeper understanding and appreciation of this important musical form.

1. Historical Background of Baroque Keyboard Music

1.1 Social and Cultural Characteristics of the Baroque Period

From the 16th century to the first half of the 18th century, European society underwent profound transformations, and the social and cultural landscape of this period exhibited distinctive characteristics^[2]. The further consolidation of feudal absolutism fostered the flourishing development of court art, while the continuing influence of the church kept religious music in a dominant position. At the same time, the rise of the emerging bourgeoisie provided a new social foundation and aesthetic demand for the development of musical



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arts. Baroque art pursued grandeur, magnificence, and luxurious effects, a tendency that profoundly influenced architecture, painting, sculpture, and other art forms of the time, with music being no exception. Within this social and cultural atmosphere, music composition displayed a combination of elegance and solemnity with emotional lyricism, pursuing both formal completeness and technical brilliance. The frequent occurrence of court concerts and church music events provided an important platform for the development of keyboard music, facilitating innovation in musical forms and expressive methods. Additionally, the influence of humanism led to a greater emphasis on emotional expression in music, with composers striving for a unity between music and humanistic spirit.

The socio-economic development during the Baroque period laid a solid foundation for the flourishing of musical arts. Among the various social groups, the music patronage system established by the aristocracy played a key role in the formation of a professional musician class. Simultaneously, significant progress was made in music theory, which provided the essential theoretical support for the development of Baroque keyboard music. The vigorous development of urban musical culture created a vast space for the dissemination of keyboard music, especially with the rise of bourgeois concerts, which gradually brought music to the public and greatly contributed to the popularization of keyboard music^[3]. Advances in printing technology stimulated the growth of the music publishing industry, allowing musical works to spread more widely, further expanding the influence of keyboard music. The music aesthetic ideas formed during the Baroque period emphasized the rhetoric and emotional expressiveness of music, deeply influencing the direction and expressive methods of keyboard music composition and imparting distinctive characteristics of the era.

1.2 The Technological Evolution of Early Keyboard Instruments

During the Baroque period, early keyboard instruments underwent significant technological innovations and developments. The harpsichord, one of the most important keyboard instruments of this period^[4], saw continuous improvement in its craftsmanship, an expanding range, and more expressive tonal qualities. Instrument makers enhanced the harpsichord's

expressiveness by improving the materials used for the strings, optimizing the plectrum mechanism, and adding stops for tonal variation. The organ also reached new heights during this time, with improvements such as an increased number of pipes, enhancements to the wind pressure system, and refinements to the keyboard mechanism, which greatly enhanced the instrument's performance capabilities. The appearance of the early piano introduced new expressive possibilities for keyboard music. Although it only began to gain widespread use in the late Baroque period, its ability to vary dynamics had already begun to show its advantages.

The craftsmanship of instruments during the Baroque period became increasingly specialized and refined, with distinct regional schools and traditions emerging. The selection and processing of string materials saw constant improvements, with the use of metal wire strings enhancing the brightness and durability of the sound. The design of the plectrum mechanism became more rational, reducing mechanical noise and improving the sensitivity of playing. The development of the stops allowed the harpsichord to achieve a greater variety of tonal changes, while also promoting the development of polyphonic performance techniques. Improvements in the keyboard mechanism increased the accuracy and smoothness of playing, providing technical support for the performance of more complex music. The advancements in instrument-making also spurred progress in music theory, particularly in the areas of tuning and timbre, where significant breakthroughs were made^[5].

1.3 The Relationship Between Baroque Music and Early Keyboard Music

There exists a close, interactive relationship between the development of Baroque music and early keyboard music. Baroque keyboard music inherited the general characteristics of the period's musical art while developing its own distinct artistic style. The widespread use of basso continuo allowed keyboard instruments to play a significant role in instrumental ensembles, serving both as the foundation for harmonic progression and the support for rhythmic patterns. At the same time, keyboard music compositions absorbed the lyricism and dramatic qualities of vocal music, resulting in expressive melodic language.

Meanwhile, the development of instrumental forms

provided rich compositional structures for keyboard music, with genres such as the fugue, prelude, and toccata becoming key forms of keyboard composition. The flourishing of polyphonic music provided essential technical resources for keyboard music composition, promoting the development and application of counterpoint techniques^[6]. The emphasis on emotional expression in Baroque music was fully embodied in keyboard music, resulting in a unique musical language and expressive style. Furthermore, the development of keyboard music, in turn, advanced the progress of music as a whole, offering new possibilities for musical composition.

2. Stylistic Features of Baroque Keyboard Music

2.1 Emotional Expression and Musical Structure

Baroque keyboard music is characterized by distinct emotional expression, with its musical structure being both rigorous and logical. This is mainly due to the careful design and ingenious arrangement of the composers. They paid great attention to the delicate expression of emotions, skillfully conveying rich emotional content through meticulously designed melodic lines and harmonic progressions. Various musical techniques such as motive development, theme variation, and rhythmic contrast were employed to construct clear, interlinked musical structures.

The development of musical forms such as fugues and suites fully reflects the composers' unique understanding and sophisticated treatment of musical structure, showcasing their superb compositional skills and profound musical insight. Keyboard music compositions fully utilized the characteristics of keyboard instruments. Composers, while maintaining strict structural integrity and logical coherence, also sought to enrich expressiveness and emotional depth. They often employed contrasts of dynamics, tempo, and pitch within the compositions, skillfully incorporating these contrasts into the formal structure, making them effective tools for emotional expression. As a result, the music achieved an artistic realm where structure and emotion were perfectly unified, blending reason with feeling.

2.2 The Use of Ornamentation and Improvisation

The widespread use of ornamentation and the prominence of improvisation are two major

characteristics of Baroque keyboard music, which had a profound and positive impact on the development of music during this period. Ornamentation in Baroque music did not merely serve to embellish the melody but became an essential tool for musical expression. Baroque musicians gradually developed a system of standardized ornament symbols and performance rules, which not only aligned with the musical style of the time but also reflected the performer's artistic cultivation and musical literacy.

Another important characteristic that went hand in hand with ornamentation was the significant role of improvisation in Baroque keyboard music. Performers were expected to freely improvise within a given harmonic framework, creating spontaneous musical compositions. This was especially important in the realization of basso continuo, where performers were required to have advanced improvisational skills in harmonization. The perfect combination of ornamentation and improvisation greatly expanded the expressive range of Baroque keyboard music, giving it a lively, colorful, and dynamic quality. This was a major breakthrough in the history of music development.

2.3 The Manifestation of Counterpoint and Harmony in Baroque Keyboard Music

The handling of counterpoint and harmony is a core element of Baroque keyboard music. The keyboard music of this period fully demonstrates the artistic appeal of counterpoint, with the independent movement of voices and their interweaving creating rich musical textures. At the same time, the development of harmonic language made musical expression more varied and colorful. Harmonic progressions followed certain rules while also allowing for creativity.

The application of counterpoint techniques is reflected in various aspects, such as thematic imitation, counterpoint design, and the interweaving of voices. Composers excelled in employing various contrapuntal techniques, such as imitation, canon, augmentation, and diminution, to create complex yet unified musical effects. The combination of counterpoint and harmony formed the unique artistic style of Baroque keyboard music, a style that not only displays technical brilliance but also embodies profound artistic content.

3. Performance Techniques and Expression in Baroque Keyboard Music

3.1 Technical Requirements for Playing Baroque Keyboard Music

Baroque keyboard music demands strict technical proficiency from performers. Players must master solid foundational skills, including finger flexibility, precise touch, and voice independence. The application of fingering should adhere to the performance traditions of the Baroque period, while also considering the expressive needs of the music. A crucial task in performance is the clear expression of each voice, requiring the performer to accurately control the volume balance of each part. The handling of ornamentation necessitates a deep understanding of the Baroque performance rules and stylistic characteristics.

The control of tempo must be based on an accurate understanding of the musical style, maintaining rhythmic stability while reflecting the fluidity of the music. The choice of touch should take into account the characteristics of different instruments, as there are significant differences in playing techniques between the harpsichord and the organ. Dynamic control must be carefully adjusted according to the musical content and expressive needs. Furthermore, phrasing and breathing must adhere to the natural flow of the music, reflecting its structural depth.

3.2 Techniques and Style of Improvisation

Improvisation holds a special place and importance in Baroque keyboard music. Performers need to master the fundamental principles and techniques of improvisation, including harmonic progression design, melodic ornamentation, and rhythmic variation. The realization of basso continuo requires the performer to have the ability to improvise harmonies, accurately realizing them based on the numerical indications provided. Ornamentation should be added spontaneously, with consideration given to the musical style and expressive needs, avoiding excessive embellishment that disrupts the natural flow of the music. The improvisation of theme variations must be rooted in a deep understanding of the original material, ensuring the preservation of stylistic coherence.

Improvisation techniques differ according to the type of music, with distinct approaches for sacred and secular music. The cultivation of improvisation

skills requires long-term accumulation and practice, emphasizing the study of theoretical knowledge and the reflection on practical experience. Performers should aim to maintain personalized expression in their improvisations while respecting the historical performance traditions.

3.3 Artistic and Expressive Analysis of Music

The artistic expressiveness of Baroque keyboard music is manifested on multiple levels. The overall conception of a musical work must reflect a clear artistic intention, with an organic connection between its various sections. The handling of melodic lines should emphasize the flow and expressiveness of the music, achieving a rich tonal effect through appropriate touch and dynamic variation. The design of harmonic progressions should serve the expressive needs of the music, using harmonic color changes to enhance the overall expressiveness.

Rhythm should reflect the vitality of the music, maintaining stability while incorporating elasticity. The sense of layering in voices must be realized through precise control, enriching the musical structure. Performance should focus on the overall effect, maintaining balance between the various elements. This requires performers to have a deep understanding of the work's artistic content, using their individual artistic cultivation to provide a unique interpretation.

Conclusion

Baroque keyboard music, as an important component of Western music history, developed a unique artistic style and expressive characteristics throughout its evolution. By systematically exploring its historical background, stylistic features, and performance techniques, we gain a deeper understanding of the artistic value of this musical form. Its refined technical demands, rich expressive methods, and profound artistic content not only reflect the musical achievements of that era but also provide a valuable artistic heritage for the development of music in later generations. Contemporary musicians, while inheriting and advancing the Baroque musical tradition, should delve into its artistic features, accurately grasp its performance requirements, and strive to achieve a precise interpretation and innovative development of this significant musical form.

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