

The Baroque Era 1600-1750

Baroque Vocal Music Forms

The most popular vocal forms were long, dramatic works. The singing style was what we today would consider operatic sounding. There are four main forms, and each form uses common elements in order to tell a story.

The FOUR VOCAL FORMS are:

1. OPERA

A long, dramatic musical presentation for singers and orchestra making use of costumes, sets, scenery, lighting, and stage actions. Essentially, a play **sung** by actors portraying characters on a stage in a *theater*; normally sung throughout thus trading some sense of reality for the greater emotional power of music. Usually secular and based on stories of love or mythology. [Opera Example](#)

2. ORATORIO

A dramatic musical presentation for singers and orchestra based on a theme or text from scripture (usually, but not always from the Old Testament). *Presented in a concert hall as a musical performance*, not a theatrical performance. No costumes, scenery, staging or acting. Sacred. [Oratorio Example](#)

3. PASSION

Basically an oratorio with a specific theme – the suffering and death of Christ. Sacred. Most popular during Lent. [O Sacred Head from Bach's Passion according the St. Matthew](#)

4. CANTATA

A short oratorio-like work used *during a church service* to reinforce the readings of the day. Always ends with a chorale, enabling the entire congregation to join in on the last part. Usually sacred. [Cantata Example](#)

The above FOUR VOCAL FORMS tell the stories using the following singing techniques:

- RECITATIVE

Sung conversation, sung dialogue. Speech-like singing style with little repetition of words and sparse accompaniment. Loose rhythm. Mostly syllabic. Speech-like singing whose purpose is to tell the story. Moves the plot forward. Used in all four vocal forms, but most prevalent in opera. [Opera Recit](#)
[Oratorio Recit](#)

- ARIA

A long, expressive song that normally doesn't say much about the story but will emphasize an emotion brought about by the plot, beauty of the voices and extraordinary ability of the singers. Difficult to sing, much repetition of words, lots of melismatic singing. Usually follows ABA form (Da Capo – “back to the top”). Accompaniment is very thick and important, unlike recitative. Very definite rhythm. Used in all four vocal forms. [Opera Aria - Che faro Senza Euridice](#) [Oratorio aria - Every Valley](#)

- CHORUS

Sections of the work that involve large groups of singers (12-250+). Usually blockbuster moments. Used frequently in Oratorios, Passions, and Cantatas; used less often in Opera. [Chorus - Hallelujah Amen](#)
[Opera Chorus - Anvil Chorus](#)

To experience how seamlessly these are weaved together, follow these links.

[Amahl and the Night Visitors](#) [Bach Cantata 147](#)