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Musical Instruments in Western European Music of the 15th-17th Centuries and Their Evolution

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Abstract: This article discusses the formation and development of key musical instruments in Western Europe during the 15th-17th centuries. This period is marked by the transition from the late Renaissance to the Baroque era. The transformation is analyzed in the context of the technical capabilities of musical instruments, as well as instrumental modernization, which laid the foundation for the genre system and performance culture of subsequent eras.

Keywords: musical instruments, Renaissance, Baroque, musical genres, instrumental music, transformation, modernization.

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1. Introduction

The period of the 15th-17th centuries in Western European instrumental music represents a time of fundamental changes in music history[1]. This period spans the late Renaissance and the beginning of the Baroque era, characterized by the expansion of the technical capabilities of musical instruments, the increasing complexity of performance styles, and the emergence of new musical genres. The process of separating instrumental music from vocal music as an independent art form gained momentum during this time[2]. Innovations in the construction of musical instruments and the expansion of their timbre and dynamic range allowed composers to create more complex and expressive works, which, in turn, led to the development of virtuoso performance techniques. These changes profoundly influenced both musical theory and practice, accelerating the transition from polyphony to homophony and laying the groundwork for the formation of the concerto genre[3].

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical research design to examine the evolution of musical instruments in Western Europe during the 15th–17th centuries and their role in shaping instrumental music traditions[4]. The research is based on a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary scholarly sources, including historical treatises, musicological literature, and studies on Renaissance and Baroque musical practices[5]. The methodological framework integrates historical-contextual analysis to investigate the socio-cultural and artistic conditions that influenced the development and modernization of musical instruments, particularly during the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque period[6]. In addition, a comparative approach is applied to examine the structural, acoustic, and functional differences among major instrument families, including string-plucked, keyboard, string-bowed, and wind instruments[7]. Special attention is given to the evolution of specific instruments such as the lute, harpsichord, organ, viola da gamba, violin family, and recorder, analyzing their technical

improvements, timbral characteristics, and performance applications[8]. The study also incorporates elements of descriptive and content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the development of musical genres associated with these instruments, such as the emergence of the suite, toccata, fugue, and concerto forms[9]. Furthermore, the research considers the contributions of prominent composers and performers in expanding instrumental capabilities and performance techniques. By synthesizing historical evidence with analytical interpretation, this methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of how instrumental innovation influenced musical aesthetics, genre formation, and performance culture in Western Europe during the 15th–17th centuries[10].

3. Result and Discussion

Lute: Among the most important plucked string instruments in Western European music of the 15th-17th centuries was the lute, which held a central position in solo performance, vocal accompaniment, and ensemble music during the Renaissance[11]. Its evolution was closely tied to the musical demands of the era. In the 15th century, it had six courses of strings, and by the 16th century, the number increased to 7-10 courses, and the body of the instrument grew larger. These changes allowed composers more freedom and creativity in composition. During the Baroque period, the lute became even more complex, leading to the development of variants such as the "archlute" and "theorbo," which were designed to expand the bass range. These instruments played a crucial role in basso continuo practice, providing the harmonic foundation and bass lines. The lute also contributed significantly to the independent development of instrumental music through the creation of genres like fantasy and toccata. Notable composers such as John Dowland, Francesco da Milano, and Silvius Leopold Weiss are recognized as prominent figures in lute music[12].

Harpsichord: Among keyboard instruments, the harpsichord and its variants occupied a special place. Emerging at the end of the 15th century, the harpsichord became the most popular home and concert instrument during the 16th-17th centuries. The sound of the harpsichord was produced by plucking the strings with plectra made of quill or leather, resulting in a bright and clear timbre. There were various regional variants of the harpsichord: Italian harpsichords were known for their bright, clear sound, while Flemish (Ruckers family) and French harpsichords had a richer, fuller tone. Smaller and more compact versions of the harpsichord, such as the virginal and spinet, were primarily used in domestic settings. Genres such as the toccata, prelude, fugue, variation, and dance suites flourished for these instruments. Composers such as William Byrd, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, and Girolamo Frescobaldi made significant contributions to the development of harpsichord music[13].

Organ: By the 15th century, the organ had already developed into a complex, multi-registered instrument, predominantly used in church liturgical music. In the 16th-17th centuries, its construction was further refined, with an increased number of registers, enabling the creation of a broader range of timbres. The North German organ school, particularly through composers such as Dietrich Buxtehude and Johann Sebastian Bach, became famous for its large, dynamic organs. Organ music was distinguished by its polyphonic complexity and majestic forms. Genres such as the prelude, fugue, and choral prelude formed the foundation of the organ repertoire, allowing composers to showcase their contrapuntal expertise. The organ was used not only in religious ceremonies but also in some secular concerts, reflecting its expanded role in musical life. The development of organ music represents one of the highest achievements of Baroque polyphony[14].

String Instruments: During this period, the families of the viola da gamba and viola da braccio developed in parallel. Although the viola da gamba originated in Spain at the end of the 15th century, it became particularly popular in 16th-17th century Europe, especially in England and France. The instrument featured 6-7 fretted strings and was played vertically between the knees. The viola da gamba family included various sizes, such as the discant, alto, tenor, and bass violas, and was primarily used in ensemble

music ("consort of viols") and basso continuo, with its soft, mellow, and slightly muffled sound. Composers like Christopher Simpson and Tobias Hume contributed extensively to the repertoire for viola da gamba. The viola da braccio family, on the other hand, includes early versions of modern string instruments like the violin, viola, and cello. These instruments developed rapidly in Italy during the 16th century, especially in Cremona (Amati, Guarneri, Stradivari families). The viola da braccio instruments had a brighter, stronger, and more intense sound compared to the viola da gamba, and were used primarily in dance music, opera orchestras, and, later, concertos. By the 17th century, the violin family began to gradually replace the viola da gamba due to its dynamic capabilities, suitability for virtuosic performance, and bright timbre[15].

Wind Instruments: Wind instruments also experienced significant development during this period. The recorder, which emerged as the most widely used wooden wind instrument, formed a family of instruments in various sizes. It was valued for its soft, clear tone, and was often used in ensemble music ("consort of recorders") and sometimes in solo performances. The shawm, the ancestor of the modern oboe, had a sharp, penetrating sound and was primarily used in outdoor ceremonies and military music. The sackbut, an early form of the trombone, had a softer, mellower sound and was used in church music and ensembles. The cornett, a hybrid instrument made of wood with finger holes and a trumpet mouthpiece, was valued for its human-like timbre and was mostly used in church music. Each of these instruments contributed its unique timbre and performance characteristics to enrich the musical palette of the period.

Table 1. Classification and Characteristics of Musical Instruments in Western Europe (15th–17th Centuries)

Family of Instruments	Main Representatives	Main Characteristics	Typical Genres
String-plucked	Lute, Theorbo, Harp-lute	Many strings, plucked, soft sound, wide bass range	Fantasy, ricercare, toccata, suite
Keyboard (plucked)	Clavichord, Virginal, Spinnet	Soft plucking, bright, clear sound, limited dynamics	Tocatta, prelude, fugue, variations, dance suites
Keyboard (blown)	Organ	Many registers, monumental, polyphonic, strong sound	Prelude and fugue, choral prelude, toccata
String-bowed (gamba)	Viola da gamba (treble, bass)	6-7 strings, fretted, soft, mellow sound, vertical playing	Ensemble music (consort), fantasy, suite
String-bowed (braccio)	Violin, Viola, Cello	4 strings, unfretted, bright, strong sound, horizontal playing	Dance music, opera orchestras, concertos

4. Conclusion

The development of musical instruments in Western Europe during the 15th-17th centuries had a profound impact on music performance practices. The expansion of the technical capabilities of instruments inspired composers to use more complex passages, virtuosic elements, and expressive means of communication. As a result, musical forms also evolved, with new genres like the sonata, concerto, and suite emerging alongside freer forms such as fantasy, toccata, and ricercare. This process led to instrumental music establishing its own distinct aesthetic values, separate from vocal music. The improvement of musical instruments also influenced music education, as playing more complex instruments required specialized training and technical skill. In conclusion, the 15th-17th centuries marked an era of unprecedented development in Western European instrumental music. This period was characterized not only by technical innovations but

also by profound changes in musical aesthetics, which laid a strong foundation for the musical developments of subsequent eras.

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