

## THE KEYBOARD TOCCATA: AN EVOCATIVE PATHWAY FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE MID-BAROQUE PERIOD

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### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** The purpose of this study is to illustrate and trace one of the most predominant musical genres, the keyboard toccata. The pieces written for specific instruments emerged during the Renaissance until Mid-Baroque period. This technique of writing is called the idiomatic writing style. This was unlike in the past which composers did not specify their preferred instruments in the musical scores. Toccata stands among several types of musical genres which appeared in the late sixteenth century, for instance, intabulation, chant liturgy, theme and variations, ricercare, canzona, dance suite, prelude, and toccata. In addition, Renaissance and Baroque keyboard toccata serves in both liturgical and secular function in term of its usage. They might be composed for a purely entertainment purposed or an introduction pieces for ceremonies in churches.

**Methods:** This article utilized the historical research method mostly by examining the secondary sources such as published books and articles on early keyboard toccatas as well as related areas of study. The research aims to explore the development of the early keyboard toccata from the earliest composition for lute by Francesco da Milano in the Renaissance to J. S. Bach's works in the Mid-Baroque period. This paper also examined purpose of keyboard toccata written during the chosen timeframe through some comparative as well as analytical analysis of toccata written by different 'selected' composers such as Andrea Gabrielli, Claudio Merulo, and Girolamo Diruta.

**Results:** The comparative as well as analysis in an evolution of the Renaissance to the Mid-Baroque Keyboard Toccata, illustrates that functions and performance practices of this musical genre has been changing through times. However, this term 'toccata' remains unchanged until present.

**Conclusions:** This research document examines trait of the keyboard toccata from its origin. This array ranges from the toccata written for lute up until later ones, written specifically for keyboard instruments or piano. Research information shown in this paper has proved that toccata is one of the most significant genres of music with its long historical background. Establishing the foundation from combination of sectional, free improvisatory, and imitative textures, altogether in the early toccata, then progressed to the use of some fugal elements as well as incorporating an emotional depth; illustrates very well shifted in its stylistic evolution of the keyboard

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toccata. The reflection of its transformation in terms of technical demands, musical styles, and structures from one composer to another finds very impressive and make the place of this music genre to stand very solid in keyboard literature.

**Keywords:** Keyboard Toccata / Idiomatic Writing / Early Keyboard Works / Baroque / Renaissance

## Introduction

Around the second half of the Renaissance period, instrumental music became more independent, matured, and overshadowed its dependence on vocal repertoire than in the previous centuries. Composers began to write their music by writing a transcription of vocal pieces for an instrument, ensemble, and solo lute, as well as keyboard instruments such as clavichord, harpsichord, and organ. This also included a new compositional style which was independent from vocal model. Moreover, the development of printing technique encouraged composers to publish tutoring books for specific instruments.

The pieces for specific instruments emerged at this time, unlike in the past where composers did not specify their preferred instrument in the musical score. For this reason, composers began to write music for a particular instrument with the style of idiomatic writing. In the technique of idiomatic writing, composers utilized different kinds of techniques of writing for different instruments depending on the instruments' capabilities. Several types of musical genres appeared in the late sixteenth century, for instance, intabulation, chant liturgy, theme and variations, ricercare, canzona, dance suite, prelude, and toccata.

## Toccata: What does it refer to?

*Toccata*, traditionally, refers to a keyboard composition which acquired an idiomatic keyboard style in the writing technique. Chords, scale-like passages, contrasting tempi in quickly changing manners illustrate this form.<sup>1</sup> The word “toccata” comes from the Italian verb “toccare” which means “to touch”. As Schulenberg said, toccata was used to refer to the playing of keyboard instruments—hence the modern idea of the “touch” of the piano keyboard.<sup>2</sup> Toccata, as well as prelude, is a type of free form composition. However, the form of toccata is varied as well as its characteristics and length. Some of the toccatas have a distinct contrasting section while others are short and uniformed.<sup>3</sup>

The term first appeared in the early 16th century in a lute tablature of 1536. However, the first important collections date from the last decade of that century; they include publications by Andrea Gabrieli and Claudio Merulo. At that time the term was also sometimes applied to fanfare-like pieces; a famous

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Kirchner, “Toccata (1955),” accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/29646/Toccata--Leon->.

<sup>2</sup> David Schulenberg, *Music of the Baroque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 217.

<sup>3</sup> David Schulenberg, *Music of the Baroque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 217.

example is the fanfare headed ‘toccata’ that introduces Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* (1607).<sup>4</sup> Atlas mentioned that in Book Three of Mishaël Praetorius named *Syntagma musicum* (1619), Praetorius likened the toccata to the praeambulum or praeludium. The Italians named the praeambulum or praeludium as ‘toccata’ due to the organists starting to play and improvise this praeambulum or praeludium before a motet or fugue consisting of a simple single chord and a coloratura passage. The toccata, when played during the church service, has a prelude-like function and grew out of a tradition of improvisation.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Willi Apel said “like canzona, toccata may have originated in a different field, perhaps in music for festive functions with trumpets and timpani, only to be adapted later to the organ.”<sup>6</sup>

### Keyboard Toccata from the Renaissance Period

The earliest printed keyboard toccatas in the Renaissance were those of Sperindio Bertoldo (1591), but more significant are those in the first volume of Diruta’s *Il transilvano* (1593), including toccatas by Diruta himself, Claudio Merulo, Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, Luzzaschi, Antonio Romanini, Paolo Quagliati, Vincenzo Bellavere and Gioseffo Guami; other important collections are the *Intonationi d’organo* of the Gabrielis (1593), containing four toccatas by Andrea Gabrieli, Merulo’s two volumes of *Toccate d’intavolatura d’organo* (1598 and 1604) and Annibale Padovano’s *Toccate et ricercari d’organo* (1604). The characteristic of the Renaissance’s keyboard toccata is in a predominantly chordal style in which either hand may perform brilliant runs against chords in the other.<sup>7</sup> The style of the keyboard toccata of this period can also be referred to the Venetian keyboard toccata which was influenced by the Spanish “Fabordon (falsobordone).” The falsobordone was developed between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance where composers used polyphonic techniques when harmonizing a melodic line or a cantus firmus.

### Composers of the Early Keyboard Toccata

Among composers of the early keyboard toccata, Andrea Gabrielli and Claudio Merulo played the most important roles. Andrea Gabrielli (1510-1586) was an Italian organist and composer in the late Renaissance and was also the most world renowned member of the Venetian School of composers. According to Myrray C. Bradshaw, none of his eighth toccatas were published during his lifetime. Four of them were published in the *Intonationi* of 1593, two in the first volume of Diruta’s great study of Venetian organ music, *Il Transilvano* (1593), and two more were copied into the second volume of the Giordano manuscript in the National Library in Turin.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Latham, ed., “Toccata,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037>.

<sup>5</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe, 1400-1600* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 499.

<sup>6</sup> Willi Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 222.

<sup>7</sup> John Caldwell, “Toccata,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

Bradshaw said that these eight toccatas can be grouped into three periods of compositions as they showed distinct changes of style and form.<sup>8</sup>

The first period included three toccatas written around 1550. The style is simple and basic, referred to as the basic toccata style which has its characteristics such as: long held block chords, root position triad in close position, sometimes without the third, supporting sweeping and fast-moving scale passages. The slow bass line moved mostly by fourths and fifths. The embellishing lines were all of one or two rhythms which were sixteenth and eighth notes with very few leaps and little motivic writing. His Toccata in the Tenth Tone was the best and most developed of his early compositions. This practice could be viewed as the norm for the early toccata style and form.<sup>9</sup>

The second period of Gabrielli's keyboard toccata was marked by a remarkable modification in form by adding an imitative fugal section as well as a concluding toccata section. Two of his works fall into the middle period. They were published in *Il Transilvano* (1593) by Girolamo Diruta. Both are in Sixth tone. At this point, the toccata became a three-section composition which contains introduction followed by a toccata, ricercare, and final toccata.<sup>10</sup>

In the last period of his toccata, there was an emergence of the three basic attributions of the Baroque toccata, namely virtuoso writing, fugal passages, and the contrasting of textures. However, the three-part form remained the same. One toccata in the ninth tone from the *Intonationi* of 1593, and two others in the Giordano manuscript, one in the first tone and another in the sixth, fall into this period of toccata.<sup>11</sup> The first, second, third, etc. tones are referred to as the church mode.

The other Italian composer at the end of the sixteenth century who is known for developing the keyboard toccatas to its peak was Claudio Merulo (1533-1604), the composer, publisher, and organist. His keyboard toccata is the most innovative genre among all his compositions. According to Gordon Stewart in *A History of Keyboard Literature*, "Merulo was known for his toccatas, pieces that combined free, virtuosic writing with the imitative style of the ricercare. The toccatas usually presented between three and five sections, with display sections being separated by imitative ones." Merulo commanded an unusually imaginative use of keyboard figuration. His concept of the toccata was later adopted by Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, and Johann Sebastian Bach."<sup>12</sup> Besides his two volumes of keyboard toccatas, the first volume published in 1598 named *Toccate d'intavolatura d'organo, libro primo* consisting of with nine toccatas and the second volume published 1604 named *Toccate d'intavolatura d'organo, libro secondo* consisting of with 10 toccatas, there

<sup>8</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw and Francesco Degrada, *Andrea Gabrieli and the Early History of the Toccata* (Florence: L.S. Oischki, 1985), 320-321.

<sup>9</sup> John Caldwell, "Toccata," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root. accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

<sup>10</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw and Francesco Degrada, *Andrea Gabrieli and the Early History of the Toccata* (Florence: L.S. Oischki, 1985), 326.

<sup>11</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw and Francesco Degrada, *Andrea Gabrieli and the Early History of the Toccata* (Florence: L.S. Oischki, 1985), 323.

<sup>12</sup> Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and its Forerunners* (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1996), 19.

were several more of his toccatas contained in the Turin manuscript.

The most significant innovation of toccata from Andrea Gabrielli's is an emergence of structure in music which comprised of several different sections. Firstly, the free section is derived from the same element of Gabrielli's, for instance, from chords and passage work; however, they are no longer contrast as separate elements but woven into a unified texture. And secondly, the fugal section was expanded to be more extensive and complicated.<sup>13</sup>

To quote Willi Apel, "The picture of the early Italian toccata is completed by Girolamo Diruta in the first part of his *Il Transilvano* (1593, 1597, 1612, 1625) which comprised thirteenth toccatas by Diruta himself (4), Andrea Gabreili (2), Claudio Merulo (2), and the other composers."<sup>14</sup>

### Development of the Keyboard Toccata

The further development of the toccata continues its traits from the Italians by the North German organists and composers at the beginning of the seventeenth century or the early Baroque period. The most remarkable composers who took part in the development of the seventeenth-century keyboard toccatas were Girolamo Frescobaldi, Johann Froberger, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, and Dieterich Buxtehude.

With Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643), the Italian composer, the genre of toccata was more elaborate. His first book of toccata was published in 1615 in which the rhythm was more complex in the passage work and the contrast more intense. According to Grout and Palisca, "The toccatas of Girolamo Frescobaldi sacrifice virtuosity in favor of quiet contemplation, an unusual trait for this genre. In contrast to the imposing extroverted grandeur and virtuosity of Merulo and other Venetians, Frescobaldi's toccatas are often reserved, subjective and mystical, with sustained harmonies and extraordinary chord progressions." Grout and Palisca also said that most of the Frescobaldi's toccatas have a restless character. The music always reaches a cadence on either dominant or tonic; whereas the harmonically, rhythmically, or through continued voice movement are always weakened at the end.<sup>15</sup> His toccatas are formed like Merulo's, despite being more chromatic, and highly contrasting between sections. Furthermore, Howard Ferguson mentioned in the preface to Frescobaldi's *Toccate e partite 1614 and Il primo libro di capricci*, 1624 which contained instructions to performers how to play the toccatas of Frescobaldi. For instance, the tempo does not remain unchanged, but fluctuates according to the mood of the music. If the work is too long, various sections can be played separately with a suitable cadence and etc.<sup>16</sup> The inheritance of Frescobaldi remained until the end of the century in Italy.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Latham, ed., "Toccata," in *Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037>.

<sup>14</sup> Alison Latham, ed., "Toccata," in *Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037>.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 304.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Ferguson, *Keyboard Interpretation from the 14th to the 19th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21-23.

Johann Jakob Froberger (1616-1667), a German Baroque composer, keyboard virtuoso, and organist, was a student of Frescobaldi as well as Chambonieres. Therefore, his musical style was influenced by the best of both Italian and French. Likened to Frescobaldi's toccatas, Froberger's are more sectional in continuity but less in terms of Italian style and expressiveness. However, as Ripin stated, Froberger's toccatas always begin with the usual sustained chords and brilliant flourishes. They generally include two fugal sections on rhythmic variants of a single subject, each section being rounded off with further flourishes.<sup>17</sup> Referring to Caldwell, "A typical one consists of a fairly lengthy rhapsodic introduction, a fugato, a second fugato based on a rhythmic transformation of the material of the first, and a shorter free passage to conclude; but the scheme was not set in stone, and there is considerable variety among the pieces."<sup>18</sup> He wrote twenty-four toccatas in total. In addition, transcriptions of some of Froberger's toccatas, which contain rhapsodic elements,<sup>19</sup> entered the French repertory, though overall the French did not use the term 'toccata' at this time,<sup>20</sup> instead, the unmeasured prelude. Moreover, Froberger's toccatas were the predecessor and model for the pairing of toccata and fugue in Buxtehude's as well as Bach's works.

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), the Netherlander organist, composer, and pedagogue, had the important role as a teacher who established the North German organ school. However, Sweelinck and his contemporary, Samuel Scheidt, treated the toccata as the least important genre. Sweelinck developed his thirteen toccatas following the model of Gabrielli, in Italian Venetian style, on the psalm tone or cantus firmus. His toccatas are diverse in their styles, for instance, some are short, and some are long. A few have imitative sections, others do not.<sup>21</sup> Again, according to Bradshaw, "In every one of his toccatas, the old Venetian structure plays an important role, even though there are some sections that the *cantus firmus* is absent."<sup>22</sup>

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1737), German/Netherlander lutenist and organist, was among the most remarkable composers in the mid-Baroque era. He is famous for organ music which is based on 'chorale' called "organ chorale". However, Buxtehude was known as the one who developed and expanded the toccata. Moreover, his musical style influenced both Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach tremendously.

D. Buxtehude developed the concept of toccata comprising three to five sections, which inherited from the toccatas of Claudio Merulo and Giloramo Frescobaldi; however, expanding these sections to become either longer or larger. He used longer sections, imaginative figuration, colorful harmonic shifts, and devices

<sup>17</sup> Edwin M. Ripin, *The New Grove Early Keyboard Instruments* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 212.

<sup>18</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe, 1400-1600* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 499.

<sup>19</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe, 1400-1600* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 499.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Latham, ed., "Toccata," in *Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037>.

<sup>21</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw, "The Toccatas of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 25, no. 2 (1975): 38-39.

<sup>22</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw, *The Origin of the Toccata* (Dallas: American Institute of Musicology, 1972), 67-69.

calculated to produce dramatic effects.<sup>23</sup> According to Caldwell, in Buxtehude's compositions, the stylistic distinction between the organ and the harpsichord toccata is increasing. "With him the toccata became a large-scale work in which rhapsodic and fugal sections alternated, the whole composition being unified in style and to a certain extent in thematic substance. This mirrors the development reached independently by Froberger, and it is not unlikely that Buxtehude was influenced by it, the more so, perhaps, after the publication of Froberger's toccatas in 1693. In Buxtehude and his contemporaries, however, works of this kind may also be called 'praeludium' or 'preambulum' in the sources."<sup>24</sup> He also composed an organ toccata which is, in fact, a prelude and fugue. This work starts with toccata-like passage, followed by fugue, toccata, and fugue again. This kind of work has multi sections based on Italian Frescobaldi rather than German style.

All the above could illustrate the overall picture of the toccata from its origin; the prelude, which then grew out of the improvisatory style by Claudio Merulo who expanded the prelude to many sections as well as increased its complexity which is the style of the Italian Renaissance keyboard toccata. Later, Keyboard toccatas became more mature in Baroque by the evolution of the Italian master Frescobaldi, and the Northern German composers such as Froberger, Sweelinck, and Buxtehude. The characteristic of the early to mid-Baroque toccata is the improvisatory toccata followed by the contrapuntal or fugal section. The rapid figurations, virtuoso sounding, usual scale and accidental which can be called the rhapsodic elements are always found in the improvisatory section. The toccata was treated as a single movement, independent from the fugue at this point. Nonetheless, later Buxtehude and Bach began to pair the toccata with the fugue.

## Conclusion

A conclusion may be drawn from Eric Valentin who presented the panorama of toccata from the late fifteenth century down to the twentieth century. The earliest composition for lute comes from Francesco da Milano, the latest composition for organ from Wolfgang Fortner. Between these extremes and arranged chronologically appear these composers: Newsidler, Bertodi, A. Gabrieli, Merulo, G. Gabrieli, Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Froberger, Spiridio, Pasquini, Richter, Pachelbel, A. Scarlatti, Zipoli, Buxtehude, J. S. Bach, Muffat, Clementi, Czerny, Schumann, Rheinberger, and Debussy. All these composers' works are to be played on the piano, except Fortner.<sup>25</sup>

These proved that the genre of toccata has remained from Baroque until now, although it was hardly found in the Classical period. However, its characteristics and function have been altered to become a movement in large-scale pieces, or even independent character pieces in the following centuries.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and its Forerunners* (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1996), 45.

<sup>24</sup> John Caldwell, "Toccatas," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root. accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Erich Valentin, *The Toccata* (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag, 1958).



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