The Classical era (or Classic era, a usage generally preferred in the USA) is usually understood to mean the period in which the central ‘classics’ of the standard repertory—essentially, the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—were composed: that is, from about 1750 or soon after to some time between 1800 and 1830. Whether this is truly a ‘style period’, in the sense that the style of the three ‘classical composers’ was a universally used one, or simply a period in which those three great composers worked, has been a matter of some contention among students of the period and of musical history.

The word ‘Classical’, which is derived from the Latin classicus (meaning ‘of the first class’), is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘Of the first rank or authority; constituting a standard or model …’; further definitions refer to kinship with Greek and Latin antiquity (including ‘conforming in style or composition to the rules of or models of Greek or Latin antiquity’). The relevant definition of ‘Classic’ is ‘Of the first class, of the highest rank or importance; approved as a model; standard, leading’. In common parlance, the word is used primarily to distinguish cultivated music that is not popular or traditional, and probably has its historical roots in ecclesiastical or courtly traditions; it is thus used in a sense that implies acknowledgment of some kind of authority, seriousness of purpose, and perhaps superiority, and certainly of the idea that it has stood the test of time. In this sense it is applied to the music of composers of any era, from the Middle Ages to the present day, and might even be understood to include ‘serious’ music of the avant-garde. The term is also often applied, in the discussion of non-Western music, to courtly music traditions of such cultures as those of East and South-East Asia and the Middle East. In France, the phrase ‘French Classical Tradition’ does not normally indicate music of the late 18th century but of the age of Louis XIV, an era regarded as a ‘classical’ one.

Drawing on the association of merit with the ancient civilizations, the term was initially used in musical discourse in the sense of ‘classics of their kind’, or works widely recognized as models of excellence within their own genre. Forkel, writing in 1802, referred to Bach's keyboard works as classics; Palestrina's masses and Corelli's concertos have been similarly described, as representing an outstanding group of examples of a particular genre. Mozart's first biographer, F. X. Niemetschek, wrote of the ‘classical value’ of his music, and indeed hinted at the idea of Mozart's belonging to a ‘classical era’ when he wrote that 'The masterpieces of the Romans and Greeks please more and more through repeated reading, and … the same applies for both connoisseur and amateur with regard to the hearing of Mozart's music'.

The earliest manifestations of the attitude that made this usage possible were the ‘classicizing’ of certain repertories: the music of Handel (and to a lesser extent Corelli) in England from the mid-18th century onwards, and Lully's operas at the Paris Opéra (and to some extent Lalande's motets at the Concert Spirituel). These were among select audiences; it was only towards the end of the 18th century and especially in the early 19th, with the rise of canonical repertories and the generalized development of concert life and large-scale music publishing, that this usage could...
come to be called the ‘Viennese Classical School’ (and later ‘First Viennese School’, to distinguish it from the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern).

It was in the early 19th century that a need was felt for a terminology that would differentiate the new Romantic movement from what had gone before. The word ‘Romantic’, as a term to describe a musical style or an approach to music, seems to have entered the musical vocabulary earlier than the word ‘Classical’, which was now invoked as an antithesis to describe the music of the preceding era. It was appropriate for a number of reasons, three in particular, of which the first is that the music of Haydn and Mozart (and in effect no other composer) had remained in the repertory and had come to achieve a canonical or classical status.

Secondly, it is apt because of the curiosity and the kinship felt by artists of the second half of the 18th century, and its final quarter especially, for the ancient classical civilizations and their art. This was an age during which Greek and Roman literature, art, and architecture were re-examined, more scientifically than before. Archaeologists had excavated Pompeii beginning in 1748; the visible remains were drawn, engraved for wider circulation, and their design analysed. The austere temple at Paestum, already known, was sketched and engraved, and imitated for operatic stage sets. Writers, of whom the most influential was J. J. Winckelmann in the 1750s, discovered a ‘noble simplicity’ in classical architecture. G. B. Piranesi's collections of engravings of Rome had a wide circulation and influence, and Joshua Reynolds stressed that the highest achievement in painting depended on the use of Greek or Roman subjects and their representation of heroic or suffering humanity. Jacques-Louis David, inspired by Pompeii and Rome, provided eloquent paintings of Socrates and Brutus in the 1780s and, following classical principles, went on to become the official artist of the French Revolution. The sculptor Antonio Canova used classical statues as the basis for his figures of modern men and women. At the end of his career, the poet and librettist Pietro Metastasio wrote a survey of Greek drama and Aristotelian theory of tragedy, and made a translation of Horace's Ars poetica, as models for operatic practice. (The turn of the century is sometimes described as a ‘neo-classical’ era, but that term is more appropriate to the visual arts than to music, where it is more aptly and usefully saved for the stylistic events of just over a century later.)

What grounds, one may ask, might composers of this era have had for regarding themselves as heirs to, or revivers of, some kind of classical tradition? There were no musical models for them to imitate, as there were in the literary and the visual arts. Any answer to this question (which of course is an unreal one, since the composers were dubbed ‘classical’ only retrospectively)—and this is the third reason referred to above—must be concerned with the formal and structural features of the music of the era and its relation to expression: the traditional Classico-Romantic antithesis, which, to present it in grossly oversimplified form, defines the precedence given by the Classical composer to formal matters and by the Romantic composer to expressive ones.

There are in fact a number of important stylistic features common to a high proportion of the music composed, in all genres, during the period in question. The so-called pre-classical period, in which features of the Baroque are softened and heavily decorated (the ROCCOCO STYLE) and features of the Classical era are adumbrated, had begun by 1730; some writers see it as continuing until the ‘high’ Classical period of the 1770s or 80s and including all the work of such composers as Pergolesi, C. P. E. Bach, J. C. Bach, and Hasse, as well as the early and even the middle works of Haydn. By 1750 many composers were using patterns of symmetrical phrase structure, coupled to cadential harmony, with increasingly static bass lines, of the kind that would underlie much Classical composition, and soon after that date the basic Classical formal pattern—known as sonata form—evolved from its binary-form precursors.

Sonata form, involving the presentation of two contrasting groups of material in complementary keys, and their later recapitulation in the same key, is fundamental and permeates virtually all the music of the Classical period (excepting only pieces in variation form, the occasional fugue, and certain types of dance and vocal composition, although the underlying presence of its procedures is rarely absent), and it continued in use—of a more self-conscious kind—long thereafter. In this intermediate pre-classical period various other stylistic characteristics, or mannerisms, are found: those of the primarily north German empfindsamer Stil, with its intensely expressive ‘sighing’
clichés, those of the Sturm und Drang period, marked by their stormy outbursts and passionate tone, and the light galant manner, with its aura of gracious, courtly charm, and its standardized cadence patterns. All these had to be synthesized for the universal style of the high Classical era to be achieved.

It was Haydn and Mozart who achieved that synthesis in its fullest form: and therein lie the arguments, forcefully propounded by Charles Rosen (1971) in particular, that the Viennese Classical style is the style of Haydn, Mozart, and, in a later extension, Beethoven, and accordingly that it is not appropriate to talk of a ‘Classical period’. It has been argued by Friedrich Blume (1970) that ‘there is no “Classic” style period in the history of music, only a “Classic-Romantic” one’—although he continues to refer to it. Nevertheless, many writers have felt that it is realistic, not to say convenient, to accept that the period of the Classical composers, however few they are in number, can fairly be reckoned a ‘Classical period’. In any case, most of the composers active in this period wrote in styles that are in a general sense indistinguishable from those of the great men. It is however incontestable that their own personal languages lack the breadth and the richness of those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, or their universality: for between them these three reached heights far beyond any others of their time (and arguably of any time) in all the central genres of music—the symphony, the concerto, the string quartet (and quintet), the piano sonata, opera (both comic and serious), and sacred music.

Another composer with a claim to be regarded as Viennese Classical, although far more limited than these three, was Gluck. His central contribution was the creation (in which he was not alone but was the most prominent) of a new operatic style, which renounced the extravagances, vocal and decorative, of serious Italian opera in favour of a Winckelmann-like ‘noble simplicity’. In Orfeo ed Euridice (1762) he concentrated on a single subject and the emotions of just two characters, and devised a language, less convention-ridden than the prevailing one, to heighten its expression; his later operas, especially Iphigénie en Tauride (1779), develop his principles while maintaining a powerful focus on the emotions of the central characters. Few other composers (among them was Salieri) were strongly or directly influenced by Gluck, at least for a generation; Mozart showed a way in his last classical opera, La clemenza di Tito (1791), of achieving a classical synthesis by means of a less radical simplification of the Metastasian operatic tradition, and his type of ‘reform’ was closely in line with Italian operatic developments in the 1790s.

The placing of Beethoven within the Viennese Classical school raises difficult issues. To those who first described the school, immediately after his lifetime, his gigantic status demanded his inclusion as an instant classic. Yet he is clearly at least on the verges of Romanticism, with his wildness and extravagance, his refusal to observe the proprieties, his concern for extra-musical meanings to his music, his intentness on originality (forswearing the traditionally classical ease of communication), his heroic attitude to his art, and his personal suffering. It is the fact of his clear departure point in Haydn and Mozart, and the sense of Classical form that he always retained (possibly his deafness to innovations played a role in this), that justifies his inclusion. There are arguments too for including Schubert in this select group (as does Rushton, 1986), since he maintains Classical proportions in his mature compositions in a sense that later Romantics do not; yet it is clear especially from his handling of form and incident that his priorities are not the same as those of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven and that his musical thought, once past the early works, is that of the new era. Among other composers of the time, a strong case can be made out for regarding Rossini as Classical rather than Romantic in his compositional thinking.

The great social developments concurrent with the Classical era had a profound influence on musical life and musical composition. First, the lot of the composer underwent considerable charge. In 1750, most composers were employed by private patrons or by the church; by 1800, private patronage was greatly diminished and increasing numbers of composers now had to make their living on a freelance basis, composing and performing for a wider public. This, generally speaking, was made easier by the growth of concert life, which had developed substantially since the 1760s; by the growing market for teachers, with the large increase in numbers of middle-class daughters and the greater availability of instruments; and by the changes in methods of music-printing and -publishing, with cheaper editions poured out in quantity by numerous firms in the leading centres (London, Paris, Vienna, Leipzig, Amsterdam). By the end of the Classical period,
instrumental music enjoyed a new primacy, as a direct consequence of the changes in patronage, and sacred music was never again to enjoy the centrality that had been taken for granted up to the end of the Baroque era.

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Bibliography


