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The Classical Period

The History of Classical Music


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The Heroic Style

In 1812, music critic E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote, “Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven have developed a new art, whose origins first appear in the middle of the eighteenth century.” The “new art” Hoffmann referred to is a genre now known as classical music, a style composed from about 1750 to 1820.

While historians divide musical eras into neat categories, the music itself followed no such tidy timeline. Musicians of the classical era were influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach and likely viewed their compositions as a natural evolution of his baroque style. According to Robert Sherman and Philip Seldon:

Beethoven played several pieces from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier … Mozart made string transcriptions of Bach pieces and wrote to his father that he had finally found music with something to teach him. Perhaps [composer Hector] Berlioz summed it up best when he wrote to a friend that “Bach is Bach, just as God is God.”

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Along with Bach's influence, classical music was advanced by a relatively new instrument, the pianoforte. As a precursor to the modern piano, the pianoforte was invented by Italian instrument maker Bartolomeo Cristofori in 1710. The instrument was first mass produced in Germany.

Austria, and England in the 1760s. The pianoforte could produce loud or soft notes depending on how hard the keys were struck. Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven were all masters of the pianoforte and utilized the expressive tones of the instrument in a variety of ways. The pianoforte could be used to play quiet solo pieces or loud chords with a full orchestra. In addition, with its four-octave range, the pianoforte was a composer's dream, ideal for writing numerous parts for a variety of orchestral instruments.

**Enlightened Thinking**

The advances in classical music occurred during an era known as the Enlightenment, a cultural movement that wielded a powerful influence on composers and other artists. The philosophers of the Enlightenment were deeply inspired by science while strongly rejecting the unbending religious dogma of the Church. Enlightenment thinkers supported artistic self-expression, free from censorship by church or state. They opposed religious intolerance and the repression of the people by the totalitarian kings and princes who ruled Europe. Enlightenment writers, musicians, and artists dreamed of a society where truth would triumph over ignorance, reason over superstition, and liberty and freedom would topple oppressive despotism.

The influence of the Enlightenment on classical music may be seen in the notable decline of religious compositions. This was accompanied by a sharp rise in the popularity of secular music written specifically for middle-class audiences rather than the nobility. Overall, the Enlightenment inspired classical composers to write music that was logical, intelligent, and balanced.

**Elegant Symphonic Music**

During the Enlightenment, there was an emphasis on learning and self-improvement. This created a trend in which countless
average citizens picked up instruments and learned to play music at home. Classical composers were able to take advantage of this situation by writing music that was elegant and interesting—yet simple enough for amateurs to play. This allowed composers to earn respectable incomes publishing their pieces in lesson books. The trend was also seen in opera, where vocal songbooks were popular among people who wanted to sing songs at home that they had enjoyed in the theater. Using these books, refined young women learned to play the piano, harpsichord, while young men picked up the violin, oboe, or flute. Professional musicians augmented their incomes by giving lessons in peoples’ homes.

The shift in music from the complex and mysterious to the simple and elegant was advanced by the form known as style galant, or galant. This style was characterized by free-flowing melodies that were not complicated by the rhythms of counterpoint. Galant songs featured light instrumentation that provided a backdrop to the main melody. According to Stanley Sadie and Alison Latham, “The ideal medium for galant melody was the singing voice, in a cantata or an operatic song (preferably on an amorous text) … Another popular medium was the flute … which was specially esteemed for its capacity for elegant and tender shading.”

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**Concert Life**

*During the Enlightenment, music became more accessible to the average person, and the first public concerts were performed in Europe. British musicologists Stanley Sadie and Alison Latham describe this phenomenon:*

> It was in the eighteenth century that concert life began as we know it. In earlier times instrumental music was chiefly intended for performance at court or for groups of gentleman amateurs to play in their homes. Now a new phenomenon arose. Groups of people, often of both amateurs and professionals, got together to give concerts for their own pleasure … and for the pleasure of others who came to hear them. In larger cities, where more professionals were to be found, orchestral concerts were regularly given. London and Paris led, and others were quick to follow. … Concert life developed rapidly; traveling virtuosos went from city to city, organizing concerts. … The orchestra as an entity began to take firm shape. The concept of a public that came to concerts to listen was a novel one, demanding a novel approach to composition; it was more than ever necessary for a piece of music to have a logical and clearly perceptible shape, so that it would grasp and hold the listener's attention and interest.


Style galant was performed by a new type of orchestral configuration, the string quartet, composed of two violins, a cello, and a viola—a stringed instrument tuned an octave above the cello. Style galant was also played by much larger orchestras composed of keyboards, woodwind, brass, string, and (occasionally) percussion sections. These types of orchestras were labeled symphony, from the Greek term “sounding together.”

Symphony not only defined the orchestra but a new type of musical arrangement invented by classical composers. The first symphonies are made up of three songs, or movements, of various lengths. (Most modern symphonies have four movements.) Early symphonies are standardized into two styles: The three movements written in the French style feature tempos played slow-quick-slow; Italian style is played quick-slow-quick.

**The Mannheim Rocket**

Early composers did not have organized orchestras to play their symphonies. They simply assembled whatever musicians were available when it was time to give a performance. This gave the music an amateurish sound, produced by musicians who had little practice playing together. This problem was solved in the mid-eighteenth century, when the foundation of the modern professional symphony orchestra was laid by violinist Johann Stamitz in the southern German city of Mannheim.

Stamitz was hired by the city's music-loving ruler Karl Theodor to act as concertmaster in the Mannheim court. Stamitz, from what is now the Czech Republic, composed as many as seventy symphonies despite the fact that he died at the age of forty.

Stamitz's symphonies became instantly popular throughout Europe and attracted hundreds of composers and musicians to Mannheim. This resulted in the foundation of the Mannheim School, which grew up around Stamitz's talents. Sherman and
Seldon describe the sounds of Stamitz:

[His] orchestra pioneered gradations of sound that had been unknown before—swellings of volume (crescendo) and its opposite (diminuendo), a kind of drooping figure that became known as the “Mannheim Sigh” and a leaping group of notes nicknamed the “Mannheim Rocket.” Local composers, members of the … Mannheim School, wrote pieces to take special advantage of these exciting orchestral possibilities, and by showing the world what creative imagination, effective leadership, and high performing discipline could accomplish, the Mannheimers gave the symphony orchestra a completely new significance in the musical world.  

Because they were supported by nobility with somewhat limited funds, the symphony orchestras of the Mannheim era were much smaller than modern configurations, which may have well over one hundred musicians. In the mid-1750s, the Mannheim orchestra had only forty-five members. (Average baroque orchestras featured around twenty-four players.)

Franz Joseph Haydn: “Father of the Symphony”

While Stamitz originated the modern symphony orchestra, Franz Joseph Haydn's huge contribution to the symphonic style earned him the name “Father of the Symphony.”

Born in 1732 to an impoverished family in a small town in eastern Austria, Haydn spent almost thirty years in the position of Kapellmeister at a provincial court outside of Vienna. While working for Prince Nicholas “the Magnificent” Esterházy, who owned twenty-one castles, Haydn spent most of his life in the prince's luxurious two-hundred-room palace in the remote countryside of Eisenstadt.

From 1761 to 1790—the height of the classical era—Haydn conducted the twenty-five-member royal orchestra and a dozen singers while composing operas, chamber music, ceremonial pieces, and other works for the prince. In addition to writing an original composition per week, the Kapellmeister's job required him to coach the singers, fix broken instruments, and make sure the musicians, some of the finest in Europe, were properly groomed and arrived at work on time. Because the prince played the viola-like instrument known as the baryton, Haydn composed more than two hundred pieces for that stringed instrument.

Although his workload kept him busy, Haydn believed he was lucky to be able to write music continually without interruptions or restrictions. As the composer told his biographer before his death,

> My Prince was content with all my works, I received approval, I could, as head of an orchestra, make experiments, observe what enhanced an effect, and what weakened it, thus improving, adding to, cutting away, and running risks. I was set apart from the world, there was nobody in my vicinity to confuse and annoy me in my course, and so I had to be original.

“Forever New and Surprising”

Haydn was so prolific during this period that he wrote an astounding 106 symphonies, 68 string quartets, 60 piano sonatas, 25 operas, 4 oratorios, and countless songs, arias, cantatas, overtures, concertos, serenades, trios, and chamber works.

Some of the names Haydn gave his symphonies demonstrated his sly sense of humor. For example, No. 83 is nicknamed The Hen because the first movement features oboes and violins making “clucking” sounds. William Mann lists the titles for some other symphonies and how they earned their names:

> [The] Surprise, no. 94 (a loud chord to awake sleepy listeners), the Miracle, no. 96 (a glass chandelier fell and broke in the concert-room, but hurt nobody because the audience, carried away by the power of the music, had crowded to the edge of the … [stage]) …; The Farewell symphony, no. 45 in F sharp minor, was composed as a reminder to the Prince that his musicians were impatient to return home to Vienna: in the finale, the players stop playing one by one, snuff out the candles on their music-desks and leave the platform, until finally only two solo violins are left playing in

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Haydn's Courtly Life

When Franz Joseph Haydn was hired to work for the German prince Nicholas “the Magnificent” Esterházy, he was given a contract with a set of royal instructions he was expected to follow to the letter. It stated that Haydn had to settle the quarrels among his musicians, look after the instruments, and rehearse the female singers. The original contract states even more conditions:

[Joseph Haydn] will be temperate, and will know that he must treat the musicians placed under him not overbearingly, but with mildness and leniency, modestly, quietly and honestly … appearing neatly in white stockings, white linen, powdered, and either with pigtail or hair-bag [a wig accessory]….

[The] Capel-Meister shall be under permanent obligation to compose such pieces of music as his Serene Princely Highness may command, and neither to communicate such new compositions to anyone, nor to allow them to be copied, but to retain them wholly for the exclusive use of his Highness; nor shall he compose for any other person without the knowledge and gracious permission [of his Highness].


This concert hall at the court of Prince Nicholas “the Magnificent” Esterházy is the venue where many of Joseph Haydn's symphonies and operas were first performed.

the extravagant key of F sharp major. The Prince is reported to have understood the message. 

While under the prince's patronage, Haydn had little idea of how famous and respected he was throughout Europe; by the 1770s, his published sheet music was selling at a rapid rate. When the prince died in 1790, Haydn traveled to London where he was hired by promoter Johann Peter Salomon to write a dozen new symphonies and conduct concerts. In England, the composer quickly became an instant celebrity. His concerts were so enthusiastically received that cheering and applauding audiences encouraged him to repeat entire movements.

After returning to Vienna, Haydn grew tired of writing symphonies but continued to compose songs, oratorios, string quartets, and even the Austrian national anthem. In 1805 a London newspaper mistakenly printed Haydn's obituary, and England went into a period of mourning. The composer was forced to state that he was still alive, humbly writing, “How can I die now? … I have only just begun to understand the wind instruments.” In 1809, however, the master did die.

Although Haydn spent most of his life in a prince's palace isolated from the rest of society, his musical contribution is legendary. As Haydn's biographer Ernst Ludwig Gerber wrote in 1790:

When we speak of Joseph Haydn, we think of one of our greatest men: great in small things and even greater in large; the pride of our age. Always rich and inexhaustible; forever new and surprising, forever noble and great, even
Mozart the Child Prodigy

Around 1783, Haydn developed a friendship with the twenty-seven-year-old Mozart, whom he considered one of the greatest composers of the age. In a letter to concert promoter Franz Rotz, Haydn had high praise for the young composer: “If only I could impress Mozart's inimitable works on the soul of every friend of music, and the souls of high personages in particular, as deeply, with the same musical understanding and with the same deep feeling, as I understand and feel them, the nations would vie with each other to possess such a jewel.”

Haydn's wish that Mozart could find royal patronage was based on a harsh reality. Even as Mozart was composing immortal works that have remained popular throughout the centuries, he garnered little respect from his employers or the general public. When he was in his twenties, Mozart struggled to survive by giving lessons and selling sheet music of his sonatas. Mozart's dilemma was particularly troubling as he had once been a child star in the concert halls and royal courts of Europe.

Mozart was born on January 27, 1756, and like Bach, Mozart was born into a musical family. His father, Leopold, was a composer and violinist for the respected thirty-eight-piece court orchestra in Salzburg. Leopold was married to Anna Maria Mozart, and the couple had seven children, only two of which survived: the fourth child, a daughter named Maria Anna Walburga Ignatia, called Nannerl; and the seventh and last child, a boy. Leopold believed this child was a miracle because he was so small and weak. They called him Wolfgang. His second name, Amadeus, meant “loved by God” in Latin.

Mozart could plunk out tunes on the piano when he was three, and his ears were so sensitive that loud noises would make him physically ill. The boy also had perfect pitch—the ability to name a note simply by hearing it. At the age of four, he was telling
court musicians that their violins were slightly out of tune. By that time, according to Mozart's first biographer Friedrich Schlichtegroll, Mozart could learn a minuet in thirty minutes “and then play it perfectly, cleanly, and with the steadiest rhythm.”

Touring Europe

Mozart wrote his first composition, Symphony No. 1, at age six, prompting his father to recognize that the young genius might be able to support the family with his talents. Nannerl, too, was a musical child prodigy, and so Leopold and his two children began an extensive tour of the royal courts, musical academies, and public concerts of Europe playing for imperial ministers, archdukes, emperors, and queens.

To enhance his musical shows, Mozart would perform tricks taught to him by his father, such as playing complicated music on first sight, giving demonstrations of his perfect pitch, and playing a clavier keyboard that was covered by a cloth, so he could not see the keys. As word spread of the young man's talents, the Mozarts were invited to play in England, France, Germany, and elsewhere. During his travels, the young boy met many famous musicians of the day, heard all styles of music from the many regions of the continent, and remembered them for use in his later compositions.

When Mozart traveled to Italy at the age of fourteen, he was inspired to write his first opera, Mitridate, rè di Ponto, which was performed in Milan in December 1770. The opera was enthusiastically received, as Leopold wrote in a letter to his wife: “God be praised, the first performance of the Opera … took place on the 26th amid general applause. … Never in living memory was such curiosity over a first Opera to be seen in Milan as this time.”

By 1773 Mozart had written four masses, two long operas, and one short operetta, twelve choral works, and at least thirty symphonies, each about ten minutes long. Music critic Harold C. Schonberg describes the talents of Mozart:

There was literally nothing in music he could not do better than anybody else. He could write down a complicated piece while thinking out another piece in his head; or he could think out a complete string quartet and then write out the individual parts before making the full score; or he could read perfectly at sight any music placed before him; or he could hear a long piece of music for the first time and immediately write it out, note for note.

“The Most Natural Musician”

Although Mozart was an incredibly gifted composer and musician, by the time he reached his late teens, he was no longer a child prodigy who could attract standing-room-only crowds to his concerts. Unable to find work elsewhere, Mozart took a low-paying job as Kapellmeister for the archbishop of Salzburg in 1773. He continued to compose operas, symphonies, oratorios, quartets, concertos, sonatas, and other works.

During this period, Mozart suffered through the death of his mother and a rocky marriage. At one point, he was so poor he was forced to pawn his belongings. While his life was a shambles, Mozart continued to write joyous, enduring music. From his pen flowed the Coronation Mass, the beautiful E-flat Concerto for two pianos, and the equally marvelous Sinfonia Concertante for violin, viola, and orchestra. In addition he received a major commission for the opera Idomeneo about the king of ancient Crete who returns home to many problems after fighting the Trojan War.

Tired of working for unappreciative employers, Mozart finally struck out on his own in 1777. He began working as one of the world's first freelance musicians—a job few other less famous composers could manage. His fortunes began to improve as he held performances as a solo virtuoso pianist in concert halls and entertained numbers of rich patrons who enjoyed his musical talents.

In 1782 Mozart wrote the comic opera, The Abduction from the Seraglio, about a Spanish nobleman who rescues his lover from a Turkish harem. The characters were dressed in Turkish costumes, considered exotic and exciting at that time, and the opera was an extraordinary success. Working with Italian poet and lyricist Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart wrote three more immortal operas between 1786 and 1790: The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così fan tutte. The first two were immediate successes when they were performed in Prague, and Mozart achieved the greatest widespread public acclaim of his career.
In 1791, working with actor Emanuel Schikaneder, Mozart wrote yet another comic opera, *The Magic Flute*, a fairy tale about a prince who tries to rescue a maiden. The opera features clever tunes, special musical effects, witches, monsters, and other entertainments that made it a stunning success over the course of one hundred performances.

Soon after writing *The Magic Flute*, Mozart became ill with exhaustion and fever. At one o'clock in the morning on December 5, 1791, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died at the age of thirty-six. Although the exact cause of death remains unknown, modern researchers suggest that the composer suffered from kidney failure.

In the years after his death, the world became aware of Mozart's musical genius, realizing that the composer excelled in all forms of classical music. In the short thirty-six years of his life, he wrote more than six hundred extraordinary pieces of music and gave the world a legacy of music that many believe is still unsurpassed to this day. By the nineteenth century, it was apparent to many that Mozart was, in the words of Schonberg, “the most perfect, best equipped, and most natural musician the world has ever known.”

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*An eighteenth-century illustration shows a scene from The Magic Flute. The opera includes crowd pleasing entertainments such as monsters and witches.*

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**Beethoven's Wealth of Ideas**

Well aware of Mozart's talents and fame, twenty-one-year-old Ludwig van Beethoven planned to travel to Vienna to study with the composer. Unfortunately, Mozart died before Beethoven met him. As a result, Beethoven turned to Haydn for inspiration. As Beethoven's patron Count Waldstein counseled, “You will receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn.” Whether or not Beethoven ever captured the spirit of Mozart remains a matter of debate among music scholars. Whatever the case, the lives of Mozart and Beethoven followed similar paths and both composers are considered giants of the classical era.

Beethoven was born on December 17, 1770, in the city of Bonn, then a part of the Austrian empire. Like Mozart, Beethoven was from a musical family. His grandfather, also named Ludwig, was the Kapellmeister employed by the elector of Cologne. His father, Johann, was an uncelebrated tenor singer also employed by the elector. Johann, who was a violent alcoholic, desperately wanted his son to be a child prodigy like Mozart. He forced Beethoven to practice for hours. When Beethoven made musical
By the time the young Beethoven journeyed to Vienna to take lessons from Haydn, he was a talented, temperamental musician determined to make a name for himself. He played at fashionable private parties where he began improvising—making up the music as he played—which thrilled his wealthy patrons. In fits of musical passion, Beethoven would smash his hands down on the keyboard so hard he would break piano strings. In 1838 Ferdinand Ries, a friend of Beethoven's and his first biographer, wrote about the pianist's improvisational style: “All the artists I ever heard improvise did not come anywhere near the heights reached by Beethoven in his discipline. The wealth of ideas which poured forth, the moods to which he surrendered himself, the variety of interpretation, the complicated challenges which evolved or which he introduced were inexhaustible.”

Although Beethoven performed for formally dressed, upper-class audiences, he seldom took care of his own appearance, and his hair was always wild and unruly. His moods changed constantly, and his friends never knew when a chance remark might be taken the wrong way, sending the pianist into fits of rage. While Beethoven was difficult, the nobility flocked to hear his music, and the composer's future looked bright. Compositions flowed from him, and he toured often, giving concerts in Prague, at the royal court of Prussia in Berlin, and in other important European cities.

The Heroic Style

By 1800, Beethoven was in his prime. He wrote the famous *Pathétique* sonata, five piano sonatas, three violin sonatas, two cello sonatas, the Trio in B-flat Major, six string quartets, a quintet, chamber music, and songs including the famous “Adelaide.”

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Beethoven's Torment

*By the time Beethoven turned thirty, he was losing his hearing. Beethoven writes of this experience in a letter to his friend Franz.*
Wegeler:

[My] ears whistle and buzz continually day and night. I can say I am living a wretched life; for two years I have avoided almost all social gatherings because it is impossible for me to say to people: “I am deaf.” If I belonged to any other profession it would be easier, but in my profession it is an awful state, the more since my enemies, who are not a few, what would they say? In order to give you an idea of this singular deafness of mine I must tell you that in the theatre I must get very close to the orchestra in order to understand the actor. If I am a little distant I do not hear the high tones of the instruments, singers, and if I be but a little farther away I do not hear at all. … Heaven knows what will happen to me. … I have often cursed my existence … there will be moments in my life when I am the unhappiest of God's creatures.


The year 1800 also marked the first performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 1. In 1801 Beethoven wrote the music for the ballet The Creatures of Prometheus, which was performed many times in Vienna. Among his other works that year were the famous pieces known as The Funeral March (Piano Sonata Opus 26) and the Moonlight Sonata (Piano Sonata Opus 27).

While creating enduring works of music, Beethoven began to lose his hearing when he was around thirty years old. Despite this handicap, the composer carried on, writing symphonies in what has been called “the heroic style” for their timeless and dramatic quality. As Mann writes: “Beethoven wanted his audience to regard music not as the entertainment accepted by earlier audiences, but as some sort of sermon about the godlike nature of man.”

Beethoven's third through eighth symphonies are triumphant displays of the composer's genius, written ironically, when he was almost completely deaf. Sherman and Seldon describe Beethoven's work during this time: “Beethoven embarked on a revolutionary path. From here on, he would experiment with new forms even as he was expanding the old ones, invent his own musical parameters, produce works on a vast and heroic scale, and ultimately shatter existing conceptions about the expressive potential of music altogether.”

Although he spent most of the later years of his life in self-imposed isolation, Beethoven continued to write. While almost totally deaf, he could hear the vibrations of the notes by laying his head on the piano. When he finally died at the age of fifty-six, the composer's death was as dramatic as his music.

At 5:45 P.M. on March 26, 1827, a large clap of thunder rocked Vienna, and a flash of lightning filled the room where Beethoven was lying sick and unconscious. Fellow composer Anselm Hüttenbrenner wrote, “After this unexpected phenomenon of nature … Beethoven opened his eyes, lifted his right hand and looked up several seconds with his fist clenched and a very serious, threatening expression. … When he let the raised hand sink to the bed, his eyes closed half-way. … Not another breath, not another heartbeat more!”

Several days later, his funeral procession through the streets of Vienna attracted twenty thousand people. They came to pay their respects to the man who would someday be recognized as one of the greatest musical geniuses of the nineteenth century.

While the extraordinary symphonic gifts of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven dominated the classical era, they were joined by other men who also made lasting contributions. Yet, it was the opening “Da-da-da-dummmm” chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the melodies of Mozart's The Magic Flute that continue to define the classical period nearly two centuries later.

Source Citation  (MLA 7th Edition)