

The Classical Period 1750–c. 1820

The rise of the Classical style is closely linked with significant historical events and powerful political, cultural and social forces which led the way for new trends to emerge. These events were the breakdown of the absolute power of the old European system of monarchy which erupted in the terror of the French Revolution, the rise to power of the middle classes or *bourgeoisie*, and the spread of the liberal and national beliefs typical of the movement known as the Enlightenment. It was a time of enormous change, with new currents sweeping away the old styles and substituting others. The age was tinged with revolutionary spirit, new dynamism, a sense of tension, conflict, and the real prospect of social mobility.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment movement challenged authority of any kind. It was in favour of humanitarian ideals and the freedom of the individual, against privilege, and in favour of equal rights and universal education. The doctrines of the French writers, Voltaire and Rousseau, on the inequality of privilege and the rights of the individual, exerted immense influence in driving the movement forward and promoting social change. Philosophers and intellectuals of the Enlightenment sought rational answers for the difficulties that confronted them in politics, religions, social life and art. At the core of the movement was the belief that all questions could be answered by reason and knowledge. Humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment embraced the concepts of belief in the individual, regardless of birth, and the virtues of tolerance and brotherly love. Human brotherhood was embodied in the movement of Freemasonry, of which Mozart was a member.

Cosmopolitanism

The eighteenth century was also a cosmopolitan age. Foreign-born rulers abounded, composers travelled abroad frequently, taking up posts in countries other than their own, and incorporating national styles into their music.

There were an amazing number of composers around at this time, all writing about and discussing each others' 'craft' of composition. Concert life in the major cities flourished, in particular Paris, Leipzig, London, but especially Vienna – the eighteenth-century cultural centre.

Popularising of the arts

The growing wealth and increased influence of the middle classes led to a popularising of the arts and a demand for a universal language – musical as well as literary – that could be understood and appreciated by all. Novelists and playwrights altered their language to depict emotions which related as much to the everyday world of ordinary people as to the aristocratic court. It also led to the emergence of a modern public music audience whose demand for public concerts began to rival the older private concerts and the academic system.

The rise in the number of public concerts inevitably led to an increase in **amateur** performances. These in turn prompted a growth in **music printing**. There were no copyright laws at the time and works were often published without the composer's knowledge, altered, or had movements omitted. The bulk of the music printing was geared towards amateur performance. At the same time, methods devoted to teaching the amateur to play or sing in 'ten easy lessons' flooded the market.

The emphasis on literature and the arts at this time also stimulated a new public interest in reviewing, discussing and writing about music. This led to the emergence of music **journalism**, and the beginnings of the appearance of the critic's review in newspapers. The general increase of learned and casual discussions, the spread of public concerts and the new momentum of published music meant that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the relationship between the composer and the public was very

different from what it had been at the beginning of the century. This was the start of the Romantic notion of the composer as a creative artist, his art being omnipotent, and of his obligations being to the art itself and not to society.

Key characteristics

Key genres

- symphony
- chamber music
- concerto
- piano sonata
- opera
- sacred choral music
- art song

Continuity and change

The Classical age was predominantly an instrumental age. Significant genre changes from the Baroque period are:

- the Italian opera overture developed into the Classical symphony
- the concerto grosso became gradually displaced by the symphony as the dominant orchestral form
- the trio sonata was gradually displaced by the emergence of new forms, most notably the string trio, string quartet, piano trio, and piano quartet/quintet
- in keyboard music, the suite was displaced by the sonata
- the only instrumental genre to survive the transition from Baroque to Classical was the concerto for solo and orchestra, mainly through the works of Mozart
- in the early eighteenth century there was a reaction to the structure of *opera seria* which later was again challenged when a lighter comic opera emerged. Comic opera, or *opera buffa*, rose from humble beginnings to flourish alongside *opera seria*, reaching its heights in the operas of Mozart
- the oratorio, cantata and mass continued but in a much more contemporary accent.

The orchestra

The major change in the Classical period was not so much in the instruments themselves (although there were some changes) but in the new roles of the instruments:

- The continuo, which was still present in some early Haydn symphonies, gradually disappeared. The practice of the conductor sitting at the keyboard and also conducting progressed to the leader of the violins assuming increased responsibility. This led to orchestras eventually having a conductor with a baton.
- The delicate tones of the viols gave way to the fuller sounds of the violin, viola and cello. Wind instruments such as the recorder, limited in dynamic variety, also disappeared, as did the florid Baroque trumpet parts; new instruments were eventually added, notably the clarinet.
- There was a shift in the balance of the Baroque orchestra between wind and string instruments, in favour of strings. A clear division was made between melodic instruments and those which sustained the harmonies. The instruments became more clearly divided into sections as we know them today: strings, woodwind, brass, percussion. In general, the higher strings and the woodwind were used melodically and the other instruments were used harmonically. The woodwind and brass were at first used more to sustain the harmonies than to play melodies because of the limited number of notes at their disposal.
- The core of the early Classical orchestra was the violin family, along with two oboes and French horns. Gradually an increasing number of woodwind instruments was added, along with timpani, trumpets and flutes, and later, trombones.

The Mannheim orchestra was the most progressive and forward-looking orchestra at the time. The Mannheim musicians were highly-trained players. Under the leadership of their conductor, J. Stamitz, the orchestra was famous for its new dynamic range, and its ability to build dramatic crescendos and shade diminuendos. A popular

gesture of Stamitz was to begin a concert with opening forte chords from the orchestra, followed by a long steady crescendo from *pp* to *ff*, during which all the instruments would gradually enter, as the music slowly climbed up the scale – an effect calculated to thrill the audience. This was Mannheim's main 'party trick'.

The range and standards of players improved through the period. High-class virtuosos toured Europe displaying the new techniques of their improved instruments.

Keyboard

Due to the introduction of dynamics, the instruments that remained from the Baroque period were either adapted or became obsolete. The organ was adapted so that it could produce crescendos and diminuendos. The harpsichord was incapable of any gradation between *forte* and *piano* and gradually became obsolete. The clavichord, which was well suited to the ornamental and expressive style of the early Classical period, was limited in volume and capable of only a small dynamic range. It gradually became superseded by the piano around 1775. This was perhaps the greatest single event of this period with the greatest implications.

Form

Sonata form was the most important formal design in the Classical period. It developed in the last part of the eighteenth century, notably with Haydn and Mozart, and later with Beethoven in response to the needs of a new kind of texture. While Baroque music was essentially structured on long flowing lines within complex polyphonic textures, sonata form was fundamentally based on a vertical rather than horizontal scheme. This emphasised harmony rather than polyphony, keys and key changes and more simple melody-harmony texture. Contrast in sonata form was achieved by the sharp juxtaposition of keys and melodies, by clear sectional divisions and by textural contrasts.

Sonata form is a particular design on which movements of instrumental works – symphonies, concertos, trios, chamber works as

well as sonatas – are built. Although most commonly found as the structure for first movements, composers also used the form for second, third or fourth movements of works.

Sonata form is basically ternary in outline – A-B-A – the different sections being called *exposition*, *development* and *recapitulation*. To this structure, composers often added an introduction at the beginning and a coda at the end. In the Classical symphony, the exposition is usually repeated. The basic design is that the melodic material is first stated in the exposition, developed in various ways in the development, and restated in the recapitulation. This design is treated in a huge variety of ways by composers, notably through contrasting melodic material; the tonality and number of key changes (sometimes called the tonal design); ways in which they develop their material; textural contrasts and actual changes to the sonata form structure. The basic plan is as follows:

The exposition

First subject: this is usually a strong, motivic theme in the tonic key.

Bridge passage: this functions as a passage for modulation from the tonic key to another key – usually the dominant or the relative major if the tonic is a minor key – to reach the second subject.

Second subject: usually a more lyrical, cantabile melody in the new key.

The development

In this section the composer develops the thematic material of the exposition. The themes are often fragmented, and motifs from the melody are used for development, such as a particular intervallic leap, or rhythmic pattern. These motifs work through the entire texture of the section. The main point of the development is the often rapid key changes, which frequently build to a strong, dramatic climax point, after which the music 'travels' back to the home key. The tonal journey can be fairly straightforward, modulating through closely-related keys; or it can take sudden unexpected turns and shifts to move into far-reaching keys.

Recapitulation

The composer now restates the exposition section, usually adding some small variations. The main point about the recapitulation is that the bridge passage is altered, so that the second subject theme remains in the tonic key instead of modulating as in the exposition.

Coda

A coda is often added, summing up the movement, usually using themes already heard.

Further work and listening

- Listen to the first movement of a symphony or sonata by Haydn or Mozart. In the exposition, how does the second subject contrast with the first? What key does it modulate to? Which theme, or part of a theme, is developed in the development? Compare the recapitulation with the exposition – are there any changes, and if so, what are they? How does the composer end the work?

Musical style: The transition from Baroque to Classical

The change in musical style from Baroque to Classical closely reflects the social changes of the age. The change was gradual, and for some time the old style juxtaposed the new. Signs of the new style can be seen from about 1720 onwards, particularly in the works of Couperin, Pergolesi, D. Scarlatti, C.P.E. Bach, J. C. Bach, and in a range of pre-Classical styles, detailed below, that flourished in around 1730.

Rococo

The rococo (*rocaille* or rockwork) style was a reaction to the heavy grandeur, power and formalities of the Baroque period. The style embraced playfulness, refined wit and elegance. The less formal, more intimate social atmosphere of the salon became preferable to the imposing formality of large court entertainment. The simplicity of the pastoral scene, very characteristic of the rococo style, was a stark contrast to the heroes and mythological scenes characteristic of the Baroque. In music, as a reaction to the complex contrapuntal lines of the previous era, the rococo style was light and decorative. One of the main stylistic characteristics was graceful, melodic ornamentation.

Style galant

A French term implying 'elegant', 'courtly'. The style emphasised a pleasing, entertaining and 'natural' style of music, as opposed to the elaborate counterpoint and severe lines of the previous era. Melodies were made up of short phrases, often repeated with simple accompaniment and transparent harmonies with frequent cadences. The galant style can be found in the works of Pergolesi and G.B. Sammartini.

Pergolesi (1710–1736)

La Serva Padrona (The Maid as Mistress)

Listen to CD1, track 15 and follow the score opposite.

Change and continuity

Baroque characteristics

Melody

Continuous melodic line without obvious cadences. Melodies frequently built on motivic and sequential repetition; often a compact pattern repeated in a self-perpetuating manner. No regular periodic structures; regularity was often disguised through melodic extensions, irregular or dovetailed cadence points

Texture

Texture more complex and subtle, very much based on counterpoint, with some homophonic passages

Mood

One mood (affection) throughout an entire section or movement

Dynamics

Limited use of dynamic contrasts; sudden contrast from *f* to *p*.

Harmonic pace

Quick harmonic pace with regular pulse. Continuous energetic harmonic motion driven from the basso continuo (walking bass)

Harmonic foundation

Harmonic foundation provided by figured bass (harpsichord and bass); other instruments played parts continuing the melodic interest; florid, ornamental; 'gap' between subordinate bass and florid melodic lines. Basso continuo (walking bass) was a principal force – everything was based on this

Harmony and tonality

Rich harmonies, quick harmonic pace, bold chromatic harmony, rich dissonances, great use of the minor keys

Early Classical characteristics

Melody is important. Simpler melodies based on triads, scales, with definite rests; relatively short clear-cut phrases; often lyrical phrases, balanced, sense of proportion; regular phrase lengths of eight bar measures often split into 4+4

Texture clearer and less complicated. Clear distinction between melody and accompaniment. Use of typical accompaniment patterns, for example, *alberti bass* – chords of the harmony broken up into short patterns. Steady bass patterns in orchestral music which give the rhythmic drive to Classical music, compensating for the energetic drive of the Baroque bass continuo line

Deliberately composed for emotional contrasts and varied moods within a movement, with one mood juxtaposed against another. A much stronger sense of drama, contrasting moods, tension and relaxation. The pacing of climaxes and their dénouement was very important. Audience's emotional experiences are kept in a greater state of flux

Deliberate use of dynamics for contrast and surprise. Haydn frequently tried to surprise his audience with sudden 'surprise tactics'. More explicit instructions for the performer eg: *f*, *p*, *mf*, *mp*. Dynamics now much more an integral part of the music

Harmonic pace generally slower. Pace more crucial now to the impact of a movement – more varied, playing a definitive role in the ebb and flow of the music. Modulations less adventurous in Early Classical period

Harmony/tonality – most popular keys: D, F, G and B \flat majors. Much more simple. Initially predominantly tonic, dominant, sub-dominant harmonies, progressions often based on a circle of 5ths; repeated bass lines; increasingly chromatic harmonies; tonality and far-reaching modulations intensified

More emphasis on blending and balance; orchestra became more closely divided into melodic and harmonic instruments; fundamental harmonies given notably to brass and woodwind

two. Haydn's most important masses are all large-scale festive works using full orchestral forces, often with horns and trumpets, and four solo vocalists. At the time, the sheer scale and exuberance of his masses were occasionally criticised by the clergy for not being in the spirit and showing the decorum suitable for religious works. Haydn, however, justified his flamboyant writing by explaining that he thought it was appropriate for him to compose cheerful sacred music.

Unlike Baroque, Classical sacred music is characterised by the juxtaposition of musical styles – the Classical melody-harmony and the polyphonic style imitation and fugue. There is also an emphasis on the chorus and orchestra, the solo parts or ensembles for soloists occurring mainly as sections of the choruses. In some masses the orchestra plays a role at least equal to that of the voices, notably in Mozart's *Requiem*. As in the vocal writing, there is a blend of the old vocal polyphony and symphonic development.

The masses of Haydn and Mozart served as models for the early nineteenth century. Beethoven regarded his second mass, the *Missa Solemnis*, Op. 123 as his greatest work in this form. It is recognised as difficult to sing and to interpret, and too long and elaborate for ordinary liturgical use.

Oratorio

An oratorio is an extended musical setting of a sacred, usually non-liturgical text. The forms and styles are similar to opera but without scenery, costumes or action. The most significant oratorios of the Classical era are Haydn's *The Creation* and *The Season*. Haydn was much influenced by the oratorios of Handel, and like Handel he uses recitatives and arias, duets, trios – sometimes larger ensembles – choruses and orchestra. The musical style and texture is that of the Classical era with fugue and fugato sections in the choruses alongside homophonic sections. A special feature of Haydn's oratorios is the way they depict scenes of nature.

Opera

An opera is a musical dramatic work which combines words, music, drama and scenery, costume and acting, with music normally playing a dominant role.

Gluck (1714–1787)

The opera reforms of Gluck paved the way for opera development in the Classical period. Particularly significant is his work, *Orfeo and Eurydice*. Gluck aimed to make the music bring out the expression of sentiments in the text, rather than dominate the poetry or interrupt the text for unconventional orchestral ritornellos, or for a display of ornamental pieces just to satisfy the demands of the singers. He also stressed that the overture should be relevant to the drama and the orchestration should suit the text. He aimed to break down the sharp contrast between recitative and aria and allow more integration and flow between movements and the dramatic action.

Opera buffa (comic opera)

The dominant position of *opera seria* was challenged in the early eighteenth century by opera buffa or comic opera. Pergolesi was particularly significant in this change with the phenomenal success of *La Serva Padrona* (see page 43). Above all, this opera could be understood because it had genuine dramatic qualities and because it was amusing. It was also characteristic of the reaction to the Baroque opera seria and of the new spirit of the later eighteenth century. Pergolesi created a distinct new genre which was subsequently imitated by composers after him, who extended the genre by increasing the number of characters (Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* has only three characters and one is mute), and the number of acts.

The greatest composer of opera buffa was Mozart. His works *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1783) and *Così fan Tutti* (1790) were all based on librettos by Da Ponte. He raised the opera buffa form to a higher plane by giving greater depth to the characters, and by

highlighting serious social tensions and issues in a humorous, appealing way. The many ensembles and extended finales of these operas also brought a new emotional weight to comic opera.

Opéra comique

The French comic opera, or *opéra comique*, again modelled on Pergolesi, emerged as a reaction to the grand and complex operas of Lully and Rameau. Despite resistance from older supporters of French grand opera traditions, changes to French opera were given impetus by support from influential writers such as the philosopher, Rousseau – in his celebrated *Letter on French Music* (1753) he condemned French music.

The subject-matter of French comic opera was basically the same as Italian comic opera, being concerned with pastoral, peasant, middle-class and everyday life. Examples of French *opéra comique* include Grety's *Richard Coeur de Lion* (1784).

Singspiel

German comic opera, called *singspiel* was founded in the English ballad opera, notably

The Beggar's Opera. As in England, spoken dialogues were interspersed with simple, folk-like songs and dances. Examples of the developed *singspiel* style are Mozart's two operas, *Die Entführung aus Dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Harem – 1782) and *Die Zauberflute* (The Magic Flute – 1791). Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* (1805) is also based on the German *singspiel*.

Further work and listening

- Listen to and study Gluck's *Orfeo and Eurydice*. Look particularly at the use of the instruments of the orchestra, including the exceptional trombones; the choruses; and the combination of expressive style and the *sturm und drang* style with its powerful string figuration, leaping motives and tremolos.
- Try to go to see a Mozart opera, for example, *The Marriage of Figaro*, or *The Magic Flute*, noting especially how Mozart portrays the personalities of the characters and the social tensions of the time.