

Classical Music Periods

Like other human pursuits the creation of music has evolved over time. Music History Scholars look back over time, and attempt to break that evolution up into stages, in the same way Paleontologists and Historians classify other types of change. Such a classification system is always going to be a simplification. In reality music has evolved in a more gradual manner with a number of smaller revolutionary steps along the way. Still a broad classification is helpful to make sense of the complexity and give labels to different styles and techniques of music. Although there are some differences of opinion about the dates for different transitions (there is always a degree of overlap), most musicologists are agreed on the overall shape of musical development. Below is a quick summary of the key periods of musical development.

The breakdown into music periods concentrates on Western Classical Music not because there wasn't music elsewhere in the world, but simply because that is the type of musical tradition focused on at mfiles. In our summary of that classification, we have used the following names and dates for the different musical eras:

- * Early Music (before 9th Century); Medieval or Gothic (9th to 14th centuries)
- * Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries)
- * Baroque (1600 - 1750)
- * Classical (1750 - 1820)
- * Romantic (1820 - 1910)
- * Modern (1910 - present)



Early Music (before 9th Century):

Although music has undoubtedly been a feature of human society for many thousands of years, not very much is known about its early history. It is not until the time of some of the ancient civilizations that writings and sometimes pictures and artifacts have recorded the use of musical instruments. It is assumed that some music may have been improvisatory and that any technical aspects of music will have been passed via oral traditions, experienced musicians passing their skills by example to students. In this respect the learning of musical techniques is no different from other skills.

In the later centuries of this period, formal musical traditions were being incubated in the catholic monasteries of the time, and the church was to play a major role in the subsequent development of music. A formal approach to the unaccompanied singing of religious texts in Latin was developed, called Gregorian chant named after Pope Gregory I of the 6th Century AD. This singing or "plainsong" often centered on a single note with a few notes either side of it. The equivalent of keys used at this time was called Modes which roughly corresponds to scales starting on different white notes on a piano.

Medieval or Gothic (9th to 14th centuries):

Over the years many human endeavors have had the benefit of language. In particular a written language can convey a lot of information about past events, places, people and things. But it is difficult to describe music in words, and even more difficult to specify a tune. It was the development of a standard musical notation in the 11th century that allowed music to be documented in a physical form. Now music could be communicated efficiently, and succeeding generations would know something about the music of their ancestors.

It was the demands of the church that required a musical notation, and so the earliest written music was Church Music. The plainchant of this time was still unaccompanied, but new developments were starting to appear. The singing might alternate between two parts for solo singers or choirs, or two parts might be sung together in a style called Organum. In early Organum a second part simply followed the main part at a fixed interval so that the two parts moved in parallel. Later the supporting parts became more independent of the main one and this freedom led to early forms of harmony. Outside of the church's influence, Minstrels and Troubadours were entertaining in the castles of Europe, with music and song a key part of their unwritten repertoire.

Composers from this period were usually monks, and mostly their names were not written down. Among the few names we do know about today are Hildegard von Bingen (a nun and Abbess) and Guillaume de Machaut. An example of Gregorian chant from this period is the Dies Irae or "Day of Wrath".

Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries):

The Renaissance period is well-known as a time of rapid development in all forms of learning and the arts. There was a new self-sustaining freedom of expression which spread throughout much of Europe, and incubated many new ideas and schools of thought. The church was still very powerful and its influence was everywhere, yet the reformation brought a degree of freedom to religious thinking and some hymns which we recognize today were written in this period. A shift in power also meant that the secular needs of the Royal Courts were as important as those of the church in sponsoring new musical material. So as well as music for the Mass, there were Motets and Madrigals setting texts and verse to music, as well as a number of dance forms. Music styles became more complex with multiple parts for different instruments and further developments in harmony. Instruments such as the recorder and lute were common as well as early versions of today's instruments. The creativity of this period was given further impetus by the invention of the printing press which brought standardization to the previously hand-written forms of musical notation, and allowed many more copies to be made.

Key composers of this period include Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, John Taverner, Josquin des Prez and Giovanni Palestrina.

Baroque (1600 - 1750):

In the arts the word Baroque often implies elaborated decorated. This is certainly true of some of the music of the period, but there were also many fundamental changes in its structure. The church's influence continued to decrease, and some composers of the day had a degree of freedom beyond their normal duties of composing for religious and secular occasions. In terms of style, further advances were made in turning the earlier "organum" into the modern harmony of today. Harmony was often indicated by the use of a figured bass to accompany a melody. A figured bass is a baseline with harmonies stated but not fully written out, giving scope for a degree of improvisation.

Instrumental suites consisting of a number of movements based on dances, and concertos created the basis for the classical forms to come. Some preludes and all fugues used multiple independent parts in a technique known as polyphony or counterpoint, and the rise of opera married song and story-telling into a new art form. Replacing the modal system, a new form of keyboard tuning was introduced based on splitting octaves into 12 equal intervals. Called Equal Temperament or Well-Tempered, this enabled different keys to be used without distortion, and it was easier to modulate between keys.

All of these separate developments made this a time of rapid change which laid the foundation for the Classical period to come. Key composers of the Baroque era include Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, Johann Pachelbel, Georg Phillip Telemann, Jean-Philippe Rameau, Henry Purcell, Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi, Domenico Scarlatti, Allesandro Scarlatti, Tomaso Albinoni, Claudio Monteverdi and Francois Couperin.

Classical (1750 - 1820):

Towards the end of the Baroque period, some composers were already setting off in new directions. The sons of Bach (CPE and JC) for example were already seeking new avenues away from the styles of their father, and a freer movement of artists and musicians between European countries helped to give them inspiration. During this classical period, the forms instigated by the church were still there, but for the most part the major composers of the day worked for the royalty or nobility of the time. Nevertheless public concerts were becoming more popular during this time, and concert halls and opera houses were attended in all major cities.

It is in this period that many familiar "forms" were conceived, and the music of this time was often thought of as being abstract and pure rather than depicting anything in particular. Indeed instrumental music was more common than vocal forms. The concept of a Theme and Variations reached its zenith in this period, Sonata Form was the foundation of Symphonies, Concertos and String Quartets as well as Sonatas, and works were not given titles but merely called things like "Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major". The strict definition of form (and the concept of music being abstract and detached) was seen as a major constraint by some later composers, but allowed the great composers of the day the creative tools to build many acknowledged masterpieces.

The great composers of this period were Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Johann Stamitz, Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Luigi Boccherini and Christoph von Gluck with others such as Franz Schubert and especially Ludwig van Beethoven being seen as transitional and indeed instrumental in bringing about the Romantic period.

Romantic (1820 - 1910):

The Romantic era was another period of rapid evolution in music. From the foundations laid down by the Classical masters, composers were now composing from the heart. The fact that composers were no longer employees but independent meant that they could follow their own direction, composing music that pleased them. Of course composers still had to live so they accepted commissions, made deals with publishing houses, composed music with commercial value, and promoted their own music through concerts across Europe and other parts of the world. Many composers of the time were also very skilled performers or conductors and would therefore go on tour with their new works. Thus composers were among the celebrities of the time, and there a degree of showmanship involved with ever longer and more elaborate works played by huge orchestras and choirs.

Played using "modern instruments" the music of this period is very familiar to us today, especially those "popular favorites" which are still played frequently today. The language of this music is also familiar from its influence on music for film and television. That it was able to make this transition was the result of its dramatic power and ability to convey both the extremes and subtleties of emotion. This kind of power needed new techniques and audiences heard ever more complex harmonies and rhythms, and the leitmotif was invented. Many composers sought new directions, and different "schools of thought" branched out in different directions. Examples of this being the impressionists who used notes to paint musical pictures or impressions, and the nationals who embraced the folk tunes and styles of their own countries. Classical forms were also stretched so that for some composers the symphony became a symphonic or tone poem, which might tell a story for example. Not all the music of this time was orchestral. Chamber music for smaller forces was also very common, and musical miniatures for solo instruments or singers could be heard in smaller venues or played by ordinary people.

As well as Beethoven and Schubert, composers of the Romantic period include Frederic Chopin, Felix Mendelssohn, Hector Berlioz, Johannes Brahms, Edvard Grieg, Antonin Dvorak, Robert Schumann, Georges Bizet, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Anton Bruckner, Camille Saint-Saens, Gustav Mahler, Erik Satie, Claude Debussy, Modest Mussorgsky.

Modern (1910 - present):

If the Romantic period saw the start of some fragmentation into different schools, this trend continued and accelerated into the modern era. There were those who continued to develop older traditions: the neo-classicists, the late romantics and the impressionist schools still prevailed, and those who took a new path with atonal music, serialism and later with experimental and minimalist music. Some composers created thematic material which could hardly be called "melodies", introducing dissonant intervals and different scales, and unusual rhythms and cross-rhythms were explored. There were composers, considered extreme by some audiences, who used traditional instruments in unconventional ways, overturned principles previously considered fundamental, and questioned the roles of composer, musician and listener. Experimental composers used randomization techniques, or gave unusual instructions which might not include any conventional musical notation at all.

While classical music became more elite, popular music (which had been around for centuries) found a new mass audience, with the advent of recordings, radio and television. These new media had an insatiable demand for music, and film music in particular required much original music and recruited composers educated in the classical traditions. Popular music in turn had a strong influence on serious music, and jazz and other ideas became incorporated into the concert repertoire. The same electricity which powered the new media also fuelled new gadgets for amplification and powered new instruments such as the electric guitar and synthesizers. More recently it has become possible to create and manipulate sound solely within computers, in a similar way to their use for creating graphics and animations for those same media. With all these developments music is much more accessible around the world, e.g. corporate dj toronto, and as styles and techniques are invented, re-invented and combined this in turn stimulates further invention and discovery.

Composers of the modern period include Richard Strauss, Edward Elgar, William Walton, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Sergei Rachmaninov, Zoltan Kodaly, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, George Gershwin, Maurice Ravel, Francois Poulenc, Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, John Cage, Philip Glass, Michael Nyman, Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Benjamin Britten, Olivier Messiaen, Henryk Gorecki, Gyorgy Ligeti, John Corigliano, Aaron Copland, John Williams, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Malcolm Arnold.