

The Classical Age (1750 - 1810)

Classical means a citizen (later on a writer) of the highest class. The word is applied to something of special merit and of lasting value. The architecture of ancient Greece and Rome is described as Classical, a style which places an importance on grace and simplicity, beauty of line and shape, balance and proportion, order and control.

Classicism in art had its beginnings in the Rococo style, in which elegance, courtliness, delicate colours, pastoral scenes were important factors. This fashion in painting was paralleled in music by the *style galant*, which means courtly and polite. **Frederick the Great**, an accomplished flautist, played works in the style galant. His harpsichordist - **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach**, the second son of **J. S. Bach**, also adopted the style. **Johann Christian Bach**, the court musician of **George III** of England, known as the '**London**' **Bach**, composed music in the style galant and influenced the young **Mozart**.

The word '**Classical**' in music has a more precise meaning. It refers to music composed between **1750 and 1810** - a fairly brief period which includes the music of **Haydn**, **Mozart** and the earlier compositions of **Beethoven**.

Later as the classical style matured, it came to emphasise more the qualities of grace and beauty of melody and form, proportion and balance, moderation and control. The classical composer strikes a perfect balance in his music between expressiveness and formal structure. The texture tends to be lighter and clearer, less complicated than the polyphonic style of the Baroque era. The texture was **homophonic**, ie. Tunes above a chordal accompaniment.

An important composer of opera during the classical era was **Gluck (1714 - 1787)**. He reacted against the superficialities and over-decoration of Italian opera seria. His idea was that music should serve the story, not vice versa. Singers had taken on such importance that the action was frequently held up while they were allowed to show off their technical brilliance. Gluck decided it was time for this to change. He first put his ideas into practice in his best known opera which was performed in Vienna in 1762 '**Orfeo ed Euridice**' (This made use of the same Greek legend as **Monteverdi's 'Orfeo'**, composed in 1607). Gluck explained his ideas of what an opera should be. The music should serve the story. The action should be more continuous avoiding interruptions merely for vocal display. Instruments should be chosen and used to suit each situation in the story, and the overture should prepare the audience for the nature of the drama that was to follow.

Mozart (1756 - 1791) transformed opera by his musical genius and dramatic instinct. His 3 greatest operas are : '**The Marriage of Figaro**', '**Don Giovanni**' and '**The Magic Flute**'. These operas show Mozart's keen observation of human nature which enables him to bring life and warmth to his characters. **Arias**, while deepening our understanding of the character, often help to carry the story forward. Mozart makes the final scene of an act into an elaborate structure during which all the characters join in an ensemble, but with each character voicing his or her own reaction to the situation that has come about. The orchestra in a Mozart opera plays an important part in the unfolding of the story, expressing the mood and enhancing the importance of the voice.

During the classical era, for the first time in musical history, music for instruments became more important than music for voices. Many works were written for piano which had considerable powers of expression. A pianist could make sudden contrasts between soft and loud and could control all the various shades of tone and

volume in between. Sounds could be made to grow gradually louder or gradually softer, and further contrasts might be made between legato and staccato. A player might shape an expressive melody in a singing style against a quieter accompaniment with the left hand. J. C. Bach gave the first public performance of music on the piano in London. The piano was invented in 1709 by **Bartolomeo Cristofori**.

The Orchestra : The continuo fell out of use and composers started using wind instruments, especially the horns, to bind the texture. By the end of the 18th century the orchestra included strings,

2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 kettledrums.

Johann Stamitz, at Mannheim developed the string technique and balance of the **Symphony Orchestra** so that it became the envy of Europe. Stamitz was one of the earliest composers of Symphonies.

There are four **movements** in a **Classical Symphony** :

1. A fast movement in **Sonata Form** (sometimes there is a slow introduction)
2. A slow, song - like movement in **Ternary form**, or **Variation form**.
3. A **Minuet and Trio**, (borrowed from the **Baroque Suite**)
4. A fast movement in **Sonata** or **Rondo form**

Sonata was the name a Classical composer gave to a work in 3 or 4 movements for one or two instruments only. If three instruments took part it was called a **trio**, if four, a **quartet**, five, a **quintet**, etc. Other important compositions for orchestra were the Symphony and the **Concerto**. The Symphony was in fact a Sonata for orchestra. It grew from the **Italian Overture** which had three sections, contrasted in speed : **quick, slow, quick**. In the early Classical Symphony these became three separate movements. Later the usual number became four, with the **Minuet and Trio** inserted between the slow movement and the brisk finale. Many composers took a hand in shaping the Symphony - including Sammartini, Stamitz, C. P. E. Bach, J. C. Bach. It was Haydn and Mozart who enriched and perfected the symphony during the second half of the 18th century.

Joseph Haydn has come down in history as the '**Father of the Symphony**' and the '**Father of the String Quartet**'. For 30 years Haydn served as composer / conductor on the estate of Prince Esterházy in Hungary. Here he produced **chamber music, string quartets**, operas and symphonies. His earliest string quartets consist largely of a solo for first violin accompanied by a second violin, viola and cello. In his later quartets, all four instruments play important individual parts, thus creating the ideal of the string quartet : a 'conversation among equals'. Towards the end of his life, Haydn spent several years in England, where he composed some of his greatest music.

The music of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, with that of Haydn, represents the culmination of the classical style. A child prodigy, Mozart was a virtuoso keyboard performer and a budding composer before he was ten years old. He travelled throughout Europe with his father astonishing the nobility with his performances. Throughout his life, Mozart composed music with amazing speed. His great melodic gift, and his ability to express a dramatic situation through music are clearly evident in his many operas. One of the most famous of these is 'Don Giovanni', in which both comic and tragic elements are combined. Among the instrumental works of his mature years, his piano concertos are outstanding. In them we find a wealth of beautiful melodies, original formal structures, the unique use of woodwind instruments and the interplay of piano and orchestra. Mozart was still growing musically when he died at the age of 35. A year after his death there arrived in Vienna an ambitious young man of 22 destined to become the last of the great composers of the classical tradition, his

name was **Ludwig Van Beethoven** and was already recognised as a piano virtuoso and a promising composer.

Young Beethoven took lessons in composition from Haydn - then about 60. When he showed his master a trio in c minor, the old gentleman was shocked by its aggressiveness and emotionalism. Beethoven was to give the world expanded conceptions of the forms of the classical era. The c minor trio was an early indication that Beethoven, the last classical, was to become the first and the greatest of the **Romantics**. Beethoven had the same effect on music as Michelangelo had on Italian art - they both destroyed their successors' will to create.

Taking classical forms used by Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven modified and expanded them. His works tend to be weightier and on a much larger scale. In the development section of a sonata form movement he makes a more searching exploration of ideas. He gives the coda greater importance, sometimes continuing to explore material in such a way that it amounts to a second development section. Slow movements portray a deeper emotional intensity. The minuet becomes transformed into the brisk and vigorous **scherzo**. More weight and importance is given to the final movement to balance the first.

Drama and conflict are ingredients in Beethoven's style. There is a powerful, often violent rhythmic drive, a sharper use of discords, frequently marked sforzandos and striking contrasts - timbres (tone colours), pitches (high against low), and dynamics (loud against soft). During a crescendo, when the loudest chord is expected, Beethoven will often take the listener by surprise by making a sudden drop to piano.

Beethoven increased the size of the orchestra by adding extra horns, piccolo, double bassoon, and three trombones in the finale of the 5th symphony. These instruments are used again in the 9th symphony (Choral) which also includes solo voices and mixed chorus, bass drum, cymbals and triangle.

Sonata form :

1. A slow, impressive **Introduction**
2. **The Exposition** : which includes : (a) a first, vigorous subject (or theme), (b) a second, more tuneful, less vigorous subject in a new key, (usually **Dominant** or relative minor)
3. **The Development** : which explores the musical ideas presented in the Exposition.
4. **The Recapitulation** : the same themes as in the Exposition, but both in the **Tonic** key
5. **A Coda** : which rounds off the movement

The Classical Concerto : had 3 movements as it did not include a minuet. The first movement is in sonata form. The first movement of a Concerto has a **double Exposition**, one for the orchestra alone presenting the main musical material in the tonic key, followed by the entry of the soloist in the second exposition, now with the second subject group in a related key. The composer often holds back material from the first exposition in order to add interest and variety when it is introduced in the second. Then follows the Development and the Recapitulation, shared by soloist and orchestra. Towards the end of the Recapitulation, the orchestra pauses, and the soloist plays a **Cadenza** : a showy passage based on themes heard earlier, which displays the brilliance of the soloist. Originally the soloist was expected to improvise a cadenza on the spot, later on composers began to write out the music they expected to be played. A cadenza usually ends with a trill, the signal for the orchestra to re-enter and play the coda.

Main characteristics of Classical music :

- 1.** Lighter, clearer texture than Baroque
- 2.** Emphasis on grace and beauty of melody and form, balance and control, polished and elegant in character.
- 3.** More contrast within the piece of keys, tunes, rhythms, and dynamics, frequent changes of mood and tone - colour.
- 4.** Melodies were short with clear - cut phrases and clearly marked cadences.
- 5.** Orchestra increased in size and range, woodwind becomes a self - contained section.
- 6.** Harpsichord replaced by piano
- 7.** Importance given to instrumental music, sonata, string quartet, symphony, concerto.
- 8.** Sonata form used for the first movement of sonatas, string quartets, symphonies, concertos, and overtures.