The Classical Period: c. 1750-1820

Historical & Social Perspectives

The Classical period, also known as the Age of Enlightenment, was defined by vastly contrasting moods: staunch defense of the progressive aristocracy cast against revolutions of the masses taking control of their own destinies. The ruling class enjoyed its authority through hereditary and self-proclaimed divine right. The past was revered, tradition was cherished and the status quo upheld at all costs. Aristocracies became increasingly in-bred to protect its own propagation. Monarchs of German descent ruled in England, Poland and Sweden; Spanish and French royalty peppered Italy; Russia was ruled by a young Prussian princess. Indeed, even their high-placed artists and philosophers traveled far and wide. Frenchman Voltaire occasionally resided at the French-speaking court of Frederick the Great of Prussia and Italian poet Metastasio was welcomed at the German imperial court in Vienna.

Monarchs not only patronized arts and letters, but also worked toward social reform. Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, Joseph II of Austria, and the early reign of Louis XVI of France became known as munificent despots – working to better the plight of their subjects while enjoying the excesses of their social status. Longing for universal human brotherhood, embodied in the Freemasonry movement, spread rapidly throughout Europe. Poets (Goethe and Schiller) and composers (Mozart and Beethoven) were included in the free-flow of ideas and ostensible benevolence.

As the quest for equality, brotherhood, and liberty spread, so did the flow of knowledge and information. A new rising population became intellectually aware and became hungry for more knowledge. The problem was that as aristocratic patronage waned in the latter half of the 18th century, control of philosophy, science, the arts, and political might had to be wrested from the entrenched society that brought about its distribution. It was a cosmopolitan age with the underpinnings of revolt. Consider these important events that shaped the latter half of the 18th century and early 19th century:

- The United States of America cast off its subjugation of the British Monarchy.
• Parisian citizens storm the Bastille (infamous French prison).
• Hapsburg (German) troops suppress revolution in Brussels, Belgium.
• French mobs conquer the Tuileries Palace, leading to the killing of scores of aristocrats, including King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and their children.
• Spain declares war on a weakened Britain from loss to United States revolution.
• Napoleon’s armies invade Germany, Italy, Austria and defeat Turks in Cairo, Egypt.

Indeed, the unwitting aristocracy aided the groundwork, but also the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and another Age of Discovery brought about political unrest as resources of knowledge were brought to the masses. Consider these important scientific inventions and discoveries that took place during the Classical period:

• 1752 – Benjamin Franklin discovers electricity; French philosophers publish Encyclopédie.
• 1760s – James Watt invents steam engine; James Hargreaves, the spinning jenny; Johann Winckelmann publishes The History of Ancient Art.
• 1771 – First edition of Encyclopedia Britannica
• 1774 – Joseph Priestly discovers oxygen.
• 1785 – Edmund Cartwright invent the power loom.
• 1788 – Edward Gibbon publishes The of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
• 1793 – Eli Whitney invents cotton gin.
• 1796 – Edward Jenner perfects vaccination treatments.

This age resulted in a concept of intellectual dualism. On one hand, Classical art captured the exquisite refinement of a way of life that once flourished; on the other, it intimated the beginnings of a new way of life, a new order in the making. In addition to being the Age of Enlightenment, this time was referred to as the Age of Reason. The philosophers, who through aristocratic patronage, espoused liberal thought for the all, used reason to bite the very hand that fed them – the aristocracy. John Locke and David Hume in England, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France, Immanuel Kant in German and Voltaire throughout his many travels became spokesmen for the rising bourgeois and the prophets of revolution.

This period also reflected upon Greek and Roman art and architecture, much like the Renaissance. An important event that renewed focus on Greco-Roman art and architecture occurred in 1748 when
archaeologists unearthed ruins at Pompeii and Herculaneum. This focus on form and symmetry pervaded the design of buildings, from humble dwellings to elaborate public structures. Palaces were built with master plans adhering to symmetry and proportion. Elaborate gardens and grounds were planned and cultivated with precise dimensions abiding by a balanced design. Even Thomas Jefferson patterned the United States Capitol and the library at the University of Virginia after Greek and Roman temples. This focus on classical architecture at our own nation’s birth made the Ionic, Doric and Corinthian columns a staple of American public buildings well into the current age.

**Music in the Classical Period**

The cosmopolitan age transcended into musicians’ lives as well. German composers found engaged audiences and patrons in Paris and Italy and Italian opera composers and vocalists were found in Germany, Spain, England, Russia and France. Johann Quantz in his treatise, *On Playing the Flute*, hypothesizes that “[f]or a style of music that is received and approved by many peoples, and not just by a single land, . . . must be the very best.”¹ “Today there is but one music in all of Europe . . . this universal language of our continent,” declared Michel Chabanon.²

**Musical Forms**

The Classical Period saw music take on prescribed structures and recognizable forms. Large and small musical forms were employed for a variety of reasons. They gave the untrained audience (aristocracy) aural clues to listen for to follow the performance. They allowed composers to create and try new ideas within safely established structures. They gave performers opportunities to have structured and reliable performances of new material.

Concertos continued to be an audience favorite into the Classical period with the ability for composer-performers such as Mozart and Beethoven to display their virtuosity. The first and last movements of the three-movement work usually contained a *cadenza*, a solo passage of sophisticated workmanship. The first movement is fast, incorporates at least one or two cadenzas for the soloist and often used the *sonata* as its detailed form. The

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² Michel Paul Gui de Chabanon. *De la Musique considerée en elle-même et dans ses rapports [etc.].* (Paris, 1785), p97
second movement is usually song-like in nature, is slower and used the sonata, rondo, or theme and variations as its small-scale form. Finally, the third movement captured a light and witty style, had the fastest tempo of the three movements, and often used the rondo small-scale structure.

Symphonies during this era had as few as three and as many as five movements. However, four movements became the standard — as exemplified by Haydn’s enormous output — in a fast-slow-moderate-fast arrangement. Within these larger forms, movements with smaller detail forms would be established.

The first and perhaps most influential was the sonata or sonata-allegro form (the addition of allegro is from the commonplace tempo of this form). This three-part form is laid out in an A-B-A format — thus the beginning and ending portions being similar with a contrasting theme between them. However, each A section had its own a-b-a configuration as well. This form mirrored the balanced approach to architecture with many manor homes having a central edifice with two contrasting yet symmetrical facades on each side. This form is used frequently as the first movement of most concertos, sonatas, and symphonies. It also is used in overtures of opera and other programmatic works, using themes from portions of the opera as component themes.

The rondo was a favorite as the final movement of a concerto or sonata. Usually using catchy and identifiable themes, they would also be used in string quartets and symphonies. A recurring primary theme is separated by shorter secondary themes.

A theme and variations uses one main theme throughout the movement, usually stated at the beginning. Each succeeding section presents a modification of the main theme, not so much though that the theme is unrecognizable. Thus, the transformation is easy to follow and the piece has a feeling of ongoing development and growth.

Haydn and Mozart realized the advantages of keeping the interest and attention of the audience. Accommodating the popularity of dancing, especially the minuet, the composers included a minuet as the third movement to most of their symphonies, many chamber music pieces and even some piano music.
The dance in triple meter provided an effective distinction from the other movements in the multimovement formats.

Solo sonatas and chamber ensembles borrowed extensively from the aforementioned forms in outline and detail. Depending upon the composer, the commissioning patron, the performer or performers for whom it was written, the audience, the number of movements and the detailed forms there within would be altered.

**Musicians’ Lives in the Classical Period**

**Court Composer** The complacent aristocracy had not developed any new patronage system during the Baroque or Classical periods. In fact, musicians and composers had very little standing within the royal court. The court composer was still responsible for supplying all music – religious, chamber, dance and choral – for the variety of events hosted or held by the patron aristocrat. However, aristocratic events settled into a predictable routine of elaborate and often questionable manners, moral orations and musical performances.

**Court Concerts and Balls** Following an overindulgent meal and excessive drink, the royal entourage would enter the music room. Throughout the duration of the brief concert, guests would routinely talk, noisily doze off, or leave and return sporadically. Once the obligatory concert was concluded, guests would again nap and change attire for the ensuing ball, dancing into the morning hours.

**Resident Musicians** Most French, German and Austro-Hungarian courts maintained a staff of resident musicians. They would serve as small orchestras and choirs when the royal court held opera, concerts and dances. More or less servants, musicians often found themselves putting down a serving tray before picking up a violin bow.

**The Big Three: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven**

Perhaps the best way to study this period’s actual musical output in to focus upon the three dominant musical figures of the era, and their representative works: Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven.

**Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)** Franz Joseph Haydn lived his life primarily in his native Austria, born in Rohrav, a small town near the Hungarian border. Recognized for his musical talent at a young age, Haydn received a scholarship to study music in Vienna. There, he was a member of the Vienna Boy’s
Choir. Afterwards he held several posts as a violinist, composer and music director. As he entered his thirties, Haydn accepted the position as the court composer for the Esterházy court, the powerful Hungarian family. He traveled extensively between the family’s palaces providing weekly operatic performances and orchestral concerts.

Haydn was most prolific during his thirty years of service to the Esterházy court writing concertos, operas, sonatas and string quartets. Of his 106 symphonies, eighty-three were written as the Esterházy resident composer. These works defined the symphony genre. Haydn cemented the four-movement format of the symphony with its fast-slow-moderate-fast assembly. What was remarkable about this symphonic development was Haydn incorporation and proliferation of the minuet dance into this serious composition. If a movement were to be omitted, it was usually the third movement. However, Haydn found it to be very useful and provided a suitable contrast from the slower second movement and an appropriate progression to the fast finale movement.

Despite Haydn’s position as a court servant and his dislike being treated as such, his working relationship with brothers Prince Paul Anton and Nicholas Esterházy was fairly amicable, allowing Haydn considerable latitude in his compositional work, especially as social commentary on life at the palace. An example of his satirical nature is his Symphony No. 45 known as the “Farewell”. Haydn wrote this symphony protesting the treatment of the orchestral musicians who were not allowed to bring family members to the Esterházy palace at Eisenstadt, thirty miles south of Vienna. Haydn composed a clever answer to this decree by the aristocrats. After three uneventful movements, during the finale, members of the orchestra extinguished their reading candles, packed up their instruments and left the performance hall until only two violinists finished the symphony. Prince Nicholas took the hint and declared an extended leave for musicians to visit families in Vienna.

Following the death of the Esterházy patrons, Haydn was offered a commission from concert and opera producer Johann Peter Salomon. Although in his sixties, Haydn accepted the commission and the conditions it placed upon him: residency in London. Haydn spent over four years in England over two separate trips. He found English society to be far more progressive than the stodgy feudal Austrian social practices. While the local aristocracy gave him a warm welcome, it was the personal appearance and the endearment to the English people that fueled his compositional fires. To that end, he found these sojourns
to England very fruitful as he composed a collection of twelve “London” symphonies, Nos. 93-104 – in tribute to the city and its people.

Having become a wealthy and famous artist across the continent, Haydn returned to Vienna where he spent the remainder of his days comfortably. The comfort did not distract him from compositional work as he composed two great oratorios – *The Creation* and *The Seasons* – again inspired by his visits to London and the performance halls of another great oratorio composer – George Frederic Handel.

Franz Joseph Haydn was the last distinguished composer who, overall, lived contentedly in the service of nobility. This is in stark contrast to his contemporary, his erstwhile pupil, respected colleague and close friend, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91)** One of the greatest child prodigies ever known was born into a musical family in Salzburg, Austria in 1756. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart displayed his extraordinary musical talents at the age of four when he performed in public on both violin and piano. The following year, he began composing music; by age eight, he had composed his first symphony. Mozart completed his first oratorio at age eleven and his first opera the ensuing year. A remarkable feat for most musicians during his time, but to hit three major genres before his teenaged years is unheard of then, and today.

At the beginning, however, Mozart was not a solo act. His sister, Maria Anna (Nannerl) toured with him throughout Europe playing violin and piano to the astonishment of aristocratic audiences. These tours were supported, supervised and by their father, Leopold (1719-87) himself a renowned musician and composer. Despite his extraordinary genius, Mozart never benefited from a stable patron. In fact, he was disgusted once he realized that his services as a composer were nothing more than hired help for the Prince-Bishop of Salzburg, for whom he was employed. However, as recounted by the film *Amadeus*, Mozart was thought to be in dire financial straits for most of his career. To the contrary, he fared quite well as both a court musician and as a freelance musician of Vienna. Mozart was busy composing and performing to keep accurate records of his finances. His own accounting practices often omitted major opera commissions as well as the stipends from many performances. Reasonable estimates of his earnings would place Mozart in the upper-middle class of 18th century Vienna. However, he chose most of the time to live beyond his means, purchasing expensive clothes.
entertainment and traveling extensively. These habits kept his sister, Nannerl, and wife, Constanze Weber busy trying to make ends meet.

Whilst in Vienna, the world began to see his great accomplishment in the twenty opera he wrote. In truth, the styles of many of Mozart’s operas were akin to today’s musical theater: romantic or comedic in nature, spoken dialogue and songs in native tongue to highlight outstanding performers. *The Abduction from the Harem* (1782) and *The Magic Flute* (1791) were successes in this style of opera known as *singspiel*. These works departed from the traditional Italian-language, completely sung operas that dominated the genre.

However, Mozart was not only known for his operas. He wrote for every imaginable instrument of the period, in every possible format, for every conceivable venue. He wrote fifty symphonies, most notably the *Linz* (No 36, 1783), *Prague* (No. 38, 1786), and *Jupiter* (No 41, 1788). He composed serenades, divertimentos, and dance suites for orchestra in addition. He wrote twenty-three piano concertos, five violin concertos and concertos for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn (all considered standards of each instrument’s repertoire). He wrote for instruments in a variety of contexts: string quartets and quintets, flute quartets, clarinet quintet, piano trios and quartets. Mozart wrote for his native instrument, piano with seventeen sonatas, and numerous rondos, variations, fantasias and duets. He wrote eighteen masses, several oratorios and other sacred music (notable: unfinished *Requiem*, 1791).

In comparison to his tutor and close friend Haydn, who is considered productive in his own right, Mozart composed nearly twice as many compositions in less than half as many years. Mozart was only 35 when he died from apparent kidney failure. Myths surrounding his death, again perpetuated by the film *Amadeus*, are grossly exaggerated. It is highly unlikely that fellow composer and rival Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) was involved in any way with Mozart’s untimely passing. Additionally, the film also shows Mozart being dumped unceremoniously into a common grave outside of Vienna. This attest is factual in that it is known that Emperor Joseph II decreed in 1784 that bodies be disposed of in the following manner: 1) put into a communal grave removed form the city; 2) covered in a linen sack without a coffin; 3) sprinkled with lime; and 4) left unmarked with no headstones at the grave site. Sanitary and practical reasons governed the imperial edict. Prevention of disease and drinking water contamination, conservation of finances for the bereaved were ample reason for the monarch to assist in the cause of all the Viennese – and such was the case for perhaps the most renowned and beloved composer of his era.
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Truly a figure that transcends time, Ludwig van Beethoven is a rare composer that provides a bridge from the Classical period to the period that follows, the Romantic period. His name is most often associated with serious music. His sonatas are at the center of any piano recital. His Eroica Symphony is played when honoring those who have fallen on the field of battle and his Ninth Symphony – the Ode to Joy – is played on every concert at the United Nations. Because he was able to make remarkable music on two musical and historical periods that has stood the test of time, it is only fitting that he is at the center of the music making and music learning experience.

From his early years in Bonn, Germany, Ludwig van Beethoven showed a tremendous talent at the piano, first performing in public at age eight. His father, himself a court musician, had his son study composition, organ and violin in addition to the piano. In 1783, Beethoven was hired as assistant organist at the court of Bonn. Beethoven’s father continued to pressure him to emulate Mozart as a performer and composer. Instead of resenting this pressure, Beethoven embraced it and dreamt that he would some day study composition with the master only fourteen years older than he. In 1787 at age seventeen, Beethoven journeyed to Vienna to experience first hand the cultural center of Europe. While travel chronicles are vague at this time, many accounts point to Beethoven actually meeting and playing for Mozart during that trip. Beethoven performed a prepared piece, then followed with an improvisatory performance based a melody supplied by Mozart. Initially, Mozart was mildly taken with the young performer. However, following the prowess shown during the improvisatory selection, Mozart is believed to have declared to those in attendance, “Keep an eye on this man. Someday he will give the world something to talk about.” Another master of the era took interest in Beethoven’s career. In visits to Bonn in 1790 and again in 1792, Franz Joseph Haydn paid special visits to young Ludwig, encouraging Beethoven’s patrons to send the young talent to Vienna for intensive studies. The court officials in Bonn, swayed in no small part by Haydn’s urging, sent Beethoven off to Vienna at the age of twenty-one where his music was admired.

Despite his success, Beethoven was moody and withdrawn. In 1801, Beethoven began to lose his hearing. To find a cure, he went from physician to physician, each subjecting him to painful but ultimately useless treatments. One doctor recommended thermal bath treatments in a small village outside of Vienna. The following year, as he contemplated suicide, he wrote to his brothers in Bonn in the midst of
Beal City Bands  Through the Ages: Historical Perspectives  Page 10 of 13

these treatments at Heiligenstadt. Beethoven writes, “From year to year my hopes for a cure have been gradually shattered. Finally, I must accept the prospect of permanent deafness . . . I have been considering suicide, but my art has held me back. For indeed how could I die before I have composed all the music I feel inside.”

Beethoven would create his most powerful and memorable music as he faced the growing disability of his deafness. Composing, regardless of his state of hearing, was always a struggle because of his obsession with writing and rewriting his music. Several existing but rejected versions of his most famous works confirm this. One remarkable piece of evidence even captures Beethoven’s revision of dedications of his pieces. A surviving preliminary manuscript of Beethoven’s Third Symphony ‘Eroica’ was originally dedicated to French despot Napoleon Bonaparte. Originally, Beethoven admired Bonaparte for attempting to unite Europe, but when his egoism became evident, Beethoven hastily scratched out the words “A Napoleon Bonaparte” on the title page of the work. Even so, his compositional output was considerable and it changed the course of music and influenced all composers who would succeed. Not only did his music become the example for the early nineteenth century, his independence became an inspiration for all musicians. His legend cast a shadow throughout the 1800s with which many composers could never reconcile.

Transcending his escalating deafness, Beethoven maintained an active composing schedule during his entire life. As his deafness increased, he required an instrument that would produce more sound. The pianos used by other musicians simply would not produce enough sound nor were they versatile enough for the demands of Beethoven’s work. He contracted with Englishman John Broadwood, a shipbuilder, and Viennese piano builder Johann Streicher to build larger sturdier instrument very similar to today’s concert grand pianos. These technical improvements came at a cost to Beethoven: regular lodging. Since his new pianos were large and his incredible playing disturbed his neighbors, the noise, especially when composing in the middle of the night, led Beethoven to be evicted from nearly eighty apartments in and around Vienna. Many buildings have plaques that read “Beethoven Lived Here.”

Another outgrowth of his deafness was his experimentation and enlargement of the orchestra. He began increasing the numbers of traditional instruments and introducing new ones to the orchestra in an effort to exude more emotional expression. He also composed longer and structurally more complex symphonies than either Haydn or Mozart twenty-minute works. Beethoven’s last symphony, No. 9 ‘Choral’, takes approximately one hour and ten minutes to perform. However, Beethoven did not abandon Classical
forms – he expanded them to usher in a new Romantic period. Here are some important characteristics of Beethoven’s works that show that transition:

- Volume of the orchestra increases; number of instruments used, new instruments introduced.
- Developmental sections occur in all sections of the form.
- Traditional forms are freer – more liberties taken with guidelines.
- Music will move from movement to movement without pause.
- Themes are restated in more than one movement (Symphony No. 5 ‘Fate’).
- Changes in tempo within movements are more frequent.
- Coda or closing sections are usually longer, more elaborate and triumphant than predecessors; usually include powerful repeated chords.

Unlike some composers who enjoy celebrity only after their deaths, Beethoven’s music was performed extensively throughout continental Europe and in Britain – although as he aged, he was unable to hear its performance. Beethoven received accolades as the greatest living composer by his generation. He passed on as an affluent man at age fifty-six.

**Other Important Composers**

**Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1698-1775)** Organist at the Milan cathedral, Sammartini was also a famous violin teacher. Of his more than 2000 compositions, his Symphony in F (1744) is regarded as the first Classical symphony, earning him the moniker the “Father of the Symphony”.

**Children of Bach: Wilhelm Friedemann (1710-84)** J.S. Bach’s 2nd child and eldest son was a composer of keyboard and chamber works some of which are still in print. He was an acknowledged competent musician, but due to a lack of stability died poor and resentful. **Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714-88)** Bach’s 5th child and 3rd son, he held the position of court composer for Frederick the Great. He is recognized as the founder of the sonata-symphony form. Perhaps the most famous of Bach’s children as a composer, he held positions for 21 years as Kapellmeister at five different churches in Hamburg. **Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732-95)** Bach’s 16th child and 9th son, he held a variety of musical posts and composed chamber music, assorted keyboard sonatas and concertos and some symphonies still in practice. **Johann Christian (1735-82)** Bach’s 18th child and 11th son, perhaps the best traveled of Bach’s children. He held positions as organist in Milan but eventually went to London, became known as the “English Bach” in service to King George III.
As an opera master and music master at court, he wrote operas, symphonies and variety of compositions for harpsichord.

**Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-87)** Born in Bavaria, Christoph Gluck truly lived this period's cosmopolitan life. He spent significant time in Italy, London, Vienna and Paris composing opera. His important opera, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, defined the genre early in the Classical period, reaching new levels of dramatic and musical significance.

**Johann Wenzel Anton Stamitz (1717-57)** A remarkable violinist, violin teacher and conductor, Stamitz held important positions at the court in Mannheim, Germany. He established a new standard for conducting, through development of gesture and nuance. Stamitz composed 50 symphonies, enlarging the form and style, and developed performance techniques of Mannheim Steamroller and Mannheim Rocket.

**François Joseph Gossec (1734–1829)** A native of Belgium and student of prominent composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, Gossec composed symphonies (first in France) string quartets and opera, for which he was famous. Gossec also wrote some of the first symphonies written strictly for wind instruments only. He was admired for his technique in orchestration spending 80 years as a leading musical figure in Paris.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828)** Son of a poor schoolmaster who, with his family, loved and practiced music routinely, Schubert was admitted to the choir of the Viennese Royal Chapel at age 11. While there, he received a decent general and musical education. Once his voice broke, he took to assisting in his father’s school but quickly abandoned this in favor of a musical vocation. Due to his amicable nature and respectable talent, he was aided in his studies by a group of cultured middle-class patrons, including local poets and painters. This group would meet regularly and share artistic output. With Schubert being the most influential and flamboyant personality, this group became known as the Schuberitade. A fluent and prolific composer, Schubert is known to have written over 600 songs, known as *lieder*, in all, set to outstanding poetry of Wilhelm Müller, Johann von Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He also composed in many other genres: operas (unsuccessful), masses, piano compositions (22 sonatas and other smaller pieces), miscellaneous overtures, chamber music and choral works and 9 or 10 symphonies. The question regarding the symphonies surrounds two incomplete works late in Schubert’s life. Schubert’s *Unfinished*,
believed to be his 8\textsuperscript{th} symphony, has only two movements when written in 1822. The \textit{Grand Duo} for piano, written in 1825, is believed to be the piano sketches of Schubert’s final symphony; two different men following Schubert’s death have completed orchestrations of the work.

\textbf{References}


