

Mozart and Elements of the Classical Style

Mozart's music stands as an archetype of the classical style

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived at the height of the Classical period in music history—a time of elegance, beauty, refinement, and grace. His melodies were simple, graceful, and full of feeling. He employed the orchestra's colors masterfully. The ease with which he composed and the beauty of Mozart's music could be summed up in one phrase—sublime art by a genius.



“Mozart was arguably the most naturally gifted musician in history. His inspiration is often described as ‘divine’, and he was certainly born with musical gifts that mere mortals can only dream of. Nevertheless, he worked assiduously to become not only a great composer but also a conductor, virtuoso pianist, organist and violinist. In other words, he was supreme in all areas of musical endeavor. His compositions (over 600 of them) embrace the very different demands of opera, symphony, concerto, chamber, choral, vocal, and instrumental music. In every form he touched he produced an astonishing number of imperishable masterpieces. Though he had little interest in establishing new musical structures, he brought to perfection those already in existence with ‘music more beautiful than it can ever be played’, as the great pianist Artur Schnabel once aptly described it.” (*The Great Composers* by Jeremy Nicholas)

Mozart wrote 22 operas—10 of them in his teen years. Although many operas written by other composers during the Classical period seem out-of-date and stilted, Mozart's still appear remarkably fresh to today's audiences. Since his death, the music world has never seen anyone with Mozart's combination of musical genius, compositional facility, and seemingly divine inspiration. His music remains the essence of the Classical style: elegant, graceful, refined, and unsentimental, but with a deep vein of emotion.

What came before the Classical Style of music?

At the time Mozart began composing, European music was dominated by the **galant style**—an 18th-century movement in music, visual arts, and literature—that was a reaction against the highly evolved intricacy of the Baroque Style.

“The evolution from the high Baroque to the Classical musical style was a mirror of an extraordinary social evolution that we, today, call the **Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment, circa 1730 to 1780, was the period that saw the institutions of Europe—religious, political, social, educational, industrial, financial, and artistic—slowly but inexorably lower their focus from the aristocracy and the high clergy to a new class of people then emerging from the bowels of the new European mercantilism and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. For lack of a better name, we call this new and growing class the middle class, and the Enlightenment marked their initial entry into the mainstream of European society. A new brand of humanism, philosophical humanism, evolved, one that asserted that all people were important, not just representatives of the Church and the state.” (*How to Listen to Great Music* by Robert Greenberg)

What are the main characteristics of Classical Music?

The Classical period was an era from about 1730 to 1820, and falls between the Baroque and Romantic periods. Classical music is less complex than Baroque music.

Listen for these characteristics of Classical music:

- an emphasis on **beauty, elegance, and balance**.
- **variety and contrast** within a piece, as well as contrasting moods.
- variety in dynamics, instruments, pitch, tempo, key, and timbre.
- short well-balanced **melodies** and clear-cut **question and answer phrases**.
- mainly simple diatonic **harmony**.
- clearly marked cadences.
- mainly **homophonic textures** (melody plus accompaniment) but with some use of counterpoint (where two or more melodic lines are combined)

What instruments are used in classical music?

The orchestra became standardized during the Classical period. The orchestra consisted of strings (first and second violins, violas, cellos, and double basses), two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two or four horns, two trumpets, and two timpani. The orchestra increased in size, range, and power.

The harpsichord, which had been a mainstay in Baroque continuo accompaniments for recitatives, was gradually replaced by the piano as the main keyboard instrument. Unlike the harpsichord, which plucks strings with quills, pianos strike the strings with leather-covered hammers when the keys are pressed, which enables the performer to play louder or softer (hence the original name "fortepiano," literally "loud soft") and play with more expression.

Who were the best-known composers during the Classical period?

In addition to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, notable Classical composers included Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Franz Schubert. Other composers whose music is still played include Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Luigi Boccherini, Domenico Cimarosa, Muzio Clementi, Christoph Willibald Gluck, and Antonio Salieri. Composers Beethoven and Schubert were transitional figures; their early music is considered Classical, but they stretched limits and transitioned to the Romantic era.

What are the main characteristics of Classical Art?

Although it varies from genre to genre, Classical art is renowned for its harmony, balance, and sense of proportion. In paintings and sculptures, artists employed idealized figures and shapes, and treated their subjects in a non-anecdotal and emotionally neutral manner. Color was always subordinated to line and composition.

Principal sources:

The Great Composers: The Lives and Music of 50 Great Classical Composers, by Jeremy Nicholas, © 2008, Quercus, London ML390.N57 2008

How to Listen to Great Music, by Robert Greenberg, © 2011, Penguin Group, London MT6.G76 2011

Opera for Dummies, by David Pogue & Scott Speck, © 1997, Foster City, CA MT95.P68 1997