

THE WORLD OF MUSIC

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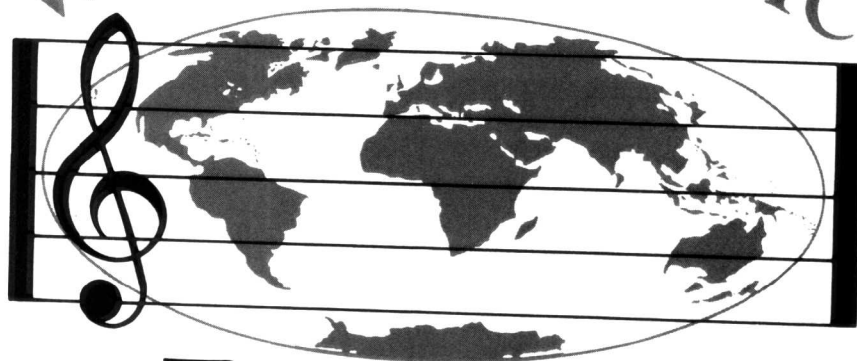


# European Classical Music: 1600-1825

RICHARD CARLIN

00-1825

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WORLD OF MUSIC



European  
Classical Music  
1600-1825

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# Preface

About 500 years ago, a group of composers and musicians created what has come to be recognized as a new style of music. Today we call it *classical* music. This music, the creation of innovative musical performers working in several European cities, is performed in concert halls—by amateur, professional, and student musicians—throughout the world.

Classical music is not as popular among young listeners as rock and roll. This is probably because few listeners have studied the music or the lives of its composers. This book will attempt to show you how classical music evolved, the many fascinating figures who played key roles in its evolution, and the underlying “rules” of composition and performance that define the classical style.

Many of the performers and composers that you’ll be reading about in this book were as flamboyant as today’s rock and roll stars and just as revolutionary. Antonio Vivaldi, an Italian master of the violin, was a fiery performer. Like today’s rock guitarists, his concerts incorporated as much dramatic showmanship as they did pure musical skill.

Today we are all familiar with the story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, thanks to the hit film *Amadeus*. Mozart was not only an incredibly talented musician, displaying talent almost from the cradle, but he was also a fiercely independent individual. He refused to live by the old rules that said musicians were second-class citizens, only the servants of the upper classes and the church. His refusal con-

demned him to a life of poverty. But Mozart paved the way for more personal and artistic freedom for the composers who followed.

For every revolutionary like Mozart, there were also conservatives like Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach worked as an organist, composer, orchestral conductor, and, eventually, spent a good portion of his life as an underpaid teacher in a church school in Leipzig. It was not until seventy-five years after his death that his compositions were discovered by a larger audience.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that these classical musicians were exactly like today's rock performers. They lived in different times, worked with different musical instruments, and had different expectations as performers and composers. This book will try to help you understand these differences so that you can be a better listener.

Reading about classical music is one thing. Listening is something else. I urge you to visit your library to hear the music of these great composers. I've listed many albums at the end of each chapter. Most are complete sets that are expensive to buy. But often the individual records in a set are issued separately. Consult your record dealer if you'd like to purchase some of these records.

Other books in this series cover different aspects of music. These books are:

*Man's Earliest Music:* An introduction to music terminology, the development of musical instruments, and the music of four ancient cultures: The Pacific Islands, Aborigine music of Australia, the music of the Pygmies of central Africa, and American Indian music.

*British and American Folk Music:* A study of the traditional music of the United Kingdom and the United States. Includes chapters on ballads, blues, country music, and the folk revival.

*Rock and Roll:* A study of the development of rock, from its early roots in country and urban blues, through the stars of the 1950s, including Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly, through the "British invasion" of the 1960s, Motown, California rock, disco, new wave/punk, and contemporary pop.

We hope to expand this series to include other aspects of world music.

Richard Carlin

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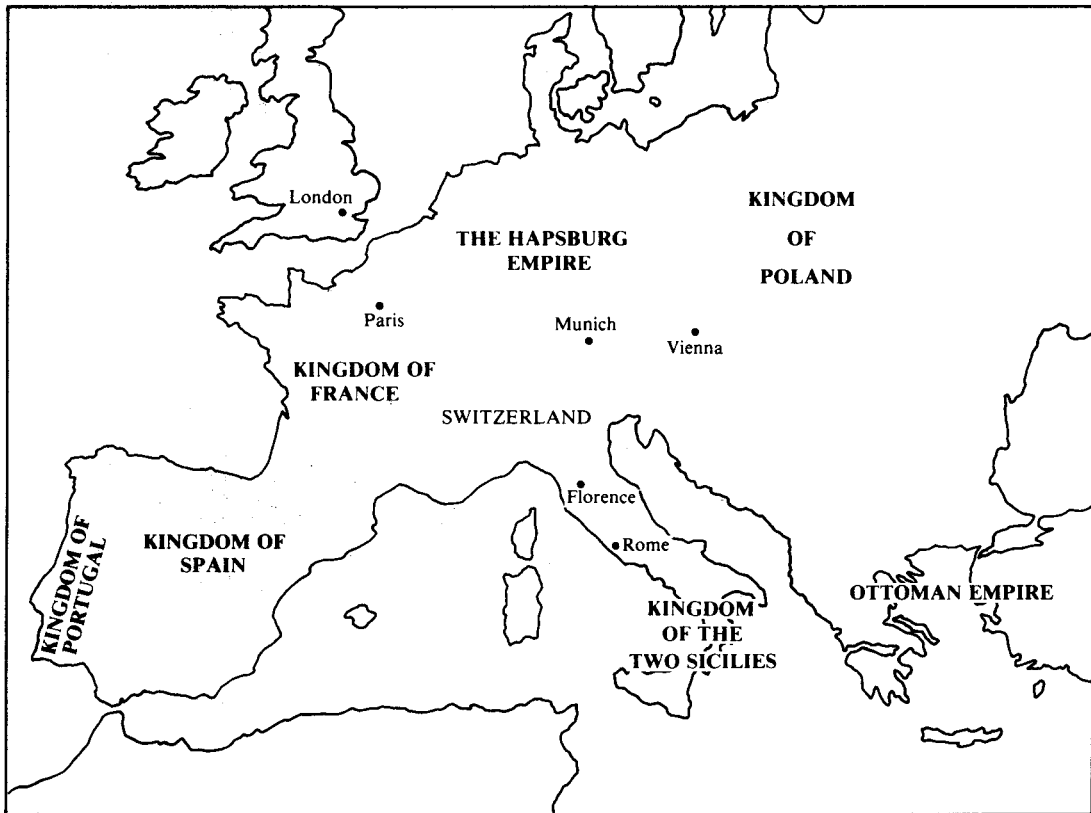
# What is Classical Music?

What is classical music? What sets it apart from other forms of musical expression? Let's begin by looking at some of the meanings of the word *classic*, then turn our attention to the types of compositions that the classical composers wrote. We will conclude with a brief outline of the history of classic music, from its medieval roots to today.

## THE WORD CLASSIC

Literally, the classical period in history refers to a time in ancient Greece and Rome when the arts (particularly architecture and sculpture) reached a high level of development. In this sense, *classical* refers to a sense of balance that you can see, for example, in the design of the Parthenon, a famous building on the Acropolis, the ancient center of Athens. In their architecture, the Greeks and Romans emphasized the importance of form, the underlying structural design, rather than external ornament. *Symmetry*, or the perfect balancing of parts, is an important aspect of classicism; so that, if you look at the front of the Parthenon, each side is perfectly balanced. You could imagine folding the building in half at its midpoint and seeing that each side perfectly matches the other.

This definition of classical can be extended to describe anything that is beautiful in a cold, hard, formal way, rather than something that appeals to the emotions. For example, it's hard to get excited over four lines drawn on a sheet of paper to make a perfect square.



European centers of classical music

There's nothing to make the heart beat fast in that drawing. But, from a classical point of view, a square is perfectly beautiful, because it embodies perfect balance and symmetry. This distinction between formal beauty and emotion is an important one in the history of music, because musicians have always struggled with creating perfect compositions (that are organized in a formally pleasing manner) versus appealing to the emotions of the listeners. Ideally, a piece of music should do both.

Another meaning of classical is "great" or "perfect." Because many people have admired the achievements of the Greeks and Romans, and their designs have become the standard against which all others have been judged, the term *classical* has come to mean the ultimate or best that can possibly be produced. We refer to a great movie or a wonderful old car as *classics* because they set the standard against which all other movies or cars are judged.

Yet another meaning for classical is simply “old.” After all, the Greeks and Romans lived a long time ago. Anything old (even twenty years old!) might be described as *classic*, while anything more recent would be described as *modern*. The makers of a popular soft drink have dubbed one formula the “classic” mixture, simply because it’s older than the newly introduced potion.

## CLASSICAL MUSIC: AN OVERVIEW

Classical music can be described in the same three ways that we have already used to define the word *classic*. It is music that is perfectly balanced, recognized as great or perfect, and usually at least 100 years old. So, this is music that has balance, perfection, and age. But if we left this definition the way it is, almost anything, from “The Star Spangled Banner” to “Three Blind Mice” to Beethoven’s Fifth



Transverse flute, lute and viol  
players, c. sixteenth century  
(Courtesy New York Public Library)

Symphony would be considered *classical music*; obviously this definition won't do.

Broadly speaking, when we talk about *classical music*, we're referring to music that was created by individual composers, either employed by European churches or courts, over the last 500 years. This music was *notated* (or written down in some form) so that it could always be played in the same way. Individual performers may add their own interpretations, but basically each piece remains unchanged from the time it is composed through all the years that it is performed.

Each classical composition is unique; you can distinguish a symphony by Beethoven from one by Mozart because it will differ in many ways, including melody, harmony, and rhythm.\* Although there may be some similarities, there are enough differences to recognize different works by different composers, or even by the same composer. Classical music is performed for a special audience, whether it be monks in a church, nobles in a castle, or, more recently, ticket holders in a concert hall.

The range of classical music from the medieval period to today would include everything from *plain song*, or the half-spoken, half-sung music performed by monks as part of their religious services, to Italian *arias*, or songs written to express feelings of love; from instrumental music to accompany dancing or plays, to complicated instrumental works composed without any purpose besides pleasing the listener; from solo instrumental pieces for performance on the lute, harpsichord, piano, or violin, to pieces written to be played on the trumpet as a fanfare to announce the entry of a king or noble into a crowded room.

The story of classical music is also the story of centers of governmental, cultural, and commercial activity in Europe. From 1500 to 1900, several European cities became important centers of government, religion, and commerce, centering on both church and court. These centers included cities in Italy, such as Rome, Florence, Mantua, and Naples; Vienna in what is modern-day Austria; Paris; Mannheim and Leipzig in Germany; London; and Prague, to name just a few. Composers could find patronage—food, shelter, and capable musicians with whom to work—from the clergy, nobility, government officials, and the cities themselves. In the eighteenth and

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\* If you are unfamiliar with these terms, they will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2; short definitions are given in the glossary.

nineteenth centuries, the growing middle class of bankers, merchants, and traders became an enthusiastic audience for classical music, and through their organization of concerts and direct financial aid to composers, sponsored a good part of the musical activity.

## TYPES OF CLASSICAL MUSIC

The simplest division that can be made in classical music is between (1) vocal and (2) instrumental. Vocal music tended to predominate up until 1650 (more pieces were written for vocalists, and they were more complex than pieces written for instrumentalists). Instrumental music came into its own only in the following years. In chapter 3, we'll discuss why this happened by studying the development of musical instruments and the orchestra.

Vocal music can be further divided into two major strands: (1) religious music and (2) secular (nonreligious) music. Music has always been associated with important church rituals, such as the celebration of the Mass. The High Mass (in Latin, *Missa Solemnis*) is divided into two parts: the *proper*, which changes depending on the time of year, and the *ordinary*, which is always a part of every Mass. Each of these parts is further subdivided into five sections; the five sections of the ordinary have inspired the most elaborate music.

Originally, Mass was sung or chanted in a single melody line, with the melody doubled either in the higher or lower octaves. Simple harmonies were introduced from about the year 800 to 1500, with the sixteenth century seeing the most elaborate, polyphonic harmonies introduced. In the period from 1450 to 1650, instrumental accompaniment was introduced into the Mass. Bach's Mass in B Minor is the most famous example.

Individual songs or *hymns* were also an important part of the church service, although they were not a part of the Mass itself. Also important were *motets*, or elaborately developed part-songs with many different interweaving vocal lines. In the Protestant church, particularly in the Anglican branch, motets were called *anthems*.

The *oratorio* developed in sixteenth-century Italy as a more dramatic form of sung religious expression. Originally, oratorios were retellings of religious stories, performed by actors appearing in costume. The musical arrangements were kept simple, with almost no polyphony, so that the words could be clearly heard and the story easily followed. The Roman priest St. Philip Neri (1515-1595) is

credited with inventing the form as a means to attract Roman youths to the church. Oratorios were not performed as part of a church service, or inside of the church itself, but their message was a clear call for young people to return to the church. Eventually, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the oratorio lost its connection with drama and took its standard form: an extended musical setting of a religious text, with instrumental accompaniment.

The *opera* began its life as a kind of a secular oratorio. While the oratorio grew away from its stage roots, opera became a highly developed mixture of drama (with actors and actresses appearing in costumes and elaborate sets) and music (all lines were sung). Within the opera, two types of songs developed: the *recitative*, a half-sung, half-chanted style of singing that was used to relate important plot information; and the *aria*, which developed into an elaborate song designed to express deep feelings, allowing the singer to demonstrate many complex vocal techniques and the extent of his or her vocal range. Arias became so popular that they were often performed separately in vocal concerts. Operatic song, unlike church song that featured many voices singing a variety of different parts, usually had a single voice singing one melody, with accompanying harmony provided by the orchestra.

Earlier forms continued to coexist with this new vocal music. The *madrigal*, dating back to at least the thirteenth century, continued to be popular in the years 1500 to 1750. This was a part-song, similar to the motet or anthem, but madrigals were usually sung with a



Virginal player, with children's choir, c. 1616 (Courtesy New York Public Library)



Violin player, Italy, c.  
seventeenth century (Courtesy  
New York Public Library)

single voice taking each part. The themes of madrigals were not religious, but usually were based on classical mythology. *Ayres* and *ballets* were similar to the madrigal, but had less elaborate parts, usually emphasizing a single voice within the group, with the other voices (and/or instruments) providing accompanying parts.

In instrumental music, fairly simple forms for solo instrumentalists, and very loose rules for groups, were common in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Most soloists took as their music popular dance or vocal tunes of the day. A common form was the *theme and variation*, where the tune was first played as it was commonly known, and then elaborated upon in variations. The *fantasia* is an extended elaboration of a particular melody.



Early Dutch piano, c. eighteenth century (Courtesy New York Public Library)

Originally, composers did not write specifically for groups of instruments. Instead, instrumentalists simply took vocal scores and adapted them to their instruments. A group of *viol* players could each take one of the vocal parts—soprano-alto-tenor-bass—and play them on their instruments (see chapter 3). Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, there were a few composers who began to write arrangements for groups of either viols or lutes.

A problem that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers faced was how to create longer instrumental compositions. If they simply kept adding together short melodies, they would create a piece that would very soon grow tiresome to listeners. In chapter 2, we'll see that most melodies are based on repetition and variation. By using harmonic progressions based on the new major and minor scales, the composers could unify their longer works while giving them variety.



Earlier composers found their answer in the search for a longer instrumental format in the *suite*, which grouped together several individual instrumental pieces. The suite usually opened with a commanding first movement to gain the attention of the audience. (This *overture* sometimes took on a life of its own. Eventually some composers wrote individual overtures to be performed without the following movements.) The remainder of the suite was made up of popular dance forms, such as allemandes, courantes, giges, minuets, and sarabands. These dances were often paired, so that two minuets were performed as a single movement, with the second melody chosen to contrast with or complement the first. The first melody would then return after the second was played to end the movement. This A-B-A format was quite important in the later development of the sonata, concerto, and symphony.

The *sonata* form, created in the eighteenth century, lay the basis for all longer instrumental compositions over the next 200 years. Briefly, this form featured the A-B-A principle of contrasting two themes. The first movement of a sonata would open with a quick theme, followed by a slower, contrasting melody (often in the relative minor or major), and closed with a recapitulation of the first theme. The entire sonata itself consisted of three contrasting movements. The following movements sometimes followed the A-B-A format, although some were also composed using theme and variation or fugal forms.

The term *sonata* was loosely applied in the eighteenth century to compositions for one to five instruments. Compositions for a larger group of instruments playing all together were named *symphonies*. Those that featured either a single instrument or a small group of instruments playing in a call-and-response format with the entire orchestra were called *concerti*.

The first symphonies were a natural extension of the earlier overtures that opened the performance of a suite. Like the overtures, they were not terribly deep compositions, but were performed merely to provide amusement for the audience. The composers did little to exploit the potential of the various orchestral voices at their disposal, or to explore the possibility of contrasting different melodic themes. Later, composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven wrote symphonies that took full advantage of the different voices in the orchestra. They used the sonata form in order to create tension between the two contrasting themes. This technique allowed the creation of symphonies of great emotional depth and beauty.