

Classical Era 1750-1825

The term “classical” is used in different ways. When some people refer to “classical” music, they mean “serious” music, as opposed to popular or folk music. But when musicians use the term “classical music,” they mean music written between 1750 and 1825.

The music of this era can best be described as elegant, formal, and restrained. For the first time, instrumental music was more important than vocal music. In fact, the most important new musical form of the Classical era was the **symphony**, an extended work in several movements (often four) for orchestra.

The symphony grew out of the **sonata**, a popular form of the Baroque era. A sonata is a work for solo instrument, either alone or accompanied. In a symphony, there is no solo instrument, and the orchestra becomes the “instrument” for the composer. So a symphony could be described as a sonata for orchestra.

Another Classical form which evolved from the sonata is the **concerto**. A concerto is a sonata for a solo instrument, accompanied by an orchestra.

The Classical orchestra was very similar to today’s orchestra, though smaller in size. The instruments were basically the same as those in a modern orchestra. The stringed instruments were identical to today’s violins, violas, cellos, and stringed basses. The string section was the most important part of the Classical orchestra. Woodwind and brass instruments had also evolved and were similar to today’s flutes, oboes, clarinets, horns, trumpets, and trombones. Percussion instruments included drums, cymbals, and timpani.

The organ was still an important instrument. But the piano replaced the harpsichord as the most popular keyboard instrument. The piano could play louder than a harpsichord and thus could produce sounds from very loud to very soft. Musicians call this a wide dynamic range. The piano’s wide dynamic range made it appealing to Classical era composers.

In the Baroque era, musical works had contrasting sections, such as fast-slow-fast, or loud-soft-loud. There were no changes in tempo or loudness (what musicians call the dynamic level) within a section. It was fast, or loud, the whole way through. In the Classical era, composers began to change the tempo or the dynamic level within a section. The changes could be gradual or sudden. A movement could begin slowly and gradually increase in tempo. Or a soft section might suddenly become loud.

The vocal forms of the Baroque era, such as **operas**, **oratorios**, and **cantatas** remained popular with Classical composers.

Many composers of the Classical era were employed or supported by aristo-

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crats. This type of employment is called patronage. The aristocrat was a **patron** of the composer. He **commissioned** compositions from the composer and paid him for his musical creations. This gave the composer a continuing source of income, an outlet for his music, and the freedom to develop his craft. Composers of the Classical era could best be described as fine musical craftsmen.

Many composers traveled throughout Europe to perform their music and to hear the music of other composers. This resulted in a single style for music of the Classical era...a style that is elegant and formal, and which sounded the same in Rome, Italy, as it did in Vienna, Austria.

Composers of the Classical era

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782)
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Some famous people of the Classical era

Crispus Attucks (1723-1770), U.S. African-American patriot of American Revolution
Adam Smith (1723-1790), British economist
Francis Marion "The Swamp Fox" (1735-1795), U.S. leader of American Revolution
Thomas Paine (1736-1809), U.S. author, supporter of American Revolution
Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), U.S. president
Pierre Charles L'Enfant (1754-1925), French architect, planned U.S. District of Columbia
Robert Burns (1759-1796), Scottish poet
Eli Whitney (1765-1825), U.S. inventor
Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), French general and emperor
Jane Austen (1775-1817), British novelist