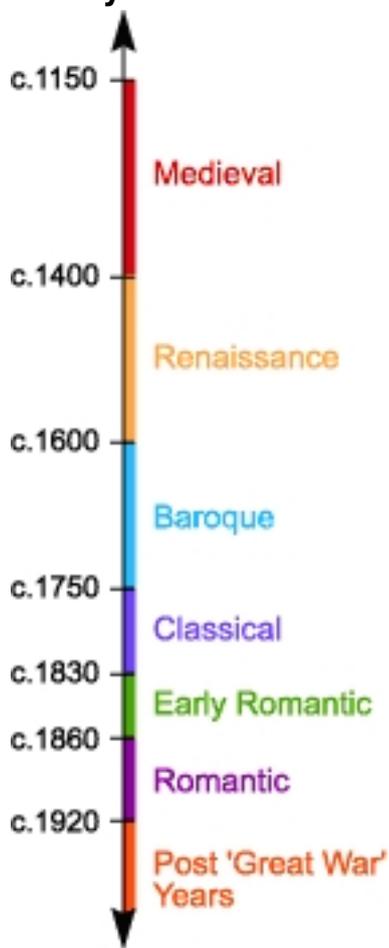


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History of Classical Music



Medieval (c.1150 - c.1400)

This is the first period where we can begin to be fairly certain as to how a great deal of the music which has survived actually sounded. The earliest written secular music dates from the 12th century troubadours (in the form of virelais, estampies, ballades etc.), but most notated manuscripts emanate from places of learning usually connected with the church, and therefore inevitably have a religious basis.

Gregorian chant and plainsong which are monodic (i.e. written as one musical line) gradually developed during the 11th to 13th centuries into organum (i.e. two or three lines moving simultaneously but independently, therefore almost inadvertently representing the beginnings of harmony). Organum was, however, initially rather stifled by rigid rules governing melody and rhythm, which led ultimately to the so-called Ars Nova period of the 14th century, principally

represented by the composers de Vitry, Machaut, and Landini.

Recommended Recording:

- [Adorate Deum: Gregorian Chant from the Proper of the Mass Nova Schola Gregoriana Naxos 8.550711](#)

Renaissance (c.1400 - c.1600)

The fifteenth century witnessed vastly increased freedoms, most particularly in terms of what is actually perceived as 'harmony' and 'polyphony' (the simultaneous movement of two or three interrelated parts). Composers (although they were barely perceived as such) were still almost entirely devoted to choral writing, and the few instrumental compositions which have survived often create the impression (in many cases entirely accurately) of being vocal works in disguise, but minus the words.

There is obvious new delight in textural variety and contrast, so that, for example, a particular section of text might be enhanced by a vocal part dropping out momentarily, only to return again at a special moment of emphasis. The four most influential composers of the fifteenth century were Dunstable, Ockeghem, Despres and Dufay.

The second half of the 16th century witnessed the beginnings of the tradition which many music lovers readily associate with the normal feel of 'classical' music. Gradually, composers moved away from the modal system of harmony which had predominated for over 300 years (and still sounds somewhat archaic to some modern ears), towards the organisation of their work into major and minor scales, thereby imparting the strong sensation of each piece having a definite tonal centre or 'key'.

This was also something of a golden period for choral composition as a seemingly endless flow

of a capella (unaccompanied) masses, motets, anthems, psalms and madrigals flowed from the pens of the masters of the age. In addition, instrumental music came into its own for the first time, especially keyboard music in the form of fantasias, variations, and dance movements (galliards, pavaues etc.). Composers of particular note include Dowland, Tallis, Byrd, Gibbons, Frescobaldi, Palestrina, Victoria, Lassus, Lobo, Cardoso and Gesualdo.

Recommended Recording:

- Byrd: Mass for Four Voices; Mass for Five Voices; Infelix ego
- Palestrina: Missa Papae Marcelli; Missa aeterna Christi munera
- Palestrina: Missa hodie Christus natus est; Hodie Christus natus est; Stabat mater / Lassus: Missa bell' amfitrit' altera
- Victoria: Missa O magnum mysterium; Missa O quam gloriosum / A. Lobo: Versa est in luctum
- Tallis: Mass for Four Voices; Motets

Baroque (c.1600 - c.1750)

During the Baroque period, the foundations were laid for the following 300 or so years of musical expression: the idea of the modern orchestra was born, along with opera (including the overture, prelude, aria, recitative and chorus), the concerto, sonata, and modern cantata. The rather soft-grained viol string family of the Renaissance was gradually replaced by the bolder violin, viola and cello, the harpsichord was invented, and important advances were made in all instrumental groups.

Until about 1700, the old modes still exerted themselves from time to time by colouring certain melodic lines or chord progressions, but from the beginning of the 18th century the modern harmonic system based upon the major and minor scales was effectively pan-European. Choral

music no longer dominated, and as composers turned more and more to writing idiomatic instrumental works for ensembles of increasing colour and variety, so 'classical' music (as opposed to 'popular') gradually began to work its way into the very fabric of society, being played outdoors at dinner parties or special functions (e.g. Handel's Water Music), or as a spectacle in the form of opera. On a purely domestic level, every wealthy lady would have a spinet to play, and at meal-times the large and rich houses would employ musicians to play what was popularly called Tafelmusik in Germany, of which Telemann was perhaps the most famous composer.

Of the many 17th century composers who paved the way for this popular explosion of 'classical' music, the following were outstanding: Monteverdi, Corelli, Alessandro Scarlatti, Schutz, Buxtehude, Purcell and Lully. Yet, the most popular composers of the period, indeed those who seem to define by their very names the sound of Baroque music at its most colourful and sophisticated are Johann Sebastian Bach, Handel, Telemann, Rameau, François Couperin, Domenico Scarlatti, and Vivaldi, all of them at their creative peak during the first half of the 18th century.

Classical (c.1750 - c.1830)

The Baroque era witnessed the creation of a number of musical genres which would maintain a hold on composition for years to come, yet it was the Classical period which saw the introduction of a form which has dominated instrumental composition to the present day: sonata form. With it came the development of the modern concerto, symphony, sonata, trio and quartet to a new peak of structural and expressive refinement. If Baroque music is notable for its textural intricacy, then the Classical period is characterised by a near-obsession with structural clarity.

The seeds of the Classical age were sown by a number of composers whose names are now largely forgotten such as Schobert and Honnauer (both Germans largely active in Paris), as well as more historically respected names, including Gluck, Boccherini and at least three of Johann Sebastian Bach's sons: Carl Phillip Emmanuel, Wilhelm Friedmann and Johann Christian (the so-called 'London' Bach). They were representative of a period which is variously described as rococo or galante, the former implying a gradual move away from the artifice of the High Baroque, the latter an entirely novel style based on symmetry and sensibility, which came to

dominate the music of the latter half of the 18th century through two composers of extraordinary significance: Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Early Romantic (c.1830 - c.1860)

As the Classical period reached its zenith, it was becoming increasingly clear (especially with the late works of Beethoven and Schubert) that the amount and intensity of expression composers were seeking to achieve was beginning to go beyond that which a Classically sized/designed orchestra/piano could possibly encompass. The next period in musical history therefore found composers attempting to balance the expressive and the formal in music with a variety of approaches which would have left composers of any previous age utterly bewildered. As the musical map opened up, with nationalist schools beginning to emerge, it was the search for originality and individuality of expression which began here that was to become such an over-riding obsession in the present century.

The Romantic era was the golden age of the virtuoso, where the most fiendishly difficult music would be performed with nonchalant ease, and the most innocuous theme in a composition would be developed at great length for the enjoyment of the adoring audience. The emotional range of music during this period was considerably widened, as was its harmonic vocabulary and the range and number of instruments which might be called upon to play it. Music often had a 'programme' or story-line attached to it, sometimes of a tragic or despairing nature, occasionally representing such natural phenomena as rivers or galloping horses. The next hundred years would find composers either embracing whole-heartedly the ideals of Romanticism, or in some way reacting against them.

Of the early Romantic composers, two Nationalists deserve special mention, the Russian Glinka (of *Ruslan and Ludmilla* fame) and the Bohemian Smetana (composer of the popular symphonic poem *Vltava* or 'The Moldau'). However, the six leading composers of the age were undoubtedly Berlioz, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt and Verdi.

Late Romantic (c.1860 - c.1920)

With the honourable exceptions of Brahms and Bruckner, composers of this period shared a general tendency towards allowing their natural inspiration free rein, often pacing their compositions more in terms of their emotional content and dramatic continuity rather than organic structural growth. This was an era highlighted by the extraordinarily rapid appearance of the national schools, and the operatic supremacy of Verdi and Wagner. The eventual end of Romanticism came with the fragmentation of this basic style, composers joining 'schools' of composition, each with a style that was in vogue for a short period of time.

In order to do justice to a period so rich in famous names and compositions, this section is arranged alphabetically by country rather than composer.

- Bohemia
- France
- Germany / Austria
- Great Britain
- Hungary
- Italy
- North America
- Russia
- Scandinavia
- Spain

Recommended Recording:

- Albéniz: Iberia
Falla: Three-Cornered Hat; El Amor Brujo; La Vida Breve
[Naxos 8.550174](#)
- Balakirev: Islamey
Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition (piano version)
[Naxos 8.550044](#)
- Bizet: Carmen
[Naxos 8.660005-07 \(3 CD's\)](#)
- Borodin: Symphonies Nos. 1-3
[Naxos 8.550238](#)
- Brahms: Hungarian Dances (Complete)
[Naxos 8.550110](#)

- Brahms: Symphonies Nos. 1-4; Tragic Overture; Haydn Variations; Academic Festival Overture; Serenades Nos. 1 & 2
[Naxos 8.504001 \(4 CD's\)](#)
- Brahms: Violin Concerto
Bruch: Violin Concerto No. 1
[Naxos 8.550195](#)
- Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 'Romantic'
[Naxos 8.550154](#)
- Debussy: Suite Bergamasque; 2 Arabesques; Images; Préludes; La plus que lente
[Naxos 8.550253](#)
- Delibes: Ballet Music (Coppélia; Sylvia; La Source); Le Roi s'amuse; Kassya - Trepak
[Naxos 8.550080](#)
- Delius: Brigg Fair; In a Summer Garden
Elgar: Enigma Variations; Pomp and Circumstance Marches Nos. 1 & 4; Salut d'amour
[Naxos 8.550229](#)
- Dvořák: Slavonic Dances (Complete)
[Naxos 8.550143](#)
- Symphony No. 9 'New World'; Symphonic Variations
[Naxos 8.550271](#)
- Franck: Symphony; Prelude, Choral and Fugue
[Naxos 8.550155](#)
- Grieg: Peer Gynt Suites Nos. 1 & 2; Lyric Pieces etc.
Naxos 8.550140
- Holst: The Planets; Suite de Ballet
[Naxos 8.550193](#)
- Janáček: Sinfonietta; Taras Bulba; Lachian Dances
[Naxos 8.550411](#)
- Kodály: Peacock Variations; Dances of Galánta and Marosszék
[Naxos 8.550520](#)
- Lalo: Symphonie Espagnole
(with works by Saint-Saëns, Sarasate and Ravel)
[Naxos 8.550494](#)
- Leoncavallo: I Pagliacci
[Naxos 8.660021](#)
- Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D
[Naxos 8.550120](#)
- Mascagni: Cavalleria Rusticana
[Naxos 8.660022](#)
- Puccini: Tosca
[Naxos 8.660001-02 \(2 CD's\)](#)
- Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 2; Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini
[Naxos 8.550117](#)
- Ravel: Boléro; Daphnis et Chloé; Ma mère l'oye;
- Respighi: Pines of Rome; Fountains of Rome; Roman Festivals

- Rimsky-Korsakov: Sheherazade; Tsar Saltan Suite
- Saint-Saëns: Carnival of the Animals
- Satie: Piano Works (Selection)
- Sibelius: Finlandia; Valse Triste; Swan of Tuonela; Karelia Suite
- Johann Strauss II: Famous Waltzes, Polkas, Marches and Overtures Vol. 2
- Richard Strauss: Also sprach Zarathustra; Salome's Dance; Der Rosenkavalier (Waltzes)
- Tchaikovsky: Capriccio Italien; 1812 Overture; Romeo and Juliet Overture; Marche Slave
- Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker (Highlights); Swan Lake (Highlights)
- Wagner: Orchestral excerpts from the operas

Post 'Great War' Years (c.1920 - Present)

The period since the Great War is undoubtedly the most bewildering of all, as composers have pulled in various apparently contradictory and opposing directions. Typical of the dilemma during the inter-war years, for example, were the Austrians, Webern and Lehar, the former was experimenting with the highly compressed and advanced form known as 'serial structure', while simultaneously Lehar was still indulging in an operetta style which would not have seemed out of place over half a century beforehand.

So diverse are the styles adopted throughout the greater part of the present century that only by experimentation can listeners discover for themselves whether certain composers are to their particular taste or not. However, the following recordings serve as an excellent introduction and will certainly repay investigation:

- Bohemia
- France
- Germany / Austria
- Great Britain
- Hungary
- Italy

- North America
- Russia
- Scandinavia
- Spain

Recommended Recording:

- Britten: The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra / Prokofiev: Peter and the Wolf
[Naxos 8.550499](#)
- Copland: Rodeo; Billy the Kid; Appalachian Spring; Fanfare for the Common Man
[Naxos 8.550282](#)
- Gershwin: Piano Concerto; Rhapsody in Blue; An American in Paris
[Naxos 8.550295](#)
- Orff: Carmina Burana
[Naxos 8.550196](#)
- Prokofiev: Romeo and Juliet (Highlights)
[Naxos 8.550380](#)
- Shostakovich: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 9
[Naxos 8.550427](#)
- Stravinsky: Jeu des cartes; Rite of Spring (1947 version)
[Naxos 8.550472](#)

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