THE ENLIGHTENMENT & CLASSICAL ERA MUSICAL STYLE (1750-1827) p.1
compiled by Joan Halpert

A. The Classical Era

The Classical era was born out of the Age of Reason, -the Enlightenment, which extended from the middle of the 17th century to about 1780. It was a period of rebirth of interest in the European Renaissance, which an era in which the primary focus was on Humanism—the interests, values and needs of the people—the individual.

Prior to this period the institutions of Europe were geared to the interests and needs of the landed aristocracy as well as the high clergy. However, with the harnessing of steam, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a new class of people was born called the middle class, whose status was based on the accumulation of wealth not land.

This was a society in flux!!!!

By the sheer weight of their numbers, buying power and political influence, they asserted terrific pressure on their societies to change institutions; they wanted universal education, political power, self-determination—respect for the individual and above all to enhance their quality of life, income and upward mobility. The most profound intellectual current that came out of the Enlightenment is the doctrine of Humanism which stated that life on earth is as important as life after death. This altered the position of the church and led to separation of church and state.

B. Music of the Classical era

Baroque period music, the musical era preceding the Classical era, had lasted for about 1500 years—technically until the death of Bach in 1740. During the early 1800s Bach's music, particularly his fugues were still very popular. Nevertheless, for the new middle class, which looked to music as a source of entertainment, the polyphonic style of the baroque period was of far less interest and was far less accessible than the tuneful, single melodic line of the Classical era.

Let's imagine a scenario.

A new middle-class executive comes homes from work after a tough day on the job. He settles down in his easy chair, pours a glass of wine, leans back and calls to his son. “Son, put on some music.” Dutifully, the boy puts on Bach's Little Fugue. (A fugue is polyphonic in texture—structure—meaning it has 2 or more simultaneous melody lines of equal importance and a motoric base with a steady beat. The mechanical base is necessary to cut through the thickness of the melodies and keep the composition in balance. Like a stack of dishes piled one on top of the other, the base holds them in place.) “No, no, no yells the father. Turn that off. I need to rest—that music is too noisy, busy, mechanical, complicated.” With that the boy returns with Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik and dad fall happily asleep.

Baroque music no longer met the needs of the new middle class.

What they wanted was simple, natural music—ala the philosophy of Rousseau, music that reflected their ideals of humanism (the importance of the individual), commonality and universality: and that had simple lines like the ancient art of Greece. And so, there was a revolt in
sound and style never before experienced in the world of classical or art music.

Here are the style and sound changes that developed in the period called THE CLASSICAL ERA, which lasted from 1740 (the death of Bach) to 1825 (the death of Beethoven.)

- Music became Tuneful ------reflecting the contours and expressivity of the human voice.
- There was a beginning, middle and end.
- It was cosmopolitan in style---French, German and Italian composers downplayed national differences and garnered the best from each group, so there was similarity in their music and NO ethnic trace.
- And most significantly there was a major change in texture (meaning the # of melodies present in the piece). Classical era music is HOMOPHONIC—one melodic line predominates the composition—all other melodic material is heard as being secondary or an accompaniment. *(EX Mozart-animated---Andante--MVT 2 of Eine Kleine Nachtmusieic.*).
- The Homophonic change made way for the forms which were adapted from some Baroque style forms. These forms became the foundation of Classical era music. These major forms are
  - Theme and Variation---a main theme---with variations that alter some aspect of it. *(EX Mozart—12 variations on twinkle twinkle.)*
  - Minuet and Trio—large scale contrast between 2 minuets.
  - Rondo—central theme with contrasting episodes.
  - Sonata form
- Musical instruments became more uniform and more technically advanced. With the new pianoforte and the gradual improvements of the violin, the genre of the day became orchestral music—i.e., symphony and the concerto.

People often ask about classical music is What's it about? Music in this era is about very simply---the music. There is no intention to tell a story or to express personal feelings. It's simply about the music. Its beauty, its forms, its familiarity when one learns how it all works.

I picture the music sometimes to be like a white swan that easily glides along the surface of the water. The swan looks relaxed, beautiful, elegant, the movement looks effortless. But what is going on under the surface? The feet must be working very hard in a very studied manner. Or like a wrist watch with a clear, maybe white, easy to read, face. All the workings are underneath; (unlike the baroque style where its often on the surface). Enjoy Haydn and Mozart -----their works are incredible.

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Let's talk about the piano: In the Baroque era, the Harpsichord was a major instrument. It's a horizontal harp which has an automatic plucking mechanism--it can be loud or soft depending on which strings are plucked, but it cannot get louder or softer, i.e. crescendo or decrescendo. It also has a rather nasal sound.

About 1709 a Harpsichord builder named Christofori invented an instrument called a big Harpsichord. With its hammers and releases and sustained sound and damper felts instead of picks, it was capable of dynamic sensitivity—it was able to get louder and softer. The original piano had a small keyboard built on a horizontal wooden harp; the tone was more lyrical, unlike the nasal sound of the harpsichord. When a prototype form of the modern piano was finally constructed in late Baroque it was named
Let's talk about the violin: During the late 18th and early 19th Century, the violin underwent some significant technical changes. The fingerboard of the violin was made longer, and it was also set at more of an angle to support the increased tension of the strings. The increased tension of the strings, coupled with the change in the fingerboard, resulted in the violin having an increased range and sound projection. Older violins were adapted to these new specifications by luthiers (sometimes using techniques that significantly impaired the original instrument), and these newly made violins were crafted using this new style. The resulting increased sound-range and technical capacities of the violin was perfect for the homophonic Classical era style.

Because of the developments in these 2 instruments, the traditional 4 movement symphony and the 3 movement Concertos (frequently violin/or piano) became the most popular musical forms of the 18th century.