

THE ENLIGHTENMENT & CLASSICAL ERA MUSICAL STYLE (1750-1827)

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A. Historical perspective

Classical era music, the music of Haydn and Mozart, was born out of the Age of Reason—the Enlightenment which extended from the 1730's-1780's. It was a period of rebirth of the renaissance in which the primary focus was on Humanism—the interests and values of people.

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 in the doctrine of Humanism, which stated that life on earth is as important as life after death which reversed the position of the church.

For the new society music was their primary source of entertainment. This new middle class revolted against the Baroque style music. They found it too contrived, ornamental and calculated. It didn't meet their need or desires. And so there was a radical shift in sound and style never before felt in classical music history as the Classical era took form. What they wanted was music that was natural (Rousseau), that fit in with the lifestyle of a middle class working society. Music they could enjoy with a class of wine and relax by at the end of a long day. Music that reflected their ideals of humanism (the importance of the individual), commonality and universality.

Here are the musical sounds they wanted and were gradually adopted to meet this criteria:

- music became tuneful, reflecting the contours and expressivity of the human voice.
- it was written according to clear and specific Classical era forms.
- 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—*eine kleine nachtmusic*)

What made these radical changes easier to achieve were the scientific developments of the Baroque era in which technical changes in both the piano and the violin were developed enhancing their beauty and making them ideal for solo compositions and the increased desire for amateurism.

Lets talk about the piano. In the Baroque period 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, ie *crescendo* or *decrescendo*. It also has a rather nasal sound.

About 1709 a Harpsichord builder named Cristofori invented an instrument called a big Harpsichord. With hammers and releases and sustain 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 finally constructed in late Baroque it was named pianoforte—meaning soft and loud. EXs (Bach-concerto for harsichord)------(Mozart-Prestissimo--concerto in D minor)

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 tension of the strings being increased. 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 lathers (sometimes using techniques that significantly impaired the original instrument), and newly-made violins were crafted using this new style, which became popular in the Classical era.

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