

The Classical Period: c.1750-1820

POLITICS & SOCIETY: THE MAIN EVENTS

- ★ 1760-1820: reign of King George III in Britain. During this time Britain consolidated its empire in India especially.
- ★ 1756-1763: Seven Years War, involving all the major European powers of the time. The war ended France's position as a major colonial power. It lost all its territories in North America, while Great Britain emerged as the dominant colonial power in the world.
- ★ 1776: The American War of Independence. North Americans declared war on Britain, and in 1798 George Washington became the first American President.
- ★ 1788: Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet established the first British colony on Australia's shores. Transportation of English convicts to Australia begins.
- ★ 1789 -1799: the French Revolution, the revolt against Absolute Monarchy in France. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were overthrown and a Republic was established. The notorious French jail, the Bastille was torn down. From 1793-4 France suffered the Reign of Terror in which many aristocrats were killed by guillotine.
- ★ Napoleon conquered almost the whole of Europe through a long series of military campaigns, then crowned himself Emperor of France.
- ★ 1812: Napoleon invaded Russia. Russians retreated but in the process burnt Moscow to the ground. French troops were decimated by the Russian winter.
- ★ 1750-1850: Industrial revolution in England. Britain steadily transformed from a rural economy to an intensely industrialised, manufacturing economy. Steam powered machines were used for weaving, spinning engineering and transport. Child labour was prevalent.

SCIENCE & PHILOSOPHY: THE GREAT SCIENTISTS & THINKERS

- ★ 1774: Priestley, Cavendish and others discovered oxygen.
- ★ c. 1786: Volta demonstrated the first electric circuit.
- ★ 1796: Jenner used the cowpox vaccine for first time.
- ★ 1781: rationalist philosopher, Kant wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*.
- ★ 1720-1760: The 'Age of Reason' or 'The Enlightenment'.

- philosophers such as Voltaire, Paine and Rousseau argued that society should be organised according to rules based on rational thought rather than on religion. It was reason and rational thought that could liberate man from restrictive political and religious systems.

GREAT INVENTIONS

- ★ 1769: Watt invented the first steam-engine.
- ★ c.1764: Hargreaves developed the Spinning Jenny.
- ★ 1783: First hot air balloon flight. The first passengers were a sheep, a duck and a rooster.
- ★ 1790: Greenwood invented the first dentist's drill.
- ★ 1793: Whitney invented the Cotton Gin.
- ★ 1807: First paddle steamer
- ★ 1809: Food canning invented by Nicolas Appert

ARTISTS & ARCHITECTS

- ★ Constable: *Maria Bicknell*
- ★ Gabriel (architect) : *Pavillon Butard*
- ★ Gainsborough: *The Blue Boy*
- ★ Goya: *The Nude Maja*

- ★ Mique: Temple of Love, Versailles
- ★ Reynolds: Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of Richmond
- ★ Turner: Calais Pier

Art of the Classical period generally is characterized by a sense of idealised perfection, the absence of excessive sensuality and flamboyance, and a deliberate attempt to recreate the ideals of beauty as held by the ancient cultures. Paintings generally evoke harmony, concord, and masterly control rather than turbulence, discord and ecstatic emotional expression. Often the subjects of these paintings appear more like enlivened Greek statues, as though they were arrested in mid-posture. The overriding sense is that Man can master his baser instincts, he can control his emotions - through his intellect. Nothing is left to chance - everything is part of a well ordered plan or design, a reflection of the 'Age of Reason' which is often the name given to the 18th century.

LITERATURE: THE MAIN WRITERS

- ★ Diderot and the 'French Encyclopaedists' wrote the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers*, which is usually referred to as the *Encyclopédie*.
- ★ Goethe: Faust
- ★ Oliver Goldsmith: *She Stoops to Conquer*
- ★ Walpole: *The Castle of Otranto*
- ★ William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*;

GENERAL ARTISTIC TRAITS

During the Classical Period there was great interest in ancient Roman and Greek ideas - partly due to archaeological excavations of Greek and Roman buildings that were taking place at the time. The beauty of the ancient Greek and Roman temples was seen as an ideal form of architecture. Consequently, Classical architecture also emphasized balance, symmetry and strong contrasts of geometrical shapes with subtle decorations. The excessively ornate structures of the Baroque period were

no longer as popular. This 'Greek Revival' lasted from c. 1760-1830. It emphasized simplicity of design with limited ornamentation, based on very particular standards of good taste. There was close attention to a type of ornamentation that was very delicate and refined, such as the imitation of fine foliage and shell designs etc. The freely decorated, elaborate style of the Baroque period, was beginning to give way to the more restrained and formal approach of the Classical period. This was also reflected in piano music of the time. The keyboard itself was now capable of so much subtle expressiveness that the constant addition of elaborate ornaments became less essential and finally somewhat 'out of taste'.

CLASSICAL MUSIC: AN OVERVIEW

'Classical' refers to the conscious attempt to emulate the ancient Greek ideas in formal beauty, elegance, balance and perfection. Classical musicians thus aimed at correctness of form, precision, elegance and beauty, order and reason. Classical music is not, however, devoid of expressiveness or poignancy. What is significant is that the Classical viewpoint at that time held that music should be a more general or universal expression - human, but generalised rather than autobiographically 'personal'.

The nobility, the main class that supported musicians of the Classical period (by commissioning them to compose works), had brought the business of living to a fine art. The accent was definitely on correct form rather than on deep feeling, on the manner rather than the execution. Emotion was channeled and controlled to fit in with a view of what was seen as tasteful art, much like a beautifully balanced landscape of a formal garden. The musician working under the patronage of this noble class, had to satisfy the fussy tastes of the benefactor. It is not as though the Classical composer lacked deep feeling or imagination, but because of the expectations of the time, it was inevitable that he should compose with a sense of elegant restraint, and place enormous emphasis on the exquisite finish. Classical music therefore often lacks the autobiographical and emotional excess that was so characteristic of the Romantic period. Generally speaking, Classical music only hints at sorrow - the music more often than not tries to transport us to a sphere of undying happiness.

Much Classical music was inspired by comic opera, which generally had simple melodies with chordal accompaniments. The overall texture was light and witty, with

a fast interchange of ideas. During the Classical period, there was a gradual move towards imitation of the vocal line to the keyboard. Clementi experimented with holding notes to produce a more legato line. Short articulated figures, like small snippets of dialogue, followed one another in patterns which made up themes, which themselves were arranged to produce a larger, very formal structure.

The Classical period saw the crystallization of the rules governing the standard structure, or 'form' of music, especially the form of the sonata, symphony, concerto and string quartet. Now 'homophony' replaced the previous 'polyphony'. The most popular form of keyboard composition at the end of the Baroque period was the keyboard Suite. Of all the dance forms within the suite, the Minuet & Trio represented the musical essence of the forthcoming Classical period. Composers always sought to make the Minuet balanced, elegant, controlled, with gentle contrasts and much sparkle and refinement. It is not surprising then, that this dance form not only survived through the Classical period, but it transformed itself into a regular movement within Sonatas, Concertos and Symphonies of this period.

CLASSICAL MUSIC: THE MAIN COMPOSERS

- ★ Germany /Austria: Mozart, Haydn, early Beethoven, early Schubert, Gluck, Kuhlau
- ★ Italy: Clementi, Piccinni, Boccherini, Cimarosa

PERFORMANCE HINTS

It is probably true to say that Classical music should never 'jump out' at the listener. A classical 'forte' must never shock - the sound must always be sparkling and elegant, and somehow buoyant rather than heavy or sluggish. The texture of Classical piano music especially must always be slender rather than rich. The melodic line should always be clear and structures beautifully balanced. Rather than creating showy effects, one should try to produce a Classical sound that is intimate and tasteful.

All this is probably more true of Mozart's Italianate style than Haydn's more extroverted style. One can perhaps take bigger risks with Haydn's music. There are more sudden musical somersaults in Haydn, more harmonic colours, contrasting effects and far more variety in tempi, dynamics and brilliant figuration than in Mozart's music.

The need to achieve a sense of refinement and sparkle in Classical music can be achieved by carefully controlling the tone, by not over- pedalling, and by a painstaking observance of the tiniest details - meticulously correct phrasing, clean articulation of notes, especially the 2 note slur, which is almost the signature of the classical period! Small details should never be lost in the performance of Classical music - they should always be discernable as the total structure unfolds.

Whereas today, piano-makers tend to aim for a consistent sound from bass to treble, the Fortepiano of the Classical period had a more varied sound through its compass. The bass, for example was warm but never thick or heavy. The middle section had a very singing quality, while the upper register was quite thin. The different textures were always apparent so that individual voices could be easily discerned, and that perfect clarity prevailed. We should try to reproduce this sound when playing Classical music on the modern pianoforte. The left hand must always play its accompaniment more softly than the right hand - especially when the accompaniment is an Alberti bass. In Classical music we often find a louder section followed almost immediately by a softer section - as the classical period is all about symmetry, balance and beauty. It is through balancing opposing forces that the Classical artist believed he could achieve a sense of equilibrium and artistic poise.