

THE CLASSICAL ERA 1750 - 1820

Background and General Characteristics

General Characteristics

A brief time period when compared to the Baroque era, the Classical era saw monumental strides made, especially in the development of *instrumental music*.

Classical composers turned to the ideals of classical art and architecture – ancient Greece and Rome. This was in contrast to the majestic, grandiose style of the Baroque era. While the Baroque era was over the top and heavy with ornamentation, the Classical era stressed *clarity, self control, balance, harmony, and simplicity*. These traits are reflected not only in the music, but in the art, architecture and fashion of the time.



Some of the characteristics that identify the music of the classical period are simplicity of melody and harmony, clarity of form and timbre, and an intellectual rather than emotional approach to composition. Mastery of form is most important in establishing greatness during this period. Emotion is important too, but it must be controlled within the established form. In this way you may think of the form as a page from a coloring book. You try to make the image as beautiful as possible while coloring within the lines. Some will not do well, some will make it nice and a very few may be able to make a museum quality work out of the form on the page.

Classical Dynamics

While terraced dynamics were popular during the Baroque era, they fell out of style during the Classical era. With the new emphasis on balance, dynamics during the Classical era were *based on a system of crescendo and decrescendo (<>)* – a far more gradual approach to dynamics. This will also involve more use of subtle changes in dynamics from the individual players. While you will still hear sudden changes in volume, it is not “terraced” and is not foundational to the period.

Instrumental Details & The Classical Orchestra

Instrumental music is now equal in importance to vocal music, but the majority of new musical ideas to come out of the Classical era are in the area of instrumental, and therefore the characteristics are most evident in its instrumental music. There are very few changes in vocal music.

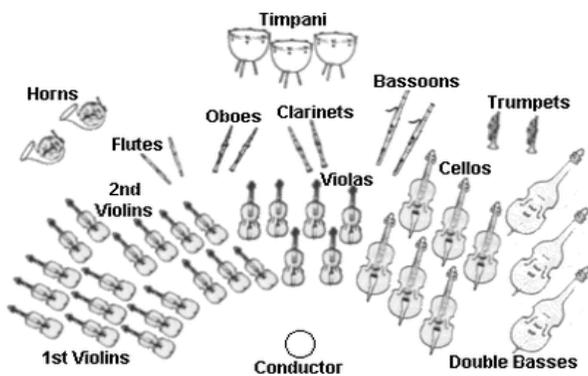
The dominant texture is now *homophonic*. This is in keeping with the simpler approach of the classicists. You will still hear some polyphony, but normally within larger works. The days of the “Great Fugues” have passed.

The invention of the *pianoforte* during the early 18th century is considered to be one of the greatest contributions of the Classical era. It became a favorite instrument and gradually replaced the clavichord and the harpsichord because of its great variety in dynamics and tonal sonority. However, it is not used throughout orchestral music (like the harpsichord was in Baroque music), but would play with the orchestra as a solo instrument in a piano concerto.



One of the most significant contributions of the Classical era was the *standardization of orchestral instrumentation*. The orchestra increased in size to 35-45 members. The keyboard was no longer a regular member which meant the addition of the conductor. The orchestra now consisted of four groups of instruments (* denotes a new addition to the orchestra):

- Strings
 - 1st violins
 - 2nd violins
 - Violas
 - Cellos
 - Basses*
- Woodwinds – varies, but mostly pairs of:
 - Flutes
 - Oboes
 - Bassoons*
 - Clarinet* (appears in later Classical)
- Brass
 - French horns
 - Trumpets (used inconsistently)
- Percussion
 - Timpani*



The Patronage System

Musicians and composers depend more on the Patronage System to make a living. Patronage was the system by which the *aristocracy would support artists and musicians*. This could happen through full time employment, where the composer would become a “musical servant” or where the aristocrat might commission the composer to write a work on a one time basis. The church was less involved in the development and evolution of music during the Classical era, but all composers wrote sacred forms of music – for money or for the glory of God.

The focal point of music moved *out of the church and into the palace* where most new musical developments were taking place (primarily instrumental). The central point for entertainment outside the palace was the opera house.