

Music Appreciation 4 November 2004

Lecture 6: The Ages of Music

Medieval music is music of Europe in the [Middle Ages](#). This era, using the interchangeable terms "medieval" and "middle ages", covers the period from the fall of the Roman Empire (476) and the papacy of [Gregory the Great](#) (sixth century) to approximately the beginning of the fifteenth century, though establishing the end of the Medieval era and the beginning of the [Renaissance](#) is admittedly arbitrary. In addition, this excludes music of the [Byzantine Empire](#), which has a largely separate development. Music was both sacred and secular, though there was almost no survival of secular music early in the era, and since notation was a relatively late development, reconstruction of music, especially before the [12th century](#), always contains an element of conjecture. The early portion of this music period is marked by the very gradual rise and development of [polyphony](#) and [counterpoint](#).

Renaissance music is [classical music](#) written during the [Renaissance](#) period, approximately 1400 to 1600 A.D. Defining the end of the period is easier than defining the beginning, since there were no revolutionary shifts in musical thinking at the beginning of the 15th century corresponding to the sudden development of the styles corresponding to the [Baroque](#) era around 1600, and the process by which music acquired "Renaissance" characteristics was a gradual one.

The increasing reliance on the interval of the third as a consonance is one of the most pronounced features of early Renaissance European art music (in the [Middle Ages](#), thirds had been considered dissonances: see [interval](#)). [Polyphony](#), in use since the 12th century, became increasingly elaborate with highly independent voices throughout the 14th century: the beginning of the 15th century showed simplification, with the voices often striving for smoothness. This was possible because of a greatly increased vocal range in music—in the Middle Ages, the narrow range made necessary frequent crossing of parts, which also made it necessary to write highly contrasting parts.

Towards the end of the 15th century, polyphonic sacred music (as exemplified in the masses of [Ockeghem](#) and [Obrecht](#)) had once again become complex, in a manner correlating to the stunning detail in the painting at the time; this was followed in the early 16th century by another trend towards simplification, as can be seen in the work of [Josquin](#), and later of [Palestrina](#), who was partially reacting to the strictures of the [Council of Trent](#), which discouraged excessively complex polyphony as inhibiting understanding the text.

In the late 16th century, there were several important, contrasting trends. In secular music, especially in the madrigal, there was a trend towards complexity and even extreme chromaticism (as exemplified in madrigals of [Luzzaschi](#), [Marenzio](#), and [Gesualdo](#)). Meanwhile, beginning in [Florence](#), there was an attempt to revive the dramatic and musical forms of Ancient Greece, through the means of [monody](#), a form of declaimed music over a simple accompaniment; a more extreme contrast with the preceding polyphonic style would be hard to find; this was also, at least at the outset, a secular trend. In [Venice](#), from about 1550 until around 1610, an impressive polychoral style developed, which gave Europe some of the grandest, most sonorous music composed up until that time, with multiple choirs of singers, brass and strings in different spatial locations in the Basilica [San Marco di Venezia](#) (see [Venetian polychoral style](#)). These multiple revolutions spread over Europe in the next several decades, beginning in Germany and then moving to Spain, France and England somewhat later, demarcating the beginning of what we now know as the [Baroque](#) musical era.

Baroque music is Western [classical music](#) from the [Baroque](#) era, after the [Renaissance music](#) era and before the [Classical music era](#) proper. This roughly covers the time period from [Claudio Monteverdi](#) (1567-1643) through [Johann Sebastian Bach](#) (1685-1750). Baroque music forms a major portion of the classical music canon and is widely performed and enjoyed.

Among the great composers of the early Baroque were Monteverdi and [Heinrich Schütz](#) (1585 - 1672). In the middle baroque the most influential composers include [Jean-Baptiste Lully](#) (1632-1687), [Arcangelo Corelli](#) (1653-1713), and [Henry Purcell](#) (1659 - 1695). In the late Baroque, the leading figures include [Bach](#) (1685-1750), [George Frideric Handel](#) (1685-1759), [Georg Philipp Telemann](#) (1681-1767), [Domenico Scarlatti](#) (1685-1757), and [Antonio Vivaldi](#) (1678-1741).

Baroque music shares with Renaissance music a heavy use of [polyphony](#) and [counterpoint](#). However, its use of these techniques differs from Renaissance music. In the Renaissance, harmony is more the result

of consonances incidental to the smooth flow of polyphony, while in the early Baroque era the order of these consonances becomes important, for they begin to be felt as chords in a hierarchical, [functional](#) tonal scheme. Around [1600](#) there is considerable blurring of this definition: for example one can see essentially tonal progressions around cadential points in madrigals, while in early [monody](#) the feeling of tonality is still rather tenuous. Another distinction between Renaissance and Baroque practice in harmony is the frequency of chord root motion by [third](#) in the earlier period, while motion of [fourths](#) or [fifths](#) predominates later (which partially defines functional tonality). In addition, Baroque music uses longer lines and stronger rhythms: the initial line is extended, either alone or [accompanied](#) only by the [basso continuo](#), until the theme reappears in another voice. In this later approach to counterpoint, the harmony was more often defined either by the basso continuo, or tacitly by the notes of the theme itself.

These stylistic differences mark the transition from the [ricercars](#), [fantasias](#), and [canzonas](#) of the Renaissance to the [fugue](#), a defining Baroque form. [Monteverdi](#) called this newer, looser style the *seconda prattica*, contrasting it with the *prima prattica* that characterized the [motets](#) and other sacred [choral](#) pieces of high Renaissance masters like [Palestrina](#). Monteverdi himself used both styles; he wrote his [Mass](#) *In illo tempore* in the older, Palestrinan style, and his [1610 Vespers](#) in the new style.

There are other, more general differences between Baroque and Renaissance style. Baroque music often strives for a greater level of emotional intensity than Renaissance music, and a Baroque piece often uniformly depicts a single particular emotion (exultation, grief, piety, etc.) (see [doctrine of the affections](#)). Baroque music was more often written for virtuoso singers and instrumentalists, and is characteristically harder to perform than Renaissance music, although idiomatic instrumental writing was one of the most important innovations of the period. Baroque music employs a great deal of [ornamentation](#), which was often improvised by the performer. Instruments came to play a greater part in Baroque music, and [a cappella](#) vocal music receded in importance.

The **Classical period** in Western [music](#) occurred in the second half of the [18th century](#). Although the term [classical music](#) is used as a blanket term meaning *all* kinds of music in a certain tradition, it can also occasionally mean this particular era within that tradition. Traditionally, it is considered that it spanned from 1750 to 1820.

The Classical period falls between the [Baroque](#) and the [Romantic](#) periods. Amongst its [composers](#) were [Joseph Haydn](#), [Muzio Clementi](#), [Johann Ladislaus Dussek](#) and [Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach](#), though probably the best known composers from this period are [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](#) and [Ludwig van Beethoven](#).

In the middle of the 18th century, Europe began to move to a new style in the arts, [architecture](#) and literature. While still tightly linked to the court culture and absolutism, with its formality and emphasis on order and hierarchy, it was also a cleaner style, one that favored clearer divisions between parts, brighter contrasts and colors. The ideas of "natural philosophy", which had established itself in the public consciousness with Newton's physics were taken as an example: structures should be axiomatic, articulated and orderly. This taste for cleanliness worked its way into the world of music as well, moving away from the layered polyphony of the [baroque](#) period, and towards a style where the melody against the subordinate harmony - called [homophony](#) was considered more important. This meant that playing of chords, in unison, became a much more important feature of music, and, in turn, made the [tonal](#) structure of works more audible.

The new style was also pushed forward by changes in economics and social structure, as the 18th century progressed, the nobility more and more became the primary patrons of instrumental music, and there was a rise in the public taste for comic opera. This led to changes in the way music was performed, the most crucial of which was the move to standard instrumental groups, and the reduction in the importance of the "continuo", the harmonic fill beneath the music played by several instruments. One way to trace this decline of the continuo and its figured chords is to see the decline of the term "obligato", meaning a mandatory, instrumental part in a work of chamber music. In the baroque world, additional instruments could be added in as continuo; in the classical world, all parts were noted, though not always notated, so the word "obligato" ceased to have any meaning. By 1800, the term was virtually extinct, as was the practice of conducting a work from the harpsichord.

This change in economics altered the balance of musicianship, whereas in the late baroque a major composer would have the entire musical resources of a town to draw on, the forces available at a hunting lodge were smaller, and more fixed in their level of ability. This was a spur to having primarily simple parts to play. In addition, the taste for a continual supply of new music, carried over from the baroque, meant that works had to be performable with, at best, one rehearsal. Indeed, well into the

1790's Mozart writes about "the rehearsal", to imply that his concerts would have only one.

Since the layering of polyphony could no longer control the surface of the music, there was greater emphasis on notating the music for [dynamics](#) and phrases. The simplification of surface made instrumental detail more important, and also made the use of characteristic rhythms, such as the funeral march rhythm, or the minuet, more important in establishing and unifying the tone of a single movement.

This led to the classical styles gradual breaking with the baroque habit of making each movement of music devoted to a single "affect" or emotion. Instead, it became the style to unify contrasts between different emotional sections, by contrasting major and minor, strident rhythmic themes with longer more song like themes and making movement between different areas of harmony the major means of creating dramatic contrast and unity. The moments of transition became more and more important, as moments of surprise and delight. Consequently composers and musicians began to pay more attention to them, making their arrival more distinct, and making the signs that pointed to them, on one hand, more audible, and on the other hand, more the subject of "play" - that is, composers more and more created false expectations, only to have the music skitter off in a different direction.

Romantic music can be defined as [music](#) in which expression of feelings is given more importance than formal balance and internal order. The use of the phrase in this sense is generally limited to the context of European [classical music](#).

Although there are moments of pieces through history where this can be said to be the case, it became the dominant musical trend in classical music during the [19th century](#), and the period roughly from 1800 to 1910 is often called the "romantic period" in music, which differs from the dates of literary romanticism by half a century. Many composers after 1910, however, have continued to write music in a style labelled as "Romantic".

Although the word "romantic" is now usually used to mean "something related to love", "romantic music" as spoken about by [musicologists](#) and academics is not necessarily about this and does not always sound like what would nowadays be thought of as "romantic" in the general sense. It is instead defined as being rooted in [romanticism](#) in literature and the arts.

The Romantic era extended the [tonal](#) and harmonic vocabulary of the previous era; in particular there was a desire for greater fluidity of movement, greater contrasts and, in the end, longer works. [Chromaticism](#) grew more frequent and varied in use, as did [dissonance](#). Composers [modulated](#) to increasingly remote keys. Modulations were not always as extensively prepared as they were in the classical era, and sometimes instead of a pivot chord, a pivot note was used. [Franz Liszt](#) and others sometimes enharmonically "spelled" this note in a different way (for example, changing a C sharp into a D flat) to modulate into even more distant keys. The properties of the diminished seventh chord, which enables modulation to almost any key, were also extensively exploited. Composers such as [Ludwig van Beethoven](#), often regarded as the first Romantic composer, and later [Richard Wagner](#) expanded their [harmonic](#) language to include [chords](#) previously unused, or to treat existing chords in different ways. Wagner's [Tristan chord](#), found in *Tristan and Isolde*, has had much written about it attempting to explain exactly what harmonic function it serves.

Romantic music analogized music to poetry and to rhapsodic and narrative structures, and at the same time created a more systematic basis for teaching the composing and performing of concert music. The Romantic era codified previous practice, for example inventing the idea of the [sonata form](#), and then almost immediately began to extend that form. There was an increasing focus on melodies and themes, as well as an explosion in composing songs. This emphasis on melody found expression in the more and more extensive use of [cyclic form](#), which turned out to be an important structural device to unify the much longer pieces which were composed in the Romantic era.

These trends — towards greater harmonic elusiveness and fluidity, longer and more powerfully placed melodies, poesis as the basis of expression, mixing of literature and music — were all present to one degree or another previously; however, the Romantic Era made their pursuit central to the idea of music itself. Technology also played a significant role in the changes in musical language — from the increasing range and power of the piano, to the introduction of valves and keys for instruments, the very sound and reach of the symphony orchestra changed, and with it the kinds of works which were possible.

20th century classical music was extremely diverse, ranging from the late [Romantic](#) style of [Sergei Rachmaninoff](#) to the complete [serialism](#) of [Pierre Boulez](#), and from the simple triadic [harmonies](#) of [minimalist](#) composers such as [Philip Glass](#) to the [musique concrète](#) of [Pierre Schaeffer](#) and the [microtonal](#) music adopted by [Harry Partch](#), [Alois Haba](#) and others.

Among the most prominent composers of the 20th century were [Gustav Mahler](#), [Richard Strauss](#), [Giacomo Puccini](#), [Claude Debussy](#), [Arnold Schoenberg](#), [Sergei Rachmaninoff](#), [Igor Stravinsky](#), [Dmitri Shostakovich](#), [Benjamin Britten](#) and [Aaron Copland](#). Classical music also had an intense cross fertilization with [Jazz](#), with several composers being able to work in both genres, including [George Gershwin](#). An important feature of 20th century concert music is the existence of the splitting of the audience into traditional and avant-garde, with many figures prominent in one world considered minor or unacceptable in the other. Composers such as [Anton von Webern](#), [Elliot Carter](#), [Edgar Varese](#), [Milton Babbitt](#), [Luciano Berio](#) have devoted followings within the avant-garde, but are often attacked outside of it. As time has passed, however, it is increasingly accepted, though by no means universally so, that the boundaries are more porous than the many polemics would have you believe: many of the techniques pioneered by the above composers show up in popular music by [The Beatles](#), [Pink Floyd](#), [Mike Oldfield](#), [Nirvana](#) and in film scores that draw mass audiences.

It should be kept in mind that this article presents an overview of 20th century classical music and many of the composers listed under the following trends and movements may not identify exclusively as such and may be considered as participating in different movements. For instance, Igor Stravinsky may be considered a [romantic](#), [modernist](#), [neoclassicist](#), and a [serialist](#).

The 20th Century was also an age where recording and broadcast changed the economics and social relationships inherent in music. An individual in the 19th century made most music themselves, or attended performances. An individual in the industrialized world had access to radio, television, phonograph and later digital music such as the CD.

In the broadest sense, **contemporary music** is any music being written in the present day. In the context of classical music the term applies to music written in the last half century or so, particularly works post-1960. The argument over whether the term applies to music in any style, or whether it applies only to composers writing [avant garde](#) music, or "modernist" music is a subject of hot debate. There is some use of "Contemporary" as a synonym for "Modern", particularly in academic settings, where as others are more restrictive and apply the term only to presently living composers and their works. Since it is a word that describes a time frame, rather than a particular style or unifying idea, there are no universally agreed on criteria for making these distinctions.

Many contemporary composers working the early 21st century were prominent figures in the 20th century, including [György Ligeti](#), [Mauricio Kagel](#), [Harrison Birtwistle](#), [Elliot Carter](#), [Steve Reich](#), [Phillip Glass](#), [John Adams](#) and [Henri Dutilleux](#) and many younger figures such as [Oliver Knussen](#) and [Thomas Adès](#). For more examples see: [List of 21st century classical composers](#).

There are a number of festivals dedicated to contemporary music, among them the [Donaueschingen Festival of Contemporary Music](#) and [Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival](#).