

CLASSICAL PERIOD

Era Overview

Three composers shape our understanding of the Classical style: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. All three had strong connections to the rich musical culture of Vienna. While it might seem easy at first to think of them as producing music that sounds very similar, it is important to remember that each had distinct personal and musical personalities and styles.

Franz Joseph Haydn was the eldest of the three composers. He worked and thrived under the old patronage system, and viewed the large number of pieces that he was called upon to compose as wonderful chances to experiment rather than as workaday drudgery. This is reflected both in his large output and in the inventive ways that he played with melodies and forms. Haydn has been affectionately referred to as "Papa" Haydn, reflecting his influence on younger composers as well as his central role in the development of two of the most important genres of the time, the symphony and the string quartet. Haydn's personality also produced a somewhat droll musical humor, as in the "surprise" in the slow movement of his [Symphony #94](#). In Haydn's work we can also see the tension between the older "learned" style of the Baroque and the more "popular" style of the late eighteenth century. Listen, for example, to the beginning of the final movement of his [String Quartet #5](#) from his Opus 20 collection. It seems "Classical" in its sound, and yet Haydn goes back to the older Baroque fugal technique to construct the work. This creative play of old and new is an important part of the Classical style.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart can be viewed as a complete contrast to Haydn in many ways. Where Haydn accepted the patronage system, Mozart chafed at it. Where Haydn was a slow, deliberate worker, Mozart was an impetuous creator. Mozart's facility at composing was legendary (if exaggerated), but in his melodies and harmonies there is an expressive and emotional element missing in Haydn's works. His harmonies are richer and more inventive. Listen to one of his melodies, from the slow movement of his [Symphony #35](#). It is every bit as simple as Haydn's, but it has a special poignancy that has endeared him to later generations. At the same time, he could write forceful and dynamic works that give us pause, as in the Confutatis from his [Requiem](#). Like Haydn, Mozart excelled in all genres, but it is perhaps in his operas that he made his most enduring mark. His final operas epitomize the Enlightenment world, and the psychological depth he could bring to even the most comic character, such as Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*, is stunning. This was to set a standard for all later composers.

Ludwig van Beethoven inherited the Classical forms of Haydn and the emotional depth of Mozart and fused them into a style that takes us step by step into the world of Romanticism. In many ways Beethoven was a true revolutionary, and his difficult personal life is often reflected in his musical world. Beethoven, unlike either of his predecessors, attacked composition almost as a physical challenge. His surviving sketchbooks show us that he labored over each motive, and tried and retried every possible way of working with his themes. Even something as seemingly simple and right as the opening of the fifth symphony was the product of dozens of considered decisions, and even the final manuscript contains last-minute changes. But most importantly, Beethoven began a

process of exploiting every aspect of composition—harmony, rhythm, and even ornamentation became for him not means to an end but ends in and of themselves. In his [Symphony #5](#), his four-note theme becomes a rhythmic motive (short-short-short-long) that is transformed in each movement. In his later works, these elements became abstract in the extreme, and these pieces were often dismissed by critics as the work of a man who had ventured beyond his natural talents. And with that abandonment of nature, we find ourselves facing the new musical world of the Romantics, who counted Beethoven among their number. If we need proof of that, we need only listen to the opening of his [Symphony #9](#). The strange open harmonies seem to go nowhere until they finally focus into the strong, surprising opening theme. This opening, with all its mystery, seems to cast a shadow over the nineteenth century, and later composers keep coming back to it in their own writing.