

Understanding Music

Seventh Edition

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the rhythm lively. A special development of the Classic era was the “Alberti bass,” named after the composer Domenico Alberti (1710–1740). This is an accompaniment made up of a

continuously moving pattern of short notes. The accompanying chords are broken up into separate notes played one after the other, not together, to keep the texture light and lively.



Two examples of
“walking bass.”

Lively, rhythmic accom-
panying figures.

Accompanying chords
broken into
“Alberti bass.”

These three features—the balanced phrases, the simple harmony, and the light accompaniment—help to give Classic music its special sound and to provide a framework for its tuneful, pleasing melodies.

NEED TO KNOW THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASSIC MUSIC

1. Balanced melodic phrases
2. Simple harmonies
3. Light accompaniment

Genres of Classic Music

Several musical genres were popular in the Classic era. The most important genres were opera, symphony, string quartet, and sonata. Some composers wrote in other genres, too. Mozart, for example, composed many beautiful piano concertos and some string *quintets*. But on the whole, composers stayed within the conventional genres. Notice that these genres are all secular. Although composers still

occasionally wrote sacred works such as Masses and oratorios, they were far less common in the Classic era, reflecting a shift in society’s makeup and interests.

Operas were staged in the palaces of a few very wealthy aristocrats or in the public opera houses of big cities such as Prague, Paris, or Vienna. Symphonies also were performed in aristocratic courts or at the public concert venues springing up all over Europe. String quartets and sonatas, with their smaller ensembles and more intimate sound, were designed for private gatherings—in an aristocratic salon or in the living rooms of middle-class music lovers.

Let’s look briefly at how the opera, the symphony, the string quartet, and the sonata developed in the Classic era.

Opera We have seen that opera was the Baroque art form *par excellence*. It combined a story with artwork, costumes, illusion, and best of all, superb singing. But during the late Baroque period, some people began to criticize Baroque opera as artificial. They complained that the plots were always about mythological or historical figures rather than about real people and actual situations; that

Opera: an exotic and irrational entertainment.

—Samuel Johnson's Dictionary (1755)

You see actresses virtually in convulsions as they rend from their lungs the most violent ululations; both fists clenched against the breast, the head thrown back, cheeks aflame, veins bursting, and diaphragm heaving. It is impossible to say which is the more unpleasantly assailed, the eye or the ear.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

the music was too heavy and complex; and that the stage sets, with their elaborate scenery and complicated machines for simulating battles and shipwrecks, were too involved. The arias, with their obligatory repeats (the *da capo* aria form, you remember, is ABA), were criticized for two reasons: (1) the repeat of the first part (the second A) interrupted the continuity of the story; and (2) singers abused the convention of embellishing the music on its repeat by showing off and drawing attention to themselves rather than to the plot. Finally, what could be more unnatural than a castrato (a man singing with a woman's voice!)?

This attack on Baroque opera was another sign of the changing social structure of the eighteenth century. Baroque opera was the province of the aristocracy; what was demanded was a style of opera that would appeal to everyone. It should be about real people in everyday situations. The result was the development of a new type of opera called *comic opera*. Comic opera became very popular in the Classic era. It featured simpler music, down-to-earth characters, and amusing plots.

In Italy comic opera was known as *opera buffa*, in France it was called *opéra comique*, and in Germany it was known as *Singspiel*. In French and German comic opera, the dialogue is spoken instead of being set to music, though there are still arias. In Italian opera the dialogue is in recitative. The most famous early example of Italian comic opera is Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733). Even the title is meant to be comical: it means "The Servant Girl Who Became Mistress of the House." The opera is about a clever servant girl who tricks her master, a rich old bachelor, into marrying her. The story was designed to appeal to an age in which rigid class barriers were being called into question.

Symphony The most important genre of instrumental music in the Classic era was the symphony. Indeed, the origins of the symphony date from the beginnings of the Classic era, about 1730, and it grew to maturity in the hands of the great Classic composers Haydn and Mozart.

The symphony began life as an introductory piece to Italian opera. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Italian operas were usually preceded by an *overture*—an instrumental introduction in three short movements: fast–slow–fast. The Italian name for this type of

opera overture was *sinfonia*. The music of these overtures was unrelated to the music of the operas they introduced. Gradually these instrumental pieces achieved independent status and were played in concert performances. The idea of independent symphonies spread rapidly, and soon composers from Italy to Germany to England were writing symphonies with no connection to opera.

The most important center of symphonic composition and performance in the early Classic era was Mannheim, in Germany. Here was a wealthy court, which supported the largest and most accomplished orchestra in Europe. The concertmaster and conductor of the Mannheim orchestra was Johann Stamitz (1717–1757), who was famous for his rigorous discipline. Stamitz was also a prolific composer who wrote more than 60 symphonies. These symphonies established the norm for the Classic symphony for the remainder of the eighteenth century.

Stamitz expanded the fast–slow–fast pattern of the Italian *sinfonia* to a four-movement scheme. The first movement is fast and serious, the second movement slow and lyrical, the third movement graceful and moderate in tempo, and the last movement very fast and lively. This pattern of movements became standard for the symphony throughout the Classic period.

Stamitz also established the basic structure of the Classic orchestra, which had three main instrumental groups: strings, woodwinds, and (sometimes) trumpets and drums. The string section consisted of two groups of violins ("first violins" and "second violins"), as well as violas, cellos, and double basses. The woodwind section had two flutes or two oboes, plus two horns. Only bright, ceremonial symphonies used trumpets and timpani. In the later Classic period, the orchestra was augmented slightly, particularly in the woodwind section. Composers often used both flutes *and* oboes. Bassoons were employed to fill out the low sounds of the woodwind section, and in the late eighteenth century clarinets also became popular.

A composer could choose the number and types of instruments in a particular work to achieve different effects. If a composer wanted a delicate sound, he or she might write for strings, one flute, and two horns. A fuller, richer sound could be obtained with the strings plus all the woodwind instruments. And for a really festive piece, trumpets and drums were added.

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab**
"Stamitz Symphony in C"

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab**
"La Serva Padrona"