

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF MUSIC: The Middle Ages to The Romantic Era**

**Note: All musical examples may be found at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).**

### **In The Beginning**

Music has been around for as long as people have, which is a long, long time. Very early music probably involved people singing prayers for good weather, and successful hunting for food and animal skins which were eventually used to make drums. Music was not written down back then and, believe it or not, there were no recordings of music made then either.

### **The Middle Ages - approximately 476 - 1500**

About the year 600 A.D., Pope Gregory I created a way to explain the musical scales that were used in church music at the time. He also gave the notes their names which are the same ones we use today and began to write music down for the first time. Pope Gregory also gave the world the Gregorian chant. This is a simple melody that was sung by monks who would all sing the same note at the same time.

YouTube Example: Gregorian Chant (Advocatam) Llibre Vermell de Montserrat

The Catholic mass was another important kind of music in the Middle Ages. Many of the greatest pieces of music composed for choirs and orchestras are masses.

YouTube Example: Bach - BWV 232 - Messe h-Moll - Gloria in Excelsis Deo

### **The Renaissance - approximately 1450 - 1600**

This time period in the history of music also featured music written for singers only. This music, often called a madrigal, was different than the Gregorian chant because the singers sang different notes at the same time instead of having them all sing the same notes. Giovanni da Palestrina was a famous Italian composer during the Renaissance and a favourite of the Pope.

YouTube Example: Palestrina - Jesu, rex admirabilis - Gardiner

Combining stories that were acted on stage with music also became popular during the Renaissance. Claudio Monteverdi was an Italian composer who helped to create this kind of entertainment which is called opera. He started with the madrigal and added melodies that were easier to remember and instruments that would play along with the singers.

YouTube Example: Claudio Monteverdi - Tu se morta

## **The Baroque Era - 1600 - 1750**

Baroque (pronounced ba-roke) music had melodies with a lot of notes and, at times, extra notes to make the melody of a piece of music sound even fancier. Composers tried new ways of putting music together at this time. They also painted musical pictures with notes to show feelings such as being happy or sad, and to show nature.

Antonio Vivaldi was an Italian musician who was one of the best known composers of the Baroque era, and one of the busiest. He composed almost 700 pieces of music of which The Four Seasons is his most famous. Each section of this piece paints a musical picture of one of the seasons of the year.

YouTube Example: Gidon Kremer - Vivaldi's Four Seasons - Spring (I. Allegro)

George Frideric Handel was born in Germany but became known as a great English composer after he moved there when he was young. He wrote 36 operas which use singing and acting to tell a story. When musical stories based on the Bible became popular, Handel began to compose oratorios where singers would sing words from the Bible with an orchestra. His most popular oratorio is the Messiah.

YouTube Example: Handel - Messiah, Hallelujah (Sir Colin Davis, Tenebrae, LSO)

Many people think that Johann Sebastian Bach is the greatest musician who ever lived. He was one of the best players of the organ in the world and he could compose music on the organ as he played in public. Bach is one of the best composers too and, like Vivaldi, he wrote a lot of music. So much in fact that many of his 20 children would help their father copy his music on paper.

Bach wrote a cantata, which is music for a large choir to sing, for the church he worked at in Germany for every Sunday and holiday church service. He wrote pieces of music that were very hard to play, known as fugues, that had up to four different melodies being played at once. Each melody of a fugue is like the others but starts at a different time like Row, Row, Row Your Boat.

YouTube Example: Glenn Gould plays Bach Prelude in C Minor

YouTube Example: Bach - Mattheus Passion - 01

## **The Classical Era - 1750 - 1825**

Music of the Classical era was more plain than music of the Baroque era. The three most important composers of the Classical era were Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

Joseph Haydn was born in Austria and is known as the father of the symphony which is a long piece of music written for a large number of many different kinds of instruments. He also wrote a

lot of music for the much smaller string quartet. Haydn was well respected by other musicians and he was known to be a funny guy. In fact, his sense of humour can be heard in some of his music. The story goes that he wrote his Surprise Symphony with a soft, slow section of music followed by a very loud section that was suddenly very loud to wake up people in the audience who had fallen asleep.

YouTube Example: Haydn : Symphony No. 94, 'Surprise', 2nd movement

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was known to be a musical genius from a very young age and, like Johann Sebastian Bach, is called the greatest musician ever by many people. Mozart wrote his first piano music when he was four years old and soon after he composed his first symphony. He eventually moved to Vienna, Austria and became good friends with Joseph Haydn who referred to Mozart as, "...the greatest composer that ever lived".

Mozart wrote many operas to make a living because they were very popular among the public. He was able to compose entire pieces of music for an entire orchestra in his head and then write down the notes perfectly the first time. Mozart was only 35 years old when he died but his name and his music will live on forever.

YouTube Example: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - Piano Concerto No. 21 - Andante

YouTube Example: Mozart Symphony 38 D Major 'Prague Symphony' (1/4)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Germany. Unlike Mozart, he was not known to be a musical genius when he was a child, but that changed as he became older and wrote more music. He took lessons from Joseph Haydn and composed many symphonies, string quartets and pieces for piano that would change music forever.

One reason why this musical change happened was because Beethoven began to lose his hearing. The emotional pain that he felt not being able to hear his own music helped Beethoven to change the way music was written and the sounds that were heard. He alone took music from the Classical style to the Romantic style by making feelings the most important part of the music.

YouTube Example: Beethoven Symphony No. 5 in C Minor

### **The Romantic Era - 1825 - 1900**

Romantic music focused on emotions and expressing your feelings through music. Three of the big names of the Romantic era were Frédéric Chopin, Johannes Brahms and Franz Liszt.

Frédéric Chopin was a brilliant composer and pianist from Poland who changed how music was written and how the piano was played. He was a true virtuoso. Chopin published his first piece of

music when he was only seven years old. He composed all of his music while playing the piano. He did not like to write his music down because he would often play pieces a little differently each time. Chopin was able to play very difficult piano music even though he had small fingers.

Chopin's music continues to be performed by pianists around the world and is thought by many musicians to best represent the spirit of the Romantic Era of music. Although Chopin was only 39 years old when he died, his name lives on as one of the greatest musicians who ever lived.

YouTube Piano Example: Chopin Mazurka in b minor Opus. 33 No. 4 in Vienna (1987). Performed by Vladimir Horowitz who was one of the greatest pianists of modern times.

YouTube Orchestra & Piano Example: Chopin Piano Concerto no. 2 in F minor, opus 21

Johannes Brahms was born in Germany and was a child prodigy. Brahms often performed at dances and small community events instead of giving concerts at churches and castles, so he learned a lot of music which gave him many ideas for his own music.

He is known as one of the greatest composers of the Romantic Era but he had to work hard at writing his music. He threw out hundreds of his compositions before anyone heard them because he did not think they were good enough. He was a master of taking a musical idea, known as a motif, and writing it many different ways in a piece of music. He was not however, known for writing catchy melodies that were easy to remember. For this reason, Brahms is not always among people's favourite composers.

YouTube Example: Brahms Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73 - I

Trained in Vienna, Franz Liszt was one of the greatest pianists in history. He set the stage for today's performers by putting on a show and entertaining people as well as dazzling them with his piano playing.

He would dramatically remove a pair of white gloves onstage before each performance and would throw his music over his shoulder to show-off his ability to memorize a lot of music. Liszt also composed some of the most difficult music ever written for the piano. Liszt eventually decided to leave the music world and become a clergyman.

YouTube Example: Marc Andre Hamelin Plays Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2

I hope that you have enjoyed reading about, and listening to, the history of music. I invite you to continue to explore the wonderful world of music from the 1900's to present-day.

