

Class Notes

Session 14 – Tues, Oct 17

In this session we talked about our new historical era (the Classical Period), learned a little bit about the biographies of Haydn and Mozart, and looked at one of our important new “forms” – the Minuet and Trio.

Classical Period (1750-1820) and the Enlightenment

This is, of course, a mildly confusing name for a musical era, since all along we’ve been listening to so-called “classical” music. Yet, this particular period is also known as the Classical or Classic period.

The Enlightenment

As science and philosophy continues to gather momentum (thanks to the work of Sir Isaac Newton and others), we enter a period called the Enlightenment. Now educated people are no longer content to study the classics, but rather they exude a new confidence that they can figure out the world through observation and reason.

Their view of God is called **Deism** - this is a belief in a Creator who is a "clockmaker" who designed the world and then simply lets it run, without interference.

Thus, a Deist doesn't really worry much about religion. What the men of this era really worshipped was "Nature." (This often tended to mean whatever they wanted it to mean. They would talk about things that we would consider “culture” or “society” and proclaim them to be “natural.”)

The most revolutionary idea of the time was the belief that man had certain essential human rights, like the right to expression, property ownership, and freedom of religion. Such concepts would eventually inspire actual political upheaval in the United States and France.

The Emerging Middle Class

The class system won't really change drastically until the Industrial Revolution (in the 1800s), but in the 18th-Century the middle class gains a new cultural significance. Public concerts cater to independent people with spending money and leisure time, and these new ideas about human rights also reflect the middle class perspective.

The Arts

In this period we have our first major *reaction* to the prevailing ideas of a previous era, where art becomes intentionally simpler and more "natural."

One useful concept in looking at arts and culture is the idea of whether a person, work or era is *Dionysian* or *Apollonian*. These qualities are named after Greek Gods – Dionysius is the God of wine and other "wild" things, and thus art that is Dionysian is also relatively wild, emotional, and creative. Apollo, on the other hand, was the God of the Sun, light, and truth, and Apollonian art tends to be very rational, organized, and technically-oriented.

In the move from the Baroque to the Classical period we definitely see a shift from a more Dionysian aesthetic to a more Apollonian one, and the pendulum is simply going to swing back and forth between these poles for the next few periods.

Architecture

In class I made a brief comparison between Baroque architecture, which is very detailed and expensive-looking, and what is called Neo-Classical architecture, which is very simple and geometrical, explicitly modeled on Greek structures like the Parthenon.

Music

In music we definitely see a trend towards more simplicity and clearer organization.

Less Polyphony

Classical composers write less polyphony than Baroque composers. In class I compared the first minute or so of a Corelli Trio Sonata (which is, of course, Baroque), with the beginning to a Mozart Violin Sonata. Here are some links for a quick comparison.

(comparisons, with Spotify links)

[SPOTIFY - Corelli, Trio Sonata in D minor, Op. 3, No. 5: Second Movement](#)

[SPOTIFY - Mozart, Violin Sonata No. 18 in G Major, K. 301: First Movement, Allegro con spirito](#)

In the Corelli, we have three different string lines that are all running at once. As I put it in class, "everybody is talking at once, and nobody ever shuts up."

You can hear in the Classical piece, on the other hand, that the instruments take turns playing the melody, and there are plenty of pauses and silences in there. Classical composers want everything to be clear and organized, and they aren't afraid to leave space in their music.

Clear, Organized Phrases

This space creates clear *phrases*. Phrases are simply short musical ideas with a beginning and end, the basic coherent units we hear in music. A piece is just a bunch of phrases strung together. I showed my favorite example of phrases in Classical-period music, from the Haydn String Quartet in E-flat major Op. 76 No. 6. (The lines I have drawn over the music mark the phrases.)

[SPOTIFY - Haydn, String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 76, No. 6: First Movement, Allegretto](#)

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Haydn's String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 76, No. 6, marked 'Allegretto'. The score is in 2/4 time and E-flat major. It features a piano introduction with dynamics markings of forte (f) and piano (p). Four phrases are marked with curved lines above the staff, illustrating the concept of clear, organized phrases.

Here you can see (and hear) that the music builds up four short segments into one complete thought, and it keeps going in this same pattern. These tiny phrases keep adding together to build larger and larger musical thoughts, and then the repeated sections build up to make a larger overall picture. This is how Classical music tends to be organized.

Baroque music has phrases, too, but they tend to be very complicated and messy – they are always spilling over and overlapping between the various polyphonic voices, so they are more difficult to hear.

Mixing Emotions

Baroque music tends to present one emotion in a large block. In class I replayed our video of a pianist playing the G minor fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I.

[SPOTIFY - Bach, Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, Fugue in G minor](#)

Here we have a very serious and stern-sounding subject, and we know we are in for two or three more minutes of (basically) the same thing. The piece changes in subtle ways but it isn't going to veer into another emotion.

I compared this to Mozart's famous *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (A Little Night Music). I showed the first few minutes and gave a little "play-by-play" – at first it is trucking along, then thoughtful, then it builds and builds until it is loud and triumphant, etc. In the first minute Mozart presents four or five different moods, each playing off of the other.

[SPOTIFY - Mozart, Serenade No. 13 in G Major, K. 525, "Eine kleine Nachtmusik": First Movement, Allegro](#)

Comic Opera

A shift in operatic tastes was a first sign of a new era in music. Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (The Maid Turned Mistress) of 1733 was one of the first comic operas (or *opera buffa*) to hit the scene, and it was an immediate sensation. Comic opera is faster paced, lighter in tone, and more interested in interaction between people than the old "serious" opera was. It also has a different attitude towards the ruling class – Baroque opera tended to glorify the nobility (because that's who was paying for it), but comic opera often ridicules them. The humorous tone of this music spreads to instrumental forms of the Classic period as well, so that you will also hear it in a symphony, string quartet, or piano sonata.

The importance of form

The large-scale pattern that a piece makes becomes supremely important in the Classical period – it is a huge part of "the point" of this music. Most Classic symphonies, piano sonatas, string quartets and so on present three or four movements which select from a handful of standardized forms. In the next few classes we will learn about the Minuet and Trio, Sonata Form, Theme and Variations and Rondo. If one can master these four patterns one will be equipped to follow the vast majority of Classical-period music.

The three major Classic-Period Composers: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven

At this point I gave a few biographical details on Haydn and Mozart. (We'll save Beethoven for later.) Our textbook actually gives a much richer picture of these two biographies, so you should read that if you haven't already.

Franz Joseph Haydn (1734 – 1809) is the earliest of the three. He was already a young composer in the 1750s, before Mozart was born. There are other "transitional" people working at this time (including Bach's sons), but Haydn is the first to really arrive at the real Classical style, and he had a hand in standardizing certain Classical formats like the string quartet and the symphony.

While Vienna was undoubtedly the leading center of musical life at this time, Haydn actually spent most of his career deep in suburban Austria and Hungary, working for a noble family called the Esterházy.

Although we can think of Haydn as the "early" guy, he actually outlived Mozart, personally taught Beethoven, and became as advanced and sophisticated a composer as both of them.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791) was born in Salzburg, Austria. Early in life he was taught music by his father, who brought him around Europe as a kind of novelty act. As he became a mature composer he became legendary as a sort of effortless genius, who could compose works of unprecedented length and complexity in his head. Fame did not always bring him financial security, however, and he sometimes struggled to make ends meet. He died young (at age 35) of a vaguely diagnosed illness. (People have many theories as to what it actually was that killed him.)

Minuet and Trio

Eine kleine Nachtmusik

In order to learn our four popular ways of organizing a movement of Classic-period music we will focus on two particular pieces by Mozart. In this lesson we looked at his *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (which translates to “A Little Night Music.”) This is a fun and “light” piece for string orchestra that has four different movements in it:

- I. Allegro
- II. Romance. Andante
- III. Menuetto. Andante
- IV. Rondo. Allegro

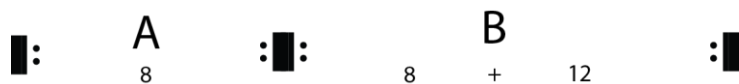
Each of these movements presents one of the four standard forms. The first is Sonata Form, the second is a slow Rondo, the third is Minuet and Trio, and the fourth is a weird hybrid between Sonata Form and Rondo. We’ll look at the first movement in our next class, but today was all about the third movement, the Minuet and Trio. We start here because (in my opinion) it is the easiest of the formal patterns to follow.

Minuet = a dance movement in triple meter

You may remember that we looked at a J. S. Bach dance suite for solo cello in our Baroque unit. That was a collection of “stylized dances” – movements based on music that people used to dance to, but composed in such a way as to be more appropriate for sitting and listening. In the Classic period the Minuet is (basically) the last surviving stylized dance, and almost every symphony, string quartet and piano sonata has one. It is in triple meter, like a waltz.

Ternary form

Each segment is in Ternary form. You may remember that in the Baroque we learned some dances that are in Binary form, with a short A and then a long B, each repeated, like so:



Ternary form is basically the same thing, except the second section ends with a return of the A material.



The final A material is often altered so that it will fit into this scheme – we call it “A Prime” and give it the little apostrophe symbol (like in math) to show that it has been changed.

Because there are three musical ideas in play (A B A) we call it Ternary.

Minuet – Trio – Minuet

So, in a Minuet and trio movement we start with our Minuet dance, which is in Ternary form:



Then we get a contrasting dance called a Trio. The Trio is usually much lighter in sound and will use fewer instruments.



Finally we come back to the Minuet. On this last pass we'll skip the repeats.



So on the large scale the Minuet – Trio – Minuet pattern makes another ABA. I like to say that this kind of movement features “three levels of threeness” with the triple meter, ternary forms, and the overall minuet-trio-minuet pattern.

The diagram I just laid out above matches our third movement from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, and of course I have an animated clip up on our website that puts the diagram in motion to match what is happening to the music.