

Developing wider listening: the Classical period

Simon Rushby

Introduction

This is the second in a series of resources to help students develop their understanding and experience of music from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods, and from the 20th and 21st centuries. The first, covering the Baroque period, was published in the November 2020 issue of *Music Teacher*.

This resource will examine the style and characteristics of the music of the Classical period through listening and practical activities. As students prepare for and navigate through their GCSE or A level courses, it's essential that they gain a broad overview of the context and style of their set works so that they can approach wider listening questions – which expect them to have experienced a diverse range of music – with confidence and understanding.

Additionally, I hope that students will enjoy developing their 'stylistic ear' through listening to music that they might not otherwise encounter. A general understanding of musical style will take them a long way, not only in their GCSE or A level studies, but also in their general cultural knowledge.

This resource could be equally valuable to Year 8 or 9 students thinking of doing music for GCSE, and those learning instruments or singing who would like to develop a better understanding of the music they're performing and, perhaps, prepare for those 'style and period' questions in practical exam aural tests.



Seven-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (at the keyboard) with his father and sister.

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Joseph Haydn.

The Classical period

In the mid-18th century, a musical style known as ‘elegant style’ began to be popular in France and also in Germany. It borrowed the name **Rococo** from architecture, and was a more refined version of Baroque style, but with very elaborate ornamentation.

Bach to Bach: scaling up Baroque decoration

Play these two extracts to show how the Rococo style focused more on melody and decoration, and less on the textural complexity of the late Baroque. They both feature a solo instrument and orchestra.

First, the final part of JS Bach’s Orchestral Suite No. 2, written in Leipzig around 1739 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8Rv9ppP6A8, from 18:34 to the end).

Second, this movement from a Cello Concerto by one of JS Bach’s sons, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, which is an example of the Rococo style (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz1YDnDeoFM). He wrote it in Berlin in the early 1750s.

Discuss with your students the similarities and differences between the musical styles of a father and his son. They could focus on the relationship of the solo instrument with the orchestra, and the roles each has in the music. They might also be able to make observations about how melodies are decorated, and approaches to harmony and texture.



A hallway in Lisbon, showing the balance and symmetry of Classical architecture.

In the second half of the 18th century, there was a significant reaction against the highly decorated Rococo style. The name **Classical** refers to the symmetry of Greek and Roman architecture, and describes this desire to strip the arts of gaudy excesses and place restraint, order and reason at the forefront of artistic thinking. The composer Gluck led the way in the 1760s and coined the term ‘**beautiful simplicity**’ to summarise how he felt music should be.

Though it’s the shortest era in musical history, the Classical period is the one in which we find the blueprints for some of the most important elements of music today. The three most famous composers of the period – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – are arguably the most influential composers ever to have lived. They have contributed hugely to the development of many musical genres, and laid the foundations for much of modern Western musical language.

Historically, the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries was an important time for Europe. The Industrial Revolution was beginning, resulting in important advances in science and technology and increasing

wealth for countries. Art and politics were deeply affected by new thinking, which became known as **the Enlightenment**, and humans became more interested in their environment and their bonds with nature. Classical philosophers found their motivation in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome, and promoted balance, order, logic and reason.

This desire to influence one’s own surroundings led to increased distrust of the ruling classes, and the period was a time of revolution throughout Europe, especially in France. Loss of respect for aristocracy and monarchy affected patronage for composers, and Mozart and Beethoven in particular wished to be less reliant on rich people who told them what to compose.

During the Classical period, Italy, Austro-Germany and France continued to be major centres for music, but Vienna really dominated, with many composers of note living there. Theatres would employ their own orchestras and stage both operas and instrumental concerts, so secular music took off in this period with symphonies, concertos, sonatas and string quartets becoming very common.

Classical musical style



Beethoven's and Schubert's graves in Vienna's Central Cemetery, and a memorial to Mozart whose final resting place is in a common grave outside the city.

We can get an overview of the general Classical style through looking at two famous pieces of music from the period.

Two famous examples of the Classical style

Listen to the first minute of Mozart's Keyboard Sonata in C major, K545 (first movement), which was published in 1788. Mozart billed it as a sonata 'for beginners' or a 'simple sonata', and he may have written it much earlier. It's presented with a score to follow here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_AX4R-d290).

As you listen with the students, ask them to note down their observations, guided by the following questions:

- ▶ How would you describe the texture of the music? How many parts are there in the texture, most of the time?
- ▶ What makes the music sound so bright, energetic and cheerful?
- ▶ What examples of decoration can you hear or see?
- ▶ The music starts in C major, but what key does it reach at the end of the first section (around 1 minute into the video)?
- ▶ The melody is always in the right-hand part. How does the left hand accompany it?

Now, here's an orchestral piece by Beethoven – the second movement of his Symphony No.3 in E flat (www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4l8ah2Rvmo). This symphony is known as the *Eroica* (or 'Heroic') and this slow funeral march may well have been written in tribute to those who gave their lives in the wars of the time. The Symphony was first performed in 1805, the year of the Battle of Trafalgar. Beethoven's original intention was to dedicate the work to Napoleon, but this idea was shelved as Beethoven disapproved of Napoleon's decision to proclaim himself emperor.

Compare the first two minutes or so of this with the Mozart extract. On the surface, it seems very different. But can your students find any similarities, in melody, harmony, tonality, texture or rhythm? The following questions may help:

- ▶ How would you compare the texture? Is it fuller or more complex? Can you hear the melody clearly?
- ▶ How is the melody accompanied? Are there any similarities with the Mozart?
- ▶ How does Beethoven create the sombre mood? Think about his use of key, harmony and dynamics.
- ▶ The Mozart was filled with interesting rhythms. How would you describe the rhythms of this Beethoven piece?

Having listened to these extracts, you can encourage students to find some common features of the Classical style. If you want, you could add to their initial listening experience with short extracts from any of these Classical examples:

- ▶ Haydn: Symphony No. 94 'Surprise' (second movement) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOLy6JxEDLw)
- ▶ Mozart: 'Deh vieni, non tardar' from *The Marriage of Figaro* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQoup3zmgE)
- ▶ Beethoven: Violin Sonata No. 5, Op. 24 'Spring' (first movement) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGFs7n6n3-8)

Discuss and agree on some key characteristics, and get students to make their own list, mind-map or word cloud. Here's a suggested list for guidance, along with some possible new vocabulary in bold:

- ▶ Melody and accompaniment texture, or **melody-dominated homophony**. Simple, often lyrical melodies with clear accompaniment texture such as **Alberti bass**.
- ▶ Balance: melodies had equal 'question and answer' phrases known as **periodic phrasing**. Pieces had balanced musical forms such as **ternary form, sonata form** and **rondo**.
- ▶ Decoration: there was still a liking for **ornaments** and other decorations, but these were more subtle, light and carefully placed than previously, often at important points like ends of phrases.
- ▶ Chord progressions led to **cadences** that clearly indicated keys – known as **functional harmony**.
- ▶ Instrumental music and secular music equalled and then overtook vocal, sacred music in popularity, though operas remained popular.
- ▶ The piano became extremely popular.
- ▶ The orchestra took its modern shape with wind instruments now a permanent feature, and brass and percussion starting to make an appearance.

Playing activity

Here is a score, adapted for classroom playing, of the beginning of the second movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 94. Known as the 'Surprise' because of its unexpected loud chords, this Symphony was written in 1791 – the year of Mozart's untimely death – for performance on one of Haydn's visits to London. The Symphony is in G major, but this second movement is written in the subdominant, C major.

The score below would work for a class activity, either as a whole class or in small groups, using whatever instruments are available. Encourage the students to observe the staccatos and the dynamic changes, and to listen for the way in which simple triads and stepwise movement are used to construct the melody.

Haydn, arr. S Rushby

Andante

Musical score for the first system, measures 1-8. It consists of four staves: two treble clefs and two bass clefs. The top two staves are for the right hand, and the bottom two are for the left hand. The music is in 2/4 time and marked *p* (piano). The melody in the right hand consists of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with quarter notes and rests.

9 (string instruments play *pizz.*)

Musical score for the second system, measures 9-16. It consists of four staves: two treble clefs and two bass clefs. The music is in 2/4 time. The top two staves are for the right hand, and the bottom two are for the left hand. The music is marked *pp* (pianissimo) at the beginning and *ff* (fortissimo) at the end of the system. The melody in the right hand consists of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with quarter notes and rests.

2

17 (string instruments play *arco*)

Musical score for measures 17-24. It consists of four staves: two treble clefs and two bass clefs. The first two staves are for the upper strings (Violins I and II), and the last two are for the lower strings (Violas and Cellos/Double Basses). The music is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and slurs. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Musical score for measures 25-32. It consists of four staves: two treble clefs and two bass clefs. The first two staves are for the upper strings (Violins I and II), and the last two are for the lower strings (Violas and Cellos/Double Basses). The music is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and slurs. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Classical style deconstructed



A good way to develop an understanding of musical style is to deconstruct and then rebuild a piece of music, rather like dismantling and rebuilding a car engine. We're going to spend some time doing this with the Andante (second movement) from the Piano Concerto No. 21 in C, K467, by Mozart (pictured above).

Mozart wrote 23 piano concertos in all, and around 11 of them come from a productive period between 1784 and 1786. At this time, Mozart was living in Vienna and making a name for himself as a performer as well as a composer, so it's likely that these concertos were written for himself to play, and also to delight the general public. He wrote in a letter to his father that it was important to write melodies that anyone could remember, while keeping the purists happy with musical insight and subtlety.

The Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K466, and the C major Concerto were written within weeks of each other in early 1785, but they could not be more different. The D minor Concerto is dark and brooding, the first minor-key concerto Mozart had written, but by contrast the C major is sunny and light with a simple, poignant slow movement. These two concertos have become perhaps Mozart's best-known.

It's difficult to know what music would be like now if Mozart had not lived, or if he had lived longer. While it would be wrong to overlook or play down the contributions of other composers of the time, especially Haydn and Beethoven, it's undoubtable that Mozart's compositional style encapsulated and shaped the music of the time, and influenced countless musicians afterwards. He was considered a prodigious talent, a genius and a trailblazer.

Yet when you look closely at Mozart's music, it becomes easier to understand Gluck's phrase 'beautiful simplicity'. Analysis of Mozart's melodies, harmony, rhythm, texture and use of instruments reveals his fantastic ability to create lasting, memorable music with surprising economy of means. Centuries before the advent of pop, Mozart was writing catchy earworms that appealed to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Before embarking on the activities below, you can listen to and follow the score of Mozart's Andante here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-twBBwKlio).

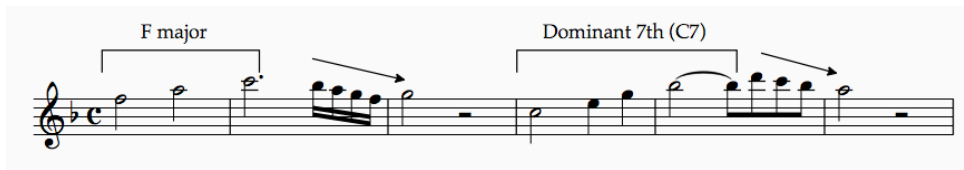
Melody, Mozart-style

Here's a stripped-down version of the principal melody from the Andante, to show how it's constructed from simple triads and scales. Get your students to play it, if they can:



Which two chords in F major are formed from the rising triads that start in bars 1 and 4?

The annotations below show how the two strongest chords in the key are used for the 'question' phrase and 'answer' phrase:



They are followed by falling, stepwise patterns that take us from tonic to dominant and back again. It's also worth noting that both phrases are the same length, though it's quite unusual to have three-bar phrases.

Mozart doesn't leave the melody like this, of course. He adds a little flavour, all the time ensuring he doesn't overpower the simplicity and balance of the melody:



The semiquaver notes act as little rhythmic springboards, but remain within the tonic chord so that this is not obscured. The appoggiaturas in bars 3 and 6 (though you could argue that the first is an accented passing note) ensure the melody isn't bland.

Composing activity

There are plenty more examples of balanced, simple melodies with just a little seasoning throughout this movement. Listen to it again with your students and see if they can pick out other examples.

As a composing activity, ask them to write their own question and answer phrase, following Mozart's template:

- ▶ Pick a simple key – maybe C, G, F or D major.
- ▶ Write a 'question' phrase using notes from the tonic chord, balancing step and leap and also rise and fall of pitch. Get it to end on a note from the dominant chord.
- ▶ Write an 'answer' that begins with notes from the dominant chord and returns to a note from the tonic chord. Make sure it's the same length as the question and contains similar amounts of step/leap and rise/fall as well as having rhythmic similarities.
- ▶ Once students are happy with their phrases, season to taste with rhythmic colour or bits of chromaticism. Classical music has plenty of decoration, just like the Baroque, but its use is far more subtle!

Mozart's approach to texture, harmony and rhythm

We've mentioned before that the commonest type of texture found in music of the Classical period is **melody and accompaniment**, sometimes called **melody-dominated homophony**. At the start of this movement, Mozart accompanies his simple melody with a straightforward but highly effective accompaniment pattern. Here it is, arranged so that students might be able to play it:

This is the accompaniment for the first three bars of the melody – the ‘question’ phrase. The answer phrase is almost the same but in reverse, beginning with the C7 triad.

Students will be able to see the homophony of this accompaniment, with all the notes moving together, and the clear indication of the two chords used, which are the tonic and the dominant 7th of F major.

Ask them if they can see how Mozart adds rhythmic interest. The steady ‘chugging’ of the triplets keeps things moving, so that the music does not sound static, and it also makes an interesting pattern against the semiquavers in the melody.

What about the harmonic interest? Well, this is provided by the chromatic notes we saw in the melody, which deliberately ‘clash’ with the chord underneath, but quickly resolve to a more friendly note. They create **dissonance**, but only in a colourful way, not to create tension or discomfort for the listener.

Composing activity: accompanying your melody

Get students to write a similar accompaniment for the melody they composed in the last activity. They need to think about how best to balance simplicity – for example, using tonic and dominant chords – and interest, by including a little rhythmic motion and some light dissonance. They also need to keep their accompaniment texturally simple, by having the parts working and moving together.

How Mozart writes for instruments

Finally, let's take a look at Classical instrumentation. Here you can most definitely get the students to do the work. Ask them to research answers to the following questions:

- ▶ What can you find out about keyboard instruments of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven's time? How did they ‘evolve’ from the Baroque harpsichord to the 19th-century piano?
- ▶ What did an orchestra look like in Mozart's time? How many players might it have had, and what instruments would they play?
- ▶ What differences were there between what stringed instruments in Classical orchestras played, and what wind instruments played? What about brass and percussion?

You can point them in the direction of these and other websites:

- ▶ www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zw3nrwx/revision/3
- ▶ https://courses.lumenlearning.com/musicappreciation_with_theory/chapter/the-classical-orchestra/
- ▶ <https://sites.google.com/site/retromusics/evolutionoforchestra>
- ▶ <http://andrewhugill.com/OrchestraManual/orchclassical.html>

We'll finish with a listening activity to help students understand Mozart's instrumentation in the Andante from his Piano Concerto No. 21 in C.

Listening activity: Mozart's instrumentation

Listen to the Mozart Andante from the beginning to 2:20 and answer the following questions. You can use the score in the video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-twBBwKlio) to help if you wish.

- 1 Which instruments play repeating triplets at the beginning?
- 2 Which instruments are playing the bass notes?
- 3 What does *con sordino* mean, and how does it change the sound of the stringed instruments?
- 4 When the wind instruments join, at 0:29, how would you describe the music they play?
- 5 Which wind instrument joins the violins in playing the melody at 1:06?
- 6 Which other two wind instruments join with the melody at 1:14? Are they playing in unison, at octaves or in harmony with each other?
- 7 In the whole of this orchestral passage (up to 1:30), how many different notes do the horns play?
- 8 When the piano enters, which features of the orchestral passage we've just heard does it take over? What do the strings play, to accompany it? How do they change the way they are playing?
- 9 How does Mozart make the piano part more interesting from 1:55 onwards?
- 10 What does Mozart do to decorate and extend the sound of the long E in the piano at 2:11?

Answers:

- 1 Second violins and violas, which divide into two groups.
- 2 Cellos **and** double basses, which share a stave in the score. Double basses sound an octave lower.
- 3 With mutes, which soften or deaden the sound.
- 4 They hold long chords that change smoothly from bar to bar. The horns barely change note at all.
- 5 The first oboe.
- 6 The flute and first bassoon. They are playing in octaves, covering a three-octave range, which expands the sound and the texture.
- 7 Each of the horns plays just two notes, the tonic (F) and dominant (C). Classical horns were restricted to how many notes they could play, as they did not have valves like modern horns do.
- 8 The melody, in the right hand, and the triplets in the left. It also plays minim bass notes. The strings play the triadic bass part, pizzicato (plucked).
- 9 He writes part of the melody in the bass clef, underneath the triplets. The pianist has to cross hands to play it.
- 10 He adds a trill. This is a common classical feature at cadence points (ends of phrases).