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by Jonathan James

INTRODUCTION

The symphony has long represented a rite of passage for any composer trying to make their mark. Ask Brahms. He waited 40 years before daring to write his first. Even Beethoven essayed the form in various different guises before he launched what was to be one of the defining canons in the repertoire. A symphony tests the mettle of any composer, demanding stamina, imaginative orchestration and a mastery of the long form.

This is the first in a three-part resource that uses the development of the symphony as a guide for charting the evolution of large-ensemble instrumental writing in Western classical music. As such, it covers principles that are essential for answers in any wider listening component, helping to contextualise set works both historically and in terms of the musical ideas they express, with supporting playlists to use as illustration.

By looking at 'symphonic thinking' in detail, this resource takes the time to ask *why* the composers settled on different forms and structures, and *how* they did so with the resources available to them. It therefore adds ballast to any student trying to broaden their vocabulary and referential framework for the higher-scoring evaluative answers, as well as underpinning compositional principles and giving inspiration for composing briefs.

Aside from offering historical context and compositional precepts, the story of the symphony carries the sub-plot of the expansion of the orchestra and its instruments, from the goat-skin tambours of *Orfeo* to the contrabassoons of Beethoven's Fifth and ophicleides of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. And with that come the questions of instrumentation, orchestration and how to manipulate the ensemble's material in ways that will captivate the listener over longer stretches of time.

This three-part resource can be used to lay the ground or give a summary view of the evolution of musical thought and practice.

- **Part one** tells the less-recounted story of how the symphony rose from its humble beginnings as incidental music and a ragtag dance medley to being one of the most defining forms in Western classical music, tracing its slow rise in the Baroque and pre-Classical periods up to its heyday of the 1750s to 80s under Haydn and Mozart.
- **Part two** looks at the revolution of Beethoven's symphonies and how they influenced the Romantic composers.
- **Part three** brings the story up to date with an analysis of the role of the symphony in the 20th and 21st centuries.

A **Spotify playlist** accompanies each resource, allowing you to demonstrate innovations in instrumental thinking at each stage.

DEFINITIONS AND CURIOUS ORIGINS

The word 'symphony' derives from 'syn-phoné' in Greek, meaning 'together-sounding'. Some etymologists highlight its cognate 'sy-phon', Greek for 'bagpipe', an instrument that is capable of bringing together two sounds with its melody and drone. You might pall at the thought of the glorious Classical symphony taking its etymological roots in the strains and wheezes of a humble bagpipe. However, in the Middle Ages the term 'syn-phoné' was applied to instruments that could produce two lines at once, such as the double-headed drum, dulcimer or even hurdy-gurdy. More broadly, 'sym-ponic' music was in the 1500s set in opposition to its less consonant 'dia-ponic' partner, as an early recognition of the role of discord.

It was not until the late Renaissance and early Baroque that 'syn-phony' came to denote writing for a small mixed ensemble. The *Sacrae symphoniae* of Gabrieli (1597) or Schütz (1629) were thus vocal cantatas and motets with some instrumental accompaniment. With the boom in instrument-making in the early Baroque came more ornate combinations of voice and instrument in order to add more splendour to the liturgy.

The trio sonata, dance suites, and operatic sinfonia

In the Italian and French courts of the early 1600s, a common combination was two violins and basso continuo, comprising a bass and harmony instrument, such as a harpsichord or theorbo – or organ, when performed in the church. These 'trio sonatas' comprised dance-inspired movements that conformed with the fast-slow-fast structure favoured by Italian composers such as Corelli. Corelli's sonatas, published in sets of 12, served as a model for many to follow, both within Italy (eg Vivaldi and Albinoni) and beyond (eg Matheson and JS Bach).

See Spotify playlist for examples of trio sonatas by Corelli and Vivaldi.

The word 'dance' is important here. Instrumental writing in the Renaissance was normally associated with accompanying dance, whether stately court allemandes or folk jigs. Choral writing, by contrast, was devoted to the church, its purity of sound and connection to the liturgical text being best suited to that context. With the rise of trio sonatas also came the ordering of contrasting dances into a suite or 'ordre', to use the term adopted by Couperin and Rameau.

See Spotify playlist for Couperin's *Le petit rien*, from *Ordre XIV*.

Given their elaborate and intricate writing, these would be written both for listening to and, less often, for dancing to. The forces used would depend on those available in the court. Jean-Baptiste Lully had access to no fewer than 24 virtuoso violins in his orchestra, thanks to the lavish excesses of Louis XIV's reign (1643-1715). Some say the 'four-and-twenty blackbirds' from the nursery rhyme 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' allude to the black-clad violinists who were at the Sun King's every beck and call. It's a macabre image if so.

These dance suites regularly called on a combination of wind instruments (recorders, oboes and bassoons) with the usual strings and basso continuo.

A parallel development was happening within the conventions of theatre music, as opera burgeoned in the hands of Peri and Monteverdi. Within early opera, the term 'sinfonia' was used to designate instrument-only interludes, either to accompany a group dance or to smooth over a transition between scenes. One of the first operatic 'sinfonias' is to be found in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1609), a courtly dance that acts as a brief introduction to the following aria. It's in a lively three-time, with cross-rhythms tapped on the tambour, and lasts a mere 20 seconds.

See Spotify playlist for the Sinfonia from Monteverdi's *Orfeo*.

Interchangeable names

This function of introducing an important moment within the play meant that these interludes were often referred to as 'overtures', such that 'sinfonia' and 'overture' or 'overtura' were synonymous. In fact, there was a lot of interchangeability in the names for 'symphonic' works at this stage, leading through the Rococo and into the early Classical periods. A short, generally light work for instrumental ensemble usually numbering more than six players could therefore appear under several different guises, including:

- *introduzionae*
- *cassation*
- *serenade*
- *divertimento*

All of the above tended to keep to the Italian fast-slow-fast model and were mainly written to accompany courtly events, such as a banquet or receptions. Music in general in the Baroque courts played a background

role, much to the frustration of the composer – unless the patron was particularly musically sensitive. To return to an earlier example, Louis XIV, it is said, had music to accompany his every activity, from early-morning bathing to late-night lullabies.

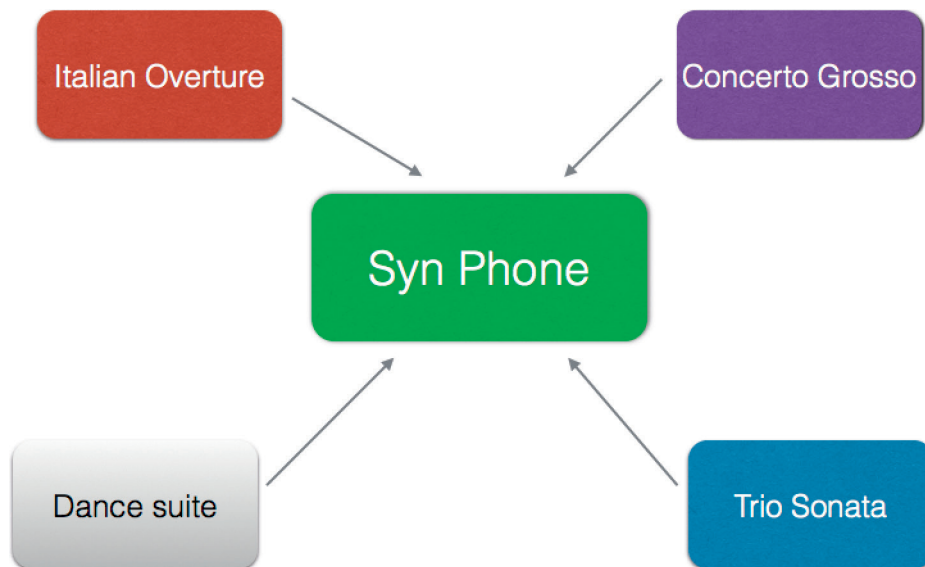
German composer Louis Spohr recounts how his patroness, the Duchess of Brunswick, would insist on laying a thick red carpet under the court musicians to deaden their sound so that they would not disturb her card-playing. When once they did get carried away, Spohr was reprimanded by the lackey in waiting, who told him:

'Her highness requests that you not *scrape away* so furiously.'

Indignant, Spohr encouraged his musicians to play even louder. Needless to say, he faced a severe reprimand by the Court Marshal.

As instrumental ensembles swelled in the Baroque period, and the level of technical aplomb increased accordingly, so the concerto grosso also began to flourish, pitting the virtuoso group of soloists against the 'ripieno' accompaniment. This allowed for more antiphonal devices and interesting textural writing, echoing in their way the call-and-response of Gabrieli's brass and voice *Canzonae* in St Mark's Basilica in Venice.

In overview, you could represent the symphony so far as a confluence of all these different influences and instrumental forms:



THE EARLY CLASSICAL SYMPHONY

An important innovator in the development of the symphony was a figure who has otherwise slipped out of view: Giovanni Sammartini (1700-75). Writing in a pre-Classical, Galant style, this Italian composer sought more drama and excitement in a way that rivalled the operatic writing of Rameau and Lully across the border in France. Listening to his first movement of his Symphony in E flat (c1760) you can easily hear the influence he must have had on later Classical composers. Haydn studied Sammartini's work, and the imprint on his own early music is clear.

See playlist for Sammartini's Symphony in E flat, J-C 26.

With students, you could highlight the following features that would become so customary in a Haydn symphony:

- periodic phrasing of the melody held in the first violins.
- vigorous repeated-note accompaniment in the underlying strings.
- elegant dialogue between oboes and strings.
- horns used to emphasise the continuo role and cadences.
- inverted pedal notes in the wind against the busy strings beneath.

- well-judged length of sequence over a cycle of 5ths (no Baroque excess here).
- drama of the brief development, with its harmonic exploration and motivic unity.
- straight recapitulation (with little variation) and codetta.

The symphonies of Sammartini and his Italian colleagues Alessandro Scarlatti and Pietro Locatelli give us a foundation to the orchestral sound and the structure of a Classical symphony. And yet it is their German counterparts who most often get the limelight.

German competition

In the enlightened court of Mannheim, the Czech-born Johann (not Carl) Stamitz was experimenting with even more outlandish devices. In two decades or so (between 1717 and 1737), he sharpened up the orchestral sound with electrifying effects that became much imitated by composers across Europe who wished to add theatricality to their sound and impress their patrons.

It's interesting that Stamitz shared the same patron, Alexandre Le Riche de la Poupelinière, as Rameau at the beginning of his career before moving to Mannheim. Revolutionary spirit was definitely in the air in Poupelinière's establishment, perhaps even an expectation of those in his employ. The Elector Palatine in Mannheim gave Stamitz a similar latitude, however, and it was in the laboratory of his court that the composer devised such effects as:

- the **'Mannheim rocket'**: surging upward arpeggios led by the strings.
- the **'Mannheim birdies'**: ornamentation of the line that delighted the listener with its imitation of birdsong.
- the **'Mannheim steamroller'**: a long crescendo over a bass pedal, often pulsing with repeated notes.

With the 'steamrollers', an added convention was that the audience would rise to their feet as the music got louder, culminating in a burst of cheering and applause. Rossini must have had that somewhere in the back of his mind as he composed his own 'steamrollers' at the end of his opera overtures, no doubt hoping for a similar ovation.

The danger with these effects was that they could, in the hands of lesser composers, become cheap formulas, used at the expense of a proper exposition and development of musical ideas. It's useful to remember that symphonies of the kind exemplified by the Mannheim court were now becoming commonplace, and not just in Western Europe. One catalogue records that at least 13,000 symphonies were in existence in the period 1720 to 1740 being performed in courts from Sicily up to Finland.

The Mannheim symphonies were referred to 'Sinfonia a 8', reflecting that they generally had two oboes and two horns alongside the four string lines (with harpsichord in alignment with the bass). A 'Sinfonia a 6' would be a composition without either the pair of oboes or horns.

Another important addition instigated by Stamitz was the regular inclusion of a minuet and trio, expanding the symphony from three movements to four, and setting a precedent for German composers in particular to follow. From the 1750s, the minuet was very much an expected element in the symphony, and often the most playful movement.

The *Grove* dictionary calculates that, of these many early symphonies, only a small percentage (7-8%, apparently) were in the minor key. That would change as composers of the 'Sentimental style' ('Empfindsamer stil') sought a broader emotional range to their work.

Enter Bach

When Mozart said 'Bach is the father of us all', he was in fact referring to Carl Philippe Emmanuel Bach (1714-88), the most preeminent of Johann Sebastian's sons. CPE Bach's string symphonies give us an insight into his extraordinary mind, and attest to how he was not afraid to take risks to achieve maximum emotional impact. Sammartini's 'galant' symphonies appear tame by comparison.

See playlist for examples of the Mannheim effects under Stamitz, in two of his symphonies in E flat.

See playlist for movements from CPE Bach's symphonies Nos 1 and 5.

Take, for example, the *presto* finale from his B minor Sinfonia No. 5 for strings and harpsichord (1773). It starts on with two violent, quadruple-stopped chords on the B dominant 7th, a jarring discord in that context. The quaver movement scarcely lets up, with the entire section bounding hell-for-leather over broken chords. There are sudden dynamic shifts and a level of discord that matches Domenico Scarlatti or, going back further, Gesualdo, in their darker moments. This would have been a thrilling listening experience for its first audience, and remains fresh even for today's ears.

As well as daring discord, CPE Bach pushed boundaries of rhythm and metre as well. The opening to his First Symphony is extraordinary in this respect. Without recourse to the score, you would be stumbling to find the downbeat for the first eight bars, such are the offbeats and confusing entries that negate the barline. This Symphony, written for strings and an extended wind section comprising flutes, oboes and horns, bursts with vitality. The opening is equally striking for how bare it is. The first violins lead with single off-beat Ds and are surrounded by space, as the others wait in eager anticipation for the tutti outburst just around the corner. This is writing that defies expectations on all fronts, texturally, rhythmically and harmonically. It's easy to see why it sparked the imagination for Mozart and others who studied it.

What's also interesting about Bach's approach is that he involves everybody in the argument, giving them an independence normally reserved for fugues. In the two movements above, every line is athletic and alive, and integral to the texture. This relative complexity compared to the more homophonic Italian examples and the fierce rhetoric set a benchmark for the next major figure in the symphony's history, Joseph Haydn.

THE MATURE CLASSICAL SYMPHONY

It's at this point, in the 1760s, that most textbooks pick up the story of the symphony, citing Haydn as the 'father' of the genre. 'Papa Haydn' was so called as much for his avuncular and protective nature to the court musicians he looked after as for his propagation of both the symphony and the string quartet. And while he was by no means the inventor of the symphonic form, as we have seen, he did much to consolidate the thinking behind it and set up new principles for others to follow – or reject, as they saw fit.

See playlist for Haydn's Symphony No. 6, 'Le Matin'.

Initially, Haydn leaned more to the Galant aesthetic than the Sentimental style. His very first symphonies are more like Italian concerti grossi, with three movements, fast-slow-fast. Early on, he and his publisher realised the potential of giving the work a nickname, both endearing it to its commissioning patron and making it more memorable to the public at large. Symphonies Nos 6 to 8 are therefore known as 'Morning', 'Noon' and 'Evening', inspired by those different times of the day. By these symphonies, Haydn had adopted the Mannheim model of four movements, allowing for a short minuet and trio as an interlude.

Most of Haydn's early symphonies were played by a mere 12 to 14 musicians, despite the splendour and resources of the palace.

The finale to 'Le Matin', Symphony No. 6, represents the Italian influence well, with its bravura, soloistic writing and cascading scales. There are also playful pauses for thought, reflecting the wit for which Haydn was to become famous. In the Esterháza Palace, where he spent 30 years of his career, he experienced the double-edged sword of both the freedom to experiment and a crushingly busy schedule, with operas, symphonies and chamber music needing to be written, rehearsed and performed on a daily basis. Add these musical duties to his pastoral and clerical responsibilities as Kappellmeister, and it makes for a formidable job specification that could easily be shared between two or three people.

HAYDN'S 'RUSTIC' STYLE

Haydn was able to blend the sophistication of court music with a more rustic quality that reflected his love of the outdoors (even though the palace was almost entirely surrounded by inhospitable marshland). The rustic touches present themselves in:

- having, on occasion, a *Ländler* (an Austrian 'dance of the land' in three-time) to replace the more staid minuet and trio.
- quoting folk tunes in his finales.
- including an imitation of a bagpipe's drone and whistling tune above, most often in his trios.
- his general lust for life and love of 'splendid nonsense' (his words) that ran counter to the etiquette of the court.

Listen on the playlist to the third movement of the 'Surprise' Symphony, No. 94, for a good example of a hearty *Ländler*.

Haydn's darker side: the 'Sturm und Drang' symphonies

The 'Storm and Stress' period came in the 1760s and 70s, inspired by Romantically charged, confessional works of literature where the writer appeared to bare all. It was an exciting trend that swept through Germany and beyond, inciting the artist to deal with naked emotions and the darker sides to existence. Six of Haydn's symphonies from this time venture into minor keys, and are given names such as:

- *Lamentation*
- *Grief*
- *Passion*
- *Fire*

'LA PASSIONE', SYMPHONY NO. 49 IN F MINOR

This Symphony was most likely performed on Good Friday, and was one of Haydn's most sought-after and frequently performed works in his own lifetime, with several reprints being commissioned in different countries.

After an uncharacteristically sombre and slow first movement in the exotic key of F minor, the second movement lifts off in a way that channels the Mannheim theatricality and the verve of CPE Bach. After a brief minuet and trio, the final *presto* is incredibly charged, using repeated-note quavers that at this speed sound like a precise tremolo.

Everything relies on extreme contrast, whether sudden surges in dynamics, plunges from major into minor, or stepwise movement followed by leaps of over an octave. It's a great Symphony to challenge the stereotype that Haydn wrote just uplifting music and was always of good cheer.

See playlist for the finale of 'La Passione'.

Haydn's mastery: the 'London' symphonies

In 1795, Haydn could have rested on his laurels, having been released from court employ with a healthy pension and the respect and admiration of musicians across Europe. However, he was lured out of impending retirement by the promoter Johann Salomon, who introduced him to an adoring public in London, where he wrote 12 of his finest symphonies, eventually called the 'London' symphonies.

The skill of the London orchestras, as well as their larger size and superior sightreading skills (still in evidence today, incidentally) brought out the showman in Haydn. Many of them, such as the 'Surprise', the 'Military', the 'Clock' or the 'Drumroll', contained theatrical effects to keep both musicians and listeners on the edge of their seats, including alluding to 'God Save the King' (in No. 98) or imitating a lavish Turkish marching band (in No. 100) or indeed a charming tick-tock of an ornate clock (in No. 101 – see *Music Teacher* November 2017 for a full resource on this Symphony).

The pressure must have been immense to deliver a new spectacle with each symphony. With the 'Surprise' Symphony, Haydn delighted the London audience with the famous full-orchestra chord at the end of the phrase in the slow movement, jolting the listener bolt upright after having lulled them into a sense of calm. After that,

they clamoured for more sensations in a similar vein. Haydn managed to entertain them while never losing the integrity of a symphonist who had honed his craft over 40 years and was still searching for something new to say.

EXTENDING HAYDN'S LEGACY: MOZART AND BEETHOVEN

By the time Haydn had hit his stride in the 1750s, the symphony had taken on a definitive form that would remain more or less intact for a century. Each movement had a distinct character and role to play in the overall narrative, illustrating what by now had become 'symphonic thinking':

1. First movement: **a musical debate and argument.** Slow introduction (sometimes) and *allegro* in sonata form, most often with two subjects but sometimes monothematic.
2. Second movement: **a heart-felt song or serenade,** derived from the operatic aria. Normally ternary, with different levels of development, or a theme and variations.
3. Third movement: **a social dance.** The minuet and trio.
4. Fourth movement: **a celebration.** Derived from Italian *opera buffa*, a spirited *allegro* or *presto*, most often cast as a rondo, a sonata-rondo, or less often as a theme and variations.

Mozart inherited this form not only from Haydn but also from Haydn's brother Michael and another of the Bach sons, Johann Christian. As with Sammartini, these composers have been relegated to secondary status in most historical accounts, although their influence was considerable in their day.

All the principles of drama and dialogue inherent in the symphonic thinking at this time were taken to a new level by Mozart. He brings the lightness of touch he created in his divertimentos and serenades, and adds the urgency and emotional range he exploited to such great effect in his operas.

An interesting comparison can be made between the final movements of Haydn's 'La Passione', explored earlier, and Mozart's first work of symphonic maturity, the 'little' G minor Symphony, No. 25. Where Haydn operates within the bounds of one 'affect', following late Baroque doctrine, Mozart's finale flits between multiple emotional states.

It's more mercurial and dramatically surprising, in its way. Both use an urgent repeated-note accompaniment, clipped short phrases and the wind section to give ballast to the busy strings, but two very different personalities emerge.

We talk of 'maturity' in the 'little G minor' Symphony, even though Mozart was only 17 at the time he wrote it (in 1773). As a reminder of his precocity, Mozart had already embarked on his symphonic journey when he was only eight years old.

Mozart's use of the orchestra

Throughout his career, Mozart excelled at orchestration, understanding instinctively how to make the most of the instruments at his disposal. By the 1770s, the wunderkind was happily writing for orchestras containing a full complement of wind instruments (including flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets) and confidently manipulating the textures in daring new ways. Clarinets would also make occasional appearances when the venue allowed, such as in the lavish 'concerts spirituels' in Paris (1773).

One signature use of the wind section is having a lone wind instrument, usually the oboe, hold a pedal note over the activity beneath. The held note takes on different colours as the harmonies shift, and its stasis perfectly counterbalances the busyness elsewhere. The first movement of the A major Symphony No. 29 has many such moments.

Whereas the strings have been used as the main protagonists, Mozart uses his skill for writing wind serenades in the 'Prague' Symphony, No. 35, perhaps in homage to the famed Bohemian wind players for whom he was

Mozart once wrote in a letter that he wished he could have 12 double basses in his string section!

See playlist for excerpts from Mozart's symphonies Nos 25 and 29.

writing. This more equal division of labour characterised his symphonic writing at this time, enriching the dialogue and interplay between all forces at his disposal. The 'Haffner' (No. 35) and 'Linz' (No. 36) symphonies also demonstrate this ability to juggle different lines with an ease that belies their complexity, the latter being written in only four days.

Furthermore, Mozart was not afraid to use the percussion section in full force, freeing the timpani from merely augmenting the trumpets in punctuating the cadences. The finale to his 'Haffner' Symphony is a celebrated example, with the timpani acting as gun-shots that stir the frenzy around them.

Mozart's final three symphonies

As with Haydn, Mozart saved his best until last. The final three symphonies, Nos 39 to 41, were written in a blaze of inspiration in the summer of 1788. This, in a prolific year that produced a total of 158 other works, reflected a combination of a robust work ethic, poor cashflow and prodigious talent.

Frustratingly, there is little correspondence explaining why these masterpieces were written. Mozart normally wrote only on commission, or with a specific concert prospect in mind. To do otherwise would be financial suicide, particularly at a time when he was already debt-ridden and hawking for loans. It is possible that he was seeking to emulate the success of Haydn and JC Bach in publishing a set of symphonies that could be taken to England for a more rapturous – and lucrative – reception.

The three symphonies have fundamentally different characters. No. 39 is warm and charming, the most 'galant', while No. 40 dark and urgent, and No. 41 (nicknamed the 'Jupiter') the grandest, surpassing all orchestral writing of before in its craft and fecundity of idea. No. 40 is the most forward-looking, while No. 41 embraces the past with its use of Gregorian chant and fugue.

No. 39 is the only one to omit oboes from the wind line-up, giving prominence instead to the clarinets, who charmingly lead the Ländler in the trio of the third movement. Compare to the earlier Haydn Ländler from his 'Surprise' Symphony.

See playlist for the finales from Mozart's symphonies Nos 39 to 41.

In all three, greater weight is put on the finale, matching the intensity and level of argument in the first movement. There is more thematic exploration in the finales than ever before. The 'Jupiter' is the *pièce de résistance* in this respect, with its final melding of sonata form and fugue, such that for 30 seconds of pure genius in the coda, fragments from five themes are juggled simultaneously in an astonishing fugato passage. Although this is held up as the shining specimen from the movement, the whole thinking of that finale until that point has been fugal. Such is its ingenuity that repeated listening only deepens the experience. As Schumann later remarked:

'Does it not seem as if Mozart's works become fresher and fresher the more often we hear them?'

'Fresh' is a good word to use here. At no point does Mozart's deft fugal writing seem academic or dry, or written in a way that is attention-seeking. Rather, it seems to be the logical summation of all that has come before, a natural flowing together of previous ideas, with all the themes re-clothed and re-imagined in a new light.

Mozart continued the legacy of Haydn in writing music that, through its sense of purpose, well-wrought form and style, has a wonderful inevitability to it, an internal logic that settles and re-orders the mind. This is a feature of the mature Classical style, with its balanced, periodic phrasing and clear architecture. You can press pause on a recording and have a good inkling of what might follow.

'Inevitability' is a better word than 'predictability' here, which suggests stale routine and formula. Both Haydn and Mozart also revelled in the art of surprise and of defying expectation. Their late works are distinguished by the number of times the rug is slipped from beneath the feet and the music takes on dramatic new twists and turns. And this ability to hold inevitability and surprise in creative tension marks them out as masters of their craft.

CONCLUSION AND LOOK AHEAD

From the dancing sinfonia in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to Mozart's 'Jupiter', the symphony has grown from 30 seconds to 30 minutes. It has not followed a neat chronological path – artistic movements rarely do. Rather than a timeline, it's better to imagine a mobile Venn diagram where different influences, styles and forms slowly merge, their intersection growing until, under Haydn, the symphony takes definitive shape.

By the time Mozart had set a new benchmark in symphonic writing in 1788, a teenage composer in Bonn had just turned adult and was attracting the attention of Haydn with his gifts for improvisation. The young Beethoven at that stage had just set his sights on Vienna and was determined to make his name in the Austrian capital. He had yet to write his first symphony, but when he did, he launched a canon of work that was to redefine the form and set the whole course of Western classical music on a new path. This is where the next resource will pick up, following the symphony's evolution under Beethoven and on into exotic new shapes under Berlioz and Mahler.