

The Classical Era

(1750 - 1820)

Instrumental Music

During the Classical Era, many changes in instrumental style took place. The classical [sonata](#) evolved a great deal during the period. Sonata form was the basic structure in which composers wrote instrumental music. Sonata form was applied to solo sonatas, chamber music, symphonies, and concertos. Musical compositions of this time contained three or four movements, each with its own special characteristics.

The first movement of a Sonata was called the sonata-allegro. It consisted of three sections:

1) Exposition:

This section presented the main theme of the movement in the [tonic key](#) . The theme then transitioned by a bridge and modulated to the dominant key, or relative major key if the movement was in a minor key. The second theme was presented in the dominant key. This section concluded with a closing theme or [codetto](#) .

2) Development:

This section used the material from the exposition which the composer "developed" and expanded. Motives were presented in various keys, registers, and groupings of instruments. In this section the composer also used new themes that were not found in the exposition section. The composer ended this section in the [tonic key](#) and moved directly into the recapitulation.

3) Recapitulation:

The recapitulation was a restatement of the exposition but with all subsections remaining in the tonic key.

In the second movement of a sonata, there were three specifications that usually occurred. It was written in a slow tempo, in a contrasting key (usually the subdominant or dominant), in relation to the whole work. Additionally, this movement was more lyrical than the other movement.

The third movement in the classical sonata was called the [menuetto](#) or minuet. Like the other movements, this one also had special characteristics. It was written in a moderately fast tempo, played in the tonic key, and was written in three-four. The minuet had three sections: minuet, trio, and a repeat of the minuet. In a sonata with three movements, the minuet was left out or omitted. In some of Haydn and in most of Beethoven's works in sonata form, the third movement was called a scherzo. It utilized the same aspects of the minuet, but was more humorous in nature. Sometimes the two middle movements were reversed, so that the minuet came second and the slow movement third. In a three movement composition, the minuet or scherzo was omitted.

The fourth movement, or finale, also had distinct characteristics. It had a lively tempo, was played in the tonic key, and was usually played in sonata-allegro form.

THE SYMPHONY

Another important form of instrumental music was the symphony, which blossomed during the 18th century. The basic form of the classical symphony was the Italian overture, called *sinfonia*. It was an orchestral composition arranged in three movements (fast-slow-fast).

Instrumentation commonly found by the end of the 1700's included:

1. Four woodwind instruments in pairs (flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons)
2. Trumpets, horns, and timpani in pairs
3. String choir with first and second violins, violas, cellos, and string basses

Orchestration utilized the following:

1. The strings remained the most important sound in the orchestra.
2. Themes were played by first violins.
3. Harmonies were usually played by second violins and violas.
4. Cellos and basses were doubled, however, the basses sounded an octave lower.
5. Brass instruments, without valves, were only used in tutti passages and played harmonies, instead of main thematic material.

CONCERTO

The Classical solo concerto was similar to that of the Baroque but differed in the style and structure of movements. The Classical Concerto followed the fast-slow-fast formula, but omitted the minuet movement, thereby containing only three movements.

First Movement

The first movement was written in sonata-allegro form, but had two separate expositions. The first exposition introduced principal themes by the orchestra in the tonic key. The second exposition had a solo instrument convey the theme in a more brilliant and showy style.

In the next stage the composer developed and expanded these musical ideas. At the conclusion of the development section, recapitulation began. At this point, the composer restated the main themes of the movement. Near the end of recapitulation a *cadenza* is played. This cadenza was freely improvised in a virtuosic manner. During the 1800s, cadenzas were usually written out beforehand by composer or performer.

Second Movement

The second movement was written in a contrasting key. It utilized a slow tempo and was stylistically more lyric than the first. This movement is the least virtuosic movement of all three.

Third Movement

The third movement was written in *rondo* form. It had a lively tempo, and was stylistically lighter than the other movements. Sometimes a cadenza was added.

CHAMBER MUSIC

Chamber music was its own distinct musical entity, very different from the orchestral medium. It was composed for a very small ensemble with only a few members and with only one instrument to a part. It was at its height in music literature during the Classical era.

Divertimento

Divertimento was composed for various media, such as small chamber ensembles and small orchestras. It had three to ten movements, which included minuets, dances, standard sonata-form movements, and marches. This music was meant for outdoor and informal performances. It was less sophisticated than symphonies. Haydn wrote over 60 divertimentos, and Mozart wrote more than 25.

String Quartet

String quartets were the most popular chamber medium of the Classical era. They were made up of one cello, two violins, and a viola. They were written in 4 movements, using the Classical sonata form.

Other Chamber Music

Music was also written for mixed quartets, which used three string instruments and one additional instrument (usually oboe, clarinet, piano or flute). There was also music written for string *trios*, mixed trios, string *quintets*, and mixed quintets.

Keyboard Music

Solo Sonatas for piano or harpsichord were important during the Classical era. Well known composers of this style were Karl Philipp Emanuel Bach, J.C. Bach, and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Additionally, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven also wrote piano sonatas.