

Western Music History

Music Style Periods & Composers

Musicians generally refer to four or five distinct periods in the history of western art music:

- < 1600 – Early
- 1600-1700 – Baroque
- 1700-1800 – Classical
- 1800-1900 – Romantic
- > 1900 – Modern

Early Music (Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance)

<400 – Ancient

The Hurrian Hymn is over 3400 years old and is the oldest surviving melody. It was scribed onto a clay tablet using Cuneiform letters. Click the link to hear this fascinating song: <https://youtu.be/Tx6v0t5I5SM>. Read more about it here: <https://www.classicfm.com/music-news/videos/oldest-song-melody/>.

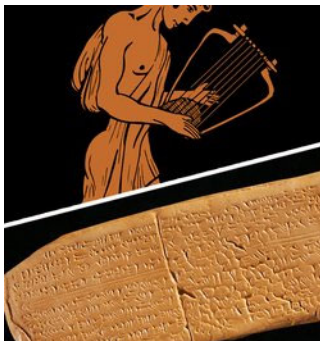
400-1400 – Medieval

Writing music down in notation started to be done earnestly.

Music for the church influenced this period. Here is an example of "Gregorian Chant," music written for the Roman Catholic Church: <https://youtu.be/kK5AohCMX0U>.

1400-1600 – Renaissance

An era of discovery, innovation, and exploration, "Renaissance" means rebirth. Composers during the Renaissance intended their music to be sung with ease either in church as large choral pieces or in town as madrigals by traveling minstrels. Instruments became more expressive and agile like the lute and sackbut (an early trombone). The printing press made a significant contribution during this time too. In Rome, Allegri and Palestrina were great Renaissance composers, writing huge, flowing choral works that still enthrall listeners today. Tielman Susato's "The Danserye" is a famous collection of popular instrumental dances from the Renaissance time.



The Baroque Period, 1600-1700

Dances were popular during the Baroque era. Preludes, variations on a theme, and counter-point characterize this period. (Counter-point is two melodies being performed at the same time.) Baroque musicians played the clavichord, a soft-sounding, lightly tapped, early keyboard instrument. Baroque audiences enjoyed the harpsichord, a forerunner to the piano, with its bright-sounding, plucked strings. The pipe organ was also used extensively. In Baroque music, fast passages were often played legato (flowing), while slower movements were often played staccato (short and separated). Baroque musicians freely improvised when performing and only used the printed music as a guide. They viewed the written score as a kind of roadmap and frequently added their own improvements to it. Famous Baroque composers include Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, Johann Pachelbel, and Antonio Vivaldi.

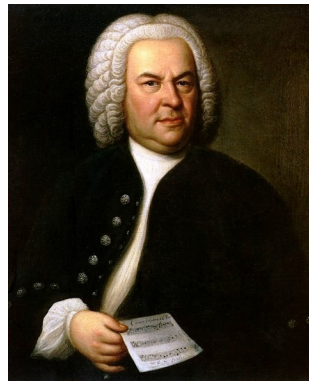
Handel composed “Water Music” for the king’s boat rides up and down the Thames River. Handel also wrote wonderful pieces for combined orchestra and choir known as oratorios and cantatas. The most well known is Handel’s “Messiah,” featuring the “Hallelujah” chorus.

J.S. Bach wrote music for orchestras and choirs. The "Brandenburg Concertos" and the "Well-Tempered Clavier" stand out among his many works.

Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” and Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” are today’s most popular wedding songs.



G.F. Handel



J.S. Bach



Vivaldi



Pachelbel

The Classical Period, 1700-1800

Minuets, trios, and concertos were very popular in the classic period. Concertos featured a soloist accompanied by a full orchestra. Classical music often involved one-line melodies played on top of slow-moving chord progressions and arpeggios. (Arpeggios are notes of a chord played one after the other going up and back down.) Classical musicians performed with precise articulations and wide dynamic contrasts. Classical era composers wrote some of the most recognizable melodies and memorable tunes in all of music history. The most famous classical period composers include Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig Von Beethoven.

Orchestras made big changes during this period by adding flutes, clarinets, oboes, trumpets, and horns to the violins, violas, cellos, and basses of the string section. This created a whole new sound called the symphony orchestra. Musical pieces called symphonies had a standard, three-part construction consisting of a quick opening, a slow middle movement, and a fast finish.

Instrument makers also introduced the pianoforte which led to the creation of popular solo pieces for piano called piano sonatas.



Mozart



Beethoven



Haydn



The Romantic Period, 1800-1900

Including the Impressionism Period, 1890-1910

Music of the romantic era sounds powerful with massive expression, tremendous energy, and intense passion. Chords are full, thick, and complex with the seventh-type chords routinely employed. Romantic musicians experimented with chromatic harmony, distant key changes, sung cantabile lines, and off-beat syncopation. Using music, composers described profound truths, deep emotions, and the human condition. They frequently drew inspiration from paintings, sculptures, fables, natural scenes, and legendary stories. Beethoven ended the classical period and started the romantic era. Famous romantic period composers include Felix Mendelssohn, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, Stephen Foster, Johannes Brahms, Antonín Dvorak, Edvard Grieg, Edward Elgar, Claude Debussy, Scott Joplin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Modest Mussorgsky, Maurice Ravel, and Camille Saint-Saëns.

Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner composed innovative and imaginative operas that greatly influenced the music of the romantic period. Verdi composed operas with a straightforward, direct approach. Verdi introduced new ideas to opera that had social, political, and nationalistic themes. Wagner wrote incredible, continuous sweeps of music for his operas. Wagner's "The Ring" takes 17 hours to perform! He also gave his characters their own signature melodies and individual songs called "leitmotifs." For example, here is a Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd version of Wagner's "The Valkyrie" performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra: <https://youtu.be/Z2biTTzO-g>. Can you hear the unique tunes representing each character?

New ideas about constructing musical instruments arose during the romantic period. Brasswinds like trumpets and horns began being made with valves. In Belgium, Adolphe Sax invented the saxophone. In Philadelphia, J.W. Pepper invented the sousaphone.

During the Romantic period, Tchaikovsky, much troubled, composed the "Swan Lake" and "Nutcracker" ballets. Johann Strauss became the waltz king, and John Phillip Sousa became the march king conducting "The President's Own" Marine Corp Band.



JP Sousa



The Modern Period, 1900-2000 (*Also known as the Contemporary Period.*)
Is >2000 the “Post-Modern” Period?

Music changed dramatically in the 20th century due to incredible advances in technology. Electronic recording, playback, radio, television, and motion pictures brought music to people everywhere. After 1900, new styles of music popped up every decade:

Music from the ‘20s to ‘50s is also called “The Great American Songbook”	1900	Blues, Ragtime
	1910	Jazz
	1920	Country, Broadway
	1930	Big Band, Swing, Gospel
	1940	Rhythm and Blues, Bluegrass, Bebop, Duwop
	1950	Rock ‘n Roll, TV jingles, movie soundtracks
	1960	Contemporary Folk, Beach-Surf
	1970	Funk, Soul, Disco,
	1980	New Wave, Techno, Rap
	1990	Hip Hop, Dance
	2000	Video game music

Famous composers in the early modern era include Bela Bartok, Jean Sibelius, Ralph Vaughn Williams, Gustav Holst, Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, Charles Ives, Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin.

Notable composers in the later modern period include Leonard Bernstein, Leroy Anderson, Aaron Copland, Ennio Morricone, Hans Zimmer, Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, Morten Lauridsen, Andrew Lloyd Webber, John Williams, and Eric Whitacre.

Contemporary composers experiment with random sequences, dissonance, pentatonic scales, and various scale modes. Modern-day music-makers create with digital synthesizers, computers, and smart devices.

Compared to the musicians of the Baroque period, today’s musicians aim to perform a composer’s written music in a much more precise and accurate manner. We strive to play the sheet music exactly as written or as close to the author’s intent as possible. Baroque musicians interpreted an author’s work with more liberties, embellishments, and improvisations – almost like a jazz musician!



George Gershwin



Leonard Bernstein



Leroy Anderson



Aaron Copland

For more information, please visit Classic FM's web pages! To learn more about historical periods in music, see: <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/periods-genres/> . To find out more about famous composers, go to: <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/> .

What's your favorite music to sing or play? What kind of music do you like to listen to? Who is your favorite composer?