A Highly Subjective, Highly Abbreviated History of (Western) Classical Music

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Music is an evolving art

Our species has made music for tens of thousands of years.

Music may have given *Homo sapiens* an evolutionary advantage: easily remembered songs preserve and transmit accumulating cultural knowledge long before written languages arose. [1]

40,000 year old bone flute, found in southern Germany in 2008. [1]
Nothing but written fragments...

...remain for music that predates early Christian liturgical music. [2]

This 2\textsuperscript{nd} century papyrus fragment includes musical notation.

Second century AD papyrus thought to be a fragment from a collection of songs which included musical notation. [3]
A chronology

The development of classical music is often discussed in terms of six different periods. The use of polyphony and large-scale structure became increasingly complex; musical instruments evolved too.

- Medieval (5th century AD – c. 1400)
- Renaissance (c. 1400 – 1600)
- Baroque (c. 1600 – 1750)
- Classical (c. 1750 – 1820)
- Romantic (c. 1820 – 1900)
- Modern (c. 1900 – present) [9]

Sometimes (not always) the boundaries between periods are indistinct.
The Church supported the musical arts

Gregorian chant is a monophonic (single melody, no harmony) liturgical form that probably dates from the eighth century. [5]

Musical notation (different from modern notation) allowed the Church to disseminate Gregorian chants throughout medieval Christendom.

Anon: *Puer Natus Est Nobis*, Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo De Silos, Castile, Spain

16th century Gregorian chant manuscript. [4]
There could be conflicts

Early (~10th century) Church policy held that musical instruments were inappropriate for use during worship services. [6]

Even so, pipe organs came to be used in liturgical music. Elfeg, Bishop of Winchester, “procured an organ for his Cathedral had built in his cathedral in 951... having twenty-six pairs of bellows, requiring seventy men to fill it with wind.” [8]

It is possible that the development of the pipe organ led to the invention of polyphonic music: on the organ it was possible to play chords, combinations of notes. [2]
Early polyphony used “two melodic lines simultaneously at parallel intervals, usually at the fourth, fifth, or octave.

The resulting hollow-sounding music was called organum and very slowly developed over the next hundred years.

By the eleventh century, one, two (and much later, even three) added melodic lines were no longer moving in parallel motion, but contrary to each other, sometimes even crossing. ” [9]

We are more accustomed to the sound of triads.
Evolution of the instruments

Baroque keyboard musicians played Harpsichords. The keys cause the instrument’s strings to be plucked by a plectrum; only limited volume control is possible. The piano was invented later.

Probably a copy of a Dulcken 1747 [10]
Viola da gamba

Note the frets on this bass viol da gamba, and the presence of six strings instead of four.

“Gamba” is like “jambe” (thigh) in French.

Probably a reproduction of a 17th century instrument [11]
Sacbut and Serpent

Sacbut: Renaissance version of the trombone, first appeared c. 1500. [12]

Serpent: Renaissance bass cornet, c. 1590. [13]
It’s progress, not just change

The newer instruments were more nimble and gave musicians greater control, richer tone, and increased range.

Modern Steinway concert grand piano [16]

“Davydov” Stradivarius cello (1712) owned by Jacqueline DuPres, photo c. 19 [17]
Evolution of the orchestration

Baroque orchestral pieces were conducted from the keyboard, with the conductor playing a harpsichord. These were not concerti, in which a solo instrument plays “against” the rest of the orchestra.

As new orchestration techniques developed, the use of a harpsichord as an anchor for the music subsided.

Mid 18th century: “Much of our modern performance practice can be traced to the orchestra at the court of the Elector Palatine, Prince Karl Theodor, at Mannheim.” [2, 15]

- the orchestra was large, compared to other orchestras of the time
- its musicians were better trained, and played with greater precision
- a variety of new features—loud-soft dynamics, for example—were part of the orchestra’s style of play.

Mannheim is in central Germany, about 300 miles east of Paris.
Hearing the music, back then

Remember: there was no widely-deployed technology available to record/replay music until late in the 19th century. [14]

People heard music in Church, saw it performed in live concerts, and (if they could afford to), played it themselves.

Royal families could patronize the arts by supporting composers; churches could hire composers to write religious music to be included in services.
The Baroque period (c. 1600 – 1750)

Some of the composers:

- Claudio Monteverdi, 1567 – 1643. Lived in Venice, Italy; his 1607 opera *L’Orfeo* is “widely acknowledged as the first great work in the history of the genre.” [18]

- Antonio Vivaldi, 1678 – 1741. His most famous composition is probably *The Four Seasons*, comprising four of the twelve Opus 8 concerti.

- Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685 – 1750. He didn’t do opera, but was the champion of everything else during the Baroque era. Bach was enormously prolific.


Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto no. 3*, BWV 1048 (1721) [19]
The Classical period (c. 1750 – 1820)

New forms of composition, including: the symphony and string quartet. The works are more layered, more complex. Some of the composers:

• Franz Joseph Haydn, 1732 – 1809. Vienna; he is “rightly regarded as the father of both the symphony and the string quartet.” [18]

• Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756 – 1791. “Music’s supremely gifted creator, whose achievements mark a zenith of Western culture.” [18] Also, “the only composer in history to have written undisputed masterworks in virtually every musical genre of his age.” [23]

• Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770 – 1827. “The most important and influential musician in history.” [18] His revolutionary works forced the transition from the Classical to the Romantic period; he composed works in the style of both periods.

Mozart’s Symphony no. 40, K. 550 (1788) [26]
The Romantic period (c. 1820 – 1900)

Dramatic changes to the form of the symphony and the string quartet. A few of the composers (in addition to Beethoven):

• Johannes Brahms, 1833 – 1897. I think: Brahms makes immediate, powerful emotional statements in the opening notes of his orchestral and chamber works.

• Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin, 1810 – 1849. “Polish-born pianist and composer of matchless genius in the realm of keyboard music.” [18] I think: the Nocturnes are heartbreakingly beautiful.

• Felix Mendelssohn, 1809 – 1847. Boy genius: her wrote his Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream at the age of 17.
Twentieth century

The twentieth century was a time of global war, genocide, and environmental destruction. It was also the century in which political freedom and human rights became the norm in most of Europe. The music of that/this century is complex, sometimes dissonant, unsettled, forceful.

There is an impressive range of styles; I do not know if they all have names.

- Impressionism: Claude Debussy, 1862 – 1918; Maurice Ravel, 1875 – 1937.
- Sergey Prokofiev, 1891 – 1953; Dmitri Shostakovich, 1906 – 1975, both Russian.
The conflict between Art and Power

Paul Hindemith, 1895 – 1963. “German composer, performer, teacher, and theorist, influential though largely unloved, one of the most important musicians of the 20th century... When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they branded Hindemith’s music ‘culturally Bolshevist.’” After the premier of *Mathis der Mahler*, Joseph Goebbels called Hindemith “an atonal noisemaker.” [18]

Mathis der Mahler, first movement (1934)

Dmitri Shostakovich. “Russian composer. His 15 symphonies are the most important addition to the symphonic repertoire by any composer born in the 20th century... Among his greatest works are 15 string quartets, which like the symphonies reflect a career-long balance between musical form and emotional content.” After Josef Stalin heard Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* District, he “ordered the publication of a review in *Pravda* excoriating the music and its creator.” Shostakovich called his 5th Symphony “a Soviet artist’s reply to just criticism” and was “instantly rehabilitated.” [18]

5th Symphony, first movement (1937)
The String Quartet

Haydn is credited with developing – some musicologists say “inventing” – the string quartet. And it was just a lucky fluke!

Haydn's early biographer, Georg August Griesinger, tells the story thus:

The following purely chance circumstance had led him to try his luck at the composition of quartets. A Baron Fürnberg had a place in Weinzierl, several stages from Vienna, and he invited from time to time his pastor, his manager, Haydn, and Albrechtsberger, in order to have a little music. Fürnberg requested Haydn to compose something that could be performed by these four amateurs. Haydn, then eighteen years old, took up this proposal, and so originated his first quartet which, immediately it appeared, received such general approval that Haydn took courage to work further in this form. [32]

Modern string quartets continue to be written with this instrumentation in mind: two violins, one viola, one cello.

The structure and organization of a quartet has evolved considerably since Haydn’s time.
A few of the more notable composers of string quartets

Classical period: Haydn, of course. Mozart too, also Beethoven’s six early quartets: op. 18, 1–6.

Mozart: *Quartet # 14*, K. 387, 1st movement (1782)

Romantic period: Beethoven’s middle and late quartets; Brahms; Mendelssohn; Schubert

Beethoven: *Quartet # 8*, op. 59 #2, 1st movement (1806)

Brahms: *Quartet # 1*, op. 51 #1, 3rd movement (1873)

Twentieth century: Bartók, Shostakovich, Elliott Carter (born 1908)

Bartók: *Quartet # 2*, op. 17, 1st movement (1917)

Carter: *Quartet # 1*, 1st movement (1951)
Dmitri Shostakovich (1)

From the program for the February 22, 2011 concert. Notes written by Robert Strong. [33]

Born September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia
Died August 9, 1975, in Moscow, Soviet Union

Dmitri Shostakovich was born to a middle-class family with a history of anti-tsarist political activism. His musical gifts became apparent when he began piano lessons at age 9, and at age 13 he was admitted to the Petrograd (later Leningrad) Conservatory. A brilliant student, he had an amazing musical memory and excellent technical skills as a pianist. His First Symphony, premiered in 1926, won him immediate international recognition and a well-paying commission from the government’s Department of Agitation and Propaganda to compose a major work in honor of the Russian Revolution’s 10th anniversary.

Shostakovich was never politically active but was able to thrive in the 1920s because Lenin’s Commissariat of Enlightenment permitted experimentation in the arts as a means of wiping out the old aesthetic norms. Stalin’s rise to power in 1929 changed everything, bringing the arts directly under his control in the service of the Soviet state. Commissions and privileges were offered to those whose work conformed to the Communist party line, while the wayward suffered poverty, imprisonment, or death.
Two terrifying official denunciations shaped Shostakovich’s response to the demands of the state. The first was the 1936 editorial in Pravda criticizing his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at the start of Stalin’s brutal Great Terror. Shostakovich was again condemned as a decadent “formalist” in 1948 during Stalin’s postwar search for “enemies of the people” in the arts community. In each case, he was officially reinstated only after a public confession of error. From the mid-1950s until his death, he was honored as the leading Soviet composer and was put forward as a figurehead of the government’s music establishment in a succession of political posts, conferences, and government-prepared speeches.

Dmitri Shostakovich was a man of contradictions. In public he appeared fragile, nervous, and withdrawn, eyes darting behind thick glasses, but with close friends he could be charming and high-spirited. He loved sarcasm and parody, but his manners were unfailingly polite and considerate. Contemporaries describe a hard core of personal strength that he brought to his music.
Perhaps the most significant contradiction was the double life Shostakovich led as an “official” composer producing propaganda for the Soviet state and a private composer pouring his personal feelings into his work. The government’s coercive mix of threats and honors kept him outwardly compliant and created an environment in which he struggled to assert his artistic integrity in large-scale works. His chamber music attracted less official scrutiny, and he turned to string quartets increasingly over his career.

Shostakovich’s quartets often use traditional sonata form, but he breaks down the formal structure in a variety of ways to create a sense of unresolved suspension. This stylistic pattern, in addition to his practice of withholding harmonic resolution, creates what music historian Judith Kuhn has called “a rhetoric of disintegration.” Recurring musical elements—sinister waltzes, funeral marches, fragile harmonies, sudden changes of mood—and the composer’s use of a four-note musical signature and self-quotation reinforce the highly personal creative expression to be found in all the quartets.
## The Concert

|  | Scherzo: Allegretto—  
|  | Recitative: Adagio—  
|  | Etude: Allegro—  
|  | Humoresque: Allegro—  
|  | Elegy: Adagio—  
|  | Finale: Moderato |


| String Quartet No. 14 in F-sharp Major, Op. 142 (1973) | Allegretto  
|  | Adagio—  
|  | Allegretto |

|  | Serenade: Adagio—  
|  | Intermezzo: Adagio—  
|  | Nocturne: Adagio—  
|  | Funeral March: Adagio molto—  
|  | Epilogue: Adagio |

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1st movement

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The Pacifica Quartet won a Grammy in 2009!

Simin Ganatra
violin

Brandon Vamos
cello

Masumi Per Rostad
viola

Sibbi Bernhardsson
violin
References (1)


[8] Two Hundred and Fifty Easy Voluntaries and Interludes, for the Organ, Melodeon, Seraphine, &c., John Zundel, Oliver Ditson & Co., Boston, 1851, p. 6, https://urresearch.rochester.edu/fileDownloadForInstitutionalItem.action;jsessionid=F9761E86CCF0070750964C380024ADB7?itemId=6329&itemFileId=10122, visited February 20, 2011.


References (2)


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