

Music History - Chapter 5

Sonata, Symphony, And Opera In The Early Classic Period

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Enlightenment Thought

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that valued reason and asserted the equal rights of every person. Enlightenment ideas led to advances in science and were incorporated into the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Life

Eighteenth-century politics, culture, and the arts were cosmopolitan. The flutist and composer Johann Joachim Quantz held that the best music was that which combined features of many nations and thus was universally pleasing. Musicians from across western Europe were active in Vienna, facilitating a mixing of styles. Humanitarian ideals were strong. A growing middle-class public pursued learning and the arts and helped to support the new institutions of the public concert of music and the journal of musical news and criticism. As more people could afford instruments, had time to play them, and learned to read music, the market grew for published music that amateurs could play and enjoy.

Eighteenth-Century Musical Taste

The latter 18th century preferred music that was universal in appeal, both noble and entertaining, expressive yet tasteful, natural, simple, and immediately pleasing. Yet old and new styles, and national and cosmopolitan styles, coexisted and competed.

Terminology in the Classic Period

Several terms have been used for the styles current in the mid-to-late 18th century. Classic was applied retrospectively to the music of Haydn and Mozart and has been expanded to include the entire period of about 1720-1800. The term galant (elegant) was used in the 18th century to describe the new style that emphasized melody in clearly marked phrases over light accompaniment. Empfindsamkeit (sentimentality, from the German verb for "to feel") was a related style that added surprising harmonies, chromaticism, nervous rhythms, and speech-like melody.

New Concepts of Melody, Harmony, and Form

In contrast to the constant spinning-out of Baroque music, the new styles were periodic, divided into short phrases that combine into periods and larger sections, like the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of a speech. Phrases were related through motivic similarities or through antecedent-consequent pairing. Harmonic change slowed down. In compensation, the texture was animated through devices such as the Alberti bass. Composers no longer sought to express one single affection in a movement, as in the Baroque, and instead explored contrasting styles and feelings within a single movement.

OPERA

Many elements of Classic-era style derive from Italian opera, and especially comic opera, of the early 18th century.

Early Italian Comic Opera

An opera buffa was a full-length Italian comic opera with several characters. Plots usually counterpoised comic and serious characters, and librettos often used dialect, especially for the comic characters. An intermezzo was a series of short comic scenes performed between acts of a serious opera or play. Plots revolved around a small number of characters drawn from ordinary life. The best-known intermezzo is *La serva padrona* (*The Maid as Mistress*, 1733), by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736). In opera buffa, as well as in the intermezzi, dialogue was set in rapid recitative with keyboard accompaniment, and the arias used short tuneful phrases and periods over simple harmonies.

Opera Seria

An opera seria was a serious opera on a heroic classical theme without comic interludes. The form was codified by the librettist Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), whose librettos were set hundreds of times throughout the 18th century. His plots show a conflict of passions that is resolved through heroism or renunciation, and his aim was to promote morality and to show examples of enlightened rulers. The action proceeds in recitative, and characters comment on the situation in arias.

The Aria

The standard aria form was the da capo aria, with a large A section in the tonic, a shorter contrasting B section in a related key, and a reprise of the A section. The A section normally includes an orchestral ritornello that introduces the main melodic idea; a vocal statement that modulates to a related key, most often the dominant; an abbreviated ritornello in the new key; a second vocal statement on the same text that modulates back to the tonic; and a closing ritornello, full or abbreviated, in the tonic. The B section sets a new text and usually lacks orchestral interludes. This format could be abbreviated in various ways—for instance, by omitting the opening ritornello on the repeat of A, or by expanding the A section and omitting the rest altogether. Singers were expected to ornament the written line as appropriate, especially on the repetition. There were abuses: some composers treated the da capo format too rigidly, and some singers added excessive embellishment or forced composers to alter or substitute arias to suit their voices. But the form also continued to evolve, as composers introduced a greater variety of moods and figuration and borrowed formal ideas from the sonata and concerto.

Johann Adolph Hasse (1699-1783), music director at the Saxon court in Dresden, was the leading composer of opera seria around the middle of the 18th century. He wrote in an Italianate style marked by careful accentuation of the text and melodies grateful to the voice. His wife, Faustina Bordoni (1700-1781), was one of the century's leading sopranos. She performed all over Europe, including for Handel in London and sang in most of Hasse's operas.

Comic Opera

A. General Comic opera grew in importance after 1760. Each nation or region had its own type, using the national language and musical styles. Comic opera exercised an important influence on later music, in its style, its preference for naturalness, and its use of national characteristics.

Italy

From the middle of the century, comic Italian operas—sometimes called *dramma giocoso* (cheerful drama) as well as *opera buffa*—incorporated serious and sentimental plots along with comic ones. The ensemble finale at the end of an act brought the characters on stage one by one until all were singing together.

France

French *opéra comique* began as a show with vaudevilles or other simple tunes. The 1752 visit of an Italian comic opera troupe inspired French composers to write comic operas in a mixed style with original airs called *ariettes*. One of the first is *Le Devin du village* (The Village Soothsayer, 1752) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although the Italians set dialogue as recitative, the French and other national comic opera traditions used spoken dialogue. Later in the century, the *opéra comique* was also used for serious subjects, as in André Ernest Modeste Grétry's *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* (Richard the Lion-Hearted, 1784), the first rescue opera.

England

Ballad opera became popular in England after John Gay's success with *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), a mostly spoken play which set new words to popular tunes and parodied operatic conventions.

Germany

The success of ballad opera inspired a revival of *Singspiel* in Germany, beginning with translations or adaptations of English ballad operas and French comic operas. Some *Singspiel* tunes were so popular that they have virtually become folksongs. In the north, *Singspiel* merged with native opera in the early 19th century; in the south it was influenced by Italian comic opera.

BEGINNINGS OF OPERA REFORM

Italian Reformers

Some mid-century Italian composers, such as Nicola Jommelli (1714-1774) and Tommaso Traetta (1727-1779), sought to make opera more expressive, flexible, and varied, and thus better able to reflect real human drama and sentiment.

Gluck

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787), working with his librettist Raniero de Calzabigi (1714-1795), reformed opera by making music once again subservient to the poetry and the plot. As exemplified in *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) and *Alceste* (1767), Gluck's reform opera blends Italian, German, and French traits; emphasizes the chorus, dance, and orchestra and links them closely with the dramatic action; restrains the freedom of singers to indulge in vocal display; lessens the gulf

between aria and recitative; and unifies a variety of elements in extended scenes. Gluck brought his new style to Paris and French opera with *Iphigénie en Aulide* in 1774, scoring a great triumph. Serious French opera had been in decline since the *Querelle des bouffons* (Quarrel of the comic actors), a debate in 1752 about the relative merits of traditional French opera and the new comic Italian opera. Gluck's new style was praised and imitated, establishing a new tradition of serious opera in French.

SONG AND CHURCH MUSIC

The Lied

Many collections of Lieder (German songs) were published in the 18th century, intended primarily for amateur performance at home. Composition of lieder was centered in Berlin. Most lieder were syllabic settings in folksong style with simple accompaniment.

Church Music

Masses, motets, and especially oratorios increasingly adopted operatic style in the late 18th century, although some composers continued to use the *stile antico*. English composers often wrote in Baroque styles, partly due to the continuing influence of Handel.

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC: SONATA, SYMPHONY, AND CONCERTO

The Sonata

Sonatas, symphonies, and chamber works typically had three or four movements in related keys and contrasting moods and tempos. What we now call sonata form or first-movement form was described by Koch in the 1770s as an expanded binary form in two sections, both normally repeated. The first has one large period comprising a series of four or five extended phrases, the first two presenting the movement's main idea in the tonic, the third phrase modulating to the dominant or relative major, and the others in the new key. The second section has two large periods, the first modulating back to the tonic, and the second shaped like the first section but transposing the latter part into the tonic. Theorists writing in the 1830s and later divided the form not into two parts but into three, corresponding to Koch's three periods: (1) an exposition with a first theme in the tonic, a modulatory transition, and second and closing themes in the dominant or relative major; (2) a development section which fragments and varies

the themes and modulates to new keys; and (3) a recapitulation, restating all three themes in the tonic, sometimes followed by a coda. Koch's description emphasizes the tonal plan, the later (and now more familiar) description the thematic content.

Early Symphonies and Chamber Music

In the early 18th century, the Italian opera overture, called *sinfonia*, had three movements in the order fast-slow-fast, ending with a dance. These were also performed independently, and composers such as Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1701-1775) began to write symphonies for concert performance, works in the same form that were not attached to operas. Sammartini's first movements often follow Koch's description of the form and present a number of ideas.

The Empfindsam Style

The *empfindsam* style, originated by Italians, is especially identified with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788), the most famous of Johann Sebastian Bach's sons and a very influential composer in his own right. He wrote in a variety of genres but is best known for his keyboard music, especially several sets of sonatas, marked by constantly changing rhythms, sudden surprising changes of harmony, texture, or dynamic level, and instrumental evocations of recitative and aria. His *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* is an important source for ornamentation and performance practice.

German Symphonic Composers

Composers at Mannheim, Vienna, and Berlin were the leading German composers of symphonies at mid-century. The Mannheim orchestra, led by Johann Stamitz (1717-1757), was renowned for its virtuosity, dynamic range, and controlled crescendo.

J. C. Bach's Concertos

Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), J. S. Bach's youngest son, studied and worked in Italy before going to London. There he had a successful career and met the young Mozart, on whom he had a profound influence. His concertos for piano or harpsichord and orchestra follow in their first movements a form that alternates *tutti ritornellos* with solo episodes, as in the Baroque concerto, but also features the contrasting themes and keys of sonata form.

Orchestral Music in France

Many publishers and composers were active in Paris. An important genre was the *symphonie concertante* for two or more soloists and orchestra.

The Symphony Orchestra

The orchestra of the Classic era had about twenty to thirty-five players, including strings, winds in pairs, horns, and harpsichord. The practice of *basso continuo* was gradually abandoned, and conducting duties passed from the harpsichordist to the leader of the violins. The winds, often used to double the strings and fill in harmonies, gained more independent roles late in the century. The *serenade* was a hybrid Viennese form combining aspects of the symphony and the concerto.

Chamber Music

Instrumental roles were unequal in chamber music, with the piano dominating any group with which it played and the first violin dominating in string quartets.

Summary

The early Classic period saw many innovations, especially in comic opera. The desire to reach a wide and varied audience led to music, both vocal and instrumental, that was simple, natural, and easy to grasp on first hearing. This intelligibility made possible the increasing independence—and with it the growing significance—of instrumental music in the Classic period.