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Words in bold type are defined in the Glossary on pages 6 and 7

Choral Music 101

How Classical Music Developed Over The Centuries

People have been singing since the dawn of time, with songs and musical stories passed down from parent to child, friend to friend, and as an **integral** part of religious ceremonies. But in earlier times, to learn a specific song one had to be with someone who knew it. This is part of what is called the "oral tradition," meaning music that is taught to someone who simply imitates the melody, rhythm, and words. This kind of "rote" music learning works, but it is often not very accurate. If you have ever played the "telephone game" you understand the problem: whisper a spoken phrase from one person to another; by the end of the telephone chain, the words have changed dramatically. The same thing happens when a melody or song is passed from one person to another by ear. Singing by ear can be great fun, but it is not the best way to learn a song accurately.

The oral tradition is still an important aspect of music learning and performance today. How did you learn to sing "Happy Birthday"? It was probably not from written music, but from friends and family at a party. The oral tradition is responsible for almost all of what we call folk music, including the beautiful spirituals that arose from African-American slave society. Much of our popular music today is also part of the oral tradition, since it can be composed directly to a recording without writing the music down. But music could not develop to a high level of complexity, for voices or instruments, until a system of music writing was in place.

Historic Roots of All Music

For the sake of organization and discussion, history can be divided into *periods* or *eras* during which there are certain similarities. For the study of music, each era is distinctive in the ways in which music

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The Choral Arts Society



Quick Look at the Eras of Music History (All dates are approximate.)

- 800-1000 Music of the early Christian Church
- 1100-1400 Middle Ages
- 1400-1600 Renaissance Era
- 1600-1750 Baroque Era
- 1750-1827 Classical Era
- 1827-1914 Romantic Era
- 1914-1995 20th Century Era
- 1995-Today 21st Century Era

is composed and performed. If you attend a Choral Arts concert you will hear music from various historical eras, going all the way back to the earliest period of written music.

Notre Dame Cathedral



Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France

The construction of Notre Dame (pronounced No-truh Dahm) Cathedral in Paris, France, was finished in the year 1345. It took almost 200 years to complete (in contrast, the Washington National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue took 83 years to complete). Notre Dame sits alone on an island in the middle of the Seine (Sen) River, but at the time it was built, it was surrounded by small houses and shacks where many of the poor people of Paris lived. Since the people could not read, the stone sides of the Cathedral were carved with scenes from the Bible to help people remember what they heard in their church services.

Music of the Early Christian Church

It was the 10th century before musicians began to explore ways to write down music so it could be shared by all. (Actually, there are examples of music writing from 2000 years before Christ, but those methods were unknown to the early Europeans.) The priests and monks of the early Christian Churches were among the few who could read. For many of them, their life's work was the study and interpretation of the Bible and other religious texts for congregations who could not read or write.

Undoubtedly, folk music was being played and sung outside the church during these early times, but we have no way of knowing what that music sounded like since it was not written down or recorded. All the music that we have from that very early time is music of the Church, beginning in about the year 850 (1,160 years ago!).

The leaders of the early Christian Church understood the power of **ritual** and music to involve people in worship. Their religious service, called a **mass**, was organized into **intoned** (spoken) chants that were shared when new churches were established as Christianity spread throughout the Western world. Since the chants are quite poetic in form, singing them must have seemed the next logical step. Since the music of the service was now standardized, like the ritual, there was a great need for the priests and monks to be able to read and write music.

The Middle Ages (1100-1400)

The first music to be written down in the Christian Church was called plainsong (or plainchant). Most plainsong was written with a four-line staff and notes that were shaped like circles, triangles, diamonds, and squares which indicated the rhythm.

Plainsong has a flowing melody (this is called monophonic, "one sound", as opposed to polyphonic, "many sounds" like the music of the Renaissance—see page 3) without regular rhythmic divisions.

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The melodies follow the rhythm of the words (which are in Latin). In contrast, most of our popular music today has a "beat"—a very strong and regular pulse felt throughout a song. Plainsong usually has no sense of beat at all. The early Church authorities understood the power of strong rhythms to excite people emotionally but unlike most churches today, they did not feel that strong emotion should be a part of the religious experience. They wanted the music of the church to have a spiritual/intellectual quality instead, so for many years they also restricted the use of harmony with the plainsong melodies. That way, the beauty of the sound would not distract people from serious spiritual **contemplation**.

Eventually church music progressed to two-part harmony (called **organum**), and ultimately to polyphony (puh-LIH-fo-nee): literally, "many sounds"—music with several musical lines sung at the same time, producing complex harmonies. It took several hundred years for these changes to take place.

The Renaissance Era (1400-1600)

By the time of the Renaissance (REN-uh-zants), music had developed far beyond plainsong. The word Renaissance means "rebirth," and it was a time of great exploration in the arts, literature, philosophy, politics, science, travel, and religion. The great explorers discovered the North American continent and much of the rest of the unknown world during this time (Columbus found North America in 1492).



Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa during the Italian Renaissance

The Church dominated almost every aspect of life in the Middle Ages, but now scholars and other thinkers began to turn to new ideas. They expressed realism and human emotion in art, rather than always using art as a way to worship. The Italians looked to the past for inspiration, studying the ancient Greeks. In fact, the Italians created the first operas because they were trying to set stories to music the way they thought the Greeks might have done it. Religion did not lose its importance, but as people became better educated they questioned the absolute authority of the Church. The invention of the printing press encouraged reading, and reading encouraged

Music Notation



This is a plainsong from the *Graduale Aboense*. It is in Latin, the language of the early Catholic Church. It took more than 700 years for music **notation** to develop into what most published music looks like today—five lines on a staff, treble and bass clefs that name the notes on the staff, round notes with stems that indicate various rhythmic values, beats divided into measures, expression marks that indicate how to interpret the music and tempo, etc.

The early music composers started by drawing a single line on the page and writing the words on top of the line, putting text syllables higher or lower to indicate pitch moving up and down. As melodies became more complex they gradually developed a system of notes on several lines (generally 4) with the words written underneath. The notes sometimes had no stems and were formed in various shapes to indicate rhythm. It was not until the **Baroque** Era that music notation became standardized to what it is today.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. He had a brilliant mind, and his belief in God was powerful and sincere. His studies of Biblical scriptures led him to conclude that his Church had left the path of true Christianity. One practice he found especially distasteful was the sale of indulgences. The Church teaches that if you are destined to go heaven, your soul must be cleansed of all sin in a place called purgatory. In Luther's time, some priests said indulgences made your path to heaven direct--you could literally buy your way in, while your money made church officials wealthy.

Luther felt so strongly about his beliefs that he posted a list of 95 things (known as the 95 **Theses** [THEE-sees]) he felt were problems within the Church. News about Luther's actions spread quickly. Luther refused to **renounce** his Theses, and the Church authorities charged him with **heresy** (HAIR-eh-see) and put him on trial. He was excommunicated from (kicked out of) the Roman Church, but his 95 Theses led to a reform movement against the Catholic Church. This came to be known as the Protestant Reformation, out of which came the Lutheran Church and other protestant churches. Luther continued to be a thoughtful, dedicated leader for the reformed churches, eventually marrying a former nun and raising six children.

Luther reformed church music as well, inserting hymns sung in German (the language of the people), and replacing the Latin Credo (a set of beliefs) with the German Creed. He was also an excellent musician who wrote hymn tunes, playing them on the flute while a musician friend wrote them down. His most well-known hymn is "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

The Renaissance Era - Continued from page 3

independent thought. Scholars were inspired to study earlier versions of the Bible, and come to their own conclusions rather than accepting the interpretations of others. This cultural shift coincided with **corruption** in the Roman Catholic Church which



Luther

led individuals like Martin Luther to call for reform. The **Protestant Reformation** began, and with it came simpler music for some parts of the worship service: music that ordinary people could sing, like hymns, with understandable and inspirational words in the language that the people spoke rather than in Latin.

The Renaissance was rich with new musical and artistic ideas. Music became far more complex both in the church and in the **secular** world, and polyphony was the musical style of choice. In the church, the 4-to 8-part **motet** was popular, and in the secular world, singing **madrigals**, in 2- to 8-parts, was a popular after dinner entertainment. Many choruses today enjoy singing both motets and madrigals as part of their regular **repertoire**.

With the rise of interest in individual accomplishment, composers became known by name. Some of the Renaissance composers whose music still lives today are William Byrd (from England), Orlando Lassus (from France), and Giovanni Palestrina (Gee-oh-VAH-nee Pal-es-TREE-nuh) (from Italy).



Palestrina

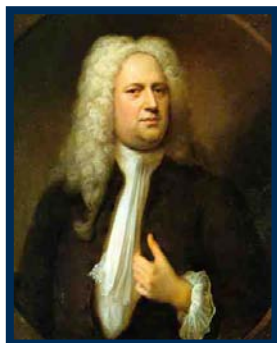
The Baroque Era (1600-1750)

Several great changes took place during the next era of music, the Baroque (Buh-ROKE). Music for entertainment became more popular than music written for the church. Instrumental music continued to grow in importance and the **sonata form** was invented and developed.

Tonality, which had been based in what were called the "church modes," moved almost entirely to the major and minor scales we are so familiar with today. That made modulation (shifting from key to key) possible, which made longer works possible, which made symphonies, operas, masses, and **cantatas** possible.

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The development of opera and **oratorio** in Italy meant that composers wrote more music for solo singers and in a new way. Although there were still many amazing large choral works written in the Baroque period, most works include solo material as well.



Handel

Bach was a **staunch** Lutheran, and he included many Lutheran hymns in his choral works. He re-harmonized the hymns, called chorales, but left them in simpler form in longer works (like cantatas) along with very complex choral **fugues** and difficult solos. The music of this period tends to be highly complex and highly ornamented (with lots of notes!).



Bach

The Classical Era (1750-1827)

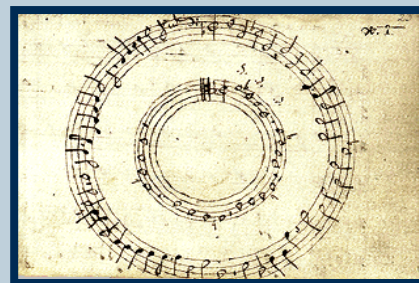
In a kind of rebellion against the excesses and complexity of Baroque music, composers in the Classical Era, simplified music in many ways. Music from this Era is generally more formal, with simpler harmonies, and is easier to perform. The composers, like Joseph Haydn (HI-dun), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (MOTE-zart), Franz Schubert (SHOO-bert) and Ludwig von Beethoven, strove for balance rather than excessive emotion.

During the Classical Era, instruments greatly improved and began to be grouped together in regular orchestras. Public concerts became popular, and composers were able to break away from the **patronage system**. To make enough money to live on, composers had always either worked for a noble person or in a church. Now



Nearly all printed music has what is called a time signature or a meter signature that is placed on the music **staff** to show the rhythmic structure of the music. In music published today, time signatures are written as two numbers, like 3 over 4 (see above), in which the three stands for the number of beats in a given measure (a measure divides the notes into specific numbers of beats for easier reading) and the four stands for a quarter note (one forth, get it?).

In earlier times, however, music was written without an indication of beat divisions. As music got more complex, musicians added a symbol at the beginning of the music to indicate whether the music moved in a rhythmic feel of 2 beats or of 3 beats. The symbol for movement in 3 was a circle, considered "perfect and unending." The circle represented the sacred Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the Christian tradition. Movement in 2 was indicated by what looked like a capital "C," but was actually a broken circle, meaning "imperfect" time. The broken circle (C) has come to mean 4/4 time in modern music notation.



This is a 16th century version of a canon (a round, like *Three Blind Mice*—that's why it's written in a circle!). Notice it has a five-line staff, a key signature (one flat), and modern rhythmic notations—notes with stems.

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Glossary

- **Atonal** – not written in any key
- **Baroque** - highly ornate and extravagant in style
- **Cantata** – short narrative composition with vocal solos and usually chorus and orchestral accompaniment
- **Cathedral** – the principal church of a diocese (grouping of churches) containing the Bishop's throne
- **Contemplation** – the act of studying or meditating
- **Corruption** – something that is bad which is supposed to be good
- **Dissonance** – harsh-toned, clashing (play the notes C and C# together to hear a dissonant interval)
- **Fugues** – compositions with many voices, in which a short melody is introduced by one part, and then taken up by others, interweaving the sounds
- **Heresy** – a belief or practice that goes against the traditional principles of the Christian church
- **Integral** – of something that is whole, or something necessary to complete the whole
- **Intoned** – recited with lengthened sounds, especially without much expression
- **Madrigal** – a part song for several voices, usually arranged in complicated vocal lines and sung a cappella
- **Mass** – the religious service of the Roman Catholic Church
- **Motet** – a short sacred composition
- **Notation** – the symbols that represent pitch and duration in music
- **Oratorio** – a large work for orchestra and voices, usually on a religious theme, performed without costumes, scenery, or acting

The Classical Era - Continued from page 5

they had the opportunity to be independent—appealing directly to a paying audience in public concerts.

Instrumental music was important in this Era, and the piano (invented in its modern form in 1709 by the Italian Bartolommeo Cristofori [bar-toh-loh-MAY-oh Kris-toh-FOR-ee]) became extremely popular. Important choral works continued to be written, like Haydn's oratorios *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. Mozart composed dozens of masses, cantatas, and operas that are still very popular today. In Germany, Schubert popularized the Lied (leet), a solo song inspired by meaningful poetry. The Lied was a hugely popular song form for the next 100 years. Today, vocal students and classical recitalists still include German Lieder on their concerts.

Known primarily for his piano music and nine symphonies, but also a composer of large choral works like the *Missa Solemnis*, Beethoven (1770-1827) is known as a transitional composer. He was so creative that although he started his compositional life writing in the styles of the Classical Era, he gradually expanded those styles, adding emotional content that had been limited by most Classical composers for the sake of balance. This ushered in a new stylistic period, The Romantic Era. Notice that the year of Beethoven's death is considered the end of the Classical Era.



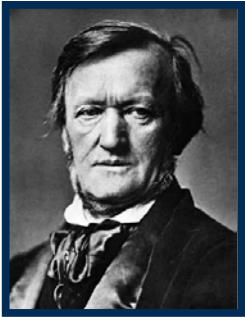
Beethoven

The Romantic Era (1827-1914)

Romantic Era composers searched for ways to make music more expressive and more complex with extremes of **dissonance**, emotional content, harmonic structure, textual richness, rhythmic variety, etc. Tonality (what we recognize as major and minor) gradually shifted and music was no longer clearly in a specific key. Everything expanded as orchestras grew larger, opera grander and choral music was written for larger groups. Robert Schumann (SHOO-mahn), Frederic Chopin (SHOW-pan), Felix Mendelssohn (MEN-del-sun), Johannes Brahms (Yoh-HAN-nes), Richard Wagner (REE-kard VAHG-ner), Giuseppe Verdi (Gee-u-Seh-pee VAIR-dee), Giacomo Puccini (JAH-ko-mo poo-CHEE-nee), Richard Strauss (REE-kard Strouss), and Claude Debussy

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(KLODE deh-bu-SEE) were some of the most influential composers of the Romantic Era.



Wagner

There were two streams of composition during this Era, one still grounded in the Classical tradition with its sense of formality and **restraint**, and the other stream eager to break down restraints to express larger emotions. Brahms' choral music, like the *German Requiem*, is beautiful, but less grand, less emotional, and less experimental, than say, Richard Wagner's operas. By the end of the Romantic Era, some composers began to abandon tonality completely. Their music was described as **atonal**.

The 20th Century (1914-1995)

When the 20th century began, most composers were still writing in the style of the Romantic Era. World War I (1914-1918), which devastated much of the Western world, ended the era of bigger-is-better in the arts. Composers responded to this "war to end all wars" by trying to find new ways to express themselves, ways that were, in the case of many European composers, even more experimental than the Romantics, and reflective of the social and civic upheavals of the time.

One early 20th century style movement, called neoclassicism (new classical style), recalled the 18th century in style and length, but retained the dissonance and atonality of late Romanticism. Igor Stravinsky (EE-gore Struh-VIN-skee), a Russian composer who fled from Communism and settled in the United States, was a leader in the neoclassical style.



Stravinsky

As in the Romantic Era, there were two streams of composition in the 20th century. One rejected tonality and musical form, reflecting the chaos of two world wars and the Cold War. Some composers that chose that path were Alban Berg, Luciano Berio, Krzysztof Penderecki (kristof Pen-der-REH-kee) and Milton Babbitt. The other stream, including American composers like Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, kept

Glossary (cont.)

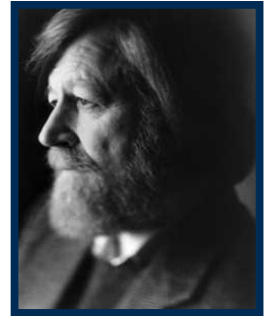
- **Organum** – plainsong with harmony in 4th's or 5th's, rather than the now more familiar 3rd's and 6th's
- **Patronage system** – Most early composers were supported financially by a wealthy or noble person who also tended to treat composers as servants.
- **Protestant Reformation** – 16th century movement for the reform of the Roman Catholic Church ending with the establishment of the Reformed and Protestant churches.
- **Renounce** – abandon, surrender, give up claim to
- **Repertoire** – a collection of pieces that a performer or group knows and is able to present
- **Restraint** – keeping in check or under control
- **Ritual** – a procedure or ceremony that is regularly followed
- **Secular** – not religious
- **Sonata form** – a type of composition in three sections (exposition, development, and recapitulation) in which two musical themes (melodies) are explored according to key relationships; an important musical form of the Classical and Romantic Eras
- **Staff** – the five lines on which music is written
- **Staunch** –loyal, steadfast, firm in one's belief
- **Theses** – an argument, belief, idea, etc. (plural of thesis, like a paper written for school)
- **Tonality** – the relationship between the tones of a musical scale—the use of one tonic key as the basis for a composition

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tonality and form to a large degree, but used dissonance and rhythmic and dynamic extremes. For choral singers, atonal music is difficult to perform since we are used to familiar scales, keys and harmonies.

Music Today

We are now in the 21st century, but it is too soon to tell what direction music composition will take. Popular music continues to use simple melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and chords, as it always has. Classical music has returned to some tonality for the most part because of the limited audience for completely atonal music and the preference of most listeners is for music that pleases the ear. In choral music, we have composers like John Adams and Morten Lauridsen (MORE-tun LAW-rid-sen), who continue to find new ways to write expressively for voices.



Lauridsen

Just for Fun

On the empty lines at the right, fill in the names of 2 composers from the Era on the left. If you want to make it interesting, see how many new words you can make out of the letters of the composers names!

Renaissance 1 _____ 2 _____

Baroque 1 _____ 2 _____

Classical 1 _____ 2 _____

Romantic 1 _____ 2 _____

20th Century 1 _____ 2 _____