Carter Lavering

3/16/16

History

Classical Music

Some people call classical music boring. Nothing could be further from the truth! Classical music is broad and diverse, with a rich history.

During the Renaissance period (c. 1400-1600), composers started to experiment with the limits of music that were previously taken for granted. What are acceptable rhythms? Which harmonies can be used? What chord progressions would be most appropriate? All of the “common-knowledge” answers to these questions were being overturned. Composers could be more expressive. Secular and sacred music influenced each other and helped each other evolve. Some instruments that came into existence during the Renaissance were the violin, guitar, lute, piano, and organ, as we know them today. The Gutenberg printing press, invented around 1450, made sharing music on a large scale possible and practical. Polyphony (having multiple intertwining melody lines) became more and more intricate through the 14th century, whereas in the 15th century music tended to be more simple and smooth. Some characteristics of music from the Renaissance are modes, four or more parts with gorgeous texture, mixing strands rather than contrasting them, and focusing harmonies on flow and progression of chords.

After the Renaissance came Baroque music (1600-1760). The word “baroque” is derived from “barroco”, which means “misshapen pearl” in Portuguese. During the Baroque period, tonality—writing a song in a specific key—became widely used. Musical ornamentation became more elaborate, and new playing techniques were developed. The opera, cantata, oratorio, concerto, and sonata were all developed during this time.

Antonio Vivaldi was an Italian composer of the Baroque period, today widely considered one of the greatest Baroque composers. Born in 1678 in Venice, Vivaldi learned how to play violin from his father. He was composing music by the age of 13, and went to work at an orphanage at age 24 as the *maestro di violino*, or “master of violin”. He was promoted to teacher of *viola all’inglese*, a type of viol, then to *maestro di coro* (master of choir), and again to *maestro de’ concerti* (music director) in 1716. He wrote many operas and oratios throughout his life, but ironically the work he’s most famous for is neither; rather, it’s a set of four violin concertos called “The Four Seasons”.

Another famous Baroque composer was the German Johannes Brahms (1833–1897). He spent much of his life in Vienna, Austria. Brahms, Bach, and Beethoven are sometimes referred to as the “3 Bs”, due to their popularity and talent. Brahms composed for piano, chamber ensembles, symphonies, and voice and chorus, but not opera. He was also a gifted pianist and would often premier his own works. He was very close with Robert and Clara Schumann, two famous Romantic composers.

The next period of music was the Classical period, from 1730 to 1820. During this period, music became lighter and clearer than Baroque music, in addition to being simpler. Changes in key, melody, mood, timbre, and many other attributes became more common within a piece. The wide variety of stringed instruments of the Baroque period consolidated into four prominent instruments in the Classical period: violin, viola, cello, and contrabass.

One well-known Classical composer is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Born in 1756, he was the youngest of seven children, and one of only two to survive infancy. Mozart wrote his first compositions at four or five years old and his first symphony at age eight. Mozart wrote for symphony, opera, solo concerto, chamber, and piano sonata, every major Classical genre. He was a master at counterpoint (voices harmonically interdependent but rhythmically independent) and he popularized the Classical piano concerto. In total, he composed over 600 works.

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) was an Austrian composer of the Classical period. Known by titles such a “Father of the Symphony” and “Father of the String Quartet”, he also was very involved with developing chamber music such as the piano trio. His music was often comprised of large structures made up of short, simple motifs. Haydn actually incorporated humor into some of his compositions, such as false endings, rhythmic illusions, and sudden loud chords.

Another of the most famous composers from this period is Ludwig van Beethoven, who lived from 1770 to 1827. Despite major problems with his hearing (he was almost totally deaf by the time he was 44) he composed music nearly until his death. His compositional profession is generally divided into three periods: early, middle, and late. In the early period, he was influenced by Haydn and Mozart, his predecessors. The middle period was brought on by his struggle with deafness and contains more grand and “heroic” works. His works in the late period are characterized by intellectual depth and intense expression. His work was imperative to the transition from the Classical to Romantic period, and he is regarded as the greatest composer of all time.

Romantic music, from around 1780 to 1910, shifted the focus of music to the natural, the past, the infinite, and the mystical: all subjects that were unsurprisingly also central to Romanticism. Woodwind and brass instruments became more prominent due to the Industrial Revolution improving the quality of valves and keys.

Frédéric Chopin was a Polish composer and pianist of the Romantic era. Born in 1810, he mainly composed piano solos. His work was influenced by Bach, Mozart, Schubert, and other classical era composers, as well as Polish folk music. He is regarded as a leading symbol of the Romantic era, and he has been the subject of many films and biographies.

Franz Liszt was another Romantic composer, and was renowned as the greatest pianist of all time in the 1840s. His piano music is often difficult on account of his own mastery of the instrument. He was a “programmatic” composer, meaning he wrote music based on a non-musical subject, such as a painting or a landscape. In addition to writing an astonishing amount of original piano music, he also transcribed a wide variety of works by other composers. These transcriptions are of great quality, and some are considered better than the original. One composer named Hans von Bülow actually stated that Listz’s transcription of his *Dante Sonett* were in fact superior to his own original composition.

A famous composer of the late-Romantic period was Pyotr Tchaikovsky. By the age of eight he could read music as well as his teacher! When he was fourteen, his mother died while he was away at a boarding school, and his first real attempt at composition was a waltz in her memory. His compositions would often incorporate Ukranian subjects, folk songs, or melodies. He continued composing and conducting until only 9 days before his death. His most well-known works include *Romeo and Juliet*, the *1812 Overture*, and *The Nutracker*.

The different eras of classical music present us with diverse styles and sounds and a variety of instruments. Its history is full of heroes, innovators, inventions, and overcoming. Classical music is rich, alive, and dynamic, and should be enjoyed by all.