

# A short history of Western music

Six periods, one sheet each. Not a list of names and dates to memorise, but an answer to a more useful question: what could composers do at the end of each period that they could not do at the start?

The dates are conveniences. Nobody woke in 1750 and began writing Classically – styles overlap, and the changes happened at different speeds in different countries. Treat the boundaries as blurred and the sequence as reliable.



## THE WHOLE STORY ON ONE LINE

| c.1150–1400                                                     | 1400–1600                                                      | 1600–1750                                                        | 1750–1820                                                          | 1820–1900                                                     | 1900–now                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Medieval                                                        | Renaissance                                                    | Baroque                                                          | Classical                                                          | Romantic                                                      | Modern                                                          |
| Music becomes writable, and voices learn to move independently. | Polyphony perfected; words and music start serving each other. | Chords, keys and the bass line. Instrumental music comes of age. | Balance, clarity and form as argument – sonata, symphony, quartet. | Bigger, louder, more personal. Harmony stretches to breaking. | The common language splinters; every composer chooses a system. |

## HOW TO USE THIS PACK

- 1 Read a period sheet, then listen to its three works before the next one.
- 2 Use the Listening Log worksheet for anything that catches you.
- 3 Ask of every piece: what is new here that the last period could not do?

Each sheet gives you the dates, what changed and why, the sound in a handful of words, the composers worth knowing, the forms that period invented, three works to hear, and one thing to steal for your own writing.

The pack pairs with *The orchestra through history*, which follows the same span through the size and make-up of the orchestra.

# Medieval

C.1150 – 1400

plainchant

open

modal

vocal

unhurried

Almost all surviving music is sacred, sung in Latin, and written for voices without instruments. The great achievement of the period is notation itself: once pitch could be recorded on lines, music could be composed rather than only remembered — and once it could be composed, more than one line at a time became possible.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Staff notation, so a piece could travel without a teacher.
- Organum — a second voice added to a chant, first in parallel, then freely.
- Rhythmic notation, letting independent voices be coordinated.
- The church modes: eight scales, none of them quite our major or minor.

## FORMS & GENRES

Plainchant — one line, no accompaniment, free rhythm following the words.

Organum — chant with one or more added voices above or below it.

Motet — several texts sung at once over a slow chant fragment.

Secular song — troubadour and trouvère songs, courtly love, sung in the vernacular.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER             | DATES           | WHY THEY MATTER                                                                       |
|----------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hildegard of Bingen  | 1098–1179       | Abbess, writer and composer; soaring chant melodies of far wider range than the norm. |
| Léonin & Pérotin     | fl. c.1160–1230 | The Notre-Dame school. Pérotin writes in three and four independent voices.           |
| Guillaume de Machaut | c.1300–1377     | Poet-composer; the first complete polyphonic setting of the Mass by one person.       |

### Listen to three

Hildegard — *O virtus Sapientiae*. One voice; hear how far the melody climbs.

Pérotin — *Viderunt omnes*. Four voices locked in dance rhythm over a held note.

Machaut — *Messe de Nostre Dame*, Kyrie. Strange, bare, and entirely deliberate.

### Steal this

A drone. Hold one low note and write a free melody above it — no chord changes at all. It is the oldest device in Western music and it still works: nothing else so quickly makes a passage sound ancient, spacious or ritual.

# Renaissance

1400 – 1600

flowing

blended

imitative

word-led

serene

Four or five voices of equal importance weave around each other, each entering with the same tune a few beats apart. The result is smooth, continuous and gloriously hard to write. Printing arrives, so music spreads; instruments gain their own repertoire; and for the first time composers worry seriously about whether the words can be heard.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Imitative polyphony — every voice sings the same idea in turn.
- Thirds and sixths treated as sweet, giving full triadic harmony.
- Word-painting: the music illustrating what the text says.
- Printed music, and instrumental writing independent of voices.

## FORMS & GENRES

- Mass — the five sung texts of the liturgy, often built on a borrowed tune.
- Motet — a sacred piece on a free text; the century's laboratory.
- Madrigal — secular, in the vernacular, vividly illustrating its poem.
- Dances & consort music — pavaues and galliards; viols and recorders in families.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER            | DATES       | WHY THEY MATTER                                                                       |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Josquin des Prez    | c.1450–1521 | The master of imitation; the first composer treated as a genius in his own time.      |
| Giovanni Palestrina | c.1525–1594 | Smooth, balanced counterpoint — still the model taught in every harmony class.        |
| William Byrd        | c.1540–1623 | English sacred and keyboard music of extraordinary richness, written under real risk. |
| Thomas Tallis       | c.1505–1585 | <i>Spem in alium</i> : forty independent voices, and not one wasted.                  |

### Listen to three

Josquin — *Ave Maria... virgo serena*. Hear the voices enter one by one.

Palestrina — *Sicut cervus*. The sound counterpoint textbooks are describing.

Tallis — *Spem in alium*. Forty voices; find the moment they all sing at once.

### Steal this

Imitation. Write a four-bar phrase, then start it again in a second voice two bars later. You now have texture, forward motion and unity from a single idea — the cheapest and most reliable way to fill a page without repeating yourself.

# Baroque

1600 – 1750

driving

ornate

terraced

contrapuntal

tonal

The bass line takes charge. Underneath everything sits a continuo — cello and harpsichord — spelling out chords, and above it melody becomes soloistic and decorated. This is the period that invents keys as we use them: the circle of fifths, modulation, and the pull of a dominant seventh towards home. Opera is born, and instrumental music finally rivals vocal.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Major and minor keys replacing the modes; functional harmony.
- Basso continuo, and figured bass as a shorthand for chords.
- Opera, oratorio and the aria — drama sung throughout.
- Terraced dynamics: loud and soft as blocks, not gradual swells.

## FORMS & GENRES

Fugue — one subject, chased through every voice and key.

Concerto — soloist against ensemble, in ritornello form.

Suite — a set of dances in one key: allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue.

Opera, oratorio, cantata — recitative to carry the story, aria to stop it.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER           | DATES     | WHY THEY MATTER                                                                    |
|--------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Claudio Monteverdi | 1567–1643 | Straddles the change; his <i>Orfeo</i> is the first opera still in the repertoire. |
| Antonio Vivaldi    | 1678–1741 | Hundreds of concertos that fixed the three-movement fast-slow-fast pattern.        |
| J. S. Bach         | 1685–1750 | The summit of counterpoint. Everything later composers learn, they learn from him. |
| G. F. Handel       | 1685–1759 | Opera and oratorio for a paying public — a working man of the theatre.             |

### Listen to three

Bach — *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3*, first movement. Relentless, and perfect.

Vivaldi — *Winter* from *The Four Seasons*. Word-painting with an orchestra.

Handel — *Zadok the Priest*. A long orchestral shimmer, then the choir lands on you.

### Steal this

A walking bass. Write a bass line that moves in steady crotchets and never stops, then put a melody over it. The engine underneath does the work; your tune can be as free as you like and the music will still drive forward.

# Classical

1750 – 1820

*clear*

*balanced*

*witty*

*periodic*

*graceful*

Counterpoint gives way to melody with accompaniment, and phrases arrange themselves into tidy four- and eight-bar units that answer one another. The continuo disappears; the orchestra standardises; dynamics become gradual. Above all, form turns into argument — sonata form sets two keys against each other, develops the conflict, and resolves it.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Sonata form, and the four-movement symphony and quartet.
- Balanced phrasing — question and answer, antecedent and consequent.
- Crescendo and diminuendo; the fortepiano replacing the harpsichord.
- Public concerts and publishing: music for buyers, not only patrons.

## FORMS & GENRES

Sonata form — exposition, development, recapitulation. See the Classical Form chart.

Symphony — four movements: fast, slow, minuet, finale.

String quartet — four equals; the period's most serious conversation.

Rondo & theme and variations — the finale forms, built on return.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER             | DATES     | WHY THEY MATTER                                                             |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Joseph Haydn         | 1732–1809 | Shaped the symphony and the quartet across a hundred-odd works, with jokes. |
| W. A. Mozart         | 1756–1791 | Opera, concerto and symphony at once; melody of impossible ease.            |
| Ludwig van Beethoven | 1770–1827 | Starts here and breaks the mould — the bridge into Romanticism.             |
| Franz Schubert       | 1797–1828 | Six hundred songs; Classical shapes filled with Romantic feeling.           |

### Listen to three

Haydn — Symphony No. 94, second movement. The joke is the point.

Mozart — Symphony No. 40, first movement. Textbook sonata form, and heartbreaking.

Beethoven — Symphony No. 5, first movement. Four notes, and a whole movement built from them.

### Steal this

Question and answer. Write two bars that end unresolved, then two that close. Repeat the pair with a different ending. That is a period — the building block of nearly every tune you know, and the fastest way to make eight bars sound finished.

# Romantic

1820 – 1900

expressive

chromatic

vast

personal

rubato

Everything grows: the orchestra doubles, the piano gains iron and power, pieces run to an hour, and dynamics stretch from barely audible to overwhelming. Harmony becomes the main expressive tool — chromatic chords, distant keys, resolutions delayed until you ache for them. Music also becomes national, and increasingly about the composer's own inner life.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Chromatic harmony pushed to the edge of key itself.
- Programme music — pieces that tell a story or paint a scene.
- The conductor as interpreter; the virtuoso as public figure.
- National schools drawing on folk song and local subject matter.

## FORMS & GENRES

Lied — song with piano, the poem and the accompaniment equal partners.  
Symphonic poem — one movement, an extra-musical subject, free form.  
Character piece — the short piano piece: nocturne, prelude, intermezzo.  
Music drama — Wagnerian opera, continuous, on recurring motifs.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER        | DATES     | WHY THEY MATTER                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Frédéric Chopin | 1810–1849 | Wrote almost solely for piano and redefined what it could sing.                 |
| Clara Schumann  | 1819–1896 | Leading concert pianist of the century, and a composer of real substance.       |
| Richard Wagner  | 1813–1883 | Stretched harmony and scale so far that the next generation had to start again. |
| Johannes Brahms | 1833–1897 | Romantic feeling inside Classical discipline; the counter-argument to Wagner.   |

### Listen to three

Chopin — Nocturne in E flat, Op. 9 No. 2. The piano taught to sing.  
Clara Schumann — Piano Trio in G minor, first movement. Romantic warmth, Classical bones.  
Wagner — *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude. The first chord is still being argued about.

### Steal this

Delay the resolution. Set up a cadence the listener can hear coming, then slip somewhere else and arrive four bars late. Longing in music is mostly a matter of timing — of making people wait for a chord they already know is due.

# Modern & since

1900 – now

various

rhythmic

coloured

experimental

unresolved

The shared language breaks up. Some composers abandon keys altogether, some invent systems to replace them, some turn to folk music or jazz, and some go back to Classical clarity on purpose. Rhythm becomes as adventurous as harmony was, recording changes what music is for, and by the century's end a composer may write in any style at all – the only real requirement is that the choice be deliberate.

## WHAT WAS NEW

- Atonality, and serialism as a way of organising without a key.
- Irregular and shifting metre; rhythm as the leading element.
- Recording, electronics, and eventually the computer as instrument.
- Minimalism: pattern, repetition and very slow change.

## MOVEMENTS TO KNOW BY NAME

Impressionism — Debussy, Ravel: colour and mood over argument.

Serialism — Schoenberg, Webern: all twelve notes, ordered by a rule.

Neoclassicism — Stravinsky, Poulenc: old forms, new harmony.

Minimalism — Reich, Glass, Pärt: repeating cells, gradual process.

## WHO TO KNOW

| COMPOSER            | DATES     | WHY THEY MATTER                                                              |
|---------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Claude Debussy      | 1862–1918 | Loosened harmony from its duties; wrote with timbre as a structural element. |
| Igor Stravinsky     | 1882–1971 | Rhythm as the driving force, then reinvented his style twice over.           |
| Dmitri Shostakovich | 1906–1975 | Fifteen symphonies and fifteen quartets written under political danger.      |
| Steve Reich         | b. 1936   | Phasing patterns: process you can hear happening as it happens.              |

### Listen to three

Debussy — *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Where the twentieth century starts.

Stravinsky — *The Rite of Spring*, Part I. Count the accents if you dare.

Pärt — *Spiegel im Spiegel*. Almost nothing, held perfectly still.

### Steal this

A repeating cell. Take a short pattern, loop it, and change one note every four bars. Nothing else.

Minimalism proved that a listener will follow very slow change with real attention — and it is the easiest way to write something that sounds like now.