

From Bach To Gershwin
A Musical Journey | *Warren Lee*



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From Bach To Gershwin

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The definition of **young** in the context of this project refers to the level of experience in classical music, rather than age.

From Bach To Gershwin sets out to inspire and stimulate **young** audiences by presenting selected piano works by six great composers – each carefully and purposefully chosen to represent different eras in the history of classical music.

Considering the countless number of great composers and their many masterpieces from the vastness of the piano repertoire, it is neither practical nor possible to justly represent centuries of music history in only seventy minutes of music. This is not what this project is all about.

Instead, **From Bach To Gershwin** is a musical journey which aspires to guide you towards a lifelong journey in the exploration and appreciation of classical music.

If you were travelling to a city you had never set foot in, what would you take with you?

Without question, you would ask for a road map, perhaps a compass and a tour guide, as these navigational tools would help you find your bearings, points of interest as well as attractions.

Reading stories about the composers and their pieces before listening to them is very much comparable to studying the road map before visiting a city. It will give you some clues as to where to go and what to look out for and will reduce your chances of getting lost. As a result, the whole experience will be made a lot more pleasant and enjoyable.

As we go on this musical journey into past centuries to visit composers from countries as far away as Germany, Austria, France, Poland and America, you too will need a bit of help navigating. (Most people are often scared by classical music simply because they do not know where to start or where to go!) This book is your road map in disguise.



Navigational tools only enhance the listening experience but do not replace it!





What Is Classical Music?

Living in the 21st century, classical music to most of us represents some kind of ancient and serious form of high art, understood only by the elite and the educated. Some find it relaxing or therapeutic; others simply regard it as “long and winded music”! While there may be some truth to these interpretations, there is, of course, much more to it!

“Classical” music, by definition, is music that has a lasting value; music that you never get sick of! The fact that we continue to study, perform and listen to Mozart’s music today, some hundreds of years after his death, makes his music “classical”.

Can the same be said about the “pop” music we listen to today? Does the radio still plug pop songs from decades ago on a regular basis? Will pop singers in the year of 2208, care to study and perform songs written in 2008? While there can be no sure answers to these questions without a crystal ball, a reasonable guess would be that it is unlikely!

There must, then, be very good reasons why music from hundreds of years ago is still around today. So let’s buckle up, turn the clock back by some 250 years, and embark on this journey to explore the world of classical music and discover some of its secret treasures!



Did you know?

Overture is a musical term to describe a piece of instrumental music composed as an introduction to a large-scale work, typically an opera.



BAROQUE What?

The Dinosaur Years in Music?

Although Bach and the Baroque period is our first stop on this musical journey, it is not quite the beginning of music history.

Thousands of years ago, mankind found that they could make music by using their own voices, banging objects together, or blowing through animal bones. However, we have very little idea of what their music sounded like. At that time, there was no technology available to record music or even a system of music notations to write down the music they played or composed.

Music was passed from one generation to another orally. Theoretically speaking, music history did not begin until the 6th century, when music began to be notated.

The Baroque Period

The Baroque period runs approximately from the year 1600 to 1750. Music prior to this time was mainly sung or played in churches or courts, either to praise God or to entertain kings and queens.

During the Baroque period, music continued to play an important role in churches and courts, but it also began to spread into the city, where many middle-class citizens started to demand musical entertainment. As a result, music schools were formed, and even coffee shops put on musical programmes to entertain their guests.

However, the concept of a public concert – like the ones we attend today where musicians perform classical music from the past – did not exist during this period.

Music composed during this time generally sounds rather serious and solemn, profound and decorated. These qualities were called for to match the nobleness



Who Is Johann Sebastian Bach?



Johann Sebastian Bach was born into a family of musicians in Eisenach, Germany on March 21, 1685. He was the youngest of eight children, and his father was a highly regarded church organist in the town and wrote music for all its celebrations and festivals.

The origin of the “Musical Bach Family” dates as far back as Johann Sebastian’s great-great-grandfather; and for over two centuries, the family produced one respected musician after another. Members of the family filled many important musical posts across Germany. The family was also known to be very close, and would often visit one another and make music together.

Sadly, both Johann Sebastian’s parents died before he turned eleven years old. He then went to live with his eldest brother Johann Christoph who was also a musician – an organist. As a gifted child, Johann Sebastian was passionate about music and was a very good singer. He also played the organ, the harpsichord, the violin and the viola.

It was said that Johann Christoph had a volume of music containing compositions by some of the greatest composers of the time, and Johann Sebastian wanted to study them so badly that he copied out the music at night by candlelight. His brother soon found out and confiscated the music. But Johann Sebastian had already learned the music by heart. His musical aptitude and capacity for hard work were clearly evident from early on.

At the age of eighteen, Johann Sebastian was appointed the organist in the city of Arnstadt. His life and career, like many composers of his days, turned out to be a series of positions in the service of the court and the church.



Movements in music are comparable to chapters in books, in the sense that movements and chapters are divisions within a larger work. Composers in the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods were more or less governed by the customary rules of having only three movements in a sonata and four movements in a symphony. Great composers occasionally broke these rules, of course!



Did you know?

As a man, Johann Sebastian was known to be passionate, but he could also be stubborn and short-tempered. Dissimilar to other great composers, he was a practical composer who regarded himself as a working professional – a composer who wrote to meet a specific need rather than for art’s sake.

The most well-known examples were the 300 or so cantatas (music sung in church services) he composed on a weekly basis to satisfy the needs of the church. He also composed pieces for children as learning aides, as well as organ pieces to demonstrate particular instruments. The forty-eight Preludes and Fugues for the Well-Tempered Clavier also fall under this category.

In keeping the tradition of the “Musical Bach Family”, Johann Sebastian had twenty children from two marriages, of which four went on to become important musicians of their times.

- *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784)*
 - *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788)*
 - *Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach (1732–1795)*
 - *Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782)*

Following a year of poor health, Johann Sebastian passed away in Leipzig on July 28, 1750, leaving behind a giant footprint in the history of music.



What Is a Well-Tempered Clavier?

In pure literal terms, a “well-tempered clavier” means a “well-modified keyboard”. But it still does not explain much, does it?

Until J S Bach’s time, “mean-tone” tuning was widely used for any keyboard instrument, which means that semitones (the smallest interval between two keys) are of slightly different sizes. The advantage of mean-tone tuning is that a particular key can be perfectly harmonized. However, the disadvantage of this method is that what is good for C major is not good for G major. Simply put, “Three scales were made ugly in order to make one beautiful”. As a result, mean-tone tuning makes it impossible for composers to write music that goes from one key to another.

To overcome this limitation, J S Bach devised a system, now known as the “equal temperament”, where he divided the octave into twelve approximately even tones. Although there were slight imperfections in all intervals and keys, they were small enough for the ear to tolerate.

In order to demonstrate the advantages, flexibility and potential of this system, Bach composed forty-eight preludes and fugues – two each in every major and minor key – culminating in the two books of “Well-Tempered Clavier”.



Did you know?

BWV stands for the German words, **Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis**, meaning “**Bach-Work-Catalogue**”. These **BWV** numbers are basically catalogue numbers, identifying each of Bach’s work. However, the work is not listed by chronological order, but instead, by the types of compositions. For example, choral compositions are listed first, followed by keyboard music and so on.



Points of Interest in...

Track **1** – **2** **Prelude and Fugue in C major** BWV 846

Prelude

A prelude is a short piece of music, which may serve as an introduction to a succeeding movement or movements usually more complex than the prelude. Such is the case with Bach's Preludes and Fugues as fugues are by nature more complex than preludes.

In this particular prelude, you will hear one of the most elementary presentations of music. The musical concept is so simple that it sounds just like a student exercise. In fact, that may well be what Bach had in mind, as he claimed to have composed the Preludes and Fugues "for the use and improvement of musical youth eager to learn."

Does it not sound just like the arpeggio exercises all student pianists have to do nowadays? The music is so bare and simple that you may even ask, "Where is the melody?"

There are two possible answers: either every note is a melody, or there is none!

If every note is a melody, then it is not a very melodious one as it is immensely difficult to sing! And if there is no melody at all, can this be music?

Yet, you are probably finding this prelude pretty attractive, even though it has an unmelodious melody or no melody at all.

This is because Bach made very clever use of harmonies (how different chords go from one to another), and he was well known for his intelligence in striking odd chords and making them sound nice together!



Fugue

In a fugue, there are usually three or more layers of sound (called “voices”), each playing an equally important role. (This is in contrast to the “melody and accompaniment” style of music we come across more often in karaoke!) It can be said that the music is built in layers, in that every voice has an interesting and melodic line, and the musical phrase has its ups and downs at different times.

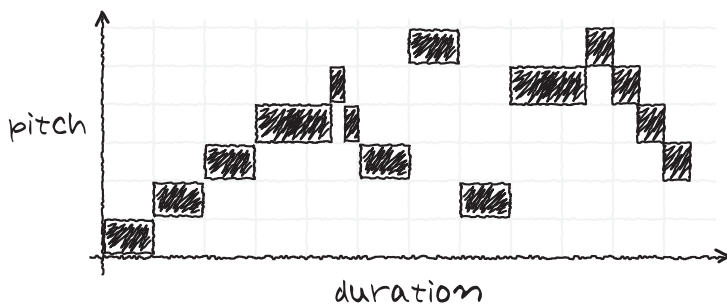
The melody of the fugue (called a “subject”) is usually introduced by only one of the voices at the very beginning, and is then joined by the other voices one-by-one, each playing the same subject. In this particular fugue, there are four voices.

What makes a fugue fascinating is that after the subject is introduced in each voice one-by-one in an orderly fashion, it then reappears repeatedly and randomly throughout: in different keys, different voices and at different times. Some reappearances are more easily noticeable, some are more hidden and slightly altered, and some are even overlapped with another reappearance in another voice!

Writing a fugue is considered one of the more testing assignments for any composer; and incidentally, playing a fugue is also regarded as one of the more challenging tasks for any pianist!

Listening Game | Identify the Subject

With the help of a graphic representation of the subject below, listen to the subject at the beginning of the fugue (Track 2 0'00" – 0'07"), and try to follow the high-and-low as well as the long-and-short of it. Play back a few times until you have the subject memorised.



How many times did the subject appear and reappear in this fugue?

Answer on page 10



Coda: The Fame of Bach's Preludes and Fugues

Since the creation of Bach's forty-eight magnificent Preludes and Fugues in 1722, they have become perhaps the most important and studied repertoire in the history of classical music. Many famous composers, such as Haydn and Beethoven were brought up with them; and musicians up to this very day still study them, analyse them and perform them religiously.

Interestingly, a French composer by the name of Charles Gounod (1818 – 1893) adapted the C major Prelude by “adding” a melody to it (as if to provide the “missing” melody). It became the song now known as the “Ave Maria”. This adaptation is so successful that people often mistake Bach’s C major Prelude as the “Ave Maria”!

You can listen to “Ave Maria” and find out more about Charles Gounod at: www.charles-gounod.com



Did you know?

Coda in music refers to a concluding passage that brings a piece of music to an end.

Answer: A staggering 23 times!



CLASSICAL Again?

The Age of Enlightenment

The Classical period refers to a style and a period of music within the history of classical music. It runs approximately from the death of Bach in 1750 to the death of Beethoven in 1827. Unlike going from one calendar year to another, the Baroque period did not change to the Classical period overnight, but gradually.

In response to the changes of people's thoughts during the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century – where arts and culture were extended to ordinary citizens – composers at the time, such as the sons of J S Bach, began to write music that was less sophisticated, more tuneful and generally lighter in spirit for the enjoyment of a larger audience.

As a result of the continued and wider spread of music, two industries became increasingly important – music publishing and instrument manufacturing. Together, they made it possible for people to buy music and own musical instruments, so that they could sing or play music at their own homes.

With this growing accessibility to music, groups of musicians – both amateurs and professionals – naturally got together to make music for their own pleasure, and for those who came to hear them. This is when the concept of the public concert began to take shape.

Composers at the time were still writing music largely to fill specific needs, either to entertain a specific patron or for a special occasion. But with the concert tradition and audiences growing, this demanded them to rethink their compositional styles to satisfy not only the churches, the courts and the rich, but also middle class citizens and concertgoers.

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791) and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827), were the three greatest and most exemplary composers who lived during this Classical period.



Who Is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart?



Perhaps the most documented musician in the history of mankind, the legacy of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart has made his birth place Salzburg, Austria a famous town. Mozart was born on January 27, 1756, and it took very little time for his father, Leopold – himself a good violinist, to recognise his son’s extraordinary abilities and God-given talents.

Mozart was only four years old when he first played the keyboard, and began composing at five. By the age of six, his father took him to the court in Munich to perform for the Bavarian Elector, and perform he did! People were amazed by his skills, his own music and also the tricks his father had taught him – to play blindfolded and improvise at sight!

His father very soon gave up his job to devote full attention to fostering and exhibiting the genius of young Mozart. They went several times to Vienna, and as far as to Paris, London, Amsterdam and Italy, giving concerts and meeting important musicians such as J C Bach and Haydn. Such was the lifestyle Mozart would eventually lead – that of a travelling musician. When Mozart died at the age of thirty-six, he had spent a total of fourteen of his thirty-six years away from home.

As a child prodigy who was admired by all, one would have thought that Mozart’s life and career would no doubt be as smooth sailing as that of a prince in a fairy tale.

Sadly, life was not as easy for Mozart. Having spent most of his time cultivating only his talents in music, Mozart neglected other education in life and did not really have much of a childhood to speak of. As a result, Mozart grew up to be a man with a complicated personality. Being as gifted as he was, he could not tolerate anything less than his own high standards and this earned him a reputation of being arrogant. He often impulsively said exactly what he thought about other musicians and rarely had anything good to say about them! He had very few musician friends, and never earned a major position in court or church, something that his father had hoped for.

Fame and fortune also did not go hand-in-hand for Mozart. Among the life affairs that Mozart struggled to cope with, he was notoriously bad at managing his money, and often gave it away needlessly. With only a relatively small number of his compositions published during his lifetime, Mozart endured great financial difficulties in the later part of his life. In 1791, Mozart died penniless in Vienna, and his wife Constanze inherited nothing but massive debts.

Mozart might have failed financially in the short span of his life, but he was far greater than anyone of his time artistically, leaving behind a wealth of music that is treasured as much today as it was in the past two centuries. He was a champion in every form of music, and wrote masterpieces for many different instruments and combinations of instruments. Above all, Mozart developed a love for writing operas, and three of his operas were of immense success: The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni and The Magic Flute. His very last composition, the Requiem – a mass for the dead, was left unfinished.



Sonata

As a concert performer, Mozart composed many of his nineteen piano sonatas for himself to perform in concerts; but Mozart also wrote a number of them for teaching purposes with his students in mind.

This particular sonata most probably falls into the latter category as Mozart himself described this sonata to be intended "for beginners". No wonder why this sonata is often referred to as the "Sonata Facile", meaning the "Easy Sonata".

Upon first hearing, you will immediately recognise the clarity and simplicity in many aspects (as compared to the Bach's fugue). The melodies and accompaniment are clearly distinguishable, with the musical phrases and sections identifiable.

Did you notice that in Bach's prelude and fugue, there were no pauses in either of them? Once the music begins, there is not a moment of silence or rest until the end? Compare this with Mozart's sonata.



Mozart probably knew that many students did not particularly enjoy practising scales and arpeggios, and so he disguised them in the music! Mozart deliberately made great uses of scales and arpeggios as the building blocks for this first movement.



Did you know?

1. The term, "Sonata" comes from the Latin word, "Sonare" which means, "to sound." A "Sonata" literally means a piece of instrumental music that is "sounded" rather than sung.

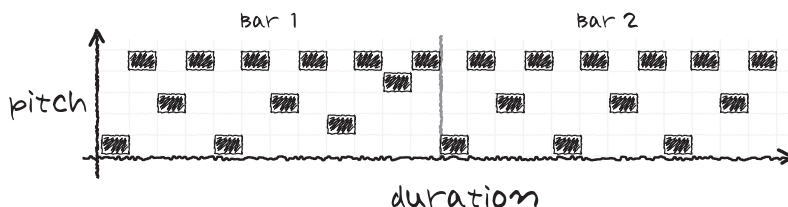
2. K. is an abbreviation for the Köchel number named after Ludwig von Köchel, who catalogued all of Mozart's compositions in chronological order. This Sonata, K.545, is therefore Mozart's 545th piece of composition!



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In contrast to the lively pace of the first movement, the second movement is more calm and resful. Here again, the melody and the accompaniment are clearly and simply defined. The pattern played by the left hand accompaniment is called the "alberti" bass, which is a common feature in music. The graphic representation of the "alberti" bass looks like this:



If Mozart were thinking of an exercise for his students in writing this movement, it would be an exercise to keep the left hand accompaniment quiet while the right hand "sings" the melody.

The third movement is full of energy and zooms past quickly. As short as it is, the opening theme keeps recurring in this short movement from time to time. But unlike the subject reappearances of the fugue, counting them here is a much simpler task as each reappearance is unaltered and preceded by a pause. How many can you count?

Answer on page 16



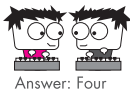
Coda: One Pianist, Two Pianos, Four Hands

Track 13

Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907), a Norwegian composer in the Romantic period, composed a second piano part as an accompaniment to several of Mozart's piano sonatas, among which Sonata in C major, K.545 was one of them. However, they were not meant to be taken too seriously, as he wrote them merely to be amusing, and to accompany and entertain his students who were studying these sonatas at the time. Nobody would ever know if Mozart would have approved of Grieg's idea had he still been alive then!

This two-piano recording has been recorded by only one pianist, with the assistance of modern technology, something called multi-track recording. This is how it was done:

1. *The first piano part – Mozart's original sonata – was recorded first.*
2. *While listening to the computer playback of the first piano part on headphones, the Grieg's second piano part was recorded, strictly following the speed of the first part.*
3. *The two parts were put and mixed together using multi-track recording software on the computer.*



Who Is Ludwig van Beethoven?



On December 17, 1770, Beethoven was born in Bonn, a small but attractive town in Germany. Himself a court musician, his father very soon discovered that his son possessed tremendous talent in music and wanted him to be the next Mozart. As a result, he was very strict with young Beethoven and his musical training.

Beethoven was a talented pianist, organist and violinist from a young age and was particularly good at improvising. On his twelfth birthday, he received a special present that he treasured very much: J S Bach's music. Among them were the Preludes and Fugues, and they became a musical bible for Beethoven ever since.

In 1787, the seventeen-year-old Beethoven – with letters of recommendation and some of his compositions in his briefcase – went to Vienna to visit Mozart. Even Mozart – infamous for his impulsive and blunt comments about fellow musicians – had nothing but praises for Beethoven.

Not only did Beethoven meet Mozart on this memorable trip, his horizon was also broadened. He saw the opportunities Vienna could offer him, and realised the limitation a small town like Bonn posed. Five years later in 1792, Beethoven left Bonn for Vienna and made it his home.

Upon arriving in Vienna, he met Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809), and became his student as well as his friend. Thanks to the blossoming music publishing industry, his first work was published in print three years later and Beethoven turned out to be the first composer whose music was printed regularly during his lifetime.



Beethoven quickly made his name as a pianist and composer in Vienna. But he neither turned out to be the next Mozart, nor did he ever want to be. Beethoven was always determined to be a creator and an artist who wrote for eternity. He had a powerful personality, and was always full of original ideas. When other composers followed the set rules and forms of composing, he stretched them, twisted them, and bent them to fit his ideas. He was a revolutionary.

Even his worsening hearing problem failed to deter him from his quest, as he continued to produce work after work that tested the limits of the tradition, even after he became completely deaf in 1817. His Third and Ninth Symphonies were both the longest in history at the time, and the orchestra his music demanded kept getting bigger. He even begged his piano manufacturer to make a more powerful piano for his needs!

In many aspects, it is near impossible to place Beethoven neatly under the Classical period, because he stretched the traditions to the limits; and in the process, transformed the style. If Bach had left a giant footprint in the history of classical music, Beethoven had single-handedly performed a metamorphosis for the history of music and was the source of inspiration for many composers who follow him.

Beethoven died in Vienna on March 26, 1827, after suffering a long illness.

Points of Interest in...

Track  –  **Sonata in C-sharp minor**, Op.27 No.2 "*Moonlight*"

Quasi una Fantasia

Given as a title by Beethoven, "Quasi una fantasia" means "like a fantasy" and was exactly what he had in mind when this work was composed in 1801.

Although this sonata has so affectionately become known as the "Moonlight" Sonata, it was in fact, neither Beethoven's idea to call it the "Moonlight" Sonata, nor was he even aware of this title. Apparently in 1832, several years after Beethoven's death, a famous poet compared the first movement of this sonata to "the moonlight shining on a lake", and that was the origin of the nickname.

A fantasy, by definition, is free to defy rules. As a revolutionary who did not like to follow rules but instead, made them, Beethoven departed from the customary sonata tradition by beginning the work with a slow movement.

The first movement, as the poet justly described, is beauty at its most natural form. Yet, there is also an underlying element of sorrow in the music. The second movement, a dance-like minuet and trio, immediately brings the listener to a much livelier mood.



Did you know?

Op. is the abbreviation of Opus, meaning "work" in Latin. An Opus number is the standard catalogue number, used widely since Beethoven's time. Like the "K." numbers in Mozart's time, an Opus number lists a composer's works by chronological order.



Such Emotion!

The last movement is the most substantial movement of the three, and this would have been a first movement by tradition. Not only did Beethoven experiment with placing this movement last in the sonata, he also redefined the limits of emotions in music and displayed a fierce, intense and powerful character in this movement. Nobody in his time dared to be so wild and demanded so much from the piano!

The music required so much power that Beethoven was known to have broken hammers and strings of his piano when he performed this piece himself!

Listen to the Mozart Sonata and this Beethoven Sonata one immediately after the other.

Did you notice the much-widened range of emotions in the latter work? Under Beethoven's pen, music became capable of expressing a lot more emotion within a single work, and the range of emotions was no longer confined to the nobleness of the upper class.





Coda: What Makes Beethoven's Music So Great?

Beethoven's melody is not particularly melodious.

(The melody in the first movement begins with six repeated notes; and in the last movement, the melody is nothing but a series of arpeggios!)

His harmony is not as clever as Bach's.

His rhythm, as in the first movement, is not particularly interesting either.

So, what makes Beethoven's music so great?



Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990) – a celebrated composer, conductor and music educator in the 20th century – perfectly described the greatness of Beethoven's music in his book, "The Joy of Music" (1959):

Beethoven broke all the rules, and turned out pieces of breath-taking rightness. Rightness – that's the word! When you get the feeling that whatever note succeeds the last is the only possible note that can rightly happen at that instant, in that context, then chances are you're listening to Beethoven.

He has the power to make you feel: something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.



MOVEMENT IV



ROMANTIC!! 

Unlike the words “baroque” or “classical” which may not be of much use to our daily language today, “romantic” is an adjective we often use in describing love and fantasy, or as an emotion or expression. Not surprisingly then, when we hear music from the Romantic period, we hear “emotion and expression” above everything else.

The Romantic period runs from about 1827 to about 1910, just before World War I. Even more so than before, it is nearly impossible to draw a clear-cut line to mark the beginning or the end of the Romantic period.

Composers prior to Beethoven’s time, as in the times of Bach and Mozart, wrote music primarily to serve a commodity or a patron. Musicians more or less belonged to the same class as servants did and were expected to dine with the servants after a performance in the court. A composer as great as Joseph Haydn contently regarded himself as a servant and never dreamed that his music would be performed after his death. Naturally, composers back then were quite happy to follow order and write according to the traditions of the Classical period, so long as the purpose was served.

Composers in the Classical period would probably ask themselves this question when they began to compose: “What can I write creatively within this form that can fit within its rules?” Whereas composers in the Romantic period would ask: “How can I express this feeling in the music?” Form, order and traditions can come later.

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Inspired by Beethoven's revolutionary movement, composers after him began to write for eternity in the hope of gaining a place in history. With this came greater freedom and more daring imagination, which enabled composers to explore at greater lengths in developing their own individual styles, breaking away from the tradition as far as necessary and acceptable. In order to express the ever-increasing range of emotions, orchestras became bigger, and pianos were also built to be larger, stronger and more powerful.

There was certainly no shortage of great composers in this period, and as promised, each delivered a somewhat unique and distinct style within the greater Romantic traditions. In Austria and Germany, there were Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828), Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847), Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) and Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) among others; elsewhere in Europe, there were Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849) from Poland and Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886) from Hungary, just to name a few.



Who Is Frédéric Chopin?



Whether one chooses to go by his French or Polish name, Frédéric (French) or Fryderyk (Polish) Chopin is today, remembered as a Polish composer. Born on March 1, 1810 near Warsaw in Poland, Chopin's father was a French immigrant and his mother was Polish.

Like many great composers before him, his musical talent became apparent early on, and he was already a promising pianist by the age of six. He fell deeply in love with the piano and everything he did on the instrument flowed easily and naturally out of him. He was already performing in public concerts as a child, and published his first composition – a polonaise – at the age of eight.

As a child, Chopin listened to his mother play Polish folk melodies on the piano, and they spent many summers in the countryside of Poland where villagers often got together to sing and dance. Chopin became so fascinated with the folk music that his first polonaise – a Polish processional march – turned out to be the first of many works devoted to his love for the Polish folk traditions. In all, he composed nineteen polonaises and over fifty mazurkas (another kind of Polish folk dance). He was very much celebrated in Warsaw for his display of love for his country through his music.

As dearly as he loved Poland, Chopin soon realised that Warsaw was too provincial for him to pursue his career in music. He had already performed in Vienna and Germany to great acclaim when he decided to move to Paris in 1831. While in Paris, he quickly established himself as a respected pianist and composer, and also devoted a lot of his time to teaching.

With much of his music composed for either himself or his students to perform, it demands the most advanced of skills. Through his music and his playing, Chopin redefined the possibilities of the sounds that can be produced on the piano. Above all, he makes the piano sing!

As one of his students recalled, Chopin's fingers "sing and bring tears to your eyes." As a teacher, he expected no less from his students, and often asked them to always keep a singing line. He also gave his students plenty of Bach and Mozart to study, the two composers whom he adored greatly. Like Beethoven before him, Chopin admired Bach's Preludes and Fugues and included them in his daily practice and warm-up routine before concerts. As a tribute and a challenge to Bach's genius, Chopin composed a set of twenty-four preludes that follows Bach's idea of writing a piece in each and every key.


However, dissimilar to any great composer before him, he decided early on that he would only write for the instrument he loved. As a result, only a handful of his compositions involved other instruments and even in those works, the piano has an important role to play. In this regard, Chopin is most unusual and perhaps the greatest composer ever to have earned a place in history – next to Bach, Mozart and Beethoven – without ever writing a string quartet, a symphony or an opera.

Two years after Chopin's love affair with the famous book writer George Sand (her pen name) came to a fruitless end, he died in Paris on October 17, 1849.



Chopin dedicated his life to writing piano music, and almost every note and piece that he wrote became a masterpiece. To choose a single work that represents his mastery is all but impossible, but this particular piece has been presented here for a number of note-worthy reasons:

- 1. Heritage:** Since Chopin's first published work was a polonaise, it is therefore fitting to explore the world of Chopin's music and his roots in Poland with this "grand" polonaise.
- 2. Sentiment:** This polonaise was composed in 1830 – 1831, right at the time when Chopin left Poland for Paris.
- 3. Orchestration:** This work was originally written for piano and orchestra, and is the last of the few pieces that Chopin ever composed for instruments other than solo piano.

The orchestral parts in the original version are, however, very insignificant. Apart from the opening introduction (Track  0'00" – 0'26"), the orchestra merely plays a secondary role in supporting the solo piano. The orchestra seems to play only the "punctuation" rather than the "text" of the piece, and its role is so minimal that the piece sounds perfectly fine without it as is heard on this CD. Chopin performed this polonaise with orchestra only once at the first performance, after which this work was largely played as a solo piece. (In the solo version, the piano fills in for the orchestral part without any difficulty!)

It is also interesting to note that the Grande Polonaise was written in 1830 – 1831, but the preceding slow section – Andante Spianato was composed and added later in 1834 and was intended to be played by solo piano only.

Andante Spianato: The Singing Piano

“Andante” literally means “in a walking pace” and “Spianato” translates to “smooth”. This slow section, to be played “smoothly in a walking pace”, displays one of Chopin’s finest qualities as a composer – his ability to write the most breath-takingly beautiful melody. Pure and unsophisticated, the right hand sings the melody like a human voice over the flowing accompaniment of the left hand. It creates a serene atmosphere in contrast to what is to come in the polonaise.

Polonaise: A Polish Procession

Inspired by the Polish processional march or dance, a polonaise has, like a waltz, three beats in a bar; but dissimilar to it, the strong beat falls on the second of the three beats instead of the first (BOM-cha-cha in a waltz, but bom-CHA-cha in polonaise) and is generally much more energetic and masculine-sounding in character.



What Makes It a Polonaise?

If you carefully follow the left hand accompaniment in this polonaise, you will hear this rhythmic pattern (Track 10 0'26" onwards) – a typical feature of the polonaise – that keeps repeating throughout the piece:



Flying Fingers!

Another characteristic of Chopin's music is the fast-moving notes in the melody, as is particularly apparent near the end of this polonaise (Track 10 8'45" onwards). As music was increasingly presented in public concerts in the Romantic period, performers needed such difficult passages to show off their spectacular skills in order to impress the audiences! This flamboyant style of playing became known as the virtuoso style, as championed by Chopin's contemporary, Franz Liszt.

IMPRESSIONISM *What?*

Composers since Beethoven drifted off to different directions in search of their individual “romantic” styles. Chopin mastered the piano repertoire and made the piano sing; some, like Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) fought to keep the classical tradition alive as much as possible; others, like Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883) went for even bigger symphonic sound and more dramatic music.

As German music became more dramatic and intense than ever in the latter part of the 19th century, the French had something else in mind. Inspired by the famous French painter, Claude Monet and his 1874 painting, named “An Impression: Sunrise”, a new style of art – what we now call Impressionism – was born.

Monet set out to paint an impression of the sunrise, but not the sunrise as he saw it. Instead of painting to illustrate objects, for example the orange sun, white clouds and the blue sea, he painted an impression of sunrise. There were no definite outlines for any particular object in the painting; light and colours became more important than lines and were blended and used in such a way that a blurry and misty effect was achieved. This style of painting turned out to be a subtler, yet deeper way of communication, allowing more room for one’s imagination.

Fascinated by this new art style, French composers such as Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937) began to explore different musical sounds and colours by using different combinations of chords and harmonies that would normally be deemed “unacceptable” by the traditional rules. In this impressionistic style of music, the melody is no longer the most important, much the same way as a line is not in an impressionistic painting.

Impressionism is largely regarded as a style within the Romantic period than a period in itself. Based primarily in France, Impressionism began in the last two decades of the 19th century and contributed to the development of classical music in the early part of the 20th century.



Who Is Claude Debussy?



On August 22, 1862, Claude-Achille Debussy was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a town just outside Paris in France. He was born with a large bump on his forehead; and as he grew up, he hid the bump under his hair. He also chose to drop the middle name “Achille” and became known simply as Claude Debussy.

When Debussy was a child, his father was sent to prison for taking part in the revolution of 1871. Debussy had always disliked schools; and one day, his mother sent him to Cannes to stay with his godmother Aunt Octavie, where Debussy first came in contact with the nature and developed a love for it.

By the age of ten, he became a brilliant pianist and won a place to study at the Paris Conservatoire – one of the finest music schools in the world. However, he was naturally a rebellious student, and never hesitated to challenge and question even his professors. He was never someone who followed rules, and would write music that his teachers thought was too “modern”!

Nevertheless, his talents were recognised and at the age of twenty-two, he won the greatest awards of all – the Prix de Rome, which enabled him to further his study in the French Academy in Rome in 1885 – 1887. While in Italy, he met Franz Liszt; but hated the experience in Italy so much that he fled Rome and returned to Paris. It was after his return to Paris that he began to compose masterpiece after masterpiece, and became the most significant composer in France.

Debussy was known to be a very sensitive man. He never enjoyed appearing in public, and was not very comfortable with people he did not know. As a pianist, he was not as flamboyant as Chopin or Liszt were, but his touch was always extremely sensitive, and he perhaps possessed the most sensitive ears any musician had.

With his delicate style of playing as well as in his compositions, he set out to transform the piano sound, taking one step further than what Chopin did. Debussy insisted that the piano should sound like an "instrument without hammers". (Sounds are produced on the piano by the hammers hitting the strings; and as a result, piano sounds are percussive by nature.)

At a time when Impressionism in art was taking place at the end of the 19th century, Debussy became very fascinated and turned out to be a musical painter himself.

Almost all of his works have titles that suggest something, but Debussy never intended to write music that tells a story. Instead, he wanted his music to give the impression of something; be it the sea, the moonlight or Spain. This is the very reason why he is remembered today as an impressionistic composer – a term that he, in fact, did not like very much.

If Chopin had made the piano sing, Debussy gave music the capability to paint. Impressionist or not, Debussy was the greatest musical painter in the history of music. Debussy died on March 25, 1918 in Paris, at a time when France was being attacked by Germany in World War I.



Signature, Not Title

Composed in 1910, this prelude is one of the twenty-four Debussy wrote, and is often known as "La Cathédrale Engloutie", or "The Sunken Cathedral" in English.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect about Debussy's Preludes is that he "signed off" each prelude with a descriptive "suggestion". But instead of giving a title to each piece at the top, he inserted the description at the end rather like a signature, discreetly and subtly. In this prelude as in all others, his signature was in bracket and began with "...".

(... La Cathédrale Engloutie)

Instead of stating in a title: "This piece is about the sunken cathedral. Now listen to it!" Debussy wanted us to listen to the music first, and then softly ask us afterwards, "Does it give you an impression of the sunken cathedral?"

Although Debussy never meant to tell a story with his Preludes, this particular prelude does have an ancient legendary story attached to it. Before reading on, why don't you listen to the music and get a musical impression first, before finding a little more about the story?

The Story

Once upon a time, there was a place called the City of Ys where the entire city was trapped below water under the Atlantic Ocean. The "sunken" cathedral in the of City Ys, however, would rise above water at dawn in certain times of the year.



As evidence of Debussy's intention to paint this story, he gave specific instructions to the performer on the score at the beginning, "In a gently resonant mist". As the music gets louder moments later, he wrote, "Gradually coming out of the mist".

With these new pieces of information in mind, listen to the prelude again and see if that changes your impression?

Were you able to visualise an impression of a cathedral rising above the water?

Did you hear the musical impression of the bells and sounds of the cathedral?

Can you imagine what the cathedral looks like when listening to this piece?



Every person will have a slightly different picture in his or her mind and that is the essence of Debussy's music. It is this freedom in music that Debussy treasured most.



Right around the First World War in 1914 – 1918, the classical music tradition began to break up into even more different styles than during the Romantic period. Some composers continued the great traditions of the past; some broke away in search for new sounds like Debussy; and some abandoned the traditions altogether and went for the extremes in order to express the harsh and violent world in which they lived at the time.

Because of the many different schools of thought and individual styles, it is impossible to categorise this “period” with any kind of descriptive name, other than “The 20th Century”. It is also impractical to have any kind of general description of the characteristics of the music composed in the 20th century. They are simply too different!

Crossing The Atlantic!

By now, most of you must be wondering why our musical journey has been confined only to Europe. The history of classical music up until the 20th century indeed had been dominated by the Europeans, but that is not to say that there was no music making elsewhere in the world. So long as there were people, there was music.

Our final stop on this musical journey will take us across the Atlantic Ocean, to the United States of America in the 20th century, where many American composers began to make significant contributions to music history.

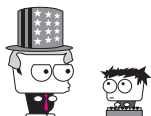
Who Is George Gershwin?



On September 26, 1898, George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York in the United States to Russian-Jewish parents. Raised in a modest family in New York, he became interested in music at an early age and always knew he wanted to pursue a career in music.

At the rather late age of twelve, he began taking piano lessons, which opened his eyes to the world of classical music and famous composers such as Debussy. Gershwin also particularly admired the great pianist-composer, Franz Liszt of the Romantic period. At fifteen, he dropped out of school to begin working as a pianist and song-plugger in "Tin Pan Alley", a location in New York City where aspiring composers and song writers would bring their music to a publisher in hopes of selling the tunes for a modest amount of money.

Gershwin's exposure to thousands of songs as a song-plugger gave him valuable experience and taught him what it took to write a successful song. In 1918, he published his first song "Swanee" and from that point on, his fame began to grow and his music became increasingly popular.



With a phenomenal gift for writing melodies, much of his music was written for the musical theatre where he had many Broadway hits including the political satire “Of Thee I Sing” (1931), the first ever musical comedy to win the highest honour – the Pulitzer Prize.

However, it was Gershwin’s influence and contribution to the classical music tradition that earned him a place in history. “Rhapsody in Blue”, written in 1924 for piano, jazz band and symphonic orchestra incorporated jazz music into a classical concert work, creating a new musical language and opening doors to many fellow American composers.

Unfortunately, Gershwin’s life came to a tragic and premature end when he fell into a coma in 1937. Despite efforts from the White House in sending two of its Destroyer aircrafts to get the best brain surgeon in the country to attempt to save him, the coma ended his life just short of his 39th birthday on July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California.

Points of Interest in...

Track 12 **Rhapsody in Blue** (for solo piano)

What Is Jazz?

Jazz was born sometime around 1896 in New Orleans in Southern United States, and was widely regarded as a kind of “lowly” entertainment music heard only in bars, restaurants and hotels. Before Gershwin’s time, jazz was well separated from the classical music tradition.

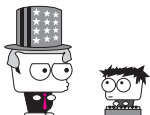
What Are the Blues?

The origin of “The Blues” probably dates back to the end of the Civil War, at a time when African slaves had been freed physically, but not financially. Not being equipped to enter the “free” world, they would often moan and sing of their problems with love, money and life. This idea explains the touch of melancholy in blues music.

Experiment in Modern Music

The time was 1924. America had just discovered jazz and was eager to share it with the world. In an effort to give this rather wild new music some measure of respectability, Paul Whiteman – a celebrated band leader – decided to present a concert called “Experiment in Modern Music” in one of New York’s most famous classical venues, The Aeolian Hall. “Rhapsody in Blue” was written for this occasion.

As Gershwin remarked about the occasion, “Suddenly an idea occurred to me. There had been so much chatter about the limitation of jazz, not to speak of the manifest misunderstandings of its function. Jazz, they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow. Inspired by this aim, I set to work composing with unusual rapidity. No set plan was in mind – no structure to which my music would conform. The Rhapsody, as you see, began as a purpose, not a plan.”



Written in just several weeks, the work showcased the rich harmonies, the sophisticated rhythms and the beautiful melodies that jazz can offer to a classical work. However, the structure of the work, as the title suggests, is rhapsodic and rather loose, perhaps too much so that it has attracted criticisms by serious composers.

Weak Structure?

Leonard Bernstein described the work as “a string of separate paragraphs stuck together with a thin paste of flour and water. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. You can even interchange these sections with one another and no harm is done.”

In fact, Gershwin went so far as to indicate on the score that several sections could be omitted if desired. This is in sharp contrast with Beethoven’s music, where omitting a single bar would have been a crime!

Despite its “flaw” in structure, “Rhapsody in Blue” remains firmly established in the standard classical repertoire today and is as much loved today as it was on the day of its first performance.

As a talented pianist who liked to show off and entertain at parties, Gershwin arranged this solo piano version as heard on this CD.

Warren Lee | artist & author

Since his televised début with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra at the tender age of six, Hong Kong-born pianist Warren Lee was destined for a lifelong career in music, both on and off the stage. His unique musical upbringing was featured on TVB's "Sunday's File" in 1993, and this TV documentary has since been frequently shown by universities as a teaching reference in "gifted education".



As the winner of the 1995 Stravinsky Awards International Piano Competition and the "Grand Prix Ivo Pogorelich", Warren was hailed by critics as a pianist "with technique to burn, an extraordinary intellect, and a Horowitzian colour of romanticism". Indebted to his mentors Professors Christopher Elton and Boris Berman, Warren graduated from the Royal Academy of Music and Yale School of Music with the highest of honors.

On the stage, Warren's artistry has brought him to concert stages across three continents, appearing in prominent occasions such as the Ivo Pogorelich Festival in Germany, the Taos Chamber Music Festival and the Yale Piano Symposium in the United States, as well as the ABRSM Gala Concert, Yale 300th Anniversary Gala Dinner and the Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award Ceremony in Hong Kong.



As a recording artist, he has made over a dozen recordings for Radio Television Hong Kong, and has also served as its Artist-in-Residence in 2004 and 2005. Over the years, Warren has collaborated with eminent musicians such as maestros Hu Yongyan and Samuel Wong, violinist Dennis Kim, flutists Robert Aitken and Trevor Wye as well as clarinetists Andrew Simon and Nicolas Baldeyrou.

Appointed a Guest Professor by the Central Conservatory of Music EOS Orchestra Academy, Warren devotes much of his time off the stage advancing various education initiatives and has taught at institutions such as The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University School of Professional and Continuing Education and The Hong Kong Institute of Education. After serving as the Music Director of Yew Chung Education Foundation, Warren earned an MBA degree from the HKUST Business School in 2007 and was elected to the international honor society, Beta Gamma Sigma.

For his most updated biography, please visit <www.warren-lee.com>.