

Musical Genres - Styles and Eras.

Classifying music into various genres does not have a right or wrong system. There are many genres & subgenres, and different ways of classifying music. At the broadest level, we can talk about music as being part of the Classical, Folk, Jazz, or World Music traditions. This resource touches [very briefly] on the Classical Music tradition.

Typically when people talk about “classical music” they are referring to music written in the European tradition, though of course, this music could now be written anywhere in the world. Classical music can be written in a number of different styles, and the date when it was written can give a strong hint about which style it is in.

In broad terms the **Medieval** era runs up until 1400BC, the **Renaissance** from 1400-1600, the **Baroque** era from 1600-1750, the **Classical** from 1750-1820 (ish), and the **Romantic** era from 1810-1910. The current **Modern classical** period run from around the start of the twentieth century and is further complicated by being subcategorized into a shed-load of different styles. Sorry.

Does it matter?

Yes! (and No). The thing is, some folk (ok, Teachers [and examiners!]) can get very sniffy if music from one period is played in the wrong manner. Think of an opera singer trying to do rap music. IT JUST DOESN'T SOUND RIGHT. It's not **Authentic**. The reason why the answer might be “No”, is that music is about having fun, and being playful & creative, and sometimes it just works even when it shouldn't. I may just finish off with an example at the end...

How can you tell which era a piece of music is from, or which style it is written in?

It can be tricky, because periods can over-lap, and some composers were “ahead of their time”, whilst others carried on referring back to earlier styles. However, if you practice listening to pieces with an intelligent ear, it does get easier...



I'd recommend initially that you read through this resource, just dipping into the carefully selected examples. You'll find some stunning music that you may well want to revisit in full later on

Medieval era up to 1400BC,

This is when the first time musical notation was used, written by monks and Roman Catholic Church officials. A good indicator that music is from this time period is if it is a single melodic line, sung in Latin without accompaniment.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBgoU2M5J_s

Renaissance era 1400-1600,

Church music remained central, but forms of music began to take shape as social dancing grew in popularity as well. A standard form of musical notation developed. Instrumentation further developed in the Renaissance era with the first Strings, Wind, and Percussion instruments, and portable pipe organs.

A good indicator that music is from this time period is if it is a rather more complex choral music, sung in Latin without accompaniment, or instrumental music which has a spritely rhythmic dance quality.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4M6FF9h1CM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxPB76pmWss>

Baroque era from 1600-1750.

The Baroque era is often artistically grand, and features elaborate decorations. (In architecture “Baroque” means “lavishly embellished”). The influence of the church was still strong, but it started to weaken in this era, being eclipsed by patronage from the courts, & aristocracy. The Baroque era gave birth to orchestral music and opera. A key sound of the Baroque era is the distinctive timbre of the harpsichord.

Examples of Baroque composers include Bach, (arguably one of the greatest composers of all time), Vivaldi, Gabrielli, Monteverdi, and towards the end of the period, Handel.

A good indicator that music is from this time period is if it has...

- **Crisp, light articulation.**
- **Strong melodic ideas, sometimes with different parts copying one-another.**
- **Melodies often ornamented with Trills, Turns or Mordents (i.e twiddly bits), esp. at the end of phrases.**
- **Energetic, lively rhythms; often dance-like.**
- **Limited range of pitch – it won’t have extremely high or low notes.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOZEj8wyj-I>

(Stunning performance of “Brandenburg Concerto No 1”)

Notice the Baroque oboes, bassoon and natural horn. They have very little key work on them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cga0VV4JQHA> Vivaldi’s “Gloria”

Classical era from 1750-1820 (ish).

Classical music is known for its attention to detail and structural clarity. Instead of decorative detail, music from the classical age focused on balance, beauty & symmetry, mirroring developments in architecture. This era runs parallel with the intellectual movement called the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment championed the rising belief that human reasoning can overcome problems of the world. This influenced the way composers treated compositions. This is the era of composers like Mozart, Haydn, and Schubert and (in his earlier work) Beethoven,

Music from the Classical era often exhibits

- **Regular and clear phrases.**
- **Graceful and elegant melodies, often with repetition, or clear answering phrases.**
- **Accompaniments that outline the relatively simple harmonies – broken chords / arpeggios.**
- **Dynamic shaping, with crescendo / diminuendo.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trM2nXK342M>

(Mozart Gran Partita for 13 wind instruments is one of the most important chamber works for woodwind written during this period).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT_63UntRJE (Mozart Clarinet Concerto – 2nd Movt @ 12’56” – a perfect example of the four points made above)

Romantic era from 1810-1910.

The Romantic era is characterised by the dominance of Emotion, taking precedence over structure and form. The artist (composer &/or performer) often takes a central role – a sometimes agonised genius; sometimes a Virtuoso; set apart from the rest of society. Literature, and also Nature, was often the starting point for composition. The scale of works grew – both their length, and the number of players necessary to play them. Instruments reached the forms that they still have today. Examples of Romantic composers include (late) Beethoven, Schubert, Mahler, Bruckner, Brahms, Berlioz.

Music from this time period often has

- **Lyrical, song-like melodies – extended phrases, and with obvious punctuation.**
- **Rich and expressive harmonies.**
- **Thicker sonorities, with significant use of the sustaining pedal in Piano music.**
- **Wider dynamic ranges *fff* – *ppp* often using sudden changes in levels.**
- **Flexible tempi – use of Rubato.**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ym3JVzD_1Q8 Richard Strauss Duett Concertino for clarinet and bassoon in F.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXHrHQ5ZEHo> Berlioz Sinfonie Fantastique 4th Movt – March to the scaffold. [Not only the Composer or performer as a genius – also the Conductor. Conducting with your eyebrows?]

Modern Classical Music

Music from the end of the Romantic period, into the 20th century and beyond is considered modern classical music. There are so many strands; including Impressionism, Serialism, Nationalism, Minimalism, Film music, Jazz influenced, “Music Concrete” the “Avant Garde”; that simple classification is pretty much impossible.... *“The twentieth century...presents a greater variety of musical styles than does any other time in musical history”* (Peter Dimond – Music made simple).

20th Century Music may exhibit

- **Vigorous rhythms, with use of spiky accents – possibly using jazzy rhythms and syncopations**
- **Unpredictable phrase lengths in melodies**
- **Adventurous harmonies – sometimes dissonant**
- **Wide dynamic possibilities – sudden changes**
- **Occasionally the complete abandonment of any coherent tonal system.**

Examples of 20th Century composers – Stravinsky, Debussy, Satie, Shostakovitch, Bartok, Britten, Bernstein, Stockhausen, Arvo Part.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZkIAVGlfWk> Stravinsky “Firebird”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQTa-EEqkiQ>

Jess Gillam on soprano saxophone playing ‘Itturalde’ by Czarda.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYvEvP2cmdk> Don’t miss this...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8wL1AR7iqo> Listen out for the amazing recorder playing!

And **This** is the reason why the answer to the earlier question might on occasion be “No”,... Baroque meets Calypso and a touch of Jazz, in a weird kind of fusion. It shouldn’t be allowed. But fortunately, it is – especially when it’s done this well...