

# Western music history assignment

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It was, however, not always so black-and-white during the days of early musical revolution; it was even less of the case when it came to classical music. For the remainder of this thesis, I would like to bring attention to four composers who I felt not only helped music evolve in terms of style, but also change the way the world will look at them, forever. First, let us begin by defining what the various styles of classical music is, as well as their evolutions. Early Western classical music is divided into medieval, renaissance and baroque, the last of which is where this thesis will be delving into first before going along the timeline.

Mozart and Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon has said that while the arguably two most famous composers of all time have helped popularize classical music amongst the general masses through various means of media, it is without a doubt that without the likes of Bach and his peers, there would have been no Gustav Mahler or Richard Strauss. That would take place centuries after most of these composers have passed on. Nevertheless, how exactly did the composers of back then affect not only music, but people in general now?

Richard Tarusis from the University of California argued that John Adams' peer *The Death of Cliffhanger* was romanticism terrorists, and Australian-American composer Melissa Dunghy has been frowned upon for using wordings from controversial speeches against neo-Baroque styled music for politically charged pieces. Did classical music really have a hand in the political or socio-economic scene of their time period? Let us take a look. Going not only in chronological order but also in terms of musical evolution,

the first to come up would be a man known the world over by his last name: Johann Sebastian Bach.

Such is the legacy of the man that after over 200 years of his death, his middle and surname would be taken as the stage name of rock/metal band Skid Row's frontman. While most people would assume a composer is merely someone who sits at a piano, Bach was in reality an organist, harpsichordist, violist and violinist. A pioneer of the Baroque period, Bach began musical tutelage under his father, a famous local violinist from his hometown of Arnstadt, Germany. Born in 1685, the young Johann Sebastian had to live with his brother Johann Christopher from the tender young age of 9 after his parents had passed away.

Through his brother, who as an organ player in church and had himself studied under Johann Poachable, Bach began learning the clavichord before being given a scholarship to study music at the age of 14. This would later prove invaluable as it exposed him to a wider aspect of European culture, whilst rubbing shoulders with the sons of noblemen. Once free from his studies at Arnstadt School in Arnstadt, Bach came into the employment of several churches and even one Duke Johann Ernst from Weimar. His dissatisfaction with his employers led him to seek a job at Arnstadt's, where not only did he have better working conditions, but it is also where he met his future wife Maria Barbara Bach. After convincing the church and city government to renovate the organ at the church, he in turn wrote his first "hit" – "Gott sei mit uns" for the inauguration of the new council. In 1723, Bach began to get seriously busy and began

rewriting his and other composer's composition, this is a common practice in those days, it is known that Bach's technique of imitating and improvising is nearly as creative as an original composition.

It was between 1722 and 1742 when Bach would write The Well-Tempered Clavier to demonstrate a technique called "equal temperament", which meant that all adjacent notes will have an identical frequency ratio, and doing so in all 24 major and minor keys. Due to this, most classically trained pianists can find their way between an F# and a Gb, which are two different notes although they are the same inharmoniously. Indeed, after his death, Beethoven called Bach "the original father of 1903).

After the passing of Bach in 1750, six years later a boy would be born also in Germany, and just like Bach, have his first name given to the son of rock agent Eddie Van Halen, and his middle name the title of a cult movie: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Although widely regarded as someone from the classical era as opposed to Baroque as in the case of Bach, Mozart came from similar beginnings: his father was too a famous violinist.

However, unlike Bach, Mozart needed not receive any musical education; he was spotted as prodigy early on by his father at the tender age of 3, and already writing simple compositions by the age of 5. Along with his sister Maria Anna, nicknamed "Manner", Mozart and family would travel across Europe to play in courts to the audience of several noblemen. Indeed, a particular influence on the young Mozart would be to see one Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, whom he met in London in 1764 and 1765.

Touring back then was even more difficult than in today's time, as they constantly had to wait for reimbursement from the nobility as well as near fatal illnesses that struck both the children as well as father Leopold. After returning from Italy on March 1 773, Mozart, who had by now composed several operas, soon found appointment in the Syllabus court by employment of ruler Prince-Archbishop Hieronymus Colored. It was here hat Mozart developed some of his best works: five violin concertos, the only ones he ever wrote, as well as a K. 71 , a piano concerto considered by many to be breakthrough piece of music (Solomon, 1995). However, after plying his trade there as well as Paris, it would not be until his move to Vienna in 1781 after a falling out with his employer Archbishop Colored that Mozart would become the composer we know of him as today. This move is the revolutionary step in his career, as well as his life (Solomon, 1995). He soon immersed himself in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederic Handel, due to Gottfried van Sweetie's owning many manuscripts of Baroque maestros.

Needless to say, his knowledge of these pieces of work along with his prodigious skills made him a remarkably famous and successful composer, which in turn led him to becoming a Freemason in 1784. Towards the end of his life, Mozart returned to writing operas, writing the masterpieces The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni before the Status- Turkish War hindered his career. Indeed, a young Beethoven spent several weeks in Vienna hoping to study with him, although no records indicate that he two ever met. Alas, Mozart would fall ill on 6 September 1791 and die almost exactly 3 months later, on 5 December at the age of 35.

Nevertheless, when one door closes, another opens. This came in the form of a Polish composer by the name of Frédéric Chopin. Like Mozart, Chopin too was a prodigy, and likewise also received musical training from not only his father who was a flautist and violinist, but also his mother who played the piano. Unlike Mozart, he did receive musical education from Czech composer Jan Zana. Just like his predecessors, he started his career at the age of 7 by giving public concerts, before becoming a playmate to the son of Grand Duke Constantine, the Russian Poland ruler.

By the autumn of 1826, Chopin began studies under the wing of composer Józef Elsler at the Warsaw Conservatory. Three years later, he would be premiering his Variations on “Lied der Elza”, Op. 2 which is a variation of a theme from Mozart's aforementioned Don Giovanni. The difference between Chopin and his virtuoso predecessors is that his income from teaching and composing allowed him to be financially independent of concert-giving something Mozart and Bach were not so lucky to have.

After leaving Poland for the very last time in 1831, Chopin became a French citizen and firmly established himself as one of Paris's premiere piano players and composers, playing pieces by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and also his own. Combining elements of his traditional Polish folk music as well as from the composers above, Chopin ushered in a new age of music: the Romantic period. Alas, just like many greats before and after him, Chopin's health, which was already known to be very poor since a very young age, deteriorated very quickly.

On 17th October 1849, Chopin passed away with his sister Ludwika by his side. His cause of death has been thought to be tuberculosis, although it is debatable; it has since simply been known as “Chopping disease”. She then removed his heart and placed it in an urn, which is now interred in Warsaw Holy Cross church. It should be noted that his funeral was a grand affair, with entrance being restricted to ticket holders, as well as Mozart Requiem being played at the ceremony complete with several soloists, in addition to his own work.

Chopin was known for employing a rubato style of playing into his work, a style that was also prevalent in the works of Mozart before him. Fellow Romantic era composer Robert Schumann also noted that Chopin had a strong sense of Polish nationalism in him; he once said in a review of Chopin's concertos in 1836 that “Now that the Poles are in deep mourning [after the failure of the 1830 rising], their appeal to us artists is even stronger if the mighty autocrat in the north [I. E. Tsar Alexander I] could know that in Chopin's works, in the simple strains of his mazurka, there lurks a dangerous enemy, he would place a ban on his music.

Chopin's works are cannon buried in flowers! “(Schumann, 1988). Last but not least, the composer who is considered to have bridged the gap between late 19th century and early 20th century Western classical music: Claude Debussy. Along with fellow composer Maurice Ravel, Debussy was one of the most prominent and influential composers of Impressionist music. Hailing from France, Debussy is the only one of the four composers I've mentioned that came from a non-musical background; his father owned a shop which sold china and crockery, and his mother was a seamstress.

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He began taking violin lessons at the age of seven, who in turn drew the attention of supposed Chopin student Marie Mathilde de Réville. At the age of 10, he enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire, where he spent 11 years studying and struck up a friendship with fellow student Isadora Philipp, who after Debussy's death would be asked for advice on how to play his pieces. Although he played pieces by Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin in public, Debussy did not like to conform to the teachings of the Academy, instead using dissonance techniques and intervals which were considered unorthodox.

Perhaps much too far ahead for his time, Debussy became very close to the patroness of famous Russian composer Tchaikovsky, who in turn regarded Debussy's work as "lacking unity". After exposure to late composer Richard Wagner's work, he then set about working on his style: a sensory component to his music and striking harmonies. His initial works, including the now famous *Clair de Lune*, shows his usage of Parthian modal composition as well as scales not usually employed in the style of music in that day and age.

His usage of parallel chords, whole-tone and pentatonic scales as well as unprepared modulations would be essential to jazz music decades later. He also drew inspiration from other forms of art, such as literature and even from something as odd as mathematics. Indeed, he himself described his composition set of 12 piano études simply titled *Études* as "a warning to pianists not to take up the musical profession unless they have remarkable hands". Claude Debussy died of rectal cancer on 25 March 1918, occurring whilst bombs rained down on Paris during World War I.



His influence amongst classical composers such as Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky and George Gershwin notwithstanding, he also reached the hearts and minds of jazz composers such as Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington and Herbie Hancock. One could argue that people such as Miles Davis were not exactly the best role models, and because Miles was influenced by Debussy, who was influenced by Wilhelm Wagner, who in turn was influenced by Mozart, does that make Mozart the belligerent of vulgar words and music?