To get a good sense of the music of the Classical Era, one needs to look no further than the mature compositions of Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

There were many talented composers working during the Classical Era. Many of them were quite famous during their own time but didn't survive the test of history and have faded into obscurity.

Some composers became legendary to later eras by circumstances beyond their control. While Mozart was one of the most musically gifted composers to ever be born, his future reputation certainly didn't suffer from the fact that he died under somewhat mysterious circumstances before he reached age 36.

In a similar way, many modern film and music artists achieve almost mythical status after their early death.

Haydn's musical output and general influence as an innovator in the era remains greater thanks in no small part to the fact that he outlived Mozart by 42 years.
Good friends in real life (dedicating some of their compositions to each other), Haydn and Mozart's compositional circumstances paralleled each other closely. Both spent much of their lives working for patrons; both eventually broke free and began freelancing (Haydn was a little more successful at it than Mozart due in part to Mozart's bad money managing habits). Both produced a very similar body of work.

Chamber music (music for smaller, intimate ensembles) was very prominent in this era. There were three important markets for it; first, as background music for functions of the patrons of these musicians: second, as a result of more public concerts (coming from the tradition of the Collegium Musicum); and third, as a result of music continuing to be a vital part of the lives of the middle class.

Since the Renaissance, the middle class had continued to gain prosperity and power in the scheme of things. Their lives included disposable income, leisure time to make use of that disposable income, and a desire for the finer things of life, which included music.

Music was a big part of the life of the average person in the Classical Era. Not only was there music at important Royal functions, it was a major part of worship (as it still is today), and a part of their daily life.

There were three ways they could hear music; either go to a live performance, look at a score and hear it in your head (that's not as difficult as it sounds--that talent is a part of a standard musician's training and many people pick it up to a degree from just playing an instrument), and finally--to perform it yourself. For most people, the third option was the easiest.

As you might be able to guess, the average pre-recording-era individual had a higher level of musical ability than one who lives today. This also had a logical effect on the music producing side of things. Quite a few modern musicians live on royalties from recordings. The 18th century parallel was the written music. Composers were paid a one time fee for their compositions by the publishers, who earned money by selling copies of the printed music.

Many became quite famous. Unlike modern musicians, they were in no danger of becoming millionaires from this type of income or being in a position to where their fame would cause them to be a driving force in society's trends.

Compositions for home use included piano sonatas, violin sonatas, piano trios (violin, piano, cello), string quartets, string quintets, and other combinations of instruments.
Many of these chamber music compositions were based around the sonata form and the sonata cycle.

As noted earlier in the text, the sonata form was a very logical presentation of contrasting musical ideas in a format similar to a debate (or discussion or argument, although that word has stronger connotations than actually apply).

The ideas are presented in the exposition, the discussion/conflict takes place in the development, and a summary takes place in the recapitulation with some sense of resolution.

Any resemblance to the concept that reason, discourse, and logic were tools to answer the questions of the human condition is only sheer coincidence.

Well, maybe it isn't coincidence. In truth, the inner workings of music are quite an important glimpse into the mindset of any era.

The sonata cycle represented a larger scale structure. Many of the above named sonatas, quartets, etc. were three or four movements long. A "movement" is parallel to an act of a play with brief intermissions taking place between each of the acts.

To modern ears, Haydn often seems to be relatively sedate, conservative, and not very adventurous, but in reality he was one of the major innovators of the 18th century.

Haydn spent much of his life in the employ of a patron who expected a great deal of music from him. He credited his circumstances with forcing him to be an innovator. It apparently also forced him into being a highly prolific composer: his catalogued works include 108 symphonies, 83 string quartets, 52 piano sonatas, more than 160 trios for various instruments, around 35 concertos for various instruments, etc.

He is often called the "father of the sonata form", "father of the string quartet", and "father of the symphony."

Because of the needs of his position, the sonata form came in quite handy as a template that could be used to create a lot of good music in a short amount of time.

A four movement sonata cycle would likely begin with a fast movement in sonata form. Second movements were usually slow and composers would often use a theme and variations, a binary form or a sonata form. The third movement was usually a standard ABA minuet and trio format at a medium pace. The form usually ended with a bang where a composer would end with a fast rondo, sonata form, sonata-rondo (a hybrid
between the sonata form and the rondo form) or a theme and variations.

Modern CDs of popular music are carefully structured to create an emotional program of sorts in a very similar way.

There were no rulebook for these structures--they were common practice based on what would work as an expressive medium. A composer creating a multimovement segment will take many factors into consideration, such as the length of the time he needs to fill, the needs of the audience (including their attention span), how closely they will be listening, how calm or stormy of a message he is going to convey, etc. (See also the article on the sonata cycle in The elements of Sound earlier in this text)

While each composition represented a complete "program" of moods, individual movements were very loosely related to each other--one could swap movements from different compositions without a major effect on the music.

One of Haydn's pupils--a somewhat tempermental musician by the name of Ludwig van Beethoven--broke that mold in his 5th symphony, making the sonata cycle truly a cycle with repeating themes.

Although not as spectacular as Beethoven, the person whose imaginative experimentation laid a lot of the groundwork for this musical formula was Haydn.

Haydn commented that his circumstances necessitated him to do a lot of innovation to find things that worked. He also once commented that occasionally he had to get down on his knees and pray for inspiration. Given his tremendous output, his prayers must always have been answered quickly.

While chamber music may have been a fixture around the house, symphonies and concerti were a little out of the scope of the average household. They were, however, an essential part of life in the Court and public concerts.

The harpsichord was still in use for parts of operas and as a keyboard fill in for larger orchestral pieces, but the piano took over as the dominant keyboard instrument.

To change dynamics on a harpsichord was a problem. To accomplish this, any were built with two or even three keyboards tiered above each other. To get louder or softer the player needed to move his hands to a different tier. Some also had a switch that engaged or disengaged a set of strings so that it could have a similar effect. The problem with this is that it is an all or nothing solution. Careful articulation was one of the few ways this could be done on that instrument. Playing the individual keys hard or soft had little
effect on the volume of the note.

In the early 1700s a musical instrument maker by the name of Bartolomeo Cristofori successfully created a mechanism for each individual key that would strike the string with force related to the amount of force used to press the key. This allowed for individual notes to be brought out cleanly from the rest of the notes being played.

The instrument became known as the pianoforte (also fortepiano), a name which suggested its ability to change dynamics.

This permitted a player now to bring out a number of musical lines, each with different volumes and articulations.

The modern concert grand piano, as well as the digital version of it, has a rich, steely, full sound with complex overtones. This is pretty far removed from its early counterpart that had only one string per key. Compared to a modern grand they sound somewhat thin, not that far removed from the sound of a harpsichord. As later composers began to push the envelope requiring a greater dynamic range and fuller sound, the modern grand piano sound developed.

As the piano became essential in the home and chamber music of the Classical Era, it also became an important part of larger scale works, specifically in the concerto.

The first known keyboard concerti were a series or harpsichord concertos by J. S. Bach. Many of them were not original, but reworked versions of other composers' concerti. Handel, among others, composed a series of organ concertos.

The keyboard concerto continued to be important to the composers of the Classical Era. Mozart, in particular, composed 27 for solo piano and orchestra, one for two pianos and orchestra, and one for three pianos and orchestra. Many of them were for himself as soloist in his various musical jobs—he was an excellent pianist.

As Vivaldi did with the violin concerto a few generations earlier, Mozart refined the piano concerto into a form and structure that influenced many later generations and was the structure that Beethoven and the later Romantic virtuosos built upon. There is a very intricate interplay between the piano and the orchestra in the sounds and the use of various musical themes in his work.

While Mozart's concertos are not simple to play, they don't require a virtuoso performer. One of the reasons is that, as mentioned above, Mozart's piano was not as developed as later instruments. The sound was still delicate and thin and probably closer to the harpsichord's sound than a modern Steinway grand piano.
Beethoven's own playing was with such force that he regularly broke strings and keys, causing piano manufacturers to make pianos sturdier that created stronger, richer sounds, thus paving the way for a musician like Liszt to come along and revolutionize piano playing the way Paganini eventually did with violin playing.

The symphony began in the Classical Era and is probably derived from a form called the French Overture and the Baroque Suite. It took on a mature form thanks to Haydn, who composed over 100 or them. His first symphonies are more intimate chamber music compositions that owe as much to the Baroque suite as the new form he was working on. By the time Haydn completed his last symphony (numbered 104), he had refined it into a four movement form with standard structures that influenced composers well into the 20th century when they wanted to write a symphony.

Some of Haydn's symphonies show a sometimes impish sense of humor. One of his symphonies starts off the second movement with a quiet theme that gets softer and softer until it is interrupted by a sudden fortissimo crash from the orchestra that then goes back down to a soft dynamic level. Another is written from the point of view of an absent minded composer who sometimes forgets where he is in the piece of music.

Haydn's musical output also reflects the changing needs of the time and of his changing musical situation. His first symphonies, like the rest of his musical output, were usually written for use in functions by his patron. His final symphonies were written at the request of a publisher and presented in public concerts.

Important vocal music of the Classical Era falls into three categories: oratorio, settings of the Mass, and opera.

The first oratorios were based on religious subjects, but by the Classical era, many were being written on secular topics.

Oratorios still followed in the footsteps of the early versions--consisting of an overture, arias, recitatives, and choruses, but without any costumes, acting, or staging.

The two finest in the Classical Era were The Seasons, and The Creation, both composed by Haydn.

Oratorios continue to be composed, including several by Paul McCartney.

The Latin Mass ordinary was given a number of settings by the great composers. Two of the finest were the Lord Nelson Mass and the Mass in Time of War, both by Haydn.
Mozart also composed a number of great ones. His setting of the Requiem is one of the all time great versions of that piece of music.

Many times a political patron was still heavily devoted to the church and the composers he employed would be expected to compose sacred as well as secular music. While they faithfully use an obviously religious text, they are not meant to be regular church music. As with most settings of the Mass, they were done with sincerity and respect, but lie somewhere between the Renaissance ideal of sacred music.

Of the large scale vocal music, opera evolved and developed the most.

In the Baroque Era, opera quickly developed into a standard format with an overture, arias (developed vocal melodies, minimal use of text), recitatives (minimal use of music, often wordy for the purpose of moving the plot along), and choruses.

Most of the early operas were based on serious, larger than life plots, often involving historical figures or mythical gods and goddesses. This was known as opera seria.

The first comic operas were sometimes very short and meant to be performed between acts of a larger opera seria.

The early 1700s saw the evolution of opera buffa, a more developed alternative to opera seria. Opera buffa topics were usually humorous contemporary situations involving real life characters.

The finest operas of the era were composed by Mozart who was a master of both the buffa and seria versions.

Cosi Fan Tutti and The Marriage of Figaro are two of his most famous comic operas. Don Giovanni and La Clemenza di Tito (the final opera he began) are two examples of his opera seria.

Italian was generally still the dominant language for operas, but Mozart helped break ground with his final completed opera, The Magic Flute, when he used his native German language for the libretto. This helped begin a tradition of German opera that culminated in the great music dramas of Wagner a century later.

Vocal music was an important part of a composer's output. Many composed solo arias for voice and orchestra in addition to full scale operas.

We also begin to see the beginning of another kind of vocal music that had a major impact in the later Romantic Era--the art song.
Known as "lied" in Germany and "chanson" in France (both of those words simply mean *song* in their respective languages), the art song was composed for a voice and a piano.

They were usually settings for voice and piano of poems by the finest poets of the era and were a more intimate and less theatrical type of vocal music.

Art songs are occasionally compared to popular songs of the rock era and they do have many similarities. Later composers would create a song cycle--a series of songs based on a particular idea or story line. Many of these song cycles are even closer to the concept of a modern album.

One major difference, however, is that 18th century composers would very rarely use their own lyrics, whereas it is common practice today for composers to write both the music and the lyrics.

It is a natural tendency for historians to find events and changing trends to mark the ending of an era. It makes for tidiness when discussing different artistic styles.

Sometimes, history isn't all that neat and tidy.

When one compares the music of the late Classical Era with music of the late Romantic Era, there is little chance of mistaking one for the other. But . . . is that a definitive reason to conclude that an era has shifted?

After all, there is always a natural evolution during a particular era. Comparing the music of Monteverdi or Corelli to the music of Handel or Bach will show a remarkable amount of change during the same era.

Most historians make a case for the Classical style to come to an end in the early 1800s and refer to the rest of the century as the Romantic Era.

It is possible to make a convincing case for a Classical-Romantic Continuum that lasts from around 1740 to 1900. As did Haydn and Mozart, a composer at the end of the 1800s was probably still composing symphonies, concerti, operas, songs, string quartets, piano sonatas, and so on. In addition to those, some new forms and styles had evolved, but they lived side by side with the older forms.

In either case, there is a bridge at the center of the one (or two) era(s), a man with one foot in the 18th century and another foot clearly planted in the 19th century and
influential in music all the way to the present era.

His name is Ludwig van Beethoven.
One perfect example is the composer Antonio Salieri, a name now permanently linked to Mozart. Salieri was a very talented composer of his time and one of the most popular and respected. His compositions include more than 40 operas and he was the court composer and Kappellmeister of Emperor Joseph II, a position he could not have gained by being incompetent. Following his death, Salieri and his music faded into obscurity, his name kept alive mostly by the unfounded rumor that he was responsible for the death of Mozart (as well as the multi Oscar winning fiction film *Amadeus*). As of the early 21st century, his music is now only being rediscovered and becoming popular with listeners.

Contrast that with Beethoven (the next generation and a pupil of Haydn) who composed only 9, and Schumann and Brahms who only completed 4 symphonies; this is not the result of untalented and uninspired composers, but the musical needs of their generations that were drastically different and demanded depth in place of breadth; and something a little closer to the reinvention of the wheel each time.

*Material copyright 2016 by Gary Daum, all rights reserved. All photos and illustrations by Gary Daum unless otherwise noted. Unlimited use granted to current members of the Georgetown Prep community.*