

## Chapter 1

# Prying Open the Classical Music Oyster

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding what's so great about classical music
  - ▶ Identifying the seven habits of highly effective composers
  - ▶ Access the audio tracks at [www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic](http://www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic)
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**T**he world of classical music is a place where idealism reigns, where good conquers evil and love conquers all, where you always get a second chance, where everything comes out right in the end, and where you can have your cake and eat it, too.

Classical music is one of the few living arts. It continues to exist by being constantly re-created, live, before an audience. Unlike the visual arts, classical music envelops you in real time and comes to life before you; unlike literature or theater, it can be understood equally by speakers of any language — or no language; and unlike dance, you don't need to look good in a leotard to perform it.

Classical music is a place to come to for pure enjoyment, for solace, for upliftment, for spiritual transcendence, and — if you follow our suggestions — for less than 25 bucks.

## *Discovering What Classical Music Really Is*

For the purposes of this book, *classical music* is the music composed in the Western Hemisphere during the past few hundred years (not including recent pop and folk music). It's the music generally composed for an orchestra or combination of orchestral instruments, keyboards, guitar, or voice.



Until very recently (at least in geological terms), people didn't make such big distinctions between "popular" and "classical" music. In the 1700s and 1800s, it was all just *music*, and people loved it. People would go to the latest performance of a symphony, concerto, song cycle, or opera just as you might go to a concert in an arena, stadium, club, coffeehouse, or bar today — to have fun! They were enticed by the prospect of seeing their favorite stars, schmoozing with their friends, and hearing their favorite tunes. They came in casual clothes; they brought along food and drink; they even cheered during the show if the spirit moved them. Classical music *was* pop music.

The fact is that classical music is just as entertaining as it ever was. But these days, it's become much less *familiar*. That's all. After you become familiar with this art form, it becomes amazingly entertaining.

## Figuring Out Whether You Like It

Not every piece of classical music will turn you on right away. And that's perfectly okay.

First of all, some pieces are, as we euphemistically say in the classical music biz, more "accessible" than others. That is, some have beautiful melodies that you can hum instantly, whereas others, on first listening, sound more like geese getting sucked through an airplane engine.

See what you like best at this very moment. There are no right or wrong answers; classical music is supposed to be fun to listen to. The trick is to find out what's most fun for you.



Play the first minute or so of each audio track at [www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic](http://www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic). Each is a musical masterpiece, each in a different musical style. The track list includes pieces from the Baroque style (roughly mid-1600s to mid-1700s), the Classical style (mid-1700s to early 1800s), early Romantic style (first half of the 1800s), late Romantic style (second half of the 1800s), and more modern, often deceptively chaotic-sounding style (20th century to the present).

Does one piece appeal to you more than all the others? If so, begin your exploration of classical music by delving into other works in that style or by that composer.

Or, if you love them all, fantastic! Our job just got a lot easier.

# The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Composers

Despite the incredible variety of styles within the world of classical music, certain consistent qualities make great music great. These sections examine seven of those qualities.

## *Their music is from the heart*



Effective composers don't try to razzle-dazzle you with fake flourishes. They mean what they compose. Look at Peter Tchaikovsky: This guy spent half his life in emotional torment, and — wow! — does his music sound like it. (Listen to Track 7 at [www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic](http://www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic) and you'll see what we mean.)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was an incredibly facile composer — melodies just bubbled out of his head effortlessly, and his pieces reflect that ease. Igor Stravinsky was a strictly disciplined, calculating, complex character; ditto for much of his music. Although their personalities were incredibly diverse, these composers wrote great music in a way that was true to themselves.

## *They use a structure that you can feel*

Great pieces of music have a structure, a musical architecture. You may not be consciously aware of the structure while you're listening to a great work; but still, you instinctively feel how that work was put together. Maybe the piece follows one of the classic overarching musical patterns (with names like *sonata form* or *rondo form*, which you can read about in Chapter 3). Maybe it just has a musical idea at the beginning that comes back at the end. In any case, we'd be hard-pressed to name a great work of music that doesn't have a coherent structure.

Recent studies at the University of California show that students who listen to Mozart before an exam actually score higher than students who don't. (Of course, we suspect that these students would've scored higher yet if they'd actually *studied* before the exam.) As you listen to a piece by Mozart, your brain apparently creates a logical set of compartments that process this form. These compartments are then useful for processing other kinds of information, as well. Classical music actually *does* make you smarter.

## *They're creative and original*

You hear again and again that some of the greatest composers — even those whose works sound tame and easily accessible to us — were misunderstood in their own day. Not everyone could relate to the compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Claude Debussy, Stravinsky, or Charles Ives when those works were first composed. (Actually, that's the understatement of the year; the audience at Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* actually rioted, trashing the theater and bolting for the exits.)

The reason for this original lack of acceptance is *unfamiliarity*. The musical forms, or ideas expressed within them, were completely new. And yet, this is exactly one of the things that makes them so great. Effective composers have their own ideas.

Have you ever seen the classic play or movie *Amadeus*? The composer Antonio Salieri is the “host” of this movie; he's depicted as one of the most famous non-great composers — he lived at the time of Mozart and was completely overshadowed by him. Now, Salieri was not a bad composer; in fact, he was a very good one. But he wasn't one of the world's *great* composers because his work wasn't *original*. What he wrote sounded just like what everyone else was composing at the time.

## *They express a relevant human emotion*

Great composers have something important to say. They have an emotion that's so urgent, it cries out to be expressed. The greatest pieces of music (*any* music, from rock to rap to today's chart-topping hits) take advantage of the ability of this art to express the inexpressible.

When Beethoven discovered that he was going deaf, he was seized by an incredible, overwhelming, agonizing frustration. His music is about this feeling. He expresses his frustration so clearly — so articulately, in a musical sense — in every note of his compositions. Beethoven's music is *intense*.

Now, this isn't to say that great composers must be intense. Joseph Haydn, for example, exuded cheerful playfulness in almost everything he wrote. Like all effective composers, *he* had something significant to say, too.

## *They keep your attention with variety and pacing*

Effective composers know how to keep you listening. Their music is interesting throughout.

One technique that achieves this effect is variety. If the composer fills his music with a variety of musical ideas, or dynamics (loudness and softness), or melodies, or harmonies, he's much more likely to keep your interest. In this way, a great piece of music is like a great movie. An explosion near the beginning gets your attention, right? But have you ever seen a movie with an explosion every minute for two hours? Have you noticed how each explosion becomes successively less interesting, until finally you don't even notice them anymore? You need variety — something contrasting and different between explosions.

In a movie, one explosion can be thrilling if it's approached correctly, with a suspenseful buildup. Effective composers know how to use dramatic pacing, too. Their music seems to build up suspense as it approaches the climax. Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* (made famous a generation ago by the movie *10*) is a stunning example. The entire piece of music is one long *crescendo* (getting louder and louder) — the suspense builds and builds for 15 minutes, and the climax is shattering. We recommend it.

## *Their music is easy to remember*

In today's pop music world, the word *hook* refers to the catchy, repeated element in a piece of music. Beatles songs are so catchy because nearly every one of them has a hook. Think "Help!" or "A Hard Day's Night" or "She Loves You" ("Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!"). Catchiness is not a scientifically measurable quality; still, you know a hook when you hear it.

In classical music, the same concept applies. A hook helps you remember, and identify with, a particular piece of music. The compositions of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Frederic Chopin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Georges Bizet, Antonin Dvořák, George Gershwin, Edvard Grieg, and Franz Schubert have hooks galore — so many hooks, in fact, that several of them have been pilfered for the melodies of today's rock songs. For example, Barry Manilow's old song "Could It Be Magic?" is a Chopin piano prelude with words added — Barry didn't write the original tune. And "Midnight Blue" is sung to the tune of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata. The music of the most effective composers is full of elements that stick in your mind.

## *They move you with their creations*

The most important habit of highly effective composers is their ability to change your life. Ever walk out of a movie or play and suddenly experience the world outside the theater differently? You know, when the real world just after the movie seems to have a feeling of danger, or sadness, or happiness, or just plain wonder, that it didn't have before?

A great musical masterpiece may give you a greater appreciation for the potential of humankind, or enhance your spirituality, or just put you in a great mood. Nothing is more triumphant than the end of Mahler's Second Symphony; after you hear it, you emerge reborn, refreshed, and somehow more prepared to face the world.