**Chapter 7**

**The Symphony**

The orchestra is at the center of western European art music. If you go to an art music concert in a concert hall, chances are very good that you will hear an orchestra—either as the featured ensemble or as a group accompanying a soloist. Much of the great music written over the past 1000 years was written for orchestra. It is ideally suited for the concert hall because it is capable of a wide range of dynamics.

The modern orchestra began in the Baroque era when instruments like the violin, viola, cello, oboe, and bassoon all were improved through better instrument building techniques. Prior to this time period instruments were used in much smaller combinations, often just four or five at a time. The developments in instrument making in the Baroque period allowed composers to create an entirely new type of human expression—the instrumental work.

At an orchestra concert today you will probably hear one or more suites or symphonies.

It is important to remember when discussing orchestral music that composers often write long pieces for orchestra. To do so, they string together a group of movements, sometimes related to one another and in earlier times, not so.

The earliest type of orchestral music still regularly performed at concerts today, and therefore of interest to us in this textbook, is the orchestral suite. The suite developed in the Baroque era. In its earliest form it was probably just a group of Renaissance or Baroque dances played one after the other. Dances such as the pavan, the saltarello, and the galliard were combined into so-called orchestral suites. These dance suites were played as dinner and dance music in the Renaissance period, by small instrumental groups. Usually the movements of a dance suite alternate styles and tempo. For example, a first movement of an orchestral dance suite might be slow and stately—procession like. The second movement might be a contrasting fast and lively tempo, followed by a third movement that was slower again. In most cases a suite would end with a quick tempo dance.

Most composers of the Baroque wrote orchestral suites but three in particular are of interest to us: George Philip Telemann, and the two most important composers of the Baroque era, George Friederic Handel, and Johann Sebastian Bach.

We will discuss Handel at a later time—when we talk about a form of vocal music called the oratorio. Johann Sebastian Bach, discussed in chapter 5, was one of the most famous composers to have ever lived. While a court composer Bach wrote a number of orchestral suites. Telemann lived from 1681 to 1767 and was a very prolific composer of chamber music, music for small groups of performers. He is best-known today for his solo concertos for wind and string instruments, his dinner music, a chamber form to be discussed later called the trio sonata, and his more than 125 orchestral suites.

In the very late Baroque era and the early Classical era, composers began to change the orchestral suite into a new orchestral form—the symphony. The symphony is the most important orchestral form ever devised and most composers from the Classical era to the current time use the form. Like the suite, the symphony is made up of a series of movements—usually four. Each of the movements is contrasting in tempo and by the early Classical era the four movements almost always alternated in the pattern; fast, slow, moderate dance tempo, and fast. Unlike the suite, the movements of a symphony are related in some manner. Often the composer uses melodic material from one movement in another; or there will be a particular pattern of keys used in the movements; or a special rhythm will be used throughout the movements. This connection between movements is what makes a symphony distinct from other forms like the suite. The symphony might last from 20 minutes to 2 hours and when you attend an orchestra concert chances are very good that you will hear at least one on the program.

In the Classical era the symphony’s movements were almost always in the same order in terms of inner form. The first movement was almost always a sonata form, the second often was a theme and variations, the third was a minuet and trio form, and the final movement was another sonata or a rondo form. This order of movement forms presented the type of contrast in tempo and style that composers desired for the symphony.

The Classical era was dominated by three composers whose music was imitated and admired throughout western Europe; Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven. All three were famous writers of symphonies.

The earliest of the three, Franz Joseph Haydn lived from 1732 to 1809. He was born in Austria and spent the majority of his professional life as the chief musician and composer for Prince Esterhazy who had a massive estate outside Vienna. Throughout the thirty years that he led the musical life of this Prince's court, he was considered to be a workman, almost a servant who served at the will of the Prince. Late in life his music became known throughout Europe, especially because of concerts and time spent in Paris and London. Haydn is best recognized for the development of the symphony. He wrote over 100 symphonies and these brought about his international fame, and it is his symphonies that are played in concert halls today. He wrote in all forms popular in the day including operas, oratorios, string quartets, and concerti. His operas are no longer often performed but his oratorios, quartets, and concerti do still appear on today's stage. Haydn is the first great composer of the Classical style and at the time was the best-known and revered composer of the Classical era.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived from 1756 to 1791 in Austria. His father was a famous composer of Baroque music and worked as a court composer in Salzburg. A child prodigy Mozart was composing music by age five and touring Europe as a soloist. He and his sister were child stars of the courts of Europe. His adult life was less pleasant than his childhood. Though now recognized as one of the two or three greatest composers to have ever lived, in his own time he enjoyed little success. Mozart apparently abhorred the patronage system where he would be expected to write works for the amusement of an aristocrat. Instead, Mozart tried merely to compose and perform without the financial assistance of any prince or church. He was one of the earliest promoters of concerts, and he regularly composed music that he would then perform or direct himself on stage. In his own life he was best recognized for his operas, and an opera called *The Magic Flute* was his most popular work. We now revere just about anything that Mozart wrote, and he was incredibly prolific. His operas, symphonies, piano works, string quartets, choral pieces, and concerti are part of every professional musician’s repertory today. Mozart brought the classical style ideas to their height in his symphonies and string quartets.

The final great composer of Classical era orchestral music is also the first great composer of the next period, Romantic era music. Ludwig van Beethoven was German and lived from 1770 to 1827. Beethoven's influence on music in the past nearly two hundred years cannot be overstated. He is thought of as a transition figure from the Classical era to the Romantic. He composed primarily using Classical era forms and concepts but added what would become many of the primary elements of change in the Romantic period.

Beethoven was the first self-expressive, some might say self-indulgent composer who got away with it. Mozart probably had the same leanings but society was not ready for a completely independent composer. By Beethoven's day, it was. He was the first composer who achieved true super stardom, idolized and fawned over by the wealthy and loved by the masses. He was a shrewd businessman who demanded and got the respect of the upper crust of society. Not so coincidentally, he was writing for the most part after the American and French revolutions, which shocked Europe and changed the social institutions of the Western world.

Beethoven spent most of his life working in German capitals and in Vienna. His output was not nearly as large as that of Bach, Handel, Haydn or Mozart. He wrote music on inspiration, not on demand of an employer. His pieces were painstakingly reworked until he was satisfied with them, something that Bach and Haydn would have never had the time to do. This allowed Beethoven and his successors to not have to use formulas in their compositions. They could take the time to think through the development of a work rather than fitting a pleasant melody into a preordained form. He finished nine symphonies, a very small number compared with the over 100 of Haydn. He wrote only one opera, but excelled at the string quartet, piano sonata, and concerto. He was probably the first musician who was strictly a composer.

Beethoven's most famous works are his symphonies, especially numbers 3, 5, and 9. He reworked the classical era form of the symphony. He expanded the orchestra slightly, lengthened each of the movements of the symphony, and replaced the traditional third movement minuet with another form called the scherzo. The scherzo lacks the refinement and grace of the minuet. It is, instead a rollicking faster tempo work. His symphonies are very tightly constructed using motivic consistency throughout. This means that almost all melodies of a particular work are related in some way or grow out of the germ of one original idea. This concept is the opposite of the old contrasting theme idea used to hold the interest of the listener. Beethoven’s idea was to show the listener just how much might be created from one idea.

Composers after Beethoven followed his example of expansion of the orchestra for more tone colors, expansion and lengthening of movements and works, and of creating an individual style or voice. During the Romantic period composers expanded the scope of the symphony by adding more movements and making the movements themselves longer and more developmental. The inner forms were expanded by adding more themes to the sonata form and by making the development sections of the forms more complex. Symphonies became more expressive and dramatic in the Romantic era. What began as a 25 minute work was expanded beyond two hours by late Romantic era composers. The small Classical era orchestra of about 30 players was enlarged to over 100 by the end of the 19th century as composers tried to find new sounds and timbres in the orchestra. The symphony became the form by which instrumental composers were judged—few important and influential composers lived who were not successful symphonists during the Classical and Romantic eras.

Johannes Brahms was one of the leading symphony composers of the Romantic era. He was German and lived from 1833 to 1897. His orchestral music is still very popular today, especially his four symphonies. In his symphonies he followed Classical era forms and traditions and used Romantic era tonalities and expressive devices. Other important Romantic era symphonists include Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Antonin Dvorak, Johannes Brahms, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and Gustav Mahler.

The symphony continued to develop throughout the Romantic era and is still written today.