Graham School of General Studies · The University of Chicago

What to Listen for in Classical Music

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**Course Description:** This course examines the evolution of Western music from the Baroque era through the 20th century. Different parameters such as harmony, rhythm, and melody are concisely explained and examined in representative masterpieces drawn from eras, genres, and styles, including the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Stravinsky among others. Rich historic context will be provided. This class will be a lively combination of lecture, analysis, and watching and listening.

**Musical Eras**

All dates must be approximate; there is considerable overlap

Before 1450 – Medieval  
1450-1600 – Renaissance  
1600-1750 – Baroque  
1750-1820 – Classical  
1820-1900 – Romantic  
Beyond 1900 – Age of the “isms”

“The very word *classical* connotes something of lasting value, something conceived with certain standards in mind. This has led some people to slap an "elitist" label onto such music. But that's a cheap shot. Although it is best appreciated, most deeply understood, by those who study it in some details, it is essentially accessible to anyone with open ears. And the act of listening is a very important part of this art form. Despite its use in shopping malls and hotel lobbies, most classical music is intended to be foreground, not background; it wants to be front and center, not piped-in.” – Tim Smith in *The NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Classical Music*

“Opera is all around us — hundreds of hours’ worth on YouTube alone — and there is no excuse not to take part in it. It still requires some commitment to knowledge and it rarely has a beat, but there’s just so much of Lady Gaga a human being can enjoy/tolerate without needing to be touched in a slightly deeper place.” – Robert Levine in *Weep, Shudder, Die: A Guide to Loving Opera*

**10:00 - 10:45 a.m. - Introduction to the building blocks of music:**

* Melody and Theme
* Harmony
* Rhythm
* Texture

**10:45-11:30 a.m. – Baroque Music Overview**

Common Baroque practices, styles, etc. Musical examples will include:

* Cantatas and Keyboard works of Bach
* Oratorios of Handel

**11:30-12:30 – Classical Style Overview**

The increasing sophistication of musical form in the classical era. Music examples:

* The symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven
* The string quartets of Haydn

**12:30-1:30 – Lunch (on your own)**

**1:30-2:30 – The Romantic and Early Modern Eras**

From intimate salon pieces to grandiose symphonies and operas, composers of this era extended music from the abstract perfection of the classical masters into a canvas of personal expression. Excerpts from:

* The piano works of Chopin, Liszt and Debussy
* The symphonies of Brahms and Mahler

**2:30 – 4:00 – What to Listen for in Opera and Ballet**

* Opera scenes on DVD from Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Strauss
* Ballet scenes on DVD from Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Stravinsky

## Recommended Books

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| Author/Editor | Title |
| David Pogue and Scott Peck (Yep, that’s the David Pogue who covers personal technology for the New York Times. He’s a Yale-trained composer.) | *Classical Music for Dummies*  *Opera for Dummies* |
| Fred Plotkin | *Classical Music 101 – A complete guide to learning and loving classical music*  *Opera 101 – A complete guide to learning and loving opera* |
| Alex Ross | *The Rest Is Noise – Listening to the 20th Century*  *Listen to This* |
| Robert Levine | *Weep, Shudder, Die: A Guide to Loving Opera* |
| Michael Steinberg | *The Symphony – A Listener’s Guide*  *The Concerto – A Listener’s Guide* |
| Tim Smith | *The NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Classical Music* |

## Helpful Websites for New Classical Listeners

**KeepingScore.org** – The SanFran Symphony’s fantastic resource with multimedia interactive “cheat sheets” to masterpieces by Beethoven, Berlioz, Copland, Ives, Mahler, Shostakovich, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. Michael Tilson Thomas tells you “What to listen for” in depth in a specific piece.

Note: Also available on DVD from Netflix et al.

**Wikipedia.org** – An excellent standard music reference resource, with composer biographies, detailed descriptions of musical pieces and many audio examples. However, Wikipedia is written and edited by the public, so bear this in mind when dealing with political or other sensitive subject matter.

## Recommended Events in Chicago

**Beyond the Score** – Chicago Symphony Orchestra series – a combination listening and learning experience. A multimedia introduction to a piece in cultural and historical context, followed by a complete performance by the CSO. For tickets – contact the CSO or visit beyondthescore.org for performances in other cities.

Friday, November 16, 18 & 30, 2012 - Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring  
February 22 & 24, 2013 - Wagner: The Tristan Effect  
May 10 & 12, 2013 - Rimsky-Korsakov: Sheherazade