

The hot new sound of Classical

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‘Classical’ is a terrible term for music. It implies that everything in the classical bin was written somewhere in the 1700s, which is so very far from true. There’s so much there that is more influenced by modern pop sensibilities than by the church music of the Renaissance.

So, here are some albums that are technically classical in that they works by symphonies or small collections of symphonic instruments, but which are decidedly modern in leanings. You’ll notice that the list barrels clear through from the early 1800s to the present without much of a break—there’s classical from the 1970s and from two weeks ago, that I wouldn’t feel bad classing as Classical, but which is decidedly not about powdered wigs.

The disclaimer, once and only once: this is entirely my opinion. Please read every sentence below to begin with ‘I feel that that’.

To give you my first opinion, I don’t really like music from back in the 1700s. Much Bach-era music is written toward the harpsichord, which is like a piano except that it is incapable of dynamics (which is why the name *pianoforte* stresses the quiet-loud capabilities of the new instrument). That means that building tension in the music often requires speeding up or trilling or otherwise throwing in too many notes. Even the non-harpsichord music, like Bach’s very listenable cello concertos, are also advised by the overtrilling.

No, music began for me around 1800, when this guy Beethoven started composing. To many, he is the precursor to the romantic movement, which is characterized by less focus on form and more on the emotional content. That is, Beethoven invented indie, and is thus the first composer to really appeal to somebody like me, who was raised on radio pop and dubs of Velvet Underground cassettes.

The romantic period included a few other notables. I continue to (heart) Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, for example. But there’s a massive risk that less-structured music takes: without caution, it winds up sounding like background music for a movie. Since movie music times itself to screen action rather than musical logic, it tends to have a certain stop-start feel that is unfun by itself. Thus, when I hear the stop-start stylings of many romantic composers (Debussy), I start to wonder what movie I should watch for the music to make sense.

Chronologically, George Gershwin fits in right here (we’ve jumped to 1920), but you already know his classical works, between the *United Air Theme* and his

operatic aria, “Summertime/ and the livin’ is easy.” He’s notable for working hard on folding popular music into a classical framework, and you’ll see that just about every composer from here on in does the same. In fact, he was so good at it that some people think that *Summertime* is a folk song that Gershwin adapted or otherwise stole. But nope, he wrote it; Wikipedia says so. Gershwin is not the inventor of the concept of folk adaptation; Modest Moussorgsky was doing this a decade or two before him, and somebody better versed than me can surely give still earlier examples.

Now skip forward to the 1950s, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, where Communist-era composers were paid well to appeal to the proletariat. We can start with Shostakovitch himself, who fell in and out with the Party, but wrote some rollicking good music in the process. The ending to his Fifth Symphony might as well have an MC on stage going ‘Everybody now pump your fists!’

Béla Bartók also knew how to rock out, as demonstrated by his Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, and his Concerto for Orchestra. [Amazon link] At this point (the early 1940s), music is already starting to look pretty experimental. There are crashes and bells that are intended to surprise the audience, Bartók wrote in absurdly complex time signatures for novel combinations of instruments, and he is once again often pulling from Hungarian folk music.

Antonín Dvořák also demonstrates the basic rule that if a composer has an accent in his name that doesn’t appear in English, he’s probably from Eastern Europe and works for modern listeners. His Ninth Symphony (From the New World) leans on American Folk songs like Gershwin did, and rocks out like Shostakovitch rousing the masses.

What are we up to here, the 1970s? I’ve only got one composer for ya from 1970, Philip Glass. To show his folk influence, he wrote two symphonies, *Low* and *Heroes*, based on themes from the same-named David Bowie/Brian Eno albums. But the stuff he wrote in the 1970s is often intolerable to most folks, because it is harshly, decidedly repetitive. [*Low* and *Heroes* are OK.] The idea is to repeat a phrase several times, and then make minor changes to a single element of the phrase, so that the minor shift stands out. Since most of pop music is based on repetition, you wind up hearing it everywhere when you look for it. But by itself, in its starkest form, it’s a bit intolerable. However, he’s still alive, and is right now somewhere composing something. After, oh, 1985, his music started to mellow out, and he began to get into a groove that is decidedly informed by his minimalist drones, but is also more recognizable as an orchestral work.

So, OK, to tide you over through the 1970s, how about Alfred Schnittke? He was often off the deep end with the stop-starts, but how can you not love a guy with a Symphony Number 0? Due to a few strokes, Schnittke composed a number of his finer works after he was pronounced legally dead. I’m not sure how a musician could be more badass than that. I’ve recommended Schnittke before in this list, and brought up a few more composers above this list.

Now So here's what I'm looking for to extend the Classical timeline: it's primarily instrumental, there are cellos, and the music is influenced by the sort of pop that we're familiar with, so it may be challenging but is not so foreign as to mystify us entirely. That's why Philip Glass's earlier stuff is out, but his later stuff is in. As above, I don't have an ear for movie soundtracks, so John Williams is out, as is Peter Gabriel's *Passion*.

We immediately recognize a group like Rasputina to be not-Classical. They're three cellists, who dress in period-type costumes. But there's vocals all the way through, the songs are about four minutes long, they ride the cellos hard to produce very uncello sounds, and the audience is all goth kids. Every one of these elements appears in formal Classical. There's cellos, bad costumes, short *Leiden*, treated pianos, and always at least a couple of goths in the audience. The point being that distinguishing the New Classical from pop is going to be hard.

Did you know David Byrne has a blog? It's a good read, since he's a smart guy who gets to go to places we don't. That link there is about a deserted factory in Germany, which he proposes is a good set for his symphonic piece about industrialization, *The Forest*. There are vocalists, including soloists, but more in the style of Mozart's and Verdi's *Requiem* than Rasputina's songs about vampires.

Godspeed You! Black Emperor. The name just reeks of hipsterdom, right down to the creative typography. But let's let that aside, and stick with the music itself. Most of their stuff has a build-and-release form; I've seen one or two curmudgeons who characterized this as monotonous, and one or two other curmudgeons who characterized their music as inaccessible noise. With half the world thinking it's obvious and half the world thinking it's impossible, I think they're doing fine. If you have to get just one, get the *Slow Riot for New Zero Kanada* EP. Could a title be more of a turn-off? But the storyline told by the music, including a lengthy rant by a standard off-the-street nut, is moving. The cover is the Biblical Hebrew word for the chaos that existed before the universe was created. No idea what it has to do with the music, but dude, it's deep. [Amazon link]

Tarantula A.D. show that yes, the cover art *can* get worse—and the name, oh, I'm embarrassed to mention them. But they do good stuff. I saw these guys live a few weeks ago, and it was wonderful to see a guy play a cello like a rock star, throwing it up while playing, headbanging, and otherwise having a good time. The music is like that too. The pieces are shorter than GY!BE's but longer than Rasputina's, and are more about the standard rock drum kit interacting with cello and violin.

Both of the above overpretentious bands are shooting for Post-rock, an genre made famous by Chicagoans like Tortoise and non-Chicagoans like Sigur Rós. But since the post-rock bands aren't playing orchestral instruments and are often more interested in interesting sound than musical narrative, few would be willing to give them a slot in the Classical chronology.

Rachel's, evidently named for a group member's old car, is more on the chamber music side. But there's a reason why the indie kids like it.

Then there's Tzadik, a label founded by John Zorn, whose solo horn playing on stuff like *Naked City* is just annoying. *Tzadik* is a pun referring to both the Hebrew letter that is their logo and to the word meaning Righteous. Thus, it is a half-step away from Ani DiFranco's Righteous Babe label.

Tzadik CDs tend to be really expensive and a total crap shoot. The bad stuff is as annoying as John Zorn experimenting on sax; the good stuff is stunning. As you can tell by the name, there's a Jewish leaning in the music selections, but there's a lot to avant garde Jewish music, let me tell you. Since I've already given you over a dozen hours of music to run out and listen to, I'll just keep the rest of the Tzadik section down to a short list: The Cracow Klezmer band (From Eastern Europe \Rightarrow Awesome), Roberto Juan Rodriguez (Cuban Klezmer \Rightarrow Righteous), Zakarya Yves Weyh, maybe Steven Bernstein (more straight-up jazz klezmer) and some of John Zorn's stuff like *The Circle Maker*. [I want to mention Tim Sparks, who plays Sephardic-influenced music, but he's disqualified from the list for being only solo guitar.]

And finally, they have no cellos, but this list would not be complete without mention of the First Vienna Vegetable Orchestra.