

History of French Music ①-1

From the Baroque to the Classical Era

c.1600–c.1750 “Baroque”

Before 1600, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, music was something “dedicated to God.” Melodies were singular, without fixed rhythm or expression, yet the pursuit of “balance and harmony” was central, and sacred as well as church music witnessed significant development.

After this period, Europe entered the “Baroque” era, the golden age of classical music. Music became more dynamic and majestic in style, and it was also during this time that opera—an indispensable element of music history—was born in Italy.

Meanwhile, in France at Versailles, the reign of Louis XIV reached its brilliant height. As a symbol of this grandeur, the monarch was praised as the “Sun King,” a title derived from his frequent portrayal of Apollo, the god of the sun, in court ballets.

With the power of absolute monarchy, the arts in France—especially opera and ballet—flourished magnificently and developed in their own distinctive ways. One such development was the emergence of French opera.

In Italy, a new style of opera intended for the common people had appeared and was transmitted to France. However, the French aristocratic court, which placed great importance on tradition, did not accept it. Instead, Jean-Baptiste Lully, who served as court composer, conductor, and favorite of the king, established a new genre: the comédie-ballet, which combined theater and ballet. By enriching it with choral and orchestral splendor, this form quickly gained popularity and exerted profound influence on the subsequent development of French opera culture.

Representative musicians: Jean-Baptiste Lully, Jean-Philippe Rameau

History of French Music ①-2

c.1750–c.1820 “Classical Music”

The death of Bach, the great master of Baroque music and “the father of music,” in 1750 is regarded as the beginning of the Classical period. The three Viennese masters—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—were active during this era. The “foundations of music” built primarily by these three remain influential even in today’s popular music.

During this time, a major conflict in music history called the “Querelle des Bouffons” broke out. It was a dispute over the superiority of French versus Italian music, triggered by the performance in Paris of the Italian opera *La serva padrona* (1733). For tradition-minded France, the arrival of a popular Italian opera divided Paris into two camps. As a result, French composition began to decline, but Paris instead expanded a new market by focusing on concert opportunities and music publishing. In 1756, France entered into an alliance with Austria, with whom they had been in conflict for more than 300 years. The Austrian Empress Maria Theresa promoted the “Diplomatic Revolution” and, as a gesture of goodwill, sent her young daughter Marie Antoinette to marry into the French royal family. Exchanges between French and Austrian musicians flourished, and French music fell under strong Viennese influence. However, with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, many musicians lost their positions and fled the country. During the Revolution, soldiers from Marseille sang the War Song for the Army of the Rhine, which gained popularity among Parisians. Believing it to be a song from Marseille, they called it *La Marseillaise*, which eventually became the French national anthem.

Representative Musician: François-Joseph Gossec

The History of French Music ②

c.1820–c.1920 “The Romantic Era”

In the 1800s, not only the upper classes but also the common people increasingly enjoyed music. The popularity of attending concerts and purchasing pianos continued to grow rapidly. Music began to shift toward “expressive,” “imaginative,” and “individualized” styles, making it into “entertaining music” and “easy-to-understand music.” This was the transformation into what we now call Romantic music. Many works were inspired by poetry and literature, while virtuoso musicians with advanced performing techniques were highly celebrated.

These musicians longed to study at the prestigious Conservatoire de Paris, one of the world’s oldest music institutions, whose origins lie in the Royal Academy of Music established by Louis XIV at Versailles. To this day, it has produced many prominent figures. Among its graduates was the representative Romantic composer Hector Berlioz.

Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) was composed after an unhappy rejection by the actress Harriet Smithson, who later became his wife. The symphony is structured as a dramatic story filled with love and hatred, and Berlioz became a pioneer of program music, which draws inspiration from narratives, poetry, paintings, landscapes, and emotions beyond purely musical ideas. This marked a major turning point for French music.

At the same time, the German-born composer Giacomo Meyerbeer achieved international fame with his productions at the Paris Opéra, establishing the golden age of Grand Opera. Its defining features were its use of historical events and figures as subjects, imposing stage sets and costumes, and the integration of ballet. Rivaling the popularity of Italian opera, French Grand Opera left a profound influence on audiences and later generations of musicians.

In 1871, during the later phase of the Romantic period, France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War. In response, Camille Saint-Saëns founded the following year the Société Nationale de Musique (“National Music Society”) to promote the development of French music and provide opportunities for young composers. Notable members included Fauré, Bizet, and Massenet. As both a distinguished performer and an educator, Saint-Saëns made immense contributions to the French music world.

Representative musicians: Hector Berlioz, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Camille Saint-Saëns, and others

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History of French Music ③-1

From around 1920 “Modern and Contemporary Period”

In the late 19th century, while preserving features of Romantic music, a new style that emphasized mood and atmosphere emerged in France: Impressionism in music. Its name was inspired by Claude Monet's painting *Impression, Sunrise* (1872).

The forerunner of Impressionist music was Claude Debussy. His *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) is regarded as the beginning of musical Impressionism. Inspired by a poem based on Greek mythology, the work lacks clear tonality and its melodies seem blurred. As an extension of program music from the Romantic era, its unique sound fascinated audiences and won acclaim from its very premiere.

Another representative of Impressionism was the "magician of orchestration," Maurice Ravel. From his Conservatoire days, he composed masterpieces such as *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899), which is still beloved today. His music was noted for its daring innovations at the time and for its colorful orchestral texture.

Influenced by these two figures, Erik Satie became known as an unconventional composer. He wrote works incorporating sirens and gunshots, and even organized concerts where audiences were encouraged to converse freely. An especially notable example is *Furniture Music* (1920), intended to be like furniture—present but not requiring attention. During its premiere, it was played in an intermission, with Satie urging the audience to chat rather than listen carefully. This concept later became the precursor of today's "background music" (BGM).

History of French Music ③-2

Around the 1950s, chanson entered its golden age.

The chanson, which originated in the Renaissance through troubadours, simply means “song” in French and refers broadly to all kinds of sung music, rather than to a particular genre. After the French Revolution, it became popular among citizens in cafés and cabarets. Even the French national anthem, La Marseillaise, is classified as a chanson.

The golden age of chanson was also linked to the rise of cinema, which was born in France about 130 years ago. At that time, films did not yet have synchronized soundtracks in the modern sense; instead, live performances or recorded music were played in synchronization with the screening. In the postwar period, the film *Gates of the Night* (1946) featured actor Yves Montand singing *Autumn Leaves*, which became a hit.

The invention and spread of the phonograph also played a crucial role in the popularization of music and the rise of celebrity musicians. Among them, Édith Piaf became an icon. Her recordings of *La Vie en Rose* (1946) and *Hymne à l'amour* (1950) sold in large numbers, benefitting greatly from this technology. With a life full of hardship, Piaf's overwhelming voice and the sincerity of her expression fascinated audiences worldwide, to such an extent that she is often described as being art itself—a legend whose influence continues to live on today.

Representative musicians: Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Erik Satie, Édith Piaf, and others