

CLASSIC *fm*

**50 MOMENTS
THAT ROCKED
THE CLASSICAL
MUSIC WORLD**

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STRIKE UP THE BAND: THE INVENTION OF THE SYMPHONY

Can anyone really be described as a ‘great composer’ if they have never written a symphony? This particular genre of classical music has been responsible for some of the most popular and revolutionary pieces ever composed – from Mozart’s *Jupiter* through to Mahler’s *Resurrection*, via Beethoven’s *Choral* and Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*. When it comes to rocking the classical music world, the symphony has played a huge part in introducing entirely new sounds to an unsuspecting public, throughout the course of history. But how did it all begin?

The word ‘symphony’ translates as ‘sounding together’. So, musically speaking, it relates to more than one instrument or voice being heard together at the same time. In that sense, there are examples of ‘symphony’ stretching back to the dawn of time – but in terms of how we define the symphony today, we want to home in on what was happening in the middle of the 18th century. It was then that the

word ‘symphony’ started to take on an entirely new meaning. Previously, it had been interchangeable with musical forms such as ‘overture’ or ‘sinfonia’ – but from then on, ‘symphony’ would refer to a specific type of orchestral piece made up of three or four movements.

The person we have to thank for the structure of the symphony as we know it today is the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn. This man, known as the ‘Father of the Symphony’, composed over a hundred of them during his life. Crucially, though, he was also the trendsetter when it came to what a modern symphony should sound like. In his early years as a composer, Haydn was given the chance to experiment with this new sound-world and in 1761 he wrote three very fine early symphonies, all with nicknames: *No. 6* (*‘Le Matin’*), *No. 7* (*‘Le Midi’*) and *No. 8* (*‘Le Soir’*). The immense popularity of these three pieces in particular led to the spreading of Haydn’s fame across Europe: by 1781, he had become the first composer to have his symphonies published in England. A string of commissions for further symphonies followed, including six from France – where, just as in England, Haydn was being celebrated for this outstanding new music.

The development of the symphony within the Classical period is indelibly linked with the invention of something called ‘sonata form’. There are whole books dedicated to this particular topic and it would be fair to say that not all of them are exactly gripping page-turners for even the most inquisitive and dedicated classical music fan. But, essentially, we reckon that all you need to keep in your mind is that the expansive musical structure of sonata form enabled composers to break away from the ‘binary’ form of the Baroque

period, which had made the expression of ideas on a large scale quite tricky at times.

Although we can't name one exact date when the symphony burst onto the scene, it's likely that without Haydn we would not have seen this musical form develop at such a pace. Mozart, composing in the same Classical era as Haydn, wrote 41 symphonies. And, of the nine Beethoven composed, a great many were groundbreaking. Think of the Third, the 'Eroica', which heralded the arrival of the Romantic era of music (much more on this one in Moment No. 20); the Fifth, with those famous four opening notes; the bucolic Sixth, nicknamed the 'Pastoral'; or the mighty Ninth, known as the 'Choral' – which, for many listeners, sits at the summit of all symphonic music.

In the Romantic period, the symphony really came into its own. Bring to mind a famous composer from the 19th century and you can bet your bottom dollar he was probably known for his symphonies. Tchaikovsky used the form in the most remarkable of ways, from his fate-filled *Symphony No. 4* to the tragedy and pathos in his final *Symphony No. 6* (the 'Pathétique'). Fans of Rachmaninov, meanwhile, will argue that no one has composed a better heart-on-your-sleeve melody than the sweeping opening to the third movement of his *Symphony No. 2*. And Brahms, who waited until he was in his forties to write a symphony, saved many of his best ideas until last, with one critic dubbing his *Symphony No. 1* 'Beethoven's Tenth' – the highest praise the composer could have hoped for.

As the symphony developed, it created a musical genre in which boundaries could be pushed in remarkable ways.

One of the most exciting examples of this is Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* – nicknamed the '*Symphony of a Thousand*', although not by the composer himself. What Mahler *did* say, however, was that in writing this work he wanted to create 'a new symphonic universe'. He most certainly achieved this goal. The forces Mahler used were on a scale unlike any ever seen before: a huge orchestra, including four bassoons, two contra-bassoons, an enormous percussion section and an entirely separate trumpet ensemble. On top of that, he included an organ, some pianos, a few harps, two adult choirs, a children's choir and eight solo singers. Although the soundscapes of this mighty work are, on one level, a million miles away from an early Haydn symphony, it's logical to argue that without the Haydn, we wouldn't have had the Mahler.

History has witnessed symphonic extremes in the other direction, too. There are plenty of short symphonies in existence: Mozart's *Symphony No. 32*, for example, lasts for barely eight minutes. But what must surely rank as the shortest symphony ever composed dates from this century. In 2002, Michael Wolters's *Spring Symphony: The Joy of Life* was given its premiere performance at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. According to the composer, the piece was never actually intended to be performed. Instead, he describes it as 'conceptual rather than realistic', and it was only when urged by a friend to have the piece played in public that Wolters relented. The work is so fleeting that the composer attempted to get it recognised in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's shortest symphony. It last for just 14 seconds – or as many as 16 seconds, if the performers are playing it a little on the slow side.