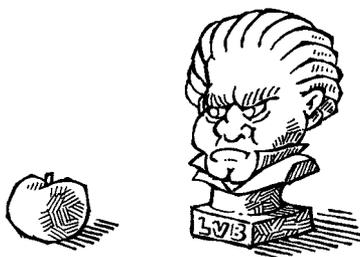


# IF IT AIN'T BAROQUE...

*MORE*  
^  
Music History As It  
Ought To Be Taught

DAVID W. BARBER

CARTOONS BY  
DAVE DONALD



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**HERE'S WHAT SOME NOTABLE PEOPLE  
HAVE SAID ABOUT  
DAVID W. BARBER'S BOOKS:**

“My heartiest commendation for an admirable work of scholarship. ... I will not say again that it is funny, since this will compel you to set your jaw and dare Barber to make you laugh.”

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on *The Last Laugh*

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– **Alan Coren**, former editor of *Punch* magazine,  
author of *The Sanity Inspector*,  
on *The Last Laugh*



# AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WHEN I FINISHED my little parody of opera history, *When the Fat Lady Sings*, I thought I was done with the world of humorous musical history. After the opera book and its predecessor, *Bach, Beethoven and the Boys*, I figured, there wasn't much more to say.

I was wrong, of course.

And so here we have *If It Ain't Baroque*, which we might consider a sequel to *Bach, Beethoven*, but from an entirely different angle.

This fresh approach, of looking at genres rather than biographies, opened up a wealth of new ideas and (quite frankly) a whole new source for jokes. I hope readers enjoy reading it at least as much as I enjoyed writing it. Even more so.

Readers familiar with my earlier books won't need to be reminded, but for the sake of new readers I'll say it again: The historical and biographical facts presented here really are true. No fooling. (Or at least true to the extent that some other historian before me bravely stated them in print, so I won't have to take the blame. This we call research.)

My thanks to illustrator and designer Dave Donald for his fine work, and to Indent Publishing for taking me back to the masses (or masses).

DWB  
Toronto, 2014



# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my former wife, Astrid Trefzger, with thanks for her continued friendship, and to the memory of journalist and author Will Cuppy (1884-1949), who keeps reminding me how it ought to be done.



# PREFACE

Blah, blah, blah ...



**PART ONE:**

**OVERTURE**



*C H A P T E R*

1





# A CLASSIC PROBLEM

SOME PEOPLE WILL TELL YOU there are a lot of different types of music. But really there are only two: good music and bad music.<sup>1</sup>

ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT BE FUN to talk about jazz music, or rock and roll or even Sudanese dance music, for the purposes of this book we must confine ourselves to what, for want of a better term, is now called “classical” music – by which of course we mean Western European “classical” music.

As a descriptive term, “classical” is hardly accurate at all: Strictly speaking, “classical” music should refer to the music of ancient, or Classical, Greece and Rome. And since we have very little idea what the music of ancient Greece and Rome might have sounded like (those ancient Greeks were great on philosophy and art, not so much so on sound-recording technology), we’re not much further ahead.

The term may also be used to refer to the music of the so-called “Classical” or “Classic” era, the period of music that falls between the Baroque and the Romantic – roughly 1750 to 1850, give or take a decade (let’s not worry right now about the Rococco or *Sturm und Drang*) – and is exemplified by the music of Haydn and Mozart.<sup>2</sup>

SO IF YOU WANT TO BE PEDANTIC – and some music lovers just thrive on being pedantic – you shouldn’t be

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<sup>1</sup> I have an ironclad and absolutely foolproof rule for telling one from the other: Good music is anything I like. Bad music is anything I don’t like. Simple.

<sup>2</sup> *Sturm und Drang* is, of course, German for “storm and drang.”

referring to the music of Bach or Beethoven or Wagner or Stravinsky as “classical” music.

But the problem is no one’s been able to come up with a better term, or at least a better term people are willing accept. Some people call it “art” music, to distinguish it from “popular” music – as if to imply that Bach shouldn’t be popular, or that there’s no artistry in the Beatles. Others call it “highbrow” music, or other terms that are even less polite. Any way you look at it, you can’t really win.

So we’re kind of stuck with the term “classical.” (And from now on I’m going to stop bothering with the quotation marks, if it’s all the same to you. They just clutter things up and get in the way.)

*C H A P T E R*





# REALLY EARLY MUSIC

**M**USIC EXISTED FOR THOUSANDS of years before anybody had the presence of mind to write it down.<sup>1</sup> Before writing, music survived by being passed on from one generation to the next – father to son, mother to daughter, brother-in-law to second cousin – as part of what we now refer to as The Great Oral Tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Even Stone Age cave dwellers probably had some sort of music tradition, even if it existed only as a series of inarticulate grunts or by banging together a few handy stones or bones lying around. (Some modern performers often look and sound a bit like Neanderthals. Maybe that's why they call it rock music.)

Later, music got more complicated and was adapted to suit particular occasions: music for wedding feasts, music for burials, music to bring on the rain or to encourage the crops, hey-we've-beaten-the-bad-guys music or music to keep dangerous animals at bay.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> You really can't blame them: They weren't writing down anything else, either. Not even grocery lists.

<sup>2</sup> The Great Oral Tradition relied heavily on the fact that most people are blabbermouths. As a method of recording music it was clumsy and prone to misinterpretation, but you must admit it saved on paper.

<sup>3</sup> The ancient Scots used the bagpipes primarily to frighten their enemies. It generally worked, as it still does today. The Roman emperor Nero played the bagpipes, too – and look what happened to him.

The ancient Chinese had a musical tradition dating back a few thousand years before the birth of Christ, to before the Shang Dynasty.<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal tribes in Africa, in the Amazon rain forest and on the North American continent developed highly sophisticated forms of singing, dancing and drumming that still exist today. Drawings inside the pyramids of ancient Egypt show us people performing on primitive musical instruments, though we have no idea what the music might have sounded like. (One of the earliest known written pieces of music appears in Egyptian hieroglyphics dating back more than 3,000 years. It seems to be some sort of lullaby. It just goes to show that, even back a few thousand years, it took work to get a baby to go to sleep.)<sup>5</sup>

But as fascinating as all this might be, it really lies outside the scope of this book. Sorry, but that's the way it goes. We only have room here to talk about classical music. (And if you don't understand what I mean by classical music, you obviously haven't read the book's introduction, as you were supposed to. Maybe you had better go back and read the introduction before going on to the next chapter.)<sup>6</sup>

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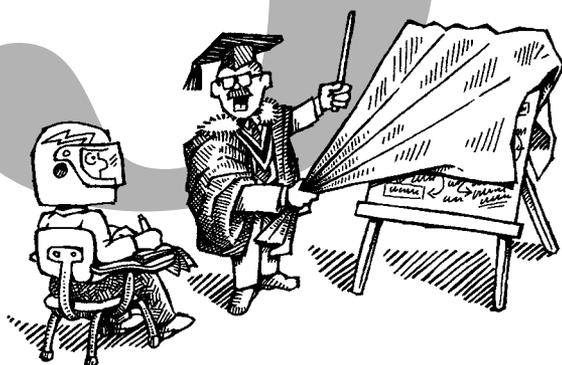
<sup>4</sup> Ancient Chinese music is built on a fundamental note called *Huang-chung*, found by blowing on a bamboo pipe of a certain length. You determine the right length by measuring the pipe against a bunch of millet seeds. Precisely how this works I'm not sure, but it made sense to them.

<sup>5</sup> And who sang this lullaby? Obviously the baby's mummy.

<sup>6</sup> If you have already read the introduction, please disregard this notice.

C H A P T E R

2





# THE BIG PICTURE

THE HISTORY OF WESTERN European music really starts around the fourth century, with the church music we call Gregorian chant. This began as a single vocal line and stayed that way for a few hundred years. Change came slowly back then.

It took a few more centuries to add more voice lines. (Then as now, good singers are hard to find, and the monks didn't want to rush anything.<sup>1</sup>)

THE EARLIEST TWO-PART CHANTS are known as *organum*, in which to the main chant (known as the *cantus firmus*, or “fixed song”) is added another voice.<sup>2</sup> *Organum* comes in two main types: parallel *organum*, in which the second voice shadows the *cantus firmus* at a set interval; and contrary *organum*, in which the second voice moves around the first pretty much any way it wants.<sup>3</sup>

By the 12th and early 13th centuries, chant and *organum* had become even more complicated, with as many as four voice parts, all based on a Gregorian *cantus firmus*. The best examples of this music come from two composers named Leonin and Perotin,

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<sup>1</sup> An abbess named Hildegard of Bingen did more than her share of writing some of this music, and very lovely it is. But by and large, monks were writing it. They had cornered the market.

<sup>2</sup> The term “fixed song” seems to imply that at some point the song must have been broken. But in fact it's more like fixed meaning rigged, the way you'd fix a race to make sure your horse came out the winner.

<sup>3</sup> There was never anything called *simultaneous organum*. The church frowned on this activity. Still does, pretty much.

who developed what we now call the School of Notre Dame.<sup>4</sup>

Much of this Notre Dame repertoire is preserved for us in a couple of manuscripts generally referred to as  $W_1$  and  $W_2$ , because most people have trouble spelling (and pronouncing) Wolfenbüttel.

Meanwhile, Europe was being overrun by roving gangs of troubadours, trouvères, minnesingers and other wandering minstrels singing songs about unrequited love and drinking and other dangerous pastimes. (They were dangerous because most of the love was directed at other men's wives. Maybe it had something to do with the drinking.)

As music progressed in the 14th century, composers of a new generation felt they were writing better than anyone before them, and in 1330 a man named Philippe de Vitry wrote an essay extolling the virtues of this new style of music, which he dubbed *ars nova*, or the "new art." He thought it was just the bee's knees. You'd think being Archbishop of Meaux would have kept Phillippe de Vitry busy enough. Obviously not.<sup>5</sup>

IN THE MID-14TH CENTURY comes the music of Guillaume de Machaut (1300-77), who's generally credited with writing the first four-part mass. Over in England, John Dunstable (1380-1453) was busy playing around with the sounds of thirds and sixths and early attempts at theme and variations.

Leaving the Middle Ages and turning to the Renaissance, such composers as Gilles Binchois (1400-60), Guillaume Dufay (1400-77), Josquin des Pres (1450-1521) and Orlando di Lasso (1532-94) started a wave known as the Netherlandish school.

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<sup>4</sup> I always have trouble telling Leonin from Perotin and vice versa. But at least it was awfully thoughtful of them to have been born in alphabetical order like that.

<sup>5</sup> Don't confuse *ars nova* with *bossa nova*, which came much later.

(Some people – old fuddy-duddies, mostly – called them outlandish.)

Like the School of Notre Dame, this wasn't really a formal school with classes or exams or anything – which at least meant you didn't have to pay tuition. They were called Netherlandish composers since most of them came from what we now call the Netherlands, or the Low Countries. One of their most important innovations was the use of popular secular songs instead of Gregorian chant for the *cantus firmus*.<sup>6</sup>

BY THE 16TH CENTURY this routine had gotten a little out of hand and the church bigwigs were pretty upset. St. Charles Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan, collected all the church music he could get his hands on. Eventually there were 1,585 pieces and he didn't approve of one of them. But a composer named Palestrina (1525-1594) came along and saved the day, convincing the church that music wasn't so bad after all, as long as you wrote it properly.<sup>7</sup>

THE 17TH CENTURY saw the beginning of what we now call the Baroque era in music – what some music lovers like to consider the Good Old Days. The old church modes were dropped in favor of the two main major and minor scales we still use today – the musical equivalent of metric and imperial, if you want to look at it that way.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It may be difficult to think of them as Low Countries when you find them at the top of the map, but that's what they're called anyway.

<sup>7</sup> That is, the way *he* did. Palestrina's influence was so great that even to this day whole generations of music students study how to compose just like him, in a particular form of academic punishment known as species counterpoint. (The human species, mostly.)

<sup>8</sup> The term Baroque comes from a Portuguese word meaning "rough pearl." Originally this was an insult, referring to architecture or music that was grotesque or in bad taste. Nowadays no one seems to remember this.

BAROQUE MUSIC'S usually pretty easy to spot: Just listen for the strong bass line, lots of notes and everything chugging along like a steam engine. Such composers as Antonio Vivaldi (1680-1743) in Italy, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) in France and Henry Purcell (1659-95) in England are all important in the general scheme of things, but none of them can hold a candle to the true bigwigs of Baroque music, German-born Bach (1685-1750) and Handel (1685-1759). Bach in this case is Johann Sebastian, J.S. for short, the father of a bunch of lesser Bachs who followed in his footsteps. (Handel is G.F. Handel, for George Frederick, or George Frideric, or sometimes Georg Friederich. But whatever his first names, his last name was Handel.)<sup>9</sup>

BACH WROTE A LOT OF ORGAN MUSIC, more cantatas than you can shake a stick at and a whole mess of big churchy stuff such as the *B-minor Mass*, the *St. Matthew Passion* and a bunch of motets. Handel wrote a lot of churchy music too (there's that little thing he calls *Messiah*), but also spent a lot of time writing operas, until he decided there was no money in it anymore.<sup>10</sup>

BAROQUE MUSIC IS BEAUTIFUL and inspiring, but it tends to be a bit heavy-handed. The next generation of composers, in what's known as the Classic era, went for something a little less pedantic and stodgy. The undisputed masters of this lighter, more melodious style are Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and W.A. Mozart (1756-91), usually known as Wolfgang Amadeus. (And let's not get into an argument over the Amadeus. Just call him Mozart and have done with it.)

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<sup>9</sup> Or sometimes Händel. Or Haendel.

<sup>10</sup> Handel was nothing if not practical. In fact, he was practically a genius.

They concentrated their efforts on chamber music and symphonies, though Mozart also turned out a few operas you may have heard of. Haydn wrote 104 symphonies at last count (or possibly 108, depending on who's counting), while Mozart wrote only 41. But Haydn lived longer and his symphonies tend to be shorter, so he had the advantage on both counts.

After Haydn and Mozart comes the dramatic, passionate music of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). Beethoven was the broody type, and it shows. He wrote only nine symphonies, but he put a lot more into them.<sup>11</sup>

Beethoven also expanded the repertoire of the piano, with which Mozart had been tinkering until he passed on, and took the string quartet off in directions it hadn't expected to be going.

Beethoven's emotional outbursts ushered in the Romantic era of the 19th century, in which everything in music got bigger, more exciting and just generally louder.<sup>12</sup>

SUCH ROMANTIC COMPOSERS as Frederic Chopin (1810-49), Franz Schubert (1797-1828) and Robert Schumann (1810-56) or even Johannes Brahms (1833-97) and Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) generally knew how far to take Romanticism, but in its extreme form it led to the music of Richard Wagner (1813-83), a German-born composer of large-scale operas who never knew when to leave well enough alone.

Such composers as Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) and Richard Strauss (1864-1949) continued to write big, splashy operas, but as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, some

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<sup>11</sup> Especially the *Ninth*, into which he put a whole choir.

<sup>12</sup> Longer, too, as anyone who's sat through a Mahler symphony or Puccini opera can tell you.

composers worried that maybe they were running out of things to say.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) added powerful rhythms and many elements of jazz music to his compositions. With Stravinsky, you never knew quite what to expect next. Arnold Schönberg (or Schoenberg, 1874-1951) shook everybody up for a while by discarding the long-established harmonic system of major and minor scales for something entirely new, which he called serialism, based on a strict mathematical formula that created “tone rows” using all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. The problem is that serialism looks better on paper than it sounds in performance.<sup>13</sup>

SOME APPLAUDED SCHOENBERG for his courage, but others felt he’d thrown the baby out with the bath water and worried he was leading music down the road to chaos. Obviously, something had to be done.

Some composers pulled back from the brink by rediscovering musical styles of the past and updating them in their own way (kind of like rerunning old movies on late-night TV). Thus we have new waves of neo-Classicism, neo-Romanticism and even neo-Medievalism. (Obviously it’s still too early for neo-Serialism, but it will probably come someday.)

As to what happens next, your guess is as good as mine. Maybe better.

There you have it: a crash course in 1,500 years of musical history in about as many words. Whew!

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, it sounds a lot like music written by mathematicians – which is probably not much better than mathematics done by musicians.