

Classical Music

What Is Classical Music?



If we want to know what classical music is, we first have to understand some basic things about the way music is written. First, all music uses standard **notation**.¹ That means that even though every piece (song) sounds different, they are all written the same way. Different notes are written on the staff. The staff is a series of horizontal lines with spaces in between them. You can tell how a note is supposed to sound based on where it is placed on the staff. High notes are written higher on the staff. Low notes are lower down. Most pieces of piano music are written on two staves. The first is the treble clef, which is on the top and contains the higher notes of a song. The second is the bass clef, which contains the lower notes and is placed below the treble clef. You read the treble and bass clefs at the same time as you read across the page – so you have to look at two sets of notes at once!

Sounds tricky, right? But that is not all you need to know to read or write a piece of music! You also need to know how fast to play it. That is called the tempo. And each song has a particular meter. The meter helps the person reading the music know how the notes should be played in relation to each other and which ones should be emphasized. The meter is a pattern determined by the number of beats (rhythmic units) in each measure. A measure is a standardized “chunk” of the music. Each piece is broken up into many measures of only a few beats each to make it easier to read. On top of it all, you need to know the

¹ **notation** – a system of symbols used to represent musical notes

dynamics of a song. In other words, you need to know how loudly or softly different sections (or phrases) of a song should be played.

Now that we know something about the basics of music notation, it should be easy to define classical music, right? Wrong! Many people think of classical music as songs that were written hundreds of years ago and played by orchestras. Orchestras are large groups of musicians. The musicians play instruments like the violin, flute, trombone, and clarinet. However, classical music is a lot more than that. A piece of classical music can be played by a quartet, a group of four musicians. It can be sung in an opera, a play in which the characters act and sing. It might have been written three hundred years ago, or yesterday. It can be slow and quiet, or fast and **dramatic**.² One person can play it with a cello. Someone with an electric guitar can even play it!

So what *is* classical music? In general, it is music in which there is not much **improvisation**.³ In jazz or hip-hop, the way a song sounds depends very much on who is playing it. Often, the performer will make up different parts. He or she might not follow exactly what is written on the page. In contrast, a piece of classical music usually sounds similar no matter who performs it. This is because the musicians playing it stick to the exact meter, tempo, dynamics, and notes as written.

It is difficult to define classical music precisely because, as in any musical **genre**,⁴ there is a broad range of music that can be considered classical. Listening to classical pieces is probably the best way to learn what “classical music” means. After a while, you will just know it when you hear it!

² **dramatic** - exciting

³ **improvisation** – a performance that is done without planning or practicing

⁴ **genre** – type or category

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. All classical music pieces are written out the same way, using
 - a. letters, words and paragraphs.
 - b. standard notation.
 - c. tempo.
 - d. meter.

2. The author contrasts classical music with jazz and hip-hop, because classical music
 - a. uses different instruments.
 - b. was only written a long time ago.
 - c. is easier to define than jazz or hip-hop.
 - d. does not use improvisation.

3. The most important reason that a piece of music is written in standard notation is probably
 - a. to tell a conductor which instruments to use.
 - b. to tell a performer how loudly to play it.
 - c. to tell a performer what notes to play.
 - d. to tell the audience what to listen for.

4. Read the following sentence: “The meter helps the person reading the music know how the notes should be played in relation to each other and which ones should be emphasized.”

The word **emphasized** means

- a. to make something more important than another thing
 - b. to purposely skip over something
 - c. to invent something that seems right, as you go along
 - d. to combine two things into one thing

5. What is the main idea of this passage?
 - a. Classical music and jazz music have two different ways of being written down.
 - b. Classical music is played using instructions that are written in a particular way.
 - c. Learning how to play classical music requires learning multiple instruments.
 - d. Classical music from long ago was written down differently than music is written today.

6. According to the passage, what instruments are often found in classical music orchestras?

7. Give two examples of how one piece of music could sound very different if two different musicians played it.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

_____, it is difficult to identify classical music simply by reading a definition because there is a broad range of music that can be considered classical.

- a. Previously
- b. On the contrary
- c. In conclusion
- d. Second

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Jazz performers improvise by making up different parts of a song while they are playing.

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who? Jazz performers
2. What do jazz performers do? _____
3. How? _____
4. When? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** genre: type or category.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____

Teacher Guide and Answers**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 870**Featured Text Structure:** Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic**Passage Summary:** Music has notes, meter, tempo, and dynamics. In a piece of classical music the musicians play the exact meter, tempo, dynamics, and notes as written. Classical music differs from jazz and hip-hop because in classical there is little improvisation.

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6. According to the passage, what instruments are often found in classical music orchestras?

Suggested answer: Orchestral instruments mentioned in the passage include the violin, flute, trombone, and clarinet.

7. Give two examples of how one piece of music could sound very different if two different musicians played it.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary. If one piece of music were played by two musicians it might sound different if the musicians change the tempo, or speed at which the notes are played, or they might change the dynamics of the song, how loudly or softly certain sections are played.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

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2. What do jazz performers do? **improvise**
3. How? **by making up different parts of a song**
4. When? **while they are playing**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** genre: type or category, especially of a form of art

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.