

ESSAY: 2468 words, excluding bibliography; owing to lack of access to libraries due to restrictions at the time of writing, I have been unable to include page numbers for a few sources.

(Q1.) Imagine you have been asked to revise the history component of your sixth form music syllabus. What would your syllabus include, and why?

In this discussion, I argue that the role of Western music over the course of history can be seen as a mirror for the evolution of social thought. In line with a shift in cultural and spiritual perception, music today juxtaposes more than ever with music of the past. But what does that say for society over the course of time? And how does the significance of a composition or its composer parallel the world which created it?

In my opinion, if A level music students are to take anything away from a revised syllabus, it should be the answers to questions like these. Such an approach to music history would offer students an insight not only into compositional development, but moreover an understanding of how music has functioned through time, and how it can be utilised as a reflection of both past and present. For the purposes of this approach, historical set works must be selected chronologically, right from the beginnings of Western classical music up to the dawn of Post-modernism. Compositions should be chosen on the basis of their impact at the time of writing; therefore, the celebrity of a composer in today's world should be given no bearing. Opera often provides a particularly interesting area of study; historically, it has acted as a vehicle for social change, characterised by its use of storyline to escalate musical meaning. In terms of gender representation, I think it is interesting to note that many women composers helped to trigger, or indeed were the cause of, key turning points in musical history. Therefore, there is no particular need to consider gender balance in the list of compositions, because by taking this approach, the issue resolves itself.

To start from the very beginning; the Medieval era—epitomic of Western classical music's roots. In the Bible it is Jubal who is nominated first musician; 'the father of all such as handle the harp and organ'¹. Recent musicologists, however, have appointed Hildegard von Bingen as the 'earliest named composer'². Although this is contested, in a revised A-level curriculum, it seems appropriate to incorporate her writing into the list of set works. Hildegard's music is not only an extraordinary achievement given its place in a world dictated by male voice; it also signifies the foundations for musical history. Her compositions are more melodic than is common for this epoch, capturing the listener in their vision of religious purity, and denoting in turn the simplicity of monastic life. Hildegard was a prolific writer of organum; a liturgical form that features two voices, in parallel, and consisting largely of consonant intervals. Organum paved the way for the later textural exploration of polyphony and counterpoint, thus providing an interesting comparison point for students over the course of their study. Furthermore, the contrast between the consonant innocence of Medieval church music and the dissonance of 20th century avant-garde music, would emphasise to students the spiritual swing from a world in which religion was all-encompassing, and life was punctuated by faith and simplicity, to the forward-thinking yet equally discordant modern age.

¹ Gen. 4:12

² (Maddocks 2001)

Transitioning to musical secularism in twelfth century Occitania, the troubadour *chansons* would form a similarly fundamental area of study. After all, it was the troubadours who invented the concept of ‘courtly love’, marking the birth of chivalry, and re-defining the Western philosophy of romantic and erotic love to this day. The cultural climate that ensued has led Medieval Occitania to be equated with a ‘Renaissance of the twelfth century’³. Troubadour music was so influential that it prompted the composition of imitative chansons in Italian, German, Spanish and even English⁴. Students would study one tenso written by Bernart de Ventadorn, a prolific composer of troubadour song, in addition to ‘A chanter m’er’⁵ by Biatriz de Dia. The emergence of trobairitz (women troubadours) provides a rare insight into gender and power dynamics as far back as the 12th-13th century, at a time in which Occitan culture typified European thought. Studying such music would not only teach students secular music’s roots; it would also offer a glimpse of the role of voice⁶ in a world in which it embodies power, and dictates the writing of history.

Approaching the Baroque era, harmony becomes increasingly central to composition. The consonant manipulation of dissonance pioneered by Renaissance composer Giovanni Palestrina⁷ in what became the model for counterpoint harmony, attracted controversy between Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Artusi in the Early Baroque period⁸, due to its conservative limitations. Two divergent methods consequently arose, headed by Monteverdi: a ‘transitional figure’⁹ in the shift from the Renaissance to the Baroque. The foremost of these became known as the *Prima Practica*, and was an embodiment of Palestrina’s renaissance polyphony. The latter, coined the *Seconda Practica*, was Monteverdi’s preferred style in both his operas and his sacred works. The *Seconda Practica* marked the beginnings of basso continuo and figured bass, which were to characterise harmonistic ideology over the course of the Baroque era. Furthermore, Monteverdi’s employment of music itself to enhance an exploration of psychology in his operas functioned as a gateway into opera’s political use across the following centuries. The best example of this is *L’incoronazione di Poppea*; written in 1643, it marks the first instance of an opera with a historical plot. Its elaborate arias and scenes riddled with passion showcase human emotion at its highest, and establish a ‘victory of senses over reason and morality’¹⁰. In a revised A-level syllabus, I therefore consider the study of Monteverdi as essential to an understanding of Baroque music’s evolution; coinciding, as it did, with the birth of a modernising Europe.

Looking towards the Middle Baroque, Jean-Baptiste Lully would play an important role in the course. The shift from itinerant to centralised court, emblematised by Louis XIV¹¹ in

³ (Haskins 1968)

⁴ (Bogin 1980)

⁵ The only words with surviving music by a trobairitz

⁶ Tomaryn Bruckner describes voice as a ‘privileged and powerful concept to describe woman’s place in history...’ (Tomaryn Bruckner 1992)

⁷ An Italian liturgical composer born around 1514

⁸ The ‘Seconda practica’ was first referenced in Artusi’s *Seconda parte dell’Artusi* in 1603

⁹ (Cruice 1997)

¹⁰ (Weinstock and Hanning 2020)

¹¹ (Versailles and the Royal Court n.d.)

France, prompted an increase in public performances¹², synchronic to the growth of chamber music. The Sun King's court thus acted as a cultural hub, creating in turn the conditions for chamber music's pinnacle later in the period. Jean-Baptiste Lully, composer to Louis XIV¹³, vivified and enriched French music. His writing is characterised by energetic and animated nuances, introducing popular dances such as the minuet to the court¹⁴. Moreover, his pioneering of the French overture and modification of Baroque orchestration¹⁵ signify a key turning-point in the Middle Baroque. Students should analyse firstly his *Menuet pour trompettes*, and secondly his *La Nuit Ballet: Overture*. Studying Lully's role in 17th century France offers an entrance into a world where many aspects of society, even musical composition, revolved around the court – an embodiment of power.

Of similar musical consequence is Lully's contemporary, Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, whose arrival at an androcentric scene indicates a surprising acceptance of women musicians over the course of modern history, which today's forward-thinking world often fails to recognise.¹⁶ More than that, Jacquet de la Guerre enjoyed prominence in her own lifetime as a celebrated court composer. Illustrative of her success, Titon du Tillet placed her immediately below Lully in his *Le Parnasse Français*¹⁷. Effectively, it was her revolutionary mixing of Italianate features with a novel French take (such as the witty manipulation of silence¹⁸) which re-defined the French *sonate*¹⁹, and set the tone for the equalisation of violin and harpsichord in Baroque chamber music. To study her work, in correlation to Lully's, would offer students a unique insight into the role of gender in the centralised French court, the legacy of which was long-lasting in Western history.

Bach undoubtedly epitomises the High Baroque, as seen in his mastering of musical concepts which had been developed earlier in the period. To fully grasp the impending shift from Baroque to Classical, I believe that Bach should play a central role in any music syllabus. Donald Burrows argues that his 'fascination with the intellectual and emotional possibilities of fugue and imitation introduced an extra dimension to...music...'²⁰ Indeed, it is for his contrapuntal and canonical works that Bach is most famous. A prolific composer both of music ecclesiastical and secular by nature, his composition is characterised not only by its purity but also by its exploration of emotion. Analysing Bach's fugal writing (such as movement two of his third sonata for solo violin) would teach students to comprehend how musical vision evolved from the basic polyphony of the Medieval age to the contrapuntal complexity of the Baroque. Bach came from a world strikingly different to today's, yet despite its comparatively backward nature, the simplicity of a religio-centric outlook on life personifies his writing as pure and innocent.

¹² (J. 2001)

¹³ From 1661

¹⁴ (Jean Baptiste Lully 2021)

¹⁵ The use of timpani, castinets and Baroque oboes (Spitzer and Zaslav 2004)

¹⁶ (Four Composers at the Court of Louis XIV 2008)

¹⁷ 1732

¹⁸ (Cyr 2008)

¹⁹ (Cessac 1995)

²⁰ (Burrows 2000)

The arrival of Classicism²¹ in the music world witnesses a textural shift from polyphony to homophony. For the purposes of this curriculum, two Classical composers should be selected across the course of the era, with an aim to furnish students with an understanding of 18th century Europe's social and political scene. The Chevalier de Saint Georges is one particular composer whose role was prominent in the pioneering of the Classical violin concerto. Although Saint-Georges's Caribbean heritage does set him apart from his contemporaries in a period underlined by racism, this is not altogether relevant to a music syllabus. In fact, it is his development of the violin's range and technical requirements which place him as a 'seminal figure'²² in music history. With an important position in the *Concert des Amateurs*, one of the first French *concerts* unattached to the centralised court, Saint-Georges equally marked the dawn of a revolutionary atmosphere that was soon to take Europe by storm. A study of his place in a modernising world thus offers students a glimpse into music's role at a time of major political upheaval.

Likewise, the course should spotlight Classicalism's rise on the opera stage. One key example stands out as figurative of opera's social power, this being Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. The opera is based upon Augustin de Beaumarchais' radical play of the same title, which attracted controversy to the extent that it took six years to finally be staged, leading Napoleon to later brand it 'the Revolution already put into action'²³. Frits Noske designates Mozart's masterpiece on a 'higher level'²⁴ than political thought: an intimate portrayal of human emotion. It is Mozart's ingenuity which characterises the score, giving it centre-stage in a witty depiction of human psychology. The music is filled with strikingly subtle nuances, such as the *Letter Duet's* third-based harmony between Susanna, the quick-witted servant, and her noble-hearted yet socially demeaned mistress. And so it was, that an opera's sensitive characterisation, punctuated by its music, drove audiences across Europe to laugh in the face of hierarchical convention.

Moving into the Romantic age, the syllabus must take into account the extensive chamber music of Louise Farrenc, Romantic composer and acclaimed professor at the Paris Conservatoire from 1842. She was among the first to pioneer the 'Piano Quintet', whose roots date back to the occasional notation of string quartet accompaniment in Classical piano concertos.²⁵ In her 'Piano Quintet No.1', Farrenc colourfully exploits individual sonorities, which leads to a masterful exploration of emerging Romantic techniques. She plays, moreover, with features typical of the Classical, such as graceful ornamentation in the second movement. It is the novel mixing of this with Romantic chromaticism's richer tones that epitomises the quintet. To study her work, in parallel with a quintet written by a later Romantic figurehead such as Brahms²⁶, would, I think, open students' eyes to the role of music in an ever-changing world. Romanticism as a movement came, in part, as a reaction to the stifling social climate which dominated industrialising Europe in the 1800s. Its musical vision was one defined by passion; its revolutionary unearthing of compositional devices led to powerful new musical heights not for the first time in history.

²¹ Musically, classicism is placed around 1730-1820

²² (De Lerma 1976)

²³ (Ganahl 2015)

²⁴ (Noske 1969)

²⁵ (Apel 2003)

²⁶ Brahms's quintet as the 'crown of his chamber music'. (Swafford 1997)

Approaching compositional history's final stages, the late 1800s-1900s mark the beginnings of a modern age. The French composer Claude Debussy was a pivotal figure in the transition from Romanticism to Modernism. His novel manipulation of motif-based, melodically and harmonically tritonic writing in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* redefined composition, leading Pierre Boulez to describe it as the birth of musical modernism.²⁷ Igor Stravinsky's rousing 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring* similarly witnesses an exposition of rhythmic colour and architectonic use of harmonic dissonance (take the Augurs chord²⁸), creating an impressively palpable body of sound.

A contemporary of Stravinsky, Dmitri Shostakovich, who was outwardly Stalinist, utilised implicitly ironic musical vocabulary in his compositional work. The strikingly aggressive personification of Stalin in the second movement of his Tenth Symphony²⁹, characterised by its pointed articulation and militaristic manipulation of percussion, acts as a good example. Shostakovich's employment of musical language to enact a hidden vision critical of Sovietism would offer students a contemporary example of voice's power. In times of brutal politicisation and stark oppression, voice emblematises individual freedom. With this in mind, American composer Florence Price should play a key role in the syllabus. In this case, her West-African heritage characterises her musical vision. Writing from an inherently racist society, her exploration of Afro-American influences results in the musical blending of two worlds. Marked by its plaintive spiritualism, Price's work equally stands out in the face of an ever-industrialising world.

To conclude, the aim of any Western music history syllabus should be to expand students' knowledge of music's historical function, be it in the political, the social or the philosophical scene of the time. A chronological exploration of musical evolution is, moreover, essential; acting as a mirror for the synchronic development of Western thought. It is only by looking progressively from Medievalism to the dawn of a modern age, that students can hope to comprehend today's world through the powerful lens that music provides. Similarly progressive is the novel scope which this approach creates for the discovery of lesser-known composers; inadvertently diversifying the syllabus by letting musical history take its chronological course.

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²⁷ (Boulez 1991)

²⁸ (Chua 2007)

²⁹ (Gerstel 1999)

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