

Classical Music Listening Guide

1. The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra by Benjamin Britten

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbUbx9cJPX0>

This piece is an excellent introduction to the orchestra and all the different instruments you will hear in an orchestra. It's a great way to open up your ears to the different timbre (sound/color) of each instrument so that when you listen to other pieces you can hear the different voices and not pay attention only to the melody.

Benjamin Britten took a piece written by Henry Purcell and then wrote variations on the theme, taking turns giving each family of instruments a variation of the theme. There is also a fugue at the end (in Latin it means "to chase"), where each family of instruments comes in with the main theme and then is quickly "chased" after by another family of instruments. The above link does a great job of walking you through the whole piece.

2. Carnival of the Animals by Camille Saint-Seans

This piece is a musical suite of 14 movements composed by Saint-Seans in 1888, however it was not published until a year after his death in 1922. Saint-Seans composed this in fun and for private performances, forbidding it to be performed publicly, afraid it would damage his reputation as a serious composer. Each suite is meant to emulate the sounds and movements of different animals. I suggest listening to it first to see where your imagination takes you with each movement. The piece begins with an introduction and then is followed by these animals.

Introduction

I. Lions Royal March

II. Hens and roosters

III. Swift Animals

IV. Tortoises

V. The Elephant

VI. Kangaroos

VII. Aquarium

VIII. Personages with long ears

IX. The Cuckoo in the deep woods

X. Aviary

XI. Pianists

XII. Fossils

XIII. The Swan

XIV. Finale

Afterwards, if you wish to have visual depictions of animals along with the recording, type [**Carnival of the Animals – A Visual Journey Through Nature's Orchestra**](#) into the youtube search bar.

3. **Ma Vlast (My Fatherland) by Bedrich Smetana**

Ma Vlast was written by the Czech composer Smetana between 1874 and 1879. He lived during a period of time when composers wrote pieces that represented their specific country, region or ethnicity, incorporating folk tunes and melodies, rhythms and harmonies. It is a symphonic poem, meaning that it is a large orchestra work that depicts a poem, story, novel, painting, landscape (in this case it is a landscape), and is in 6 movements. Each poem depicts a different landscape.

1. *Vyšehrad (The High Castle)*
2. *Vltava (The Moldau - most famous of the set)*
3. *Šárka (named for the female warrior)*
4. *Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemian Fields and Groves)*
5. *Tabor (named after the town in South Bohemia)*
6. *Blaník (It is named for the mountain Balník inside which a legend says that a huge army of knights led by St. Wenceslaus sleep. The knights will awake and help the country in its gravest hour)*

Something of interest to note is that Smetana began to lose his hearing while he was composing the first poem and then lost it completely by the time he finished it. He composed the next 5 poems deaf.

This is a great piece to listen to while out driving in the countryside.

Other famous symphonic poems include "Sorcerer's Apprentice" by Paul Dukas, "Finlandia" by Jean Sibelius, "Don Quixote" by Richard Strauss.

Wonderful pieces to listen to with a group of friends on a Sunday afternoon

4. **New World Symphony by Antonin Dvorak**

Dvorak was a native born Czech composer but who spent a part of his career in America. He was so moved by the vast countryside of the wild west that he incorporated the spirit of the west into his pieces, being greatly influenced by Native American Music and Negro Spirituals. The symphony is in 4 movements (as all symphonies are). A typical structure of the movements is fast - slow - moderately fast - fast.

In the first movement: Allow yourself to be taken into the wild west of the 1800's where the surroundings were foreign and new and exciting, as well as dangerous, never knowing who or what you would encounter around the corner.

In the second movement: evening has fallen and as the sun sets, the stars appear across the vast countryside. Dvorak, as do many composers, uses the oboe to signify the countryside.

In the third movement: the triangle and violins wake the peaceful slumberer with sounds of alarm. Here Dvorak is influenced by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*.

In the fourth movement: we hear the strings begin with a "jaw's" like theme. The brass come in soon after with the theme, bold, confident and strong. You can almost hear the men riding their horses with force across the plains. The second theme comes in with the clarinet softly and sweetly soon after.

Remember, each piece of music has a theme that is introduced near the beginning of the piece. And very often, you will hear a second theme later on. The fourth movement recalls parts of the themes from the other movements. If you don't know what the theme is, think of it this way: a theme is very often a part of the piece that you would hum or whistle. It's melodic and isn't in any rush to move to another section. If this doesn't make sense, just keep listening to classical music and eventually it will click.

Another incredible work by Dvorak that incorporates the spirit and feeling of the wild west is his **American Quartet no. 12, op. 96**. His **Cello Concerto in B-flat major** has been recognized as the greatest cello concerto and is one of my favorite pieces.

5. Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 (Eroica)

This work is said to have gapped the bridge between Beethoven writing in the Classical era and the Romantic era. It is considered the first Romantic Symphony. Beethoven was anti-monarchical, being very much influenced by the French Revolution. He had initially dedicated the symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte, considering him to embodied the ideals of the Revolution. The story of why he changed the title and took the dedication to Napoleon runs like this:

In writing this symphony, Beethoven had been thinking of Bonaparte, but Bonaparte while he was [First Consul](#). At that time Beethoven had the highest esteem for him, and compared him to the greatest consuls of [Ancient Rome](#). Not only I, but many of Beethoven's closer friends, saw this symphony on his table, beautifully copied in manuscript, with the word "Bonaparte" inscribed at the very top of the title-page and "Ludwig van Beethoven" at the very bottom ... I was the first to tell him the news that Bonaparte had declared himself Emperor, whereupon he broke into a rage and exclaimed, "So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of Man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!" Beethoven went to the table, seized the top of the title-page, tore it in half and threw it on the floor. The page had to be recopied, and it was only now that the symphony received the title *Sinfonia eroica*.^[26]

It is also in 4 movements. The third movements of many Classical Symphonies were titled Minuet, given as a kind of nod to the past where France played a big part in promoting dance music. Beethoven, who was very much against the monarchy, decided to change the title of the third movement from Minuet to Scherzo, meaning "joke". It tends to be faster and more lighthearted than the Minuet of the Classical era.

6. Beethoven's 5th Symphony (The Fate Symphony)

This symphony is considered one of the cornerstones of western music. It was written in 1805, during great turmoil in Beethoven's own life as well as that of the world, and this can be heard in the music. In his private life, Beethoven was dealing with increased loss of hearing, and politically the period was marked by the Napoleonic Wars and strife in Austria as Napoleon's troops occupied Vienna (where Beethoven worked and lived).

The beginning of the movement we hear the iconic 4 notes, three of which are repeated and the fourth note sounds a minor third down, with the rhythmic duration of short - short - short - long. It has gone down in history described as "fate knocking at the door". These four notes are described as a motif (both melodically and rhythmically), and you will hear this motif throughout the entire symphony.

The second movement is a theme and variation, where we hear the first theme in the cellos (re-emerging throughout the movement), a second theme in the winds, and a third theme in the cellos and violas. In the end the whole orchestra joins in with the first theme.

The third movement is a scherzo starting off slowly but then picks up speed. Listen to see if you can pick up the rhythmic motif of short - short - short - long.

The last movement begins in a triumphant tone, C major instead of the tragic sound of the C minor that he began the symphony with. The way the melody soars is almost cinematic!

7. Beethoven's 6th Symphony (Pastoral)

It is one of the few works of Beethoven's that has explicitly programmatic content (ie. he meant it to depict the countryside). However, he wished to depict the feeling of the countryside more than evoke an image of the countryside. This symphony is in 5 movements rather than 4, and each movement is titled by the composer himself.

1. Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside
2. Scene by the brook
3. Merry gathering of country folk
4. Thunder, Storm
5. Shepherd's song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm

Interestingly enough, Beethoven composed the light-hearted 6th symphony the same time that he composed his ominous 5th symphony. They were performed alongside each other.

8. Erlkoenig by Schubert

The Erlkoenig is based on a poem written by Goethe about a child who dying and sees death approaching as his father rushes on horseback to get him help. You can hear the rushing of the horse's hoofs in the left hand of the piano and impending doom and the rushing of the wind in the right hand. The version below is an incredible performance by Baritone: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who at the drop of the hat changes characters between the father, the son, and the narrator. Just type in the below into the search bar of youtube.

[Schubert. Der Erlkönig \(D328\) - subtitled in English](#)

These are a list of pieces that you may enjoy and if you would like to learn more about them, just type in the name of the piece in wikipedia and it will explain all the essentials.

9. Sibelius/Mozart/Mendelssohn Violin Concertos
10. Vivaldi's Four Seasons
11. Mozart's Requiem
12. Brahms symphonies
13. Brahms Cello Sonata in E minor
14. Saint-Seans/Elgar/Lalo/Schumann Cello Concertos
15. Chopin Nocturnes, Mazurkas, Polonaise, Etudes (my favorite to listen to in the evenings)
16. Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto
17. Rhapsody in Blue by Gershwin
18. Beethoven's 9th symphony
19. Leonard Bernstein has a whole set of videos called "[Young People's Concerts](#)" that explains classical music really well!

Here is a list of the pieces I performed at the house concert:

Swan by Saint-Seans

On Wings of Song by Mendelssohn

Waltz no. 2 by Shostakovich

Chopin Prelude in e minor (the piano piece Leslie played)

Waldesruhe (Silent Woods) by Dvorak

Kol Nidre by Max Bruch

Salut d'Amour by Elgar

Ave Maria by Bach-Gounod

Gabriel's Oboe by Ennio Morricone

Enjoy your adventures in classical music!!!