

SPEAKING OF SYMPHONIES

Playbill's guide to the classic arts by Barry Singer

Symphonies have been the measure of composing ambition in classical music for at least 250 years now; the Kilimanjaro-caliber heights that all great composers must scale.

Big orchestras exist to play symphonies. Composers love to write for them; so many notes, so many musicians. The equation is elemental.

The word itself has been around since ancient Greece (“symphony” initially denoted “consonance”) but “symphony” today is a synonym for nothing less than epic aspiration. An extended musical piece divided into discreet parts called movements – usually four – is the technical translation, with the first movement written in “sonata form.” Not a moonlit musical sonata, but “sonata form,” which is, in fact, quite different; a kind of short story in music, comprised of three sections: an “exposition,” that lays out the basic plot line; a “development,” that expands upon the story musically; and a “recapitulation” that really hammers it home.

“Allegro,” or moderately fast, is the pace at which a symphony’s opening “sonata” movement usually proceeds, followed by a slow movement, played “adagio,” then a light-footed “minuet,” or “scherzo;” and, finally, a closing “allegro,” or big finish. Throughout history, in the hands of questing composers, these movements have been stretched and shuffled ingeniously, but the fundamental form holds true.

Symphonies really became a thing in the 18th Century, but written at first for smaller, all-string, ensembles usually attached to the court of a king or nobleman, who paid the bills and commissioned the work. Horns began to be filtered in as the 18th century progressed. Every conceivable instrument soon followed, swelling the size of scores and onstage seating arrangements.

Joseph Haydn wrote at least 107 symphonies over 36 years throughout the 18th Century; Mozart, in 24 years, wrote 47 – dazzling numbers in terms of quantity (and quality too). Then came Beethoven, whose single-minded focus on heroic monumentality elevated the symphony in the early-19th Century to an Olympian pursuit. Beginning with his Third, the “Eroica,” Beethoven pushed the symphony beyond Mozart and Haydn in pursuit of more fervent emotions, more fevered climaxes and more explosive musical fireworks. Things got big. Beethoven’s Fifth emblazoned this heightened symphonic grandeur as an exemplar for future symphonists to grapple with; from Schubert and Mendelssohn, to Bruckner, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Mahler. Then, with his Ninth and final symphony, Beethoven pioneeringly added vocal soloists and a choir to his closing movement, expanding the aesthetics (and economics) of the symphony one more time.

If it has seemed, since Beethoven, that writing symphonies is a macho flexing thing, well that’s because it has been. The composer Alice Mary Smith appears to have been the first British female to write a symphony (she ultimately wrote two), the first performed by the Musical Society of London in 1863. The first American composer was probably Amy Beach, who completed her Symphony in E-Minor in 1896. The African-American composer, Florence Price, wrote four over the course of the 1930s and 1940s. Few, if any of these, are programmed regularly by symphony orchestras today. But it’s early yet.

Barry Singer has written about the arts for Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, The N.Y. Times, Opera News, and Playbill.

