



Beginner's Guide to a Classical Music Performance

Welcome to our Beginner's Guide to a Classical Music Performance. If you've never been to a classical music concert before, you might find the information below helpful to make your experience more enjoyable.



You may also want to read our Beginner's Guide to the Theatre first, as this gives loads of information (e.g. how to buy tickets, where to sit, dos and don'ts of the theatre, what to wear) that's also good to know when going to a classical music performance.

1. What is classical music?

Like many forms of music, defining exactly what falls into the category 'classical' is difficult. Generally, classical music is played by ensembles comprised of some or all of the families of instruments: strings, woodwind, brass and percussion, and has been written any time from the 14th century right up to the present day.

2. How do I know if I'll like it?

The best way to find out is to try it! We all hear classical music every day in TV programmes, adverts, in films and even as mobile phone ringtones, so you'll probably be surprised how much classical music you know already.

3. Can I bring my children?

Children are most welcome at concerts. By the age of eight, many young people will get a lot out of a concert. From time to time there are specially programmed family concerts that are particularly suited to a younger age range.

4. When should I arrive?

It is probably best to arrive at the concert hall at least half an hour before the performance starts. This will give you some extra time to collect your booked tickets, buy any pre-performance drinks or programmes and generally get comfortable before the concert begins.

To help reduce distracting noises during the performances, there are usually designated pauses in each programme when late arrivals will be able to be seated. If you arrive late, we recommend that you wait close to your seating area's entrance so that you can be seated by an usher as soon as the pause occurs. If you have to leave a concert before its end, it's best to do so between the different pieces of music.



5. What should I wear?

Many people attending a concert treat it as a special occasion and therefore enjoy dressing up a bit, however, it is entirely up to you. There is no set dress code and you should wear whatever you feel most comfortable in. The most important thing is that you feel relaxed and enjoy the music. If the concert has the word 'gala' in the title, it may be better to leave the jeans at home in favour of something a little more formal, but by and large no one will notice or care what you are wearing.

6. Can I bring my mobile phone?

You can bring your mobile to the venue, but make sure you switch it off before going in to the concert hall. If you have an alarm watch or electronic paging system you'll need to turn these off as well.

7. Can I take pictures?

Cameras as well as other recording devices can create major distractions for the musicians and audience members around you. As a result, no cameras, video cameras or tape recorders are permitted in concert halls.

8. What are all the different instruments?



The instruments at the front of the stage are the strings. On the left hand side of the stage are the violins, the highest member of the family, followed from left to right by the violas and 'cellos, and finally the double basses at the back on the right.

Behind the strings sit the woodwind, generally in two rows. In the first row come the flutes and oboes, and behind them are the clarinets and bassoons. Depending on what piece is being played, you might also see the piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet or contra bassoon playing very high or low notes.

Behind the woodwind you'll see the brass. On the left of the stage are the French horns, and on the right trumpets, trombones and finally tubas. At the very back of the stage come the percussion, dominated by the timpani (very large drums).

9. What different types of classical piece are there?

Here's a list of the main types of classical piece you might hear at a concert, with a small description of each:

Symphony

A piece of music for the whole orchestra, usually in four parts.

Concerto

A piece of music for the whole orchestra with one soloist, usually in 3 parts. If you go to see a piano concerto you might get more out of the experience if you sit where you can easily see the performer's hands – ask the box office staff for advice on which seats to choose when booking your tickets.

Overture

This can either be an introduction to a longer piece (for example an opera or musical), or an orchestral piece that tells a story or conjures up certain ideas or themes.

Prelude

This can be either a short introduction to another piece for orchestra (or selected instruments) or a piece for solo piano.

Mass

A choral piece (sometimes with instrumental accompaniment) that sets the religious ceremony of the mass to music. This normally consists of 6 sections. Although masses originate from the Church, it is also very common to hear these performed in concert halls and other non-religious settings.

Requiem

Similar to the Mass, but originally composed specifically for funeral purposes in the Church.

Aria

A solo song from an opera.

10. How long is a typical performance?

Programme length varies, but a typical performance lasts about two hours, including one interval. You can always ask the box office for an estimated length.

11. When do I clap?

When a piece is complete. It can be difficult to tell when a piece is over, so a good tip is to watch out for the conductor. Conductors will hold still at the end of a piece, and then noticeably relax, put their arms by their sides and turn to face the audience to receive their applause. It is great anyway to enjoy the moment of silence just after the piece has finished. If you are unsure as to whether the piece has finished, wait for someone else to clap!

Many pieces of classical music, such as a Beethoven symphony or Mozart piano concerto, have three or more movements or sections, with a short pause in between each of them. It has become customary over time not to clap during these short pauses. If you buy a programme you'll be able to find out the number of movements (and so the number of pauses) in each piece. After the last movement, you can clap until your heart's content.

12. How can I find out more about classical music?

Many concerts have events before or after the performance that will give you a bit of inside info about the music being played. Ask at the box office when booking your tickets if any of these are available for your chosen concert.

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Image 1: Audience at Symphony Hall. Photographer: Adrian Burrows.

Image 2: CBSO and audience

Image 3: CBSO