The Classical era (or Classic era, a usage generally preferred in the USA) is usually understood to mean the period in which the central 'classics' of the standard repertory—essentially, the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—were composed: that is, from about 1750 or soon after to some time between 1800 and 1820. Whether this is truly a 'style period', in the sense that the style of the three 'classical composers' was a universally used one, or simply a period in which those three great composers worked, has been a matter of some contention among students of the period and of musical history.

The word 'Classical', which is derived from the Latin classicus (meaning 'of the first class'), is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'Of the first rank or authority; constituting a standard or model...'; further definitions refer to kinship with Greek and Latin antiquity (including 'conforming in style or composition to the rules of or models of Greek or Latin antiquity').

The relevant definition of 'Classic' is 'Of the first class, of the highest rank or importance; approved as a model; standard, leading'. In common parlance, the word is used primarily to distinguish cultivated music that is not popular or traditional, and probably has its historical roots in ecclesiastical or courtly traditions; it is thus used in a sense that implies acknowledgment of some kind of authority, seriousness of purpose, and perhaps superiority, and certainly of the idea that it has stood the test of time. In this sense it is applied to the music of composers of any era, from the Middle Ages to the present day, and might even be understood to include 'serious' music of the avant-garde. The term is also often applied, in the discussion of non-Western music, to courtly music traditions of such cultures as those of East and South-East Asia and the Middle East. In France, the phrase 'French Classical Tradition' does not normally indicate music of the late 18th century but of the age of Louis XIV, an era regarded as a 'classical' one.

Drawing on the association of merit with the ancient civilizations, the term was initially used in musical discourse in the sense of 'classics of their kind', or works widely recognized as models of excellence within their own genre. Fétis, writing in 1820, referred to Bach's keyboard works as classics; Palestrina's masses and Corelli's concertos have been similarly described, as representing an outstanding group of examples of a particular genre. Mozart's first biographer, F. X. Niemetschek, wrote of the 'classical value' of his music, and indeed hinted at the idea of Mozart's belonging to a 'classical era' when he wrote that 'The masterpieces of the Romans and Greeks please more and more through repeated reading, and... the same applies for both connoisseur and amateur with regard to the hearing of Mozart's music'.

The earliest manifestations of the attitude that made this usage possible were the 'classicizing' of certain repertories: the music of Handel (and to a lesser extent Corelli) in England from the mid-18th century onwards, and Lully's operas at the Paris Opéra (and to some extent Lalande's motets at the Concert Spirituel). These were among select audiences; it was only towards the end of the 18th century and especially in the early 19th, with the rise of canonical repertories and the concomitant development of 'concert life' and large-scale music publishing, that this usage could become widespread. The idea of a specific 'Classical school', referring to Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, took firm root in German writings about music during the 1830s, as a German or Viennese phenomenon, parallel to the Weimar Classics of Goethe and Schiller; only later did it come to be called the 'Viennese Classical School' (and later 'First Viennese School'), to distinguish it from the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern.

It was in the early 19th century that a need was felt for a terminology that would differentiate the new Romantic movement from what had gone before. The word 'Romantic', as a term to describe a musical style or an approach to music, seems to have entered the musical vocabulary earlier than the word 'Classical', which was now invoked as an antithesis to describe the
The word 'Romantic' derived from 'Romance', the ancient language of France, and hence the term applied to the poems or tales, characterized by imaginative adventurousness, that were typical of its literature. 'Romantic' came, by the late 17th century, to mean something extravagantly fanciful, diverging from the accepted norms. It was not until the 18th century that the term 'Romanticism' was needed to describe a new spirit which embraced the arts, philosophy, politics, and even the sciences. Romanticism grew in different countries at different times, taking different forms, and was never a coherent movement. However, the Age of Romanticism is now generally thought of as extending from the closing years of the 18th century to the early years of the 19th.

The spirit of Romanticism

So lengthy a period, especially one associated with rapid political, social, and economic change, naturally embraced several phases and included a number of contradictory strains. However, in all its manifestations Romanticism emphasized the apparent domination of emotion over form and order. This was often more apparent than real, since the disciplines of Romantic music needed to be no less secure than those of Classicism in order to express ideas effectively. But new value was set on novelty and sensation, on technical innovation and experiment, and on the cross-fertilization of ideas from different disciplines, both within and without the arts.

In Germany the Romantic movement was primarily musical. Various poets conceded supremacy to the art of music, but their contribution, and that of painting, was welcomed in Germany tending towards a synthesis of the arts—a trend long advocated, tentatively explored, and reaching fruition in Wagner. In Italy, the movement had stronger political overtones, both poets and composers associating themselves with the Risorgimento, the movement towards political independence and unity that claimed Verdi as its laureate. In France, the paintings in various salons and Victor Hugo's Hernani (1830) were at least as potent excitaments in the Romantic movement as the largely misunderstood Berlioz. Britain, musically an outpost of Europe at this stage, made its greatest contribution to Romanticism with literary influences—the fake 'Ossian', then Scott and Byron, thrilled musical Europe.

It was largely in Rousseau, the philosopher adopted with special enthusiasm by the Romantics, that justification was found for the emphasis on emotion rather than intellect. From him, too, came delight in the country and admiration for the virtues to be found in simple, unspoilt people. There was also a turn from the rational (supreme principle in the Enlightenment) to the irrational (as representing the superior claims of the imagination). Longings for things far away, an essential Romantic characteristic, could include dreams of remote lands (in a new liking for the exotic) and of the distant past (in the fascination with a past Romantic age of chivalry). The longing for freedom from restraint engendered a passionate desire for national identity and independence and, comparably, a search for individual identity and an admiration for the dominating, convention-scorning figure of the Hero.

It was in part the observation of some of these strains in Beethoven that led the writer and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann to claim him as a Romantic; but more crucially, Beethoven's music aroused in Hoffmann fear, suffering, and a longing for the infinite. The 'Pastoral' Symphony is clearly Romantic in its 'awakening of happy feelings on arrival in the country', its brook, its alarming storm, its Rousseauian peasants. The Fifth Symphony is more intrinsically Romantic in its assertion of humankind's defiant supremacy over its fate; so is the 'Eroica', or Heroic Symphony, with its great Marcia funebre for the death of the hero, its triumphantly energetic scherzo, and its final variations on a theme Beethoven associated with Prometheus, the