

Western Music History/Romantic Music

Introduction

The Romantic era spans from 1820 A.D. up until 1900 A.D. It can be characterized by the individuality of style, where there is an emphasis of self-expression and individuality in compositional style. The music is generally very programmatic, where the instrumental music depicts a story, idea or a poem - e.g., Smetana's "The Moldau" depicts scenes along the Moldau River. The programmatic style can also be seen in the titles, which are usually very descriptive. Nationalism becomes important during this era, where composers created music using folk song, history and dances of their homelands.

There is a variety of mood, atmosphere and tone color. The orchestra expanded due to the growing size of concert halls and opera houses, causing an increase in the power of the brass section. The woodwind section takes on new tone colors, with the addition of the contrabassoon, bass clarinet, piccolo and the cor anglais. There are huge technological improvements in musical instruments which made them more musically flexible and accurate. New sounds were now created/used in all instruments. i.e. flutes were required to play in the breathy, lower registers; violins were asked to strike the strings with the wood of the bow – *col legno*. All instruments were required to play with more virtuosity.

Harmony

In Romanticism, a broader harmonic vocabulary was used, such as chromatic harmonies, adding color to the music. Dissonant, unstable chords were also used more freely. Delayed resolution of dissonances gave an increased feeling of angst. Extensive modulation was now used much more than previously in the Classical era. Because of this extensive modulation, there is less tonal gravity (the centration around one common key).

Dynamics And Rhythm

Romantic music uses a wide range of dynamics from *fff* (*fortississimo*: very, very loud) to *ppp* (*pianississimo*: very, very soft). The range of pitch is expanded. Tempo becomes another tool in the hands of the Romantic composers as indicated by the increased use of *accelerandos* (speeding up) and *ritardandos* (slowing down), as well as extensive use of *rubato* (the bending of tempo/rhythm).

Forms

Composers wrote musical miniatures as well as monumental pieces. Some genres are carried over from classicism, but are more greatly exploited, such as sonatas and symphonies. Additionally, a few new forms are invented.

Art Song

One of the forms of the Romantic Era is the Art Song. It is standardly a composition for solo voice and piano. The piano accompaniment is an integral element in the piece, and serves as an interpretive partner to the voice, rather than a simplistic accompaniment. Poetry and music are thus intimately fused. The best Art Song composers of the Romantic era include Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. The Art Songs based on German texts tended to favour the poets Heine and Goethe. The song composers interpret the poems, translating their mood and atmosphere into music. Most songs have a piano introduction and in many cases a postlude.

Types of Art Songs: **Strophic** - The same music is used for each stanza. Like a hymn in structure.

Through-composed - New music is used for each stanza. Allows music to reflect changing moods in the poem.

Song Cycles - Contains several art songs, grouped into a set. Often unified by a single story line. i.e. : Schubert's "The Winter Journey"

'Tone Poem**Beethoven (1770 – 1827)**

Ludwig van Beethoven's career has 3 phases. His first phase was between 1770 – 1802, during which his music was strongly influenced by Mozart and Haydn. He wrote his first two piano concertos, first two symphonies, string quartets Op.18 and first 10 piano sonatas all during this period. His second phase was between 1802 – 1815. During this stage he was going deaf. He greatly expanded upon existing forms, and infused his music with heroic expression. His works include the Kreutzer Sonata for violin and piano, his only violin concerto, the 3rd, 4th and 5th piano concertos and some of his greatest piano sonatas, including "Les adieux", "Waldstein" and "Appassionata". His third phase was from 1815 – 1827. Now he was totally deaf, leaving him completely isolated from society. He departs substantially from established conventions, both in form and in style. His works include the 9th symphony, the Missa Solemnis, and the late piano sonatas and string quartets.

Beethoven believed that there was a moral force behind music. He revised and refined his work repeatedly. He used classical forms and techniques but gave them new power and intensity, creating a bridge between Classicism and Romanticism. His works convey tension and excitement through syncopations and dissonances. Entailing many contrasts in mood, tiny rhythmic ideas are repeated over and over to create momentum. There is an enormous range of expression in his work: tempo, dynamic and expressive indications are marked far more extensively in his scores than in those of his predecessors. Often he had markings such as "< p". He used extremities of pitch far more. He unified the movements of his symphonies, sonatas and string quartets. Often one movement leads directly into another with out a pause (attacca). There are also thematic inter-relationships between movements. Many of his movements use sonata form, but the development sections and the coda are greatly expanded. He uses the scherzo rather than the minuet for the 3rd movements of his pieces. His Scherzos have rapid movements with rhythmic drive. His most famous works are his 9 symphonies, which were conceived for large orchestras. In some of them he adds piccolos, trombones and contrabassoon. All instruments play difficult music, and the odd-numbered symphonies are more forceful, whereas the even-numbered symphonies are very calm and lyrical. His Symphony No. 9 is the first up to that time in music history to use a choir, which we hear in the "Ode to Joy" finale movement. He wrote 32 piano sonatas, 16 string quartets, 5 piano concertos, 1 opera ("Fidelio"), 1 ballet, 1 violin concerto, and 2 masses. He incorporated fugues extensively in his later works.

Symphony no.3 This symphony was intended to reflect on the life of Napoleon. However, Beethoven scratched out its dedication to Napoleon when he found out the general had invaded Austria. Nicknamed the *Eroica* Symphony, it was the longest symphony ever composed at the time of its premiere.

Symphony no.5

In his Symphony no. 5, he unifies all contrasting movements. The first four-note motif is used extensively in first and third movements. The third movement theme reappears in the finale. The last two movements are connected by a bridge. This contrasting element that he retained by employing the motif in all four movements of Symphony no. 5 is known as a cell.

Schumann (1810 – 1856)

Schumann was a very conservative composer, whose works are very autobiographical and programmatic in nature. He was the founder of the first musical journal – “The New Journal of Music”. His most famous Art Song is considered to be “In The Lovely Month Of May”, an example of an Art Song which makes use of Strophic form.

Schubert (1797 – 1828)

Schubert was a Viennese composer and child prodigy. His output consists of over 600 songs, nine Symphonies, eight completed operas, six masses, and an abundance of piano music, string quartets and other chamber works. His songs embrace a wide spectrum of moods, and his melodies range from simple folk-like tunes to complex lines. He makes use of very rich harmonies and rich accompaniments.

The Erl King

‘The Erl King’ is an Art Song based on a ballad by Goethe. The Poem is in dialog throughout. The story is about a father riding through a storm on horse-back with his sick child in his arms. The boy has visions of the Erl King – a symbol of death. A through-composed setting is used to capture the tension and excitement of the poem. The piano part has a triplet motion, describing the galloping of the horse. The motif in the bass symbolizes the Erl King and death. Schubert makes one singer portray several characters. The ‘boy’ is sung in the high register in a minor key, often with dissonant harmonies (symbolic of his sickness), whereas the ‘father’ sings in the low register, trying to reassure the boy. The ‘Erl King’ sings coy and enticing melodies in the major key. The highlight of the piece is its closing recitative, announcing the father's discovery on reaching home of his son dead in his arms.

The Symphony

During the Romantic era, two groups of Symphony composers arose. The first being the “Conservative” Group, comprising of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and Brahms. The second is known as the “Revolutionary” Group, and consists of Berlioz, Liszt, Mahler, and Dvorak.

Berlioz (1803 – 1869)

Berlioz was a French composer, whose work contains abrupt contrasts in dynamics and tempo changes. He assembled hundreds of musicians in his orchestras to achieve an enormous range of power. He made use of unusual orchestral effects such as col legno, and the combination of bells and brasses. His melodies are long, irregular and asymmetrical. All his works are for orchestra or for orchestra with chorus and vocal soloist, and have a literary program and are dramatic and use new forms.

Symphonie Fantastique, 1830

Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique (1830) is a five movement programmatic symphony. A single melody, called the *idée fixe*, is used to represent the beloved, and makes an appearance in all movements, unifying the symphony. The theme changes in character throughout the symphony. He makes use of a large and colorful orchestra consisting of bells, harps, timpani, piccolo, cor anglais, etc... He has the heaviest orchestration in the last two movements which depict the fantastic and the diabolical.

1st movement: slow introduction with 11 tempo changes, followed by the Allegro, in which the *idée fixe* is very noble and shy.

2nd movement: A waltz, using ternary form and including the harps.

3rd movement: describes a country scene and includes the cor anglais.

4th movement: a march, here the timpani are tuned a 3rd apart.

5th movement: most fantastic. Starts with muted strings. Here the *idée fixe* is a witch, and is transformed into a dance tuned decorated by trills. Bells are used, tubas and bassoons intone the *Dies Irae*, symbolizing eternal damnation. There are contrasting Pizzicato in the strings. The movements ends with a figure in the lower strings. There is a huge crescendo at the end, culminating in a musical nightmare.

Brahms (1833 – 1897)

Brahms was a German composer, influenced by Schumann to a small extent. He created masterpieces in all forms except opera. His output includes four symphonies, two piano concertos, one violin concerto, short piano pieces, many songs (over 200) and a large number of choral pieces. He was a master of 'Theme and Variation' form. Strongly influenced by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, his music embraces a wide range of moods and uses intricate and dense polyphonic textures. He makes extensive use of imitation, canon and fugue, with intricate rhythmic patterns, including polyrhythms (various rhythms placed against each other E.g. : 2 against 3, or 3 against 2). Brahms treated tonality with greater freedom whilst adhering to strict, formal classical forms and standards. Each of his 4 movements are arranged in the traditional sequence: Allegro, Slower 2nd, Scherzo and massive finale. He employs extensive modulation throughout. He was very fond of mellow instruments / tone colors such as viola, clarinet and French horn.

Symphony IV opus 98

1st movement : Sonata form

2nd movement : Slow and lyrical, with a pair of song-like themes.

3rd movement : Scherzo. Incorporates Sonata-rondo form.

4th movement : Theme and Variation Form (Allegro in E min). Consisting of the theme, 30 Variations and a coda. The brasses and woodwinds introduce the theme (consisting of an ascending, eight bar/note melody). Variations embrace a wide range of moods, and are connected to each other and maintain the themes eight bar form and triple meter. In variations 1 – 3, the theme is presented in the top or middle parts. In variations 4 – 11, the theme is presented in the bass. In variations 12 onwards the theme is presented in the top, middle or bass parts. This movement uses an overall ternary form:

A

Theme, then Variations 1 – 11 in a Minor key. Very Forceful.

B

Variations 12 – 15 in a Major key with a slower tempo and more relaxed.

A

Variations 16 – 13 with a quick tempo in a minor key followed by the Coda.

Liszt (1811 – 1886)

Liszt wrote very controversial music. His output consists mainly of piano compositions. He found new and exciting ways to exploit the piano. He uses an enormous range of dynamics, reminiscent of Beethoven's symphonic compositions. Pianists are required to play rapid octaves and daring leaps. He transcribed many operas and symphonies for the piano. He is said to have created the symphonic poem, a one movement orchestral composition, based on a literary or pictorial idea. A single musical idea recurs throughout the work and its character is transformed. Similar in nature to the *idée fixe* utilized by Berlioz. Many of Liszt's compositions deal with the devil or death. He makes constant changes of tempo and mood in his pieces.

Transcendental Etude no.10 in F min

Uses ABA / ternary form, as well as the inclusion of a Coda. The B section is more lyrical and in a higher register, and there is constant contrast between brilliant virtuosity and melodic ideas, which occur throughout the movement.

Chopin, Frederic (1810 – 1849)

Frederic Chopin wrote relatively few works, but almost all of them remain in the pianist's repertory today. Most of his music are short, musical miniatures, which evoke a variety of moods. Even his virtuoso passages are melodic. His music is nationalistic, and expresses his love of Poland (his home country) through his many Mazurkas and Polonaises. Chopin does not use literary titles or programs in his music, but rather, his poetic effects are created by the exploitation of the pedal. All of his harmonies blend together in a rich fashion.

“Revolutionary” Etude no.12 Opus 10 (1831)

This etude is inspired by the Russian Invasion of Warsaw. It is essentially a study which develops speed and endurance in the pianist's left hand. The left hand plays rapid scale passages throughout. The piece begins with high, dissonant chords, and rushing passages.

Verdi (1813 – 1901)

Verdi's music has a great variety of moods. His operas are fast moving, and involve characters who are quickly plunged into extremes of hatred, love, jealousy and fear. The vocal melody is the soul of Verdi's opera. He uses many trios, duets and quartets in which the emotions of each character are clearly depicted. Verdi's last three operas are among his greatest: Aida, Falstaff and Otello.

Wagner (1813 - 1883)

Wagner was one of the few great composers who was able to write his own librettos, which he based on legends and myths such as the story of Tristan and Isolde and of the Norse gods. He called his works “music dramas” or “Universal Art Works” (gesamtkunstwerk in German). Wagner shifted the musical gravity from the voice to the orchestra, and so expands his orchestra, which is treated symphonically. His orchestral interludes were used to describe the present scene. He exploited the power of brass instruments fully and even invented a new instrument, the Wagner tuba. He used leitmotifs, which are a recurring, short musical idea associated with a person or object in the drama. He varied and transformed these leitmotifs to convey changes of character, and these leitmotifs are what unify Wagner's operas. He uses chromatic and dissonant harmonies, and frequent modulation, but avoids resolution of dissonances, leading to the breaking down of tonality.

The Ring

"The Ring" (AKA *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) is Wagner's most famous work. It is a widely performed sequence of 4 operas /dramas, arranged in a gigantic cycle.

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