

# The Romantic Period

It is important to remember that the Classical and the Romantic are not clear-cut periods of music history. The word Romantic is simply a label by which music written in the nineteenth century is defined. Romantic traits in music go back much earlier than this, and Classical stylistic characteristics continued throughout the nineteenth century.

## The Romantic spirit

Nineteenth century Romanticism in music reflected the spirit of the age which was one of intensity of feeling and of emotional communication. The Romantics valued freedom, remoteness and strangeness, passion, striving, endless pursuit of the unattainable, yearning, emotions, impulses. The Romantic age also had a strong interest in legends, exotic far-off lands, myths, the irrational world of the unconscious and the dream.

## Music and words

The Romantic age is one of many contradictions. Instrumental music was considered the ideal romantic art – a pure art form, free from the burden of words. However, literature and poetry played an equally central role, and the lyricism of the lied strongly influenced instrumental music of the age. Many nineteenth century composers were very interested in literary expression. Berlin, Weber, Schumann and Liszt wrote distinguished essays on music. Leading novelists and poets of the time wrote about music with a deep love and insight. The lied was an important force in music for the intimate salon. The composers Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Hugo Wolf reached new levels of intimacy with this particular union of poetry and music.

## Programme music

The conflict of the Romantic ideal between pure instrumental music to communicate emotions and the strong literary emphasis was

resolved in the concept of programme music. This is music which describes pictures by means of imaginative suggestion through the power of music. This differed from the rhetorical means of musical figures of the Baroque era, or of imitating natural sounds, reminiscent of the Classic era. The beginnings of programme music has its roots in Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. It was later taken up by Mendelssohn, Schumann, Berlioz and Liszt.

## The composer and the audience

The Romantic age also saw a changing relationship between the composer and the audience. There was a transition from relatively small, cultured audiences of the Classic era to huge diverse and relatively unprepared middle-class public audiences of the nineteenth century. Composers felt they had to strive to be heard and understood and to reach their vast new audiences. With the emphasis being very much on the individual, the picture arose of the composer 'struggling in his garret', a lone heroic figure, writing under artistic inspiration, working against a hostile environment, separating himself from society. This image of the struggling hero lent composers' music a quality of excitement which stimulated the audiences of the age.

## Public concerts

The nineteenth century was a time of enormous population growth, which led to a rapid expansion of the major cities. Musical life flourished in the cities and they became thriving centres of musical activity with their public opera houses, large concert halls, choral societies and festivals.

As the number of concert halls increased, publishing houses and music stores expanded and provincial orchestras were established, with resident and touring conductors. With this expansion the distinction between the professional and the amateur grew sharper. A division

emerged between the virtuoso performer, dazzling his audiences on the concert stage, and the intimate drawing room setting for piano solos, duets, lieder, and the family music-making evenings amongst amateur musicians.

### Music and nature

The rapid population growth meant that many people moved to the ever-expanding cities for employment. Consequently the majority of the population lived in large impersonal cities rather than small villages. The more people's daily lives became separated from nature, the more they began to look towards it and hankered after it. Much music at the time had, or was given titles concerning nature; for example, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Schumann's *Spring* and *Rhenish Symphonies*, Mendelssohn's overtures, for example *The Hebrides Overture*.

### Nationalism

Nationalism was also an important feature of Romantic music. In the nineteenth century there was conflict between the growth of nationalism and the beginnings of the socialist movement and the writings of Karl Marx (1867). Some composers reacted to the threat of domination by German influences by incorporating their own national styles in their music. The main nationalist composers included the Russian 'Five', amongst them Mussorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov; Smetana and Dvorak in Bohemia; Grieg in Norway; and Sibelius in Finland. Although other Romantic composers such as Brahms, Chopin and Liszt included nationalist traits in their music, they were really only surface features.

### Music of the past

Romanticism also had a revolutionary tinge to it. It was seen by some as a revolt against the lim-

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itations of Classicism. With the belief that music was now written for the future, for posterity, the concept that art had a history arose, bringing with it an interest in reviving music of the past. The desire for authentic source material led to the publication of critical editions of older composers, among them, Bach, Handel and Palestrina. One of the outcomes of this interest was the revival by Mendelssohn of Bach's *St Matthew's Passion*, a performance of which Mendelssohn himself conducted in 1829. There were also many other revivals. The past was very much still manifest, as all composers wrote in Classical forms, in particular the symphony, sonatas and the string quartet. The Classical system of harmony was still the basis of their music.

### Key characteristics

#### Key genres

- There was a rich variety of types of pieces composed – from large-scale opera, and instrumental forms such as the symphony and concerto, to intimate drawing room piano pieces and songs.
- New genres were developed and established: the *lied* (song), the programme symphony, the symphonic poem and the concert overture. The enormous expansion in music written for piano led to a new form of piano piece – the character piece or miniature.
- The older forms including the symphony, concerto, sonatas and chamber music all continued but in modified form.

## Romantic composers

Key Genres	Composers
Symphony	Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Bruckner, Brahms, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Mahler
Symphonic Poem	Liszt, Berlioz, R. Strauss
Piano Music	Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Clara Wieck Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms
Concerto	Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Rachmaninov
Chamber Music	Schubert, Schumann, Brahms
Lied	Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Hugo Wolf
Choral	Berlioz, Verdi, Bruckner, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Liszt
Opera	Meyerbeer, Gounod, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, Weber, Wagner, Bizet, Puccini, R. Strauss
Opéra Bouffe	Offenbach, Gilbert and Sullivan, J. Strauss
Concert Overture	Mendelssohn, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, Rossini
Suites/Ballet	Mendelssohn, Bizet, Grieg, Tchaikovsky

## Romantic Forms

Based on sonata form, the symphony, concerto, overture, chamber music and piano sonatas continued to expand from the Classical period throughout the Romantic period. The significant change was in the use and treatment of sonata form. The individual musical expression sought by the Romantic composers strained at the limitations of the structural balance and equilibrium of the Classical sonata form. The infrastructure of sonata form is built on the development of motifs, balanced statements and structured tonal relationships. The long lyrical melodies of the Romantic composers were not as conducive to motivic development as those of the Classical period. The chromatic harmony and wide-ranging modulations of the Romantic era pushed at the boundaries of sonata form, eventually irretrievably shattering the framework in the pursuit for increased emotional range. It became increasingly more difficult for the extended forms to hold together as a unified work. Gradually, large works came to be sectionalised, rather like episodes, each with a different character.

Having loosened the underpinning of the Classical sonata form, composers explored ways of holding whole sections or movements together by the recurrence of a particular motif or melody which reappeared in different transformations throughout the work, as a kind of 'hook'. This approach can be seen in Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie*, Schumann's *Symphony No. 4* and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* with the *Idée Fixé*. It was Liszt, however, who coined the term thematic transformation and who is most remembered for establishing the method of unifying a work through the transformation of a theme. This is particularly evident in his symphonic poems.

## Melody

Classical melodies were well balanced, closed rather than open and frequently built on scalar or arpeggio-like passages. In contrast, Romantic composers sought to write long

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expressive melodic lines, sometimes constructed from a series of short phrases, other times as a seamless flow. There was less emphasis on rhythmically energetic motivic themes, suitable for development. Key characteristics of a Romantic melody are wide leaps of 6ths, 7ths, diminished or augmented intervals for expressive purposes.

The range of melodies also increased in the Romantic age; phrases were not so regular and balanced; melody with accompaniment was the prevailing texture. The difficulty of using lyrical themes, in part or in whole, for motivic development – an integral part of sonata form structure – played a significant role in loosening the form and in works becoming more sectionalised, each section based on a new lyrical theme. The nationalist movement introduced melodies that incorporated folk-like characteristics, or subtly infused melodies with a flavour reminiscent of their country.

## Harmony

There were remarkable achievements in harmony techniques throughout the Romantic period. A key point was the change in approach and attitude to harmony. As a means of expression, it was the main preoccupation with composers in the nineteenth century, with frequent use of the chords as a means of expressive colour. The main changes to harmony are as follows:

- i) Great development in chromatic harmonies, complex chords, freer use of non-harmonic tones, chromatic voice leading. Common chords used for colour and expressive effects include the augmented triad and augmented 6th and the Neapolitan 6th which was used both for harmonic colour and as a means of blurring the tonal 'home' key. The Romantic composers were fond of long delays in resolving dissonances to create heightened effects of yearning and longing, often adding 3rds on chords to create chords of the 9th, 11th and 13th; in chord progressions, resolutions are often enharmonic, delayed and even non-existent.

- ii) Composers used dissonances so frequently that the dominant and diminished chords became almost consonances against more serious dissonant chords, thereby rising the 'dissonance threshold'.
- iii) Some chords were almost over used for expressive purposes; the diminished 7th F#-A-C-Eb was a favourite chord used for expressive purposes to depict emotional tension or storms.

## Tonality

One of the most crucial elements of Romantic music is the expansion of the tonal framework. In the Classical period, tonic, dominant and sub-dominant relationships assumed greatest importance. In the Romantic age, modulations to the mediant and sub-mediante assumed importance equal to the dominant and related key relationships. Sudden key changes and unusual shifts were common. The use of the minor key for whole works dramatically rose as this key allowed for greater expansion and use of chromatic harmonies. The interchange of harmonies and keys from major to minor and vice-versa was common. In the same ways that the circle of 5ths dominated Classical music, a kind of circle of 3rds developed in the Romantic age, influencing chords, key relationships and modulations. Distant modulations, tonal ambiguity, and a growing tendency to avoid distinct cadences were common. These key features all operated to extend and eventually to blur the outlines of tonality and the formal boundaries of the Classical structure.

## Texture

Denser, weightier textures were common, with bold contrasts, exploring a wider range of pitch, dynamics and tone colours.

## Rhythm

Freedom and flexibility broadly define the characteristics of Romantic rhythm. In general, there was less focus on this aspect, with rhythms tending to be less vital, and more on lyrical, expressive melodies. More frequently we

see long sections, and even whole movements based on one unbroken rhythmic pattern, cross-rhythms – particularly twos against threes – and in piano music, irregular groupings of notes in the right hand against regular quaver beats in the left hand. As the nineteenth century progressed, changing metres, and the constant shifting of a steady pulse grew more frequent, intended to disguise expected pulse divisions and to blur the regularity of the bar line.

## Instrumentation

In the nineteenth century there was an enormous emphasis on broadening the range of instrumental colour and diversity. The orchestration of Berlioz initiated a new era. His *Treatise on Instrumentation* written in 1844 was the first ever textbook on this subject. New sonorities were discovered, new instruments were added to the orchestra and the older instruments were redesigned to be more full-sounding and more flexible. The orchestra nearly trebled in size, not for the purpose of expanding the volume but for enhancing the range of sonorities, to be used like a large artist's palette for broadening the range and mix of sounds. For example, the extended string sections with individual sections often divided to achieve richer sounds. The range of instruments used to play deeply expressive melodies broadened; in particular the cello was frequently used. In general, the variety of timbre required to perform works increased enormously. Orchestral players needed to adapt their tone colour to suit individual composers' style. A rich variety of timbre was needed for vocal works, which ranged from those in a light operatic style to the powerful and dramatic operas of Wagner. Technical virtuosity improved greatly during this period, to meet the demands of the music and of the mass public audience.

## The symphony

The extraordinary achievements of Beethoven were like a lead weight on composers after him. The achievements of those who followed immediately after him were initially overlooked;

composers later in the nineteenth century tended to be compared to Beethoven to see how well they matched up. It is well known that Brahms was 'coming to terms with Beethoven' until he was in his forties, and only then did he write his first symphony.

Composers tended to take two routes after Beethoven – those that followed the more conservative, classically-based route included Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms and Bruckner; and those who took a more radical route, notably Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. The more conservative Romantics remained broadly faithful to the Classical conception of the symphony, retaining the four-movement plan and recognisable forms for their movements. The 'radicals' took the view that Beethoven was pushing forward the outer limits of instrumental music: for instance, in his *Pastoral Symphony No. 6* and *Choral Symphony No. 9*. In these works they considered Beethoven had sought far reaching sources for inspiration outside purely instrumental music.

### Schubert (1797–1828)

Of the symphonies of Schubert, the *Unfinished Symphony in B minor* (1822) is a good example of a Classically-orientated symphony with Romantic characteristics. This symphony heralds the Romantic age in a number of ways: the opening theme played in the bass, the atmospheric quality of the opening, the second subject taking on the language of a Romantic song with piano accompaniment, the key change from the opening B minor to the second subject G major. The lyrical nature of the theme lends itself well to variation.

A typical feature of the Romantic sonata style is the sectional nature of the music. Schubert often uses a one-note link to connect one 'block' with another. The development is a good example of how Schubert, influenced by the motivic development of Beethoven, uses a motif from the introduction for the development. Thus, we see the same variety within unity as in Beethoven, combined with Mozart's

formal clarity and balance, and Schubert's own expressive warmth.

### Mendelssohn (1810–1847)

Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* is another good example of a Classical instrumental symphony form with Romantic characteristics, notably greater lyricism and perhaps more use of orchestral tone-colour for its own sake.

### Schumann (1810–1856)

Schumann is another Romantic composer whose roots lie in Classical conception. It took a long time before he felt ready to write his first symphony, and his *Op. 1 – 23* are all piano pieces. Of his four symphonies, Schumann sought new ways of unifying them, as in his cyclic treatment of *Symphony No. 4*. These symphonies are all four-movement works and show well nineteenth century modifications of Classical styles.

### Brahms (1833–1897)

Brahms' symphonies contain many examples of Classical techniques of counterpoint and motivic development, while Romantic elements are found in his harmonic language and orchestral sonorities. Brahms' character is exemplified in his music – sober-minded, careful, disciplined, ordered. He wrote them when he was in his forties and his works do not display the fresh impetuousness of youth. He avoided the Romantic extremes of impulse and excessive emotionalism.

### Bruckner (1824–1896)

In his symphonies, Bruckner took his point of departure from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* while embracing some of Wagner's innovations. These included his tonal and harmonic inventions, his large-scale structures, and his orchestral innovations, notably the extensive use of brass. Bruckner was very much an individualist.

## Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Another composer who may be classed as a conservative Romantic is Tchaikovsky. He adhered to the Classical forms even though his music was in the Romantic style. However, the popularity of his works is clear and his symphonies remain a staple ingredient of the traditional orchestral concert programme. Tchaikovsky was a strong influence on many composers after him, notably Rachmaninov and Stravinsky, and also on twentieth century film music.

### Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5, 2nd Movement

Tchaikovsky was a mature and successful com-

poser when he wrote the fifth of his six symphonies in 1888. It was one of the works made possible for him to compose through the financial support he received from Nadezhda von Meck. This wealthy widow was passionate about his music, and sent him a monthly allowance for fifteen years, but only on the condition that they never met. This they never did, but wrote intimate letters to each other. This symphony, together with his fourth and sixth symphonies were immensely popular, and contributed greatly to the popularity of the genre in concert programmes. The more progressive composers of the time were convinced that the appeal of the symphony as a form had ended.

### Analysis: 2nd movement

Listen to CD1, track 33.

### Symphony No. 5, 2nd movement Tchaikovsky

Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza  
HORN SOLO

dolce con molto      espress

5      Animando      riten.

sostenuto      10      Animando

mf      p

sostenuto      15      p

mf > p

### Melody

The melody of the second movement is a marvellous example of Tchaikovsky's characteristic melodic warmth. It is 26 bars long, and made up of short phrases that work together to create a beautiful *cantabile*, expressive melody. Notice how expressively the link is made to the repeat which is played by the cellos, and how, before

repetition tarnishes its beauty, the full melody is interrupted and taken up by the violins. This builds up in ever-shortening phrases to the climax (bar 57) before dying down to begin the middle section of the movement. The melody has a remarkable shape. It is marked *dolce con molto*, and detailed throughout with tiny dynamic and articulation shadings. It begins

almost song-like, with the strings introducing it with low chords. Over the years, this melody has been set to several sets of words to make it a popular song.

### Harmony

The key of this movement is D major, in contrast with the rest of the symphony which is in E minor and of the end of the first movement. The harmonies accompanying the melody are diatonic and generally move at a pace of two chords per bar. In bars 19 and 23 the pace is quickened to four chords per bar which has the effect of moving the music on. Later in this passage the key changes to a bright F# major, the effect being one of release from the haunting, deep atmosphere of the opening section. As the music presses on, the harmonic scheme is elaborated with increasingly chromatic lines, using diatonic and chromatic harmonies, particularly diminished 7th and 9th, and chromatically-altered chords, but the predominant tonality remains D major.

### Rhythm

Two distinct rhythms permeate the bars in the excerpt, and indeed the entire movement. One is the triplet figure, which plays an integral part of the main melody and is then used almost continuously from bar 24 as a throbbing accompaniment pattern. The other is the motif first heard at bar 24 which is, in fact, derived from the Romantic falling 7th leap heard in the melody.

### Instrumentation

Much of the brilliance and power of Tchaikovsky's orchestral works is a result of his skill and method of orchestration. He was influenced by the orchestrations of Berlioz, with his emphasis on the pure colours of a single instrument and groups of similar instruments rather than a mix of instruments. There are, therefore, many beautiful and brilliant solos for individual instruments, such as in this work, with the opening melody played by solo horn, and then repeated by the sonorous, expressive cellos.

Another characteristic is Tchaikovsky's use of a large orchestra in a slow movement. The second movement is scored for three flutes, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, four horns, trumpets, three trombones, tuba, strings and percussion. The four horns combined play a prominent part in this section, giving a sombre, deep colouring to the music.

### Further work and listening

- Listen to and study the rest of the second movement of Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony. How does the movement develop? Look closely at the way the melody is used to build tension and release points as the movement progresses.
- Try composing a similar melody of your own. It is not as easy as it sounds, to create a long, unified, *cantabile* melody with shape and direction.

### Berlioz (1803–1869)

As we have seen, the 'radical' Romantics – Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner – took their point of departure from Beethoven. Berlioz was particularly influenced by Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and took this as his starting point, expanding the framework of the Classical symphony to incorporate a story, or programme. This expansion can be clearly seen in his *Symphonie Fantastique*. This is also a good example of a symphonic work unified by a theme – in this case the *Idée Fixé*. It also shows Berlioz's extraordinary expansion of orchestral tone-colour.

### Symphonic Poem

The most significant composer of programme music after Berlioz was Liszt. Liszt wrote 12 symphonic poems which in many ways sum up the character and spirit of Romantic movement in music. The works are continuous, unlike the traditional symphony four-movement separation, and held together by themes that are transformed, developed or varied in some way



and which represent the application of the ideas of thematic variation, or *thematic transformation*. Other significant examples of the genre include the Bohemian composer Smetana's *Ma Vlast (My Country)*, based on episodes from Czech history, Dukas' *L'apprenti-sorcier* – a marvellous example of a narrative type symphonic poem and R. Strauss' *Don Juan, Till Eulenspiegel, Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *Don Quixote* – all of which show Strauss' masterful techniques of transforming themes as well as brilliant orchestration.

### Mahler (1860–1911)

Mahler was predominantly a composer of symphonies and songs. His symphony writing was mainly influenced by the dramatic choral writing in Beethoven's ninth symphony, the ideas and music of Wagner, and the lyrical song writing of Schubert, together with his own literary interest in poetry and philosophical ideas. His preoccupation with the soul and the nature of infinity resulted in his symphonies using enormous vocal and orchestral forces to depict his ideas. His *Symphony No.8* is known as 'the symphony of a thousand'. This is because of the enormous orchestral and vocal requirements of male, female and children's choirs, as well as special brass and conventional orchestras, demanding approximately 1000 people for a performance! Mahler was also capable of producing very light, delicate orchestral scoring, using the full palette of orchestral colour. However, it was his use of keys, key changes and tonal excursions into ever-increasing far ranges without returning to any tonal 'home'

key that marked the final disappearance of the boundaries of the Classical symphony.

### The concert overture

The concert overture flourished in the Romantic era. Most are connected with a programme, or are descriptive in some way, usually in the character or mood of the subject. For example, the *Hebrides Overture* (1832) also known as *Fingal's Cave*, expresses how Mendelssohn felt when he visited the Outer Hebrides. Mendelssohn, like Beethoven, was more interested 'in the expression of feeling than painting'.

### Rossini (1792–1868)

Opera in Italy at the time of Rossini was extremely popular. New works were continually in demand and composers and librettists often worked under great pressure to meet deadlines and to satisfy singers. Singers were often well aware of their 'celebrity' status and were not averse to altering composer's music if they felt it did not suit their particular style. Rossini is a significant figure in the development of opera. He continued the old traditions of *opera seria* in works such as *Otello* (1816) and *opera buffa*, as in *The Barber of Seville* (1816), but changed many old opera conventions. For example, he included more and longer ensembles in his works and brought the chorus into the centre of active opera participation. In his operas the accompanied recitative is more dramatic and the orchestra takes on a greater prominence.

### Overture to The Barber of Seville Rossini

Allegro Vivace 180

Clarinet

dolce

Cello

p

bass notes

Rossini  
excite  
over  
often  
the  
gorge  
  
Liste  
  
For  
The  
of c

'When the Foeman Bares His Steel' from *The Pirates of Penzance*  
Gilbert and Sullivan

MABEL  
Go, ye heroes, go to glory! Though ye die in combat glory,

EDITH  
Go, ye heroes, go to glory! Though ye die in combat glory,

CHORUS OF GIRLS  
Go, ye heroes, go to glory!

foe-man bares his steel, Ta-ran-ta-ra, ta-ran-ta-ra! We un-com-for-ta-ble feel, Ta-ran-ta-ra!

## The lied

A vast number of songs were written in the Romantic period. This can be loosely classified into three principal kinds: ● the *lied* ● the *romance* ● French *mélodie*. The *lied* is far the most important and popular and one of the few genuinely new genres in the Romantic era. Early *lied* composers include Schubert and Zumsteeg, the latter most influential. Beethoven is claimed to be the creator of the Romantic *lied*, but it was Schubert's setting, particularly of the poems of the poet Goethe, that first embodied the poet, scene and song, which characterises the nineteenth century *lieder*. Other notable composers of the genre include Schumann, Liszt, Brahms and Hugo Wolf.

## Piano music

The development of piano music in the Romantic era can be attributed to the spirit of the times and the emphasis on the individual. It was also due to the reshaped, mechanically improved and enlarged piano to full concert grand form. As a solo instrument, the piano was ideal for the times as it suited both the intimate drawing room and the large concert hall. The rise in demand for music from the mass public led to an expansion of the genre to produce a new form, the miniature or character piece. The sonata continued in a much longer form, and was also modified in a variety of ways, to suit the Romantic character and musical spirit.