

Programme Music — From 1820 onwards

When you listen to music, it sometimes reminds you of places or objects. Some composers want you to think of a specific place or idea, so they try and make their music describe them.

Programme Music Tells a Story or Sets a Scene

- 1) Programme music is a type of music that describes an item or person, tells a story or sets a scene. It's descriptive music.
- 2) The name was first used in the 19th century — it was very popular in the Romantic period (from about 1820 to 1900). There are earlier examples of programme music though — Vivaldi's Four Seasons (written in the 1720s) portray spring, summer, autumn and winter.
- 3) Programme music is instrumental — it doesn't have words. All the imagery comes from the music.
- 4) Symphonic poems (also called tone poems) are examples of programme music. They're single-movement works that tell stories — like myths and fairy tales.
- 5) Beethoven, Liszt, Debussy and Richard Strauss all composed programme music.

Composers Use Music to Represent Moods, Places or Objects

- 1) Composers use music to set the mood (like using a minor key to make it sound sad) or set the scene (the instruments used in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony make it sound like it is in the countryside — e.g. he uses flutes, oboes and clarinets to imitate birds).
- 2) Composers often imitate real-life sounds — for example, a composer might use flowing notes to represent a brook. In Mendelssohn's Spinner's Song (from Songs Without Words), the fast, trundling rhythm sounds like someone working at a spinning wheel.
- 3) When the programme music is telling a story, different characters are sometimes represented by different themes. Every time the character appears, their theme will be played. The composer can vary the theme depending on what is happening — e.g. if the character has just won a fight, it'll sound triumphant and majestic.

Danse Macabre is an Example of a Symphonic Poem

- 1) Danse Macabre was written by a French composer called Camille Saint-Saëns. You'll probably recognise it — it's used as the theme tune to the TV series Jonathan Creek.
- 2) It's based on a poem by Henri Cazalis and illustrates Death calling skeletons from their graves to dance. Death plays the fiddle and the skeletons dance to his tunes.
- 3) Death is represented by a solo violin melody. The E-string is tuned to an F_b to make it sound creepy. When the violin plays an A against the F_b (both on open strings), it produces a tritone (or augmented fourth — two notes with an interval of three whole tones, like F and B). The tritone's often used to make things sound weird and scary.
- 4) The skeletons are represented by a xylophone — it sounds like the bones knocking together.
- 5) He also uses a melody from the Dies Irae (which means 'day of wrath') from a Requiem Mass by Thomas of Celano. A requiem mass is a mass for the dead — so it's quite appropriate in this piece.



Death, skeletons — it all sounds a bit grave to me...

The most important bit to remember about programme music is that it describes things. It'll be good if you can come up with reasons why a particular bit of music could represent a particular thing.

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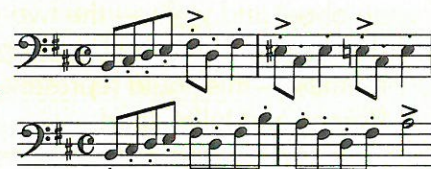
Some programme music is used for different purposes than it was written for. It's often used in adverts, TV programmes and films because it's very expressive.

Peer Gynt is an Example of Programme Music

- 1) *Peer Gynt* is a piece of programme music by Edvard Grieg. It was originally written to accompany a play by Henrik Ibsen about the adventures of a boy called Peer.
- 2) Grieg later took out 8 movements and made them into two suites.
- 3) The first suite includes the well-known pieces 'Morning Mood' (often just called 'Morning') and 'In the Hall of the Mountain King'. The other two pieces are 'Ase's Death' and 'Anitra's Dance'.
- 4) 'Morning Mood' describes the sun rising over the Sahara desert. It's very calm and peaceful.
- 5) The second suite isn't as well known. It includes movements called 'Homecoming (Stormy Evening on the Sea)' and 'Arabic Dance'.

'In the Hall of the Mountain King' is About Trolls

- 1) In the play, *Peer Gynt* sneaks into the castle of the King of the Trolls. 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' is about him sneaking in then trying to escape.
- 2) You might recognise the theme — it's used in the adverts for Alton Towers (and played around the park).
- 3) At first, the theme is played slowly by bassoons with quiet, staccato quavers imitating his careful footsteps. Occasional accented notes give it a nervous, edgy mood. →
- 4) It's then repeated at a higher pitch on the strings and higher woodwind — this represents the trolls moving around the castle.
- 5) The instruments play in different octaves until the trolls notice Peer, then they all play at the same pitch.
- 6) It gradually gets faster and faster as the chase gets more exciting.
- 7) There are sudden pauses towards the end of the piece — this is the King searching for Peer. When Peer's spotted, the music is very loud and very fast — it's really dramatic.
- 8) The piece ends with cymbal crashes and timpani rolls — this is where the mountain collapses around the trolls and Peer escapes to safety.



'Billy the Kid' is a More Modern Piece of Programme Music

- 1) 'Billy the Kid' is a ballet written by Aaron Copland in 1938. It tells the story of William Bonney (who became known as Billy the Kid), an American outlaw. It's set in America's Wild West.
- 2) Copland used folk melodies and cowboy tunes to create the sound of the Wild West. The tunes are played on a piccolo or tin whistle.
- 3) He used percussion to mimic the sound of a gun battle.
- 4) Quick, jaunty rhythms are used for the cowboys, while slow passages tell a love story.
- 5) This piece of programme music really sets the scene for the ballet. The instruments give it the feel of being in the Wild West.

Programme music tells a story...

Pay attention to the music on TV next time you're watching it. If you see a show or advert that uses a piece of classical music have a think about why the makers chose the particular piece of music.

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Programme music is used for story-telling — anything from a walk in the woods to a complete Shakespeare play. Composers need to be able to describe lots of characters, emotions and action in their music.

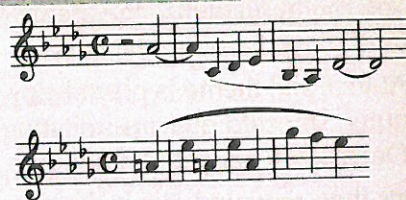
Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* is Based on the Play

- 1) *Romeo and Juliet* is a symphonic poem (see p.184) by Tchaikovsky. It's based on Shakespeare's play. You probably know the story — it's about Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet who fall in love, despite being from feuding families. It ends tragically, with the lovers killing themselves.
- 2) Tchaikovsky uses the music to tell the story — there are no words. There's a lot of stuff for him to describe — from the street fighting of the rival families to the young couple falling in love.
- 3) It has four main themes — two for the lovers, one for the warring families and one for Friar Lawrence (Romeo's friend and advisor). The themes are repeated throughout the piece, but they're altered to reflect what happens in the story.

The Themes Represent the Characters

- 1) The two themes for Romeo and Juliet are slow and lyrical. The first part is originally played as a duet between the cor anglais (a double-reeded instrument a bit lower than an oboe) and viola — the two instruments represent the two lovers. There are big jumps in pitch in these two themes — this could represent the obstacles keeping Romeo and Juliet apart.

The two love themes



The Montagues and Capulets theme



- 2) The Montagues and Capulets theme is fast and aggressive. It represents the hatred and rivalry between the two families. It's used for the battles and the sword fight. Tchaikovsky uses dialogue (question and answer) between the strings and the woodwind to show the opposing sides.

- 3) Friar Lawrence's theme sounds religious — like a hymn. It's homophonic (the parts move together in chords). It's quite solemn, and the low strings sound a bit sinister. This represents the friar's part in the tragedy — he marries Romeo and Juliet, then gives a potion to Juliet so she can fake her own death.

Friar Lawrence's theme



The Music is Very Dramatic

- 1) Tchaikovsky uses a lot of percussion to make the piece dramatic. Timpani and cymbals are really important — there's a big cymbal crash that represents Romeo and Juliet's deaths.
- 2) The contrasts between the different themes help to show the different emotions of the story.
- 3) The rhythms are really important too — the irregular rhythms in the fight sections are very different to the smooth crotchets (legato) in the love theme.

Two orchestras, both alike in dignity...

You might recognise this piece — it's used in films like *Clueless* and *Moonraker*, and TV programmes like *Scrubs*. The love theme is well known — it's often used when stuff is supposed to be romantic.