The Music of the Romantic Era*

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Abstract

For middle school and up, an introduction to nineteenth-century Western classical music.

1 Introduction

When people talk about "Classical" music, they usually mean Western art music of any time period. (For more on this subject, see Classical Music and Music of the Classical Era[1].) But the Classical period[2] was actually a very short era, basically the second half of the eighteenth century. Only two Classical-period composers are widely known: Mozart and Haydn.

The Romantic era produced many more composers whose names and music are still familiar and popular today: Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Schumann, Schubert, Chopin, and Wagner are perhaps the most well-known, but there are plenty of others who may also be familiar, including Strauss, Verdi, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Puccini, and Mahler. Ludwig van Beethoven, possibly the most famous composer of all, is harder to place. His early works are from the Classical period and are clearly Classical in style. But his later music, including the majority of his most famous music, is just as clearly Romantic.

The term **Romantic** covers most of the music (and art and literature) of Western civilization from the nineteenth century (the 1800's). But there has been plenty of music written in the Romantic style in the twentieth century (including many popular movie scores), and music isn't considered Romantic just because it was written in the nineteenth century. The beginning of that century found plenty of composers (Rossini, for example) who were still writing Classical-sounding music. And by the end of the century, composers were turning away from Romanticism and searching for new idioms, including post-Romanticism, Impressionism, and early experiments in Modern music.

2 Background, Development, and Influence

2.1 Classical Roots

Sometimes a new style of music happens when composers forcefully reject the old style. Early Classical[3] composers, for example, were determined to get away from what they considered the excesses of the Baroque[4] style. Modern composers also were consciously trying to invent something new and very different.

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[1] "Classical Music and the Music of the Classical Era" <http://cnx.org/content/m15294/latest/>

[2] "Classical Music and the Music of the Classical Era": Section Classical Ideals <http://cnx.org/content/m15294/latest/#s5>

[3] "Classical Music and the Music of the Classical Era": Section Classical Ideals <http://cnx.org/content/m15294/latest/#s5>

[4] "Music of the Baroque Period" <http://cnx.org/content/m14737/latest/>

But the composers of the Romantic era did not reject Classical music. In fact, they were consciously emulating the composers they considered to be the great classicists: Haydn, Mozart, and particularly Beethoven. They continued to write symphonies, concertos, sonatas, and operas, forms[5] that were all popular with classical composers. They also kept the basic rules for these forms, as well as keeping the rules of rhythm[6], melody[7], harmony[8], harmonic progression[9], tuning[10], and performance practice that were established in (or before) the Classical period.

The main difference between Classical and Romantic music came from attitudes towards these "rules". In the eighteenth century, composers were primarily interested in forms, melodies, and harmonies that provided an easily-audible structure for the music. In the first movement of a sonata, for example, each prescribed section would likely be where it belonged, the appropriate length, and in the proper key. In the nineteenth century (see below) (p. 3), the "rules" that provided this structure were more likely to be seen as boundaries and limits that needed to be explored, tested, and even defied. For example, the first movement of a Romantic sonata may contain all the expected sections as the music develops, but the composer might feel free to expand or contract some sections or to add unexpected interruptions between them. The harmonies in the movement might lead away from and back to the tonic[11] just as expected, but they might wander much further afield than a Classical sonata would, before they make their final return.

2.2 Different Approaches to Romanticism

In fact, one could divide the main part of the Romantic era into two schools of composers. Some took a more conservative approach. Their music is clearly Romantic in style and feeling, but it also still clearly does not want to stray too far from the Classical rules. Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms are in this category.

Other composers felt more comfortable with pushing the boundaries of the acceptable. Berlioz, Strauss, and Wagner were all progressives whose music challenged the audiences of their day.

2.3 Where to go after Romanticism?

Perhaps it was inevitable, after decades of pushing at all limits to see what was musically acceptable, that the Romantic era would leave later composers with the question of what to explore or challenge next. Perhaps because there was no clear answer to this question (or several possible answers), many things were happening in music by the end of the Romantic era.

The period that includes the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth is sometimes called the **post-Romantic era**. This is the period when many composers, such as Jean Sibelius, Bela Bartok, and Ralph Vaughan-Williams, concentrated on the traditions of their own countries, producing strongly nationalistic music. Others, such as Mahler and Strauss, were taking Romantic musical techniques to their utmost reasonable limits. In France, Debussy and Ravel were composing pieces that that some listeners felt were the musical equivalent of impressionistic paintings. Impressionism and some other -isms such as Stravinsky's primitivism still had some basis in tonality[12]; but others, such as serialism, rejected tonality and the Classical-Romantic tradition completely, believing that it had produced all that it could. In the early twentieth century, these Modernists eventually came to dominate the art music tradition. Though the sounds and ideals of Romanticism continued to inspire some composers, the Romantic period was essentially over by the beginning of the twentieth century.

[5] "Form in Music" <http://cnx.org/content/m10842/latest/>
[6] "Rhythm" <http://cnx.org/content/m11646/latest/>
[7] "Melody" <http://cnx.org/content/m11647/latest/>
[8] "Harmony" <http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/>
[9] "Harmony": Chords <http://cnx.org/content/m11654/latest/#l0b>
[10] "Tuning Systems" <http://cnx.org/content/m11639/latest/>
[11] "Major Keys and Scales" <http://cnx.org/content/m10851/latest/>
[12] "What Kind of Music is That?": Section Tonal, Atonal, and Modal Music <http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/#s7>

3 Historical Background

Music doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is affected by other things that are going on in society; ideas, attitudes, discoveries, inventions, and historical events may affect the music of the times.

For example, the "Industrial Revolution" was gaining steam throughout the nineteenth century. This had a very practical effect on music: there were major improvements in the mechanical valves[13] and keys[14] that most woodwinds[15] and brass[16] instruments depend on. The new, improved instruments could be played more easily and reliably, and often had a bigger, fuller, better-tuned sound. Strings and keyboard instruments dominate the music of the Baroque and Classical periods, with small groups of winds added for color[17]. As the nineteenth century progressed and wind instruments improved, more and more winds were added to the orchestra, and their parts became more and more difficult, interesting, and important. Improvements in the mechanics of the piano also helped it usurp the position of the harpsichord to become the instrument that to many people is the symbol of Romantic music.

Another social development that had an effect on music was the rise of the middle class. Classical composers lived on the patronage of the aristocracy; their audience was generally small, upper-class, and knowledgeable about music. The Romantic composer, on the other hand, was often writing for public concerts and festivals, with large audiences of paying customers who had not necessarily had any music lessons. In fact, the nineteenth century saw the first "pop star"-type stage personalities. Performers like Paganini and Liszt were the Elvis Presleys of their day.

4 Romantic Music as an Idea

But perhaps the greatest effect that society can have on an art is in the realm of ideas.

The music of the Classical period reflected the artistic and intellectual ideals of its time. Form was important, providing order and boundaries. Music was seen as an an abstract art, universal in its beauty and appeal, above the pettinesses and imperfections of everyday life. It reflected, in many ways, the attitudes of the educated and the aristocratic of the "Enlightenment" era. Classical music may sound happy or sad, but even the emotions stay within acceptable boundaries.

Romantic-era composers kept the forms of Classical music (see above) (p. 1). But the Romantic composer did not feel constrained by form. Breaking through boundaries was now an honorable goal shared by the scientist, the inventor, and the political liberator. Music was no longer universal; it was deeply personal and sometimes nationalistic. The personal sufferings and triumphs of the composer could be reflected in stormy music that might even place a higher value on emotion than on beauty. Music was not just happy or sad; it could be wildly joyous, terrified, despairing, or filled with deep longings.

It was also more acceptable for music to clearly be from a particular place. Audiences of many eras enjoyed an opera set in a distant country, complete with the composer's version of exotic-sounding music. But many nineteenth-century composers (including Weber, Wagner, Verdi, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Grieg, Dvorak, Sibelius,and Albeniz) used folk tunes and other aspects of the musical traditions of their own countries to appeal to their public. Much of this nationalistic music was produced in the post-Romantic period, in the late nineteenth century; in fact, the composers best known for folk-inspired classical music in England (Holst and Vaughan Williams) and the U. S. (Ives, Copland, and Gershwin) were twentieth-century composers who composed in Romantic, post-Romantic, or Neoclassical styles instead of embracing the more severe Modernist styles.

Music can also be specific by having a "programme". **Programme music** is music that, without words, tells a story or describes a scene. Richard Strauss's tone poems are perhaps the best-known works in this category, but programme music has remained popular with many composers through the twentieth century. Again unlike the abstract, universal music of the Classical composers, Romantic-era programme music tried

[13] "Wind Instruments: Some Basics" <http://cnx.org/content/m12364/latest/#p2f>
[14] "Wind Instruments: Some Basics" <http://cnx.org/content/m12364/latest/#p2f>
[15] "Orchestral Instruments": Section Woodwinds <http://cnx.org/content/m11897/latest/#s12>
[16] "Orchestral Instruments": Section Brass <http://cnx.org/content/m11897/latest/#s13>
[17] "Timbre: The Color of Music" <http://cnx.org/content/m11059/latest/>

to use music to describe or evoke specific places, people, and ideas. And again, with programme music, those Classical rules became less important. The form of the music was chosen to fit with the programme (the story or idea), and if it was necessary at some point to choose sticking more closely to the form or to the programme, the programme usually won.

As mentioned above, post-Romantic composers felt ever freer to experiment and break the established rules for form, melody, and harmony. Many modern composers have, in fact, gone so far that the average listener again finds it difficult to follow. Romantic-style music, on the other hand, with its emphasis on emotions and its balance of following and breaking the musical "rules", still finds a wide audience.