

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Summer 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 10, Monday July 2

I am going to put everything we need for Quiz Three here in one document. In reality some of these pieces will probably be put off until Class 11.

Overview: The Romantic Period (1820-1900)

You may remember how I characterized the Classical Period as a swing away from a more *Dionysian* aesthetic (wild, emotional) to a more *Apollonian* one (rational, orderly.) With the Romantic Period we see a swing back to the Dionysian.

There are a few changes in emphasis as we leave the Enlightenment and enter an era of Romanticism. Rather than trying to explain the entire world from a universal, objective perspective, Romantic thinkers are much more concerned with the **subjective experience of individuals**. They like **extreme emotional states** (like wonder, fear, and passionate, unrequited love) and are interested in the **supernatural**. They still value “**Nature**,” but the Romantic idea of Nature is much more reverent and mystical than that of the Enlightenment, when Nature was cited as the primary source of scientific knowledge.

Economically, we see the **Industrial Revolution** shake up the class system considerably. The middle class expands, and “nouveau riche” industrialists are the most important figures in society, not the old aristocracy. This is significant for music because an expanded middle class can attend public concerts and make music in the home.

In painting, we see lots of swirling, chaotic compositions and a new fuzzy “subjectivity” around the edges, as though the painting is meant to represent one person’s limited point of view rather than being clear and detailed from edge to edge.

This is a great time for literature, as the great Romantic English poets (Wordsworth, Keats), the American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman), Gothic horror novelists (Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe) and others are all writing. Perhaps the most important figure of this time is the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who embodied a lot of the trends of Romanticism right at the beginning of the period and had a strong influence on the German composers we will be listening to.

Finally, the last general trend I point out is the conception of **the work of art as a historical document** that will be significant for future generations. Up until now, people really only wanted to read, see and hear the most current arts – everything from previous generations was considered junk, to be discarded. But in the 19th century people started to revive the works of the past (like, say, the music of Handel, Palestrina and J.S. Bach) and celebrate it, and they thought

of contemporary work as potentially timeless masterpieces. Individual cultural figures (like Beethoven) become national heroes on an unprecedented scale, and are able to make a living without relying on “day jobs” like being a town composer (e.g. Bach).

Musical Trends

The Romantic period exhibits an interesting **bi-directional trend** toward simultaneous **largeness** and **miniaturization**. Public music, like pieces for orchestra and the opera house, requires bigger orchestras and generally becomes longer, louder, and more complicated. Music for piano, singers, or small combinations of instruments are intended to be played in the home, however, and this kind of music becomes shorter and more intimate.

Melodies often become longer and more “sweeping.” Rather than being compartmentalized into neat phrases like in Classical music they tend to run on and on, as though they don’t want to stop. They will make lots of “reaching” or “searching” gestures.

Chromaticism

The other notable technical detail in Romantic music is the use of **chromatic tones**. We’ve looked at how scales work, already, so we know that when you are in a key you typically use a limited set of notes. For instance, if you are in C major you stick to all the white keys – C, D, E, F, G, A, and B. “Chromatic” notes are the notes outside this set, the ones that you are avoiding. Romantic composers become skilled at mixing in these outside notes as well, so you might be in C major but still get some black keys like C-sharp and E-flat and so on.

This creates two main effects. One is what I like to call “flux” – the feeling that you are searching or wandering for a stable harmony to land on, like you are maybe modulating to a new key. In class I played this Chopin Prelude in E minor..

[SPOTIFY LINK - Chopin Prelude in E minor, Op. 28 No. 4](#)

I made this [youtube demo](#) to show how the piece really does hit almost every possible note as it makes its way down the piano.

and probably the most famous example of flux in Romantic music is Wagner’s Overture to *Tristan and Isolde*.

[YOUTUBE PERFORMANCE](#) / [NAXOS LINK](#) / [SPOTIFY LINK](#)

(We’ll learn this piece later, but I’m inserting it into the notes now!)

Another effect of chromaticism is what I like to call “magic chords” – chord progressions that carefully mix in an unexpected chord from outside the scale, to create a fresh or surprising effect. The opening chords from Mendelssohn’s Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* do this.

[YOUTUBE LINK](#) / [NAXOS LINK](#) / [SPOTIFY LINK](#)

(Here the third chord is minor when it would normally be major, and this creates a slightly spooky or “magical” feeling.)

Orchestral Music in the Romantic Period

In our intro I noted that the Romantic period sees two opposite musical trends that occur simultaneously. Music for the home becomes “miniaturized” as composers strive to make their work more playable and more enjoyable for amateurs. Music that is already large-scale, however, like orchestral music and opera, only becomes more massive.

In this part we looked at the large-scale part of the equation.

In the Romantic period **Program Music** is all the rage. This is a piece that tells some sort of story. It will often dispense with traditional means of organization (i.e. the old forms like sonata or minuet and trio) and simply follow dramatic storytelling logic instead. In a way this is an extreme form of tone painting, which we learned about way back in the Renaissance.

Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* [1830]

In the Romantic period composers become particularly interested in writing music that tells a story. This is known as **program music**.

Hector Berlioz writes the first important symphonic music after Beethoven, and it was he who really made Program Music the new thing. At the première of the *Symphonie fantastique* he literally handed out pages of text that he wanted the audience to read, so that they would be able to follow the story he was telling. (This is the “program” in program music.) Here is an edited-down version of it:

Part one - Daydreams, passions

A young musician...sees for the first time a woman who unites all the charms of the ideal person his imagination was dreaming of, and falls desperately in love with her.

Part two - A ball

[The young man spots his beloved at a ball, and fails to get her attention.]

Part three - Scene in the countryside

[The young man is strolling outdoors and again he sees his love interest. He again fails to get her attention.]

Part four - March to the scaffold

Convinced that his love is spurned, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of narcotic, while too weak to cause his death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest of visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned, led to the scaffold and is witnessing his own execution.

Part five - Dream of a witches' sabbath

He sees himself at a witches' sabbath, in the midst of a hideous gathering of shades, sorcerers and monsters of every kind who have come together for his funeral.

We are going to learn part IV for the quiz. You could read up on what Craig Wright says about this piece on pp. 251-257 in the seventh edition, 257-265 in the eighth.

Mendelssohn, Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21 [1826]

In our intro to the Romantic period I sometimes say that composers are “bored” with the traditional forms from the Classical period. They still write sonata forms and rondos et cetera, but these patterns are now kind of aside from the point. Instead, composers are excited about *program music*, pieces that tell stories.

Mendelssohn wrote his *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture when he was only 17 years old, and in a sense this piece delivers the best aspects of both the Classical and Romantic periods. It is a single, sonata-form movement that tells a story - every theme is intended to represent some character or idea from Shakespeare's play.

I've posted [an animated video](#) on our class blog that follows the form of this overture and includes illustrations from the Sparknotes summary of the plot.

(This piece is not discussed in our textbook.)

Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* [1874]

This piece is covered in [our online unit](#) with accompanying exercise. You can also read about it in the textbook on pp. 262-266 in the seventh edition and 270-274 in the eighth.

Art Song

We looked at the tradition of the Art Song, which became particularly popular in early Romantic Germany and Austria. (In German these are called *Lieder*, pronounced “LEED-er”.) Art Songs are usually performed by one singer plus a pianist. The text is written by a poet, and often published first, with the intention that composers would turn them into music. The overall goal is to create the most refined combination of text and music, not unlike the work of the Troubadours and Trouvères in the Middle Ages.

Franz Schubert’s “Erlkönig”

The first Art Song we are going to learn for the quiz is Franz Schubert’s “Erlkönig.” This is a sort of ghost story with text by Goethe, in which a man and his son are riding through the forest, being pursued by a supernatural being that preys on children. You can read a full translation of the text (with detailed comments on the music) in our textbook, pp. 247-251 in the eighth edition, pp. 242-245 in the seventh.

Robert Schumann, “Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai” from *Dichterliebe*

We also looked at part of a **song cycle** by Robert Schumann. A song cycle is a collection of art songs organized loosely around a certain theme. It’s really analogous to the concept of an “album” today. This particular cycle of Schumann’s is called *Dichterliebe* (Poet’s Love) and it deals with the frustrations of being an artist who cannot find true happiness. (This is an experience that Schumann knew very well!)

We listened to the opening song, “Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai” which has a relatively simple text about falling in love as the Spring flowers bloom. However, Schumann undercuts this happy theme with music that expresses tension and anxiety. He opens with very tense, minor-key harmonies. The melody that goes with the words often seems to be settling into a happier, more secure place, but the song never stays there, it falls back into the world of anxiety over and over. In my opinion it is this mix of “happy” and “sad” that makes the piece so compelling.

(There are no notes on this song in the book. Translation of the text appears on the website.)

Piano “Character” Pieces

Now we turn to the intimate, small-scale world of piano music, which was often performed in people’s homes. The typical piano works of this era are sometimes called “character pieces.” They occasionally tell a story (like with Program Music) or in the very least are meant to represent some person or idea. Even if they don’t have a specific subject they may still promise some “mood.”

Robert Schumann's *Carnaval* [1834]

Carnaval is a collection of 22 short piano pieces. The overall theme is Carnival, the European holiday that is analogous to our *Mardi Gras*. It happens right before Lent and it is a time for everybody to dress up in costumes and have fun.

There are certain traditional “stock characters” that are popular costumes during this event, and Schumann creates pieces of music for them. In class we listened to “Pierrot” (the sad clown) and “Pantalon and Columbine” (who chase and harass each other.) In addition, Schumann mixed in portraits of his friends, as though they might all be together at Carnival, having fun. We listened to his portrait of the love of his life, Clara Schumann.

The parts of this piece we are learning for the quiz are “Eusebius” and “Florestan.” These are two pseudonyms that Schumann used when he was writing music criticism. (This was another line of work he had, publishing his own music magazine.) “Eusebius” was supposed to represent his gentle and sensitive side, while “Florestan” was his passionate and outspoken persona. One can certainly hear the difference between these two pieces of music which reflect these two emotional approaches to life.

Craig Wright's discussion of *Carnaval* is on p. 269 in the seventh edition only. (Unfortunately in the eighth edition he talks about a different Schumann piece.)

Chopin, Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9 No. 2 [1832]

In addition to works that are explicitly about people and things, composers in the Romantic period invent many new kinds of short pieces which promise a certain mood or a certain approach to music. The *Nocturne* is supposed to be a “night piece” – something pretty and relaxing that you would listen to late at night.

This piece presents a very nice melody that repeats a few times, ornamented a little more elaborately with each pass. Craig Wright calls this a Theme and Variations, but I am not quite convinced that this is appropriate – certainly the Mozart Theme and Variations that we looked at were much more systematic in altering its material in dramatic ways (changing the key, the meter etc.) whereas here we just play the same tune a little bit “better” each time.

The one aspect of this work that I do want you to focus on is the *rubato* playing. *Rubato* means “robbed time,” and it refers to a certain way of playing in which the performer speeds up and slows down at different points. Meter here is intended to be somewhat “elastic” – you are expected to “push” and “pull” the beat as part of your interpretation.

Every performer is going to do this slightly differently, making their interpretation of the piece unique. However, if they simply played the music mechanically, without *rubato*, it would be wrong!

Rubato is also evident in our other Romantic piano works (especially the Schumann!) but I think it is most easy to focus on and follow here.

Craig Wright discusses this piece on pp. 279-281 in the eighth edition, 270-271 in the seventh.

Franz Liszt, Transcendental Etude No. 8, “Wild Jagd” (Wild Hunt) [1851]

Also, we turned to the music of Franz Liszt. Liszt was famous as a *virtuoso*, someone who plays their instrument as well as is humanly possible. (Indeed, the technique of a virtuoso often seems *superhuman*.) He composed music that could show off this amazing ability, which we would call *virtuosic*.

We watched a video of another living virtuoso pianist playing Liszt’s “Wild Jagd” (or “Wild Hunt.”) This features a lot of loud, fast flurries of notes and, most impressively, a lot of rapid “jumping around” on the piano keyboard. The chords often have a “bum, badum, badum” rhythm that sounds like a hunting call, hence the title.

(“Etude” means “study,” so this sort of piece usually focuses on one technique and tries to push it as far as it can go. Here I think the technique being explored is the chords that jump around. As you can see from watching the youtube video performance, these gestures require incredibly fast and accurate arm movements and get more and more extreme as the piece progresses.)

Liszt is discussed in eighth edition, pp. 281-283, but unfortunately our author changes out the piece for something that is pretty but perhaps less exciting. “Wild Jagd” is discussed specifically in the seventh edition on pp. 272-275.