

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2017

Prof. Smey

Session 18, Thursday April 6 and Session 19, Tues April 25 in Tues-Thurs classes

Session 19/20, Thurs April 27 for the double class

In this session we do our intro to our new historical period and start digging in to our piece list.

This unit is basically just a ruthless succession of me playing one piece after another. I am still experimenting with different ways of shuffling up the order so that it is a little less monotonous. The actual class lecture will probably be ordered to create some variety, but I'll make these notes match the list on our quiz study guide, and I'll just put the complete notes for all of our quiz pieces in this one document.

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 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 movers and shakers of this period, 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 Allen 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 want to 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.

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!)

The other effect 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]

Beethoven dabbled with some symphonic movements that were “about stuff” (for instance, his “Eroica” Symphony which was originally intended to be about Napoleon) but it was Berlioz 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 V for the quiz.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* [1869]

This is another dramatic work that tells a story, this time about *Romeo and Juliet*. It is organized in a somewhat loose sonata form, and the different themes are supposed to represent different characters or ideas from the play.

I introduced the four main themes from the piece in little clips:

The *Friar Laurence* theme

The *fighting* theme (or as the book calls it, the *feud* theme).

Love theme 1

Love theme 2

Then I played through the development section, so that we could hear the “Friar Laurence” theme and the “fighting theme” duke it out.

This piece is discussed in detail on pp. 267-269 in the eighth edition, pp. 257-260 in the seventh.

Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* [1874]

For background I talked about how Mussorgsky and his circle of friends spent a lot of time strategizing about how they could create a distinctly Russian form of art. *Pictures* was inspired when one member of this circle, the visual artist and designer Victor Hartmann, passed away at the young age of 39. A gallery show was held in his honor, and Mussorgsky was inspired to create a piece about Hartmann’s paintings and drawings.

The piece was originally composed for piano, but later in the 20th century another composer, Maurice Ravel, took Mussorgsky’s composition and arranged it for orchestra. In class I flipped back and forth a little bit between the piano version and the orchestral version, but it is the Ravel orchestration that we will study for the quiz.

For the quiz, we will only learn one movement, which is the opening “Promenade”:

Promenade

This is supposed to represent everybody filing in to the exhibition and looking around. It is kind of “dignified” and “majestic,” I suppose.

In class I will play a few other movements:

Gnomus

The gnome is a sort of fairy-tale figure, who is very small (like a “dwarf” or “elf.”) The music makes him sound like a somewhat menacing trickster. This part is inspired by a design that Hartmann made for a bedpost with an elf-like creature carved into it.

Bydlo (Polish Ox-Cart)

Represents an ox-drawn cart slowly traveling down a road. The picture that this movement was based on it now apparently lost.

The Great Gate of Kiev

This is the spectacular finale. Big, loud chords. This is based on an ornamental gateway to the city of Kiev which Hartmann designed but was never built.

As always the book covers this better, on pp. 271-274 in the eighth edition, pp. 264-266 in the seventh.

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 often 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.

Art Song

We looked at the tradition of the Art Song, which became particularly popular in early Romantic Germany and Austria. Art Songs are usually performed by one singer plus a pianist. The text is written by a poet, and often published with the intention that composers will turn them into music. The overall goal is to create the most refined combination of text and music, not unlike the Troubadours and Trouvères in the Middle Ages.

We learned two songs.

Franz Schubert's "Erlkönig" is a stand-alone piece, with text by Goethe, which tells a sort of horror story about a man and his son 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.

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. It is "my pick." Translation of the text appears on the website.)