

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 18, Tuesday April 10

In this session we saw the conclusion of *Don Giovanni* and we talked about Late Beethoven, who is a sort of bridge to our next historical period.

Late Beethoven

From 1810-1827 (or age 40 until his death at 57) Beethoven is thought to have been completely deaf. He has a lot of other health problems and is pretty much completely isolated from society.

During this period he writes a lot of long, strange, and complex piano sonatas and string quartets.

In class we listened to a bit of his String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131. This is typical of his late works in that it is overstuffed with seven movements, rather than the usual three or four. We listened to his first movement, which is a particularly intense and emotional fugue, and the final movement which is a very aggressive and angry march-like sonata form.

Then we turned to one of the few symphonic works of the late period, his Ninth Symphony which was composed in 1824. At the time of its premiere this was the most massive and unusual symphony ever written – it requires a very large orchestra as well as a full chorus of singers, and it is more than an hour in length.

We touched upon the “spooky” opening of the first movement, the hyperactive and complex second movement, and then jumped to the fourth movement, which is a theme and variations on the well-known “Ode to Joy” melody. Beethoven packs this last movement with all sorts of weird things, including a blast of noise known as the “storm,” a wordless recitative that is “sung” by the low strings, flashbacks to our earlier movements, a Turkish marching band-within-the-band, and, of course, the use of singers.

In general, Beethoven is intentionally disregarding the conventions of the Classic period and following his imagination wherever it wants to go. This makes him sort of a transitional figure into the wilder and more creative Romantic period.

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 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 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](#)

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(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.

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(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.

Schumann’s “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai” from *Dichterliebe*

In the previous session we looked at our first Art Song, Schubert’s “Erlkönig.” The Erlkönig is what we would call a “stand-alone” song – people could buy the sheet music for that single composition and perform it for their friends.

Romantic poets and composers also liked to assemble **song cycles** – these are collections of songs organized loosely around a theme which were intended to be performed in a certain order. 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.)