

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 19, Thursday April 12

This was our first class that is relevant for Quiz Three. We talked about our new era in history, the Romantic Period (1820-1900) and met three new pieces.

Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* [1830]

Beethoven experimented with some pieces that were “about” a specific person or idea - for instance, his “Eroica” Symphony was originally intended to be about Napoleon. 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, though Part V is where things really get interesting. In the final movement Berlioz abandons any of the traditional forms of the Classical period and writes a sort of soundtrack to the imaginary action in his mind.

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 wandering or searching for a stable harmony to land on, or 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](#)

and 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.

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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 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.

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 first with the intention that composers will turn it 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, meant to be sung 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.)