

## Romantic Music

### **Introduction**

When people talk about "Classical" music, they usually mean Western art music that was written before the Modern era. But the Classical period 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, Schubert, Chopin, Wagner, and Verdi are perhaps the most well-known, but there are plenty of others who may also be familiar, including Strauss, Schumann, 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 most 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 ideals, including post-Romanticism, Impressionism, and early experiments in Modern music.

### **Background, Development, and Influence**

#### **Classical Roots**

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

But the composers of the Romantic era did not reject Classical music. In fact, they were consciously mimicking the composers they considered to be the great classicists: Haydn, Mozart, and particularly Beethoven. They continued to write symphonies, concertos, sonatas, and operas, FORMS that were all popular with classical composers. They also kept the basic rules for these forms, as well as keeping the rules of RHYTHM, MELODY, HARMONY, HARMONIC PROGRESSION, TUNING, 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, rules were rules. In the nineteenth century, rules, boundaries and limits were not to be followed so much as they were to be explored, tested, and even defied.

## **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.

## **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 popular composers concentrated on the traditions of their own countries, producing strongly nationalistic music. In France, Debussy and Ravel were composing pieces that they felt were the musical equivalent of impressionistic paintings. Impressionism still had some basis in TONALITY; but other styles, such as serialism, rejected tonality and the Classical-Romantic tradition completely, believing that it had produced all that it could. These Modernists eventually came to dominate the serious music scene. 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.

## **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" dominated this century with its mass-production factories, new machines, inventions, and improvements in transportation. This had a very practical effect on music: there were major improvements in the mechanical VALVES and KEYS that most WOODWINDS and BRASS 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. As the nineteenth century progressed, 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.

### **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 reflects the artistic ideals of the time. Form is important; it provides order and boundaries. Music reflects, in many ways, the attitudes of the educated and the aristocratic of the eighteenth century. Classical music may sound happy or sad, but even the emotions stay within acceptable boundaries.

Romantic-era composers kept the forms of Classical music. 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.

Music could also be from a particular place. Audiences might enjoy an opera about a far off country, complete with 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.

Music could also be specific by having a "programme". **Programme music** is music that, without words, tells a story or describes a scene. Again unlike the abstract, universal music of the Classical composers, Romantic era programme music tries to use music to describe or evoke specific places, people, and ideas. And again, with programme music, those Classical rules can be less important. The form of the music was chosen to fit with the programme (the story or idea).

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.

ORCHESTRAL SEATING PLAN



