

Romantic. A term generally used, in music, to designate the apparent domination of feeling over order, whether applied to a single gesture within a Classical or Baroque structure, to an entire work emphasizing these tendencies or to the period of European music between approximately 1790 and 1910 (hence sometimes known as the Age of Romanticism).

1. Etymology and usage. 2. Background and general considerations. 3. Application to opera and instrumental music. 4. Technical considerations.

1. ETYMOLOGY AND USAGE. In its first, literal meaning, Romantic is derived from Romance, the *lingua romana* that was the ancient vernacular of France. From this derived the nouns *romance* or *romant* in French, *Roman* in German, *romaunt* in English, to describe the poem or tale that was the most important product of Romance literature; and in turn, since the most characteristic feature of that literature was adventure and the free play of imagination, Romantic came to mean adventurous both in subject matter and in the invention and manner of description. There was thus from the start a contrast with the discipline and restraint of the literature based on classical precept. The adjective Romantic first appeared in England as early as 1659 (in France and Germany by the end of the 17th century) and was common in the 18th century as generally synonymous with 'wild' or 'fanciful' (Dr Johnson). It is, significantly, not until the 19th century that the derivative 'Romanticism' was needed to describe a movement of art and thought. Its first application to music cannot now be precisely determined, though the word 'romanesque' (associated with 'étrange') occurs in Cherubini's *Eliza* (1794). However, the term *Romantik* (Ger.: 'romanticism') gained universal currency in Germany after the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, who in his essay on Beethoven's instrumental music (1813) discussed Beethoven's Romanticism.

2. BACKGROUND AND GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS. It is essential, if the term Romantic is to have any useful historical meaning, to set limits to its application. There are elements that might reasonably be called Romantic in Bach's Passions and in Stravinsky. But the only effective application of the term in such contexts is as representing a gesture divergent from a more ordered and contained norm. The Romantic movement may have cultivated certain qualities always present in art and in turn have bequeathed them to a succeeding age; but any valid discussion of it must concern the period in which such qualities were dominant and guided a majority of artists. This may generally be taken to be from the closing years of the 18th century to the first years of the 20th, with the essential provisos that artistic forms gather and disperse gradually, and that co-existing with them are reactionary forces.

In general application, it may be said that Romanticism represents the period of an apparent domination of instinct over reason, of imagination over form, of heart over head, of Dionysos over Apollo. It sprang from the desire to assert instinctual needs which had been too far suppressed in the Enlightenment and which developed when the claim of rationalism that Man was capable of solving his problems by the exercise of reason was shown to have left too much out of account. Some deplored the cracks in the artistic conventions constructed in the period which idealized the order of classical antiquity. Goethe, in a famous moment of irritation, declared Classicism to be health, Romanticism sickness. For others, the cracks admitted some much-needed light.

Certain distinctive traits were quick to emerge with Romanticism, providing musicians as well as other artists

with characteristic subjects. One, perhaps the most important of many deriving from the key figure of Rousseau, was a new preoccupation with Nature. Previously the town, with its ordered society and its opportunity for the rational association of minds and exchange of opinions, had been regarded as the most civilized human condition. The concept of Nature, for Dr Johnson meaning native state or a piece of obsolete mythology, acquired a force in its own right, by turns benign in its liberating qualities and destructive in the irrational elements released. Connected to this was a turn from the rational and explicable towards the mystic and supernatural, both religious (expressed partly in the new enthusiasm for Roman Catholicism in Protestant countries) and merely spooky. Another trait was a fascination with the past, especially with the previous age of Romanticism and the legends of medieval chivalry. Still more important was the new attention given to national identity; and the search for it rent Europe with revolution and war for many decades after the reverberant example of the French Revolution was succeeded by the powerful impact of Napoleon; this reflected each man's search for individual identity. The more intense, powerful and fully expressed this was the better, even if it brought violence and destruction in its wake. This was the age of the Hero.

However, Romanticism is not to be summarized by the isolation of some of its principal characteristics, not least since one overriding trait is its apparent contradictoriness – ambitions for the future mingling with dreams of the past; a determination to overthrow coupled with nostalgia for the rejected world of order and balance; fervent brotherhood yet the exaltation of the individual; proud self-consciousness yet the sense of acute isolation; the assertion of Man yet an ache for the lost God. One source of misunderstanding has been failure to realize that such manifestations are not causes but effects. The collapse of the old certainties, political, social and religious, had cast Man upon his own resources. Before long the new freedom, however heady, was to prove burdensome; for Man, having called into question an entire system of ideas, was now required to formulate answers out of his own individuality, to attempt complete self-sufficiency. But the early days seemed a dawn of new feeling in which, as Wordsworth found, it was bliss to be alive – apparently alive as Man had never so fully been before. Goethe urged that Man must keep within the limitations of his nature; the Romantic ideal was to overcome them, and thereby to open up a range of new impulses and connections. Not only were distinctions between different styles and periods swept away, but the careful barriers between the different arts erected by Lessing's *Laokoon* were trampled underfoot in the new exuberance. Closer links were formed not only between the arts but between them and politics, philosophy and religion, with the artist taking the initiative from priest and ruler in voicing popular aspiration, and being revered as the highest manifestation of the active spirit of Man. And of all the arts, it was to music that, especially in Germany, most painters, poets and philosophers looked as the ideal. This was the art that seemed to express the most with the least definition, and that by existing in time embodied the condition of flux, of change and progress, of movement between emotional states.

The aspect which the new movement of ideas took naturally varied from country to country, with common features differently stressed and with music differently involved. In Italy, Romanticism was closely connected with politics and the unification of the peninsula: it is not surprising that a nation, or would-be nation, of singers

should find the laureate of the Risorgimento in Verdi. In Germany, where Romanticism was also bound up with the struggle for national unity, it was Weber who first vividly voiced the mood of Romanticism in music and who set an example, in his mastery of the theatrical crafts, of the unification of the arts that was to open the way to Romanticism's culminating artist, Wagner. England, with a largely cosmopolitan musical tradition, made its greatest contribution in poetry, criticism and painting, producing in Byron a figure for European Romantic mythology and in Scott a master of the kind of romance now cultivated. Among France's contributions was an emphasis, in music, painting and the theatre, on the claims of the Hero.

3. APPLICATION TO OPERA AND INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC. Through all Romantic thought runs the assumption that the answer to the greatest questions were no longer to be accepted as an act of faith or discovered by rational inquiry but actually fashioned by the efforts of the imagination. In his centenary tribute to Beethoven (1870), Wagner declared that 'Music which does not represent the ideas contained in the phenomena of the world, but is itself an Idea, indeed, a comprehensive Idea of the world, embraces the drama as a matter of course, seeing that the drama, again, represents the only Idea of the world adequate to music'. From sonata, the dominant principle of classical proportion and reasoned progress, the emphasis passed to more dramatic, empirical forms. Opera entered on a period of rapid development and propagation before a new range of audiences, especially the newly emergent middle class, proving as it did the most vivid and adaptable receptacle for the new ideas that were proliferating. The subjects included 'rescue opera' (a popular genre in the wake of the perilous times of the French Revolution), of which Cherubini's *Les deux journées* (1800) is a famous example and Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805) the greatest; operas in which Nature played an increased role, such as Cherubini's *Eliza* (1794); operas dealing in the sinister supernatural, such as Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821) and Marschner's *Der Vampyr* (1828); magic operas, such as Weber's *Oberon* (1826); operas dealing in the contact between the human and spirit worlds (a genre influenced by the Viennese magic theatre), such as Hoffmann's *Undine* (1816); operas celebrating national identity such as Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (1836), Erkel's *Bánk Bán* (composed 1844–52), Moniuszko's *Halka* (1848) and Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* (1866); operas with remote or exotic settings, such as Spohr's *Jessonda* (1823) and Schubert's *Fierrabras* (composed 1823); and operas also set in remote (though seldom classical) times, such as Méhul's *Uthal* (1806) and Boieldieu's *La dame blanche* (1825).

In opera, too, the tendency was to give greatly increased prominence to the orchestra as capable of depicting scenic backgrounds, emphasizing emotional or sensational states, commenting and developing (in the new importance given to reminiscence motif and then leitmotif) and exploring psychological states. With the decline of the castrato, the role of the hero generally passed to the tenor, and new importance was given to the chorus, who increasingly played a functional role in the drama. There was a greater tendency to mingle popular songs and dances in the action, and for forms to loosen and to grow towards full continuity. In all these matters, and many others, German Romantic opera took its example from the new paths explored by French *opéra comique* of the years during and after the Revolution and Empire. In all its variety, Romantic opera addressed itself more fully than ever

before to the feelings of audiences that represented a new cross-section of society, and in doing so it assumed a role increasingly political and moral. French grand opera could reflect the interests and tastes of a new, prosperous bourgeoisie, Verdi's operas could be seized on for a real or imagined political message by the men of the Risorgimento, while Wagner, in whom the forces of Romanticism reached their climax, could conceive of his ideal theatre as a vast public rite.

It was also inevitable that instrumental music should develop new and more flexible forms. Sonata form itself, though frequently used automatically as a receptacle for ideas that little suited it, was to prove more adaptable than might have been expected, though it needed genius of Beethoven's scale to lead a way in extending the harmonic range successfully without destroying the fundamental balance. Hoffmann claimed Beethoven as a Romantic: Beethoven is Romantic in his determination to use music as a moral force, and though the Sixth Symphony is obviously Romantic in its response to scenery with feeling rather than mere imitation, the Third and Fifth are more centrally Romantic in their account of Man struggling to assert his domination over his world, while in the Ninth, as Wagner observed, 'Beethoven's wish to construct the Idea of the Good Man guided him in his quest for the *melody* proper to this Good Man'. However, the Ninth Symphony originally struck Wagner as symphonic music crying out for redemption by poetry; and, for all the volume of 19th-century symphonies and sonatas, it is in other instrumental forms that the Romantic spirit most fully manifested itself. Significantly, Romantic symphonies and sonatas tended to acquire titles, not only to suggest a declared or concealed programme but to emphasize connections with other arts and with emotional states, in general terms as with Tchaikovsky's 'Pathetic' or Bruckner's 'Romantic' symphonies, or in specific terms as with Rubinstein's 'Ocean' or Liszt's 'Faust' symphonies.

Concerto was an obvious medium to be given new emphases for its embodiment of the Artist as Hero; and from Weber's *Konzertstück* to Liszt's *Totentanz* and beyond, the Romantic concerto developed, alongside conventionally shaped works in which the display element was sensationally increased, other forms guided by literary or dramatic ideas. It was Liszt, too, himself embodying a Romantic dichotomy of untrammelled personal flamboyance and longing for the stability of faith, who developed the orchestral work based not on pure form but on a dramatic programme, using for it a title that typically embraced two arts, 'symphonic poem'. Among much else in his achievement, Berlioz, an artist Romantically conscious of his role as Artist, attempted for large works constructive methods based on literary and dramatic analogy: his developments include use of a programme related to symphonic form in the *Symphonie fantastique*, and quasi-literary methods, consciously derived from Shakespearean free form, used to embody a drama for *Roméo et Juliette*. Smaller forms, especially when cultivated by composers with the extreme sensibility of Schumann and Chopin, were more easily able to take their shape from little more than a mood, as expressions of a nervous sensation responding to an impulse either poetic, or pictorial, or even connected to instrumental technique. Again, titles emphasizing the connection with emotions aroused by other arts became common, as with Nocturne, Ballade or Eclogue. From Schubert to Wolf and beyond, poetry and music were fused together with a new expressive potency in the great age of art song, above all the German lied. It is significant

that composers now gave poetry a new importance in the shaping of the imagery and form of a song, and that songs were linked narratively to create a new form, song cycle.

4. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS. In all its manifestations, the Romantic spirit laid its greatest stress on the individual's nervous sensations and emotional impulses acting as his guide. Composers were hence committed to music that would fashion its own forms more freely than in past ages and according to the emotional demands placed on it, while the new importance of sensation as a structural guide naturally meant not only a greater reliance on instrumental colour but also, more crucially, on a subtly extending harmonic language. Though tonal harmony remained the supreme harmonic principle of the 19th century, it was of the essence of Romanticism to extend this as far as possible without causing it to break down. Thus, remoter key relationships were explored from Beethoven onwards, as a matter of course; greater fluency of modulation, including enharmonic, was cultivated, and with it an increased rate of harmonic rhythm. Further, tonal harmony was extended by the use of altered and added notes, by a greatly increased use of unprepared and unresolved discords, and of chords of the 7th, 9th, 11th and 13th. Formerly exceptional or incidental chords, such as that of the added 6th, now acquired a new prominence; and a particular role was found for the diminished 7th, both for its purely sensational qualities (associated with the supernatural by Weber with Samiel's chord in *Der Freischütz*) and for its capacity as a pivot chord permitting modulation to virtually any key. In all its varied aspects, Romantic harmony gave greater importance to emotional than to formal demands. There was, of course, a limit to which the increasing chromaticization of tonal harmony could go without changing its fundamental structure. Liszt, Chopin and Wagner all by different paths found themselves at the end of their lives in a region on the further fringes of tonality to which a new structural principle would one day have to be applied.

If the emphasis passed increasingly to harmonic exploration, melody also acquired a new significance. The increased importance of opera and song stimulated singers and in turn encouraged melody in which the display elements of the 18th century and before were subjugated to greater expressive demands, whether in Italian Romantic opera, as with the long, sensitively inflected melodies of Bellini, or in the greater melodic span introduced to symphonic music especially by Schubert. Though the instrumental 'song-melody' was no 19th-century invention, its development and its prominence as central in symphonic music was a characteristic of Romanticism. The supremacy of melody was a distinctive element in the Romantic symphony as, in various applications, with Brahms and Dvořák, while Tchaikovsky gave such importance to melody as the 'lyrical moment' as to threaten the capacity for development in his sonata structures. The 'vocal' element in melody was emphasized especially in the Romantic concerto (as with Weber's aria-like slow movements and Spohr's construction of a violin concerto as a *Gesangszene*), with the increased personalization of art showing in the interest in instruments' singing qualities. Further, the same personalization may be traced as the impetus towards ever greater virtuosity, with the artist presented as in superhuman mastery over his instrument. The cult of Paganini was partly based on personal magnetism, but his introduction of virtuosity as a functional element in compositional forms with his Caprices had a profound influence on Liszt and thence on other composer-virtuosos.

Rhythm, the weakened element in the new proportions given to music, remained basically connected to the traditional eight-bar period. However, it was typical of Romanticism to strain at this pattern, without seeking to break it and thereby to bring about a situation in which a fundamentally new approach would be required. This was achieved in various ways. From earlier practice was inherited the normal variation of expected patterns with unexpected extensions or diminutions, now given greater attention; the interest in indigenous folk music, arising from heightened awareness of nationality, encouraged irregular phrase lengths and rhythms, even bar lengths, for particular effect; and, especially with Wagner's late work, there grew a tendency to blur rhythm and even virtually to annihilate it.

The orchestra, similarly, was retained in its basic 18th-century proportions but greatly expanded in scope and content. It was characteristic of Romanticism to give increased attention to the individual qualities of instruments: this subtle understanding of instrumental personality was a trait of Weber's which was inherited and developed with distinction by Berlioz and Mahler. It was equally characteristic to seek a smooth, sensuous blend of tone such as is above all identified with Wagner. The enlarging of the orchestra was a natural outcome of both tendencies: the growth from the normal orchestra of Mozart's day, with double woodwind, trumpets, horns, drums and a relatively small string complement, to the 120-strong or even larger orchestra of Mahler, Strauss and others, was accompanied by the regular addition of extra instruments. Some were the obsolete members of an established instrumental family, such as the English horn or piccolo; some were new inventions, occasionally imported, such as the saxophone, products of an age of mechanical experiment and industrial expansion. All instruments capable of it were given substantial technical improvements, both answering and stimulating the virtuosity characteristic of the age. Most notable, perhaps, was the development of the piano from a light, wooden-framed instrument with leather-covered hammers to the metal-framed, over-strung, felt-hammered instrument appropriate to the power, warmth and range demanded of it by the great age of keyboard virtuosos. The new orchestra, enlarged beyond any connection with chamber groupings, brought about the appearance of the virtuoso conductor. In opera, the turn from technical display towards emotional display demanding different techniques hastened the end of the castrato and led to a tradition of singers whose dramatic grasp would ideally, though often not actually, match their musical and vocal powers: it was the example of Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, dramatically gifted but vocally less distinguished, that by his own testimony set the young Wagner on his career as a composer.

It is in Wagner that most of the traits of Romanticism meet in some form; and an essential part of his genius rests in his ability to confer on the disparate tendencies of the movement his own renewal of order based not on a return to Classical practice but on the achievements of Romanticism. The extended harmonic range, the enriched orchestral palette, the commitment to 'endless melody', the motivic method flexible to the articulation of ideas and images and able to probe deep into emotion and psychology, the many technical and imaginative features observed in the earlier Romantics, are all at the service of a consistent and developing Romantic view of the world. After so powerful and systematic an artist, reaction was inevitable. Despite the work of major late Romantic composers, notably Mahler, within two decades of Wagner's death in

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1883 the movement was significantly weakened, and within three had substantially spent its force.

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