

## MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2019

Prof. Smey

Class 20, Tuesday April 9

Towards the end of Class 19 we did a quick intro to the Romantic Period and considered our first major piece, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Today we'll do a more detailed intro and learn more quiz pieces.

### Overview: The Romantic Period (1820-1900)

In the previous period I talked about how this is a period that values creativity, intense emotions, subjective experience, and the supernatural. Let's now consider a few more big trends that change the structure of society and the approach to the arts.

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Finally, the last general trend I point out is the conception of **the work of art as a historical document** that will be significant for future generations.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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 by middle-class families, 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.

## Chromaticism

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!)

Another effect of chromaticism 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.)

## Art Song

In the previous class we hit one of the highlights of large-scale, spectacular “public” music for orchestra. This time we turn to the small-scale music that was intended for the home market.

We looked at the tradition of the Art Song, which became particularly popular in early Romantic Germany and Austria. (In German these are called *Lieder*, pronounced “LEED-er”.) 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 would turn them into music. The overall goal is to create the most refined combination of text and music, not unlike the work of the Troubadours and Trouvères in the Middle Ages.

### Franz Schubert’s “Erlkönig”

The first Art Song we are going to learn for the quiz is Franz Schubert’s “Erlkönig.” This is a sort of ghost story with text by Goethe, in which a man and his son are 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.

Our youtube playlist also features [a cool animated version](#), and you can get the text there by hitting the closed-captioning button.

### Robert Schumann, “Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai” from *Dichterliebe*

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. Translation of the text appears on the website.)

## Piano “Character” Pieces

After the Art Song we’ll stick with the small-scale side of Romantic music and consider some pieces written for solo piano. The typical piano works of this era are sometimes 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.

Perhaps the most intriguing musical portraits in this collection 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.

Schumann would eventually attempt suicide at the age of 44 and subsequently check himself into a mental health institution. Some people speculate that he had what we now call bipolar disorder. These two alter egos seem to possibly correspond to the manic and depressed sides of his personality, and they intriguingly suggest that he was conscious of this duality.

For the quiz we will study a movement that doesn’t have such an interesting story but is very pleasant to listen to. “Renconnaissance” (Recognition) presumably refers to Schumann recognizing one of his close friends at a masked ball during Carnival. It is in a simple A-B-A form, where the A section is very cheerful and energetic party music and the B section is more tender and emotional.

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.