

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2019

Prof. Smey

Class 21, Thursday April 11

In the previous class we revisited our intro to the Romantic Period, and then I started going through some quiz pieces. In this class we'll hit two more pieces and we'll be done! (One remaining piece is reserved for online.)

Also, we'll start talking about Romantic Opera which is a sort of "bonus topic," not on the quiz.

Orchestral Music in the Romantic Period

We'll look at two more pieces of symphonic **program music** for the quiz.

Mendelssohn, Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21 [1826]

In our intro to the Romantic period I sometimes say that composers are "bored" with the traditional forms from the Classical period. They still write sonata forms and rondos et cetera, but these patterns are now kind of aside from the point. Instead, composers are excited about *program music*, pieces that tell stories.

Mendelssohn wrote his *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture when he was only 17 years old, and in a sense this piece delivers the best aspects of both the Classical and Romantic periods. It is a single, sonata-form movement that tells a story - every theme is intended to represent some character or idea from Shakespeare's play.

(Here is a very simplified overview of the play, in case you've never seen it. There are a few important groups of characters:

The lovers' triangle quadrangle: Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius and Helena are in a complicated four-way romantic conflict. In the midst of their dispute they run off into the woods and are stuck there overnight.

The fairies: The king and queen of the fairies (Oberon and Titania) are having marital problems, and they take out their frustrations on the lovers by manipulating them through magic.

The court at Athens: Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta have the ultimate authority over who can get married in the mortal world, so the play frequently returns to them for various deliberations and pronouncements.

The amateur theater troupe: Meanwhile, a group of local workers are going to put on a play of their own. They are very bad at this and their terrible performance is very funny. At one point Oberon makes things worse by turning the leader of the group into a donkey.

This is pretty much everything you need to know to understand Mendelssohn's piece!

I've posted [an animated video](#) on our class blog that follows the form of this overture and includes illustrations from the Sparknotes summary of the plot.

(This piece is not discussed in our textbook.)

Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* [1874]

This piece is covered in [our online unit](#) with accompanying exercise. You can also read about it in the textbook on pp. 262-266 in the seventh edition and 270-274 in the eighth.

One More Piano Piece....

Franz Liszt, Transcendental Etude No. 8, "Wild Jagd" (Wild Hunt) [1851]

Also, we turned to the music of Franz Liszt. Liszt was famous as a *virtuoso*, someone who plays their instrument as well as is humanly possible. (Indeed, the technique of a virtuoso often seems *superhuman*.) He composed music that could show off this amazing ability, which we would call *virtuosic*.

We watched a video of another living virtuoso pianist playing Liszt's "Wild Jagd" (or "Wild Hunt.") This features a lot of loud, fast flurries of notes and, most impressively, a lot of rapid "jumping around" on the piano keyboard. The chords often have a "bum, badum, badum" rhythm that sounds like a hunting call, hence the title.

("Etude" means "study," so this sort of piece usually focuses on one technique and tries to push it as far as it can go. Here I think the technique being explored is the chords that jump around. As you can see from watching [the youtube video performance](#), these gestures require incredibly fast and accurate arm movements and get more and more extreme as the piece progresses.)

This piece is discussed in the seventh edition on pp. 272-275. Unfortunately our author chooses a prettier but less exciting piece by Liszt in the eighth edition, pp. 281-283.

Romantic Opera

(This section is non-quiz material, and I'm not sure how much of it we'll cover.)

The Romantic period is also the Golden Age of opera – this is when the most popular works were written, and your typical opera star (like Luciano Pavarotti) will perform selected arias from this period in concert.

With the exception of Rossini, who we'll look at first, most Romantic opera composers get rid of the strict distinction between recitative and aria – instead, they find new ways to keep the action and dialogue going without stopping the music. Like much of the music we've listened to from this period, the opera from this time can be highly expressive and emotional. (I like to say that it is “schmaltzy.”)

So for this unit I put a list of some of the more well-known 19th century operas on the board and we gradually work our way through it.

Gioachino Rossini, *The Barber of Seville* [1816]

Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto* [1851], *La Traviata* [1853], *Aida* [1871]

George Bizet, *Carmen* [1875]

Giacomo Puccini, *La Boheme* [1896], *Tosca* [1900], *Madame Butterfly* [1904]