

Music 111 – Music Appreciation

Music of the Romantic Era (1820-1900)

INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Romantic writers emphasized “freedom of expression” over time –honored conventions. All artists stressed “emotional subjectivity,” powerful feelings, and their unique personalities in their work. They were drawn to nature, the chivalry of the Middle Ages, and to the realm of fantasy for new sources of inspiration. Romanticism coincided with the Industrial Revolution.

MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Rich variety of music and individual styles
- Continued use of musical forms and songlike melodies of preceding (Classical) era
- Increased range of tone color, dynamics, pitch range, harmonic vocabulary (increased dissonance, more frequent and remote modulations)
- Greater tension and less emphasis on balance and resolution
- Individuality of style and emphasis on self-expression
- Fascination with supernatural, macabre, stories from the middle ages, and nature
- Exoticism was an expression of composers interest in foreign lands and things remote, picturesque, and mysterious.
- Increased importance given to tone color. Larger orchestras featured more active brass, woodwind, and percussion sections. New playing techniques developed and new ways to blend and combine different instruments explored.
- Chromatic harmony, or the use of chords containing notes not found in the tonic key, was used increasingly. Increased use of dissonant, unstable chords heightened emotional intensity of Romantic music and expressed feelings of yearning, tension, and mystery.
- Expanded dynamic range: dynamic markings range from *pppp* to *ffff* and everything in between. Crescendo and decrescendo used frequently
- Expanded pitch range was exploited through addition of very high (piccolo) and very low (contrabassoon) to the orchestra. Composers also experimented with extreme high and low ends of the pitch range of familiar instruments.
- Rubato, a slight holding back and pressing forward of tempo, was used with *accelerando* and *ritardando* to intensify expression of the music.
- Thematic transformation became increasingly important
- Virtuoso performers were much admired and had lucrative performing careers

The Art Song or Lied (plural = lieder) was a musical setting, for solo voice and piano accompaniment, of a poem. A true “duet” between the voice part and the piano as both express the obvious and the hidden meaning and emotional content of the poetry. They were often composed and performed in groups known as **Song Cycles**.

Piano Music - Many composers (like Robert Schumann) wrote “character pieces” which were short piano works with programmatic titles designed to be musical expressions or representations of a non-musical scene, story, or emotion. Musical nationalism was expressed by composers like Chopin who wrote **Polonaises** and **Mazurkas** evoking the music of his native Poland. Other forms included the **Nocturne** or “night piece,” and the **étude**, which was designed to help the performer learning the piece master a specific piano playing technique.

Classical forms and “absolute music” was still favored by some Romantic composers and they continued to compose symphonies, concertos, etc. but used the expanded harmonic and dynamic vocabulary of the Romantic style.

Opera continued as composers exploited expanded harmonic, dynamic, and expressive characteristics of Romantic style to bring heightened emotional intensity to staged musical drama. **Verismo** style developed. Composers moved away from recitative – aria format toward continuous flow of music. Composers such as Richard Wagner viewed opera as a melding of all of the arts. Wagner expanded on the idea of thematic transformation and developed a complex technique of employing **leitmotifs**, short musical ideas associated with a person, an object, or a thought in the musical drama. Hundreds of leitmotifs can be identified throughout Wagner's four opera cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The use and transformation of leitmotifs helps to unify the extended work musically and allows the orchestra to take a more active role in the drama. Through the use of leitmotifs the orchestra can comment on the stage action, sometimes foreshadowing action or contradicting statements made by the singers on the stage.

Other Wagner operatic innovations include:

- Placing the orchestra under the stage in the orchestra pit
- Designing the orchestra pit so that all musicians can see the conductor
- Turning off the lights in the auditorium (except the stage lights, of course) to focus the audience's attention toward the action on stage.
- Larger orchestra – including instruments developed specifically for his works (Wagner tuba for example)

Program Music: instrumental music associated with a non-musical element, (a story, poem, idea, or scene) often containing explanatory notes, called a program, in the printed music.

- **Symphonic Poem or Tone Poem** is a single movement work which can be composed in any of a variety of musical forms (sonata-allegro, rondo, sonata-rondo, etc) based on a literary or pictorial idea. This form was originally developed by Franz Liszt.
- **Concert Overture** is a single movement work, usually in sonata-allegro form, modeled after opera overtures although not part of an opera. Concert Overtures also are musical expressions or depictions of non-musical ideas, scenes, stories, plays, or poems.
- **Incidental Music** is music to be performed before and during a play. It often sets the mood or comments on the action of certain scenes of the drama.
- **Program Symphony** is a composition in several movements, each of which has a descriptive title and/or program associated with it.

Nationalism was an attempt to express a specific national identity through music using folksongs, legends, and history of homeland. Many composers strove to consciously create music that reflected the heart and soul of the people of their homeland. Some composers hoped to effect political change by stirring nationalistic feelings in their listeners. Individual groups or national "schools" of composers were formed in various countries with the purpose of discussing and examining regional musical traits in the hope of identifying unique, national musical styles.

- Bohemia (Czech) – Smetana & Dvorak
- Russian – "The Russian Five" – Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Mussorgsky
- Italy – Viva Verdi became a rallying cry as the composer's name was used to symbolize the Italian people's hope to oust the Austrian overlords in favor of a return to an Italian monarchy: V.E.R.D.I. = **V**ittorio **E**mmanuel **R**ei **d**i **I**talia (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy)
- American style based on Native American and African American spirituals was urged by Antonin Dvorak, a Czech composer who spent time composing and teaching in the United States.
- Scandinavian composers Grieg (Norway) and Sibelius (Finland.)