

The Big "Story Line"

It is the struggle between C minor and C major, between despair and hope, between death and life, that is the large-scale dramatic narrative in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It is a struggle that is won by C major during the third movement, a victory that is celebrated in the blaring and giddy fourth movement.

Beethoven's Symphony no. 5 begins darkly in C minor and ends triumphantly in C major. The catharsis it describes, of victory through struggle, is a mirror of both Beethoven's external environment and his post-reinvention heroic emotional landscape. It is a work in which the conventions of classicism are rendered secondary to Beethoven's dual artistic tenets of originality and profound self-expression above all else.

Beethoven's music was rooted in the forms and genres of classicism. But the overpowering, sometimes even demonic, entirely personalized expressive content of his music set it far apart from the Classical ideal. This is what Beethoven's contemporary Ernst Theodor Wilhelm (E.T.A.) Hoffman was getting at when he wrote that:

Beethoven's music sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and awakens just that infinite longing which is the essence of romanticism. He is, accordingly, a completely Romantic composer. (Grout, Palisca, 4th ed., 653)

When it comes to Beethoven, labels such as classicist and romantic are best avoided. His music was *sui generis*. He was a revolutionary man living at a revolutionary time, and in terms of his impact on the next generations of composers, he was, without a doubt, the single most disruptive and influential composer in the history of Western music.

Isn't It Romantic?

The Music of the Nineteenth Century

The Romantic era is understood as running from the death of Beethoven in 1827 until 1900. Were we compelled to do so, we could come up with better dates. It is a compulsion we will, for now, ignore.

The adjective *romantic* comes from the noun *romance*. A romance was a story or a poem that dealt with legendary people and/or events written in one of the romance languages, that is, one of the languages descended from Roman (Latin). For example, the medieval poems about King Arthur were called Arthurian romances. As a result, when the adjective *romantic* was first used during the seventeenth century, it referred to something remote, legendary, fantastic, and marvelous, beyond the everyday world of real life.

When applied to the art and literature of the nineteenth century, then, the word *romantic* refers not to physical love or affection but rather to something that is beyond the everyday. Where a twenty-first-century individual, when met with something incredible, might say, "Far out, man," her nineteenth-century counterpart would have said, "Most romantic, dude."

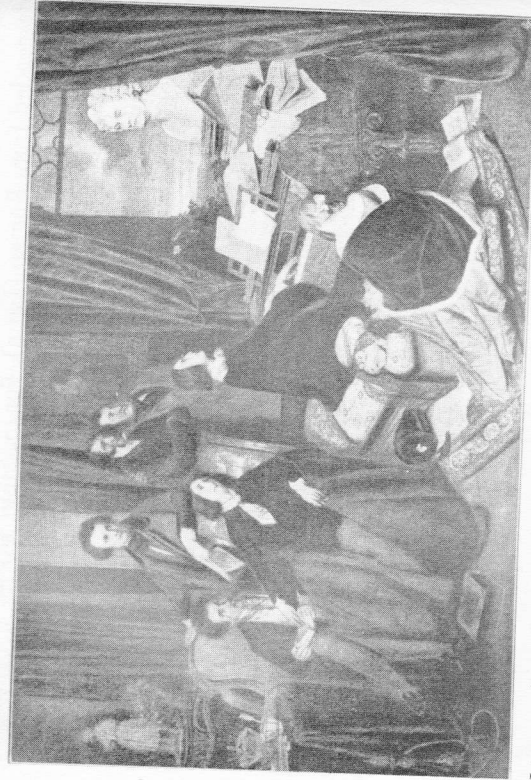
The big difference between the music of the Classical era and that of the Romantic era has to do with expanded expressive content and the incremental changes to the musical language that were made in order to describe that expanded expressive content.

We must be wary of the word *inevitable*. In truth, few things are

inevitable: death, perhaps (but certainly not taxes, not if you've got your money in a numbered account in the Cayman Islands). Nevertheless, given the social evolution that marked the European world from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, there does appear to be a certain inevitability to the development of Romantic art.

The music of the Baroque era in general, and opera in particular, acknowledged and celebrated the individual human voice to a degree entirely new in the post-ancient world. During the Enlightenment, the dramatic and homophonic elements of Baroque opera were institutionalized in the instrumental genres and musical forms of classicism. Beethoven, having come to the conclusion that music was above all a self-expressive art, adhered to Classical era rituals only to the degree that they served his expressive needs.

In his lifetime, Beethoven was regarded by many as an eccentric modernist whose late music, in particular, could be written off as the product of a slightly crazy, hearing-impaired composer. However, it didn't take long for the generation of composers who came into

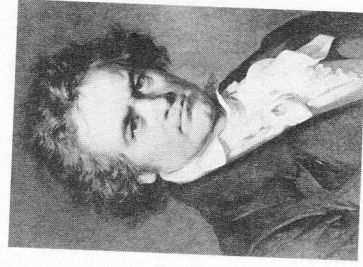


Liszt at the Piano, by Josef Danhauser (1840) The Teaching Company Collection

their prime immediately after Beethoven's death to embrace him as the Moses of new music, one that would lead them to an expressive promised land relevant to the changing social and economic realities of the 1830s and '40s.

Danhauser's painting *Liszt at the Piano* (1840) illustrates perfectly the Romantic era infatuation with the Beethovenian "ideal." Pictured is a Parisian salon filled with some of the greatest artists of the day. For his inspiration, Liszt is looking at a monumental marble bust of Beethoven perched on the piano. The bust is seen against a window, which frames a roiling and turbulent sky, as if to say that Beethoven is one with the gods, that he cannot be contained in a mere room. Typical of Beethoven's postmortem deification, the bust looks more like Tyrone Power than the short, ugly, smallpox-scarred Ludwig van Beethoven. For the great majority of composers and listeners of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, Beethoven was viewed as a spiritual guide, as a hero, as a deity, as a catalyst for the expressive evolution that we now call romanticism.

For the audiences of the Romantic era, music became the ultimate art form. The remote, boundless, ephemeral, nontactile nature of music, particularly instrumental music, made it the ideal art for the nineteenth century. Its detachment from the world, its mystery, and its incomparable power of suggestion—which works on the mind directly without the mediation of words—made it the dominant art, the one most representative among all the arts of the nineteenth century. According to the nineteenth-century English essayist Walter Pater, "All art aspires to the condition of music."



Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827) Library
of Congress, Prints and
Photographs Division,
LC-USZ62-29499

Romantic Era Trends

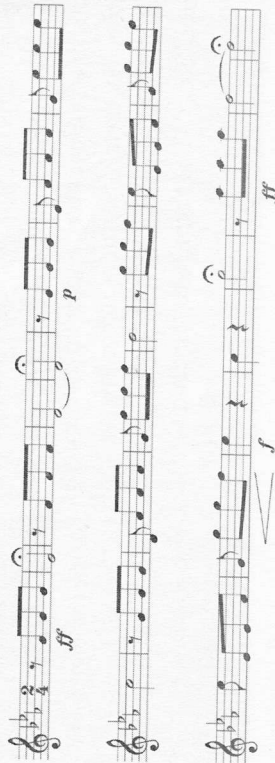
There are four main Romantic era expressive trends. They are the fascination with extreme emotional states; musical nationalism; a glorification of nature, particularly the *wilder* aspects of nature; and a fascination with the macabre, the gothic, and the supernatural.

Let's compare three thematic melodies and ask what they are each "about," beginning with the first theme of the first movement of Haydn's Symphony no. 88 of 1787:



Back in chapter 20, we said that this Classical era theme was about "nice." Let us expand on that a bit. It is "about" an upbeat, motivic melody with balanced phrases set in the key of G major, a melody most easily discussed in purely musical terms as a piece of "absolute music."

We return to the opening of the first theme of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 5 of 1808:



Back in chapter 20, we observed that this turbulent, jagged, highly motivic theme set in C minor seems to represent some dark and dramatic experience or emotion. The exact nature of that experience or emotion is up to the individual listener. Expressively, the theme is best discussed as a metaphor.

Finally, we consider the second theme from Peter Tchaikovsky's Fantasy Overture to *Romeo and Juliet* of 1869:



There should be a parental warning label on that long, sprawling theme! The theme is known as "the love theme from Romeo and Juliet" because of what it *explicitly* describes: the love (and physical desire) between two starry-eyed and star-crossed teenagers. It's no accident that this theme has the expressive impact it does; Tchaikovsky, with great savvy and care, has built a lush theme filled with phrases that climb, climb, and climb some more, until it peaks with a frankly orgasmic climax.

There is nothing abstract or metaphorical about the theme's meaning. It is *explicitly* about idealized love and almost unbearable physical yearning. This is the sort of extreme emotion *explicitly* portrayed that is typical of cutting-edge Romantic era music.

The second of the four major Romantic era musical trends is musical nationalism: the use of folk or folklike music in concert works. Such folkloric nationalism is a different thing from the language-based

nationalism we observed in the Baroque era. The nineteenth century was an age of revolution and growing national pride and awareness, pride and awareness that manifested themselves in artistic nationalism: the celebration of ethnic and national character in the arts.

Folkloric musical nationalism became an important mode of self-expression and political expression for many nineteenth-century composers. It was a sort of expression that would have been unthinkable during the more cosmopolitan Classical era.

The third of the four major Romantic era trends was a fascination on the part of nineteenth-century artists and audiences with nature, particularly the wilder aspects of nature. It was a fascination that mirrored societal reality.

For many reasons, the industrial revolution among them, the population of Europe exploded during the nineteenth century. The population of England alone grew from ten million in 1800 to twenty-one million by 1850. Most of this population growth was in the cities; London and Paris both quadrupled in population between 1800 and 1880. As the powers of the provincial courts dwindled, most composers and musicians were drawn to major cities. The urbanization of the artistic community had a tremendous impact on the nature of the art this community produced.

During the nineteenth century, nature came to be worshipped and celebrated by artists as an ideal of purity. For these artists, nature inspired an awe that counterbalanced the artificiality of the city and of human society. Different works depict nature in different ways, from the bright and brilliant sunshine of Italy (in the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's Symphony no. 4 of 1833), to the craggy mountain ridges of the Austrian Alps (the first movement of Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 3 of 1896), to a summer evening's storm as a metaphor for the great flood (the fourth movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 6 of 1808; see the following Music Box).

MUSIC BOX

Beethoven, Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68 (1808)

Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, which is nicknamed the *Pastoral*, remains one of the great "back-to-nature" works of the nineteenth century. Over the course of its five movements, Beethoven describes a day in the country. The climax of the symphony is the fourth movement, which Beethoven entitles *Sturm* ("Storm"). What begins as a summer night's thunderstorm becomes a cataclysm, nature at its wildest and most uncontrolled, and a metaphor for humankind's powerlessness over its own fate.

- While listening to this movement, be aware that its theme is neither a melody, a harmony, nor a rhythm, but rather, the concept of the *storm*. The music is entirely programmatic in that it seeks to describe a visual/literary program using purely musical means. Program music is instrumental music that seeks to paint pictures and/or tell a literary story in strictly instrumental terms.
- Form in this movement is determined entirely by the programmatic story being told, from the distant thunderous rumbles and "pitter-pats" of drizzle that begin the movement; through its vicious, dissonant, lightning-slashed climax; to the arching string line and rising flute solo that depict, respectively, an early morning rainbow and the rising sun at the conclusion of the movement.

As the natural world and its mysteries were increasingly explained by science, and as the middle and upper classes were no longer awed by religious dogma, so audiences sought ever greater titillation through their entertainment.

This should sound very familiar. Modern audiences crave the same sort of incredible, imagination-stretching entertainment, featuring anything from giant reptiles to space aliens, nasty orcs to skeletal pirates, evil galactic emperors to chainsaw-wielding madmen.

The nineteenth century had gothic novels and poets and writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley. It had music compositions such as Hector Berlioz's "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath," the fifth movement of his *Symphonie Fantastique*, and Franz Liszt's *Totentanz*, a piece of music based on the Black Death of the fourteenth century: art that titillates, terrifies, and amuses all at the same time.

All the Romantic era trends we've just observed were informed by a single overriding desire on the part of composers: to be personally expressive by creating a personal compositional sound. At the heart of the Romantic ideal lay this search for personal self-expression.

The music of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical eras is characterized by what is called period style, a relatively uniform approach to the musical language in terms of form and aesthetics. Yes, both Johann Sebastian Bach's and Wolfgang Mozart's music stands out from that of their contemporaries, but that's not because they made a purposeful effort to cultivate their own "sound"; they were just phenomenally great geniuses/artists.

However, starting with Beethoven, we are witness to a shift from period style to individual styles. Part of the cult of individual feeling that characterized romanticism made itself evident in a desire on the part of composers to find their own compositional voice, their own "sound." This is yet another aspect of romanticism that remained common currency through the twentieth century and up to today, as composers continue to cultivate a compositional voice of their own.

We can blame it on the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's emphasis on the individual reveling in his individuality found full flower in the art of the nineteenth century, during which artists no longer conceived of themselves as servants to their patrons and audiences but, rather, as *artistes*, who had to follow their own muse.

CHAPTER 23

Structural Problems

Formal Challenges in Early Romantic Music

For cutting-edge Romantic era composers, the issue of musical form was a challenge. The spontaneity, individuality, and creative freedom treasured by so many nineteenth-century composers were at odds with the notion of conforming to a preordained musical form. Many early Romantic composers altered the traditional Classical era forms almost beyond recognition, while others abandoned them altogether. Thus the challenge: to find alternative formal structures that allowed composers the spontaneity and freedom of expression they craved yet still provided a measure of compositional coherence.

For some composers, Beethoven showed the way: using the Classical era forms contextually, according to expressive need.

For those composers who chose not to use the Classical era forms, the challenges were daunting. One need only remember that composers such as Haydn and Mozart, and yes, even Beethoven, employed these forms because they were a societal given, a common structural ground between themselves and their audiences. The artistic risk is clear: if a composer abandoned the forms, he abandoned that common ground.

Ah, the creative mind! Challenges were meant to be overcome, and with varying degrees of success, the 1820s and '30s saw a number of solutions to the formal challenges of the time.

Some composers chose to write "miniature compositions," and