

The Romantic Era

(ca. 1800-1910)

Romantic inspiration

- ▶ Romantic music was often inspired by extra-musical sources such as art, poetry and literature
- ▶ Other composers were increasingly drawn to nature for their inspiration (such as Beethoven and Mendelssohn)
- ▶ Some sought to combine multiple art forms to create “universal art works” (Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*)
- ▶ *Program music*, which was based on an underlying story often given in the concert *program*, became very popular (particularly with Berlioz, Liszt, and Strauss)—with short character pieces for piano and *symphonic tone poems* for orchestra

Genres

- ▶ The principal genres of the Romantic era were:
 - ▶ The symphonic poem (inspired by plays, novels, poetry, paintings, legends, or historical events)
 - ▶ The symphony (developed by “traditional” composers)
 - ▶ The concerto (now a vehicle for famous virtuoso performers)
 - ▶ Piano music (short character pieces, etudes, and sonatas)
 - ▶ Art song (inspired by lyric poetry)
 - ▶ Opera (featuring the combination of music, theater, dance, and painting and scenic design)

Romantic ideals

- ▶ The democratic ideals of the French Revolution and the heroicism of the Napoleonic Era inspired Romanticism in music
- ▶ Music previously commissioned by and performed for elite classes was now being performed for the emerging bourgeois middle class in public concerts and in the opera house
- ▶ Some of the ideals of the Romantic period were originality, self-expression and “the genius composer,” rather than the mastery of established forms and techniques and “the composer as fine craftsman”

Other Romantic trends

- ▶ Another group of composers (including Schubert, Brahms, and Mendelssohn) continued to compose in traditional forms and genres without relying on extramusical programs—this was often called *absolute music*
- ▶ “Nationalist” composers sought to express the musical characteristics of their homeland, such as Grieg (Norway), Dvorak (Bohemia), and Mussorgsky (Russia)
- ▶ Romantic piano composers like Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt explored the new expressive capabilities of the powerful cast-iron pianos of the period

Characteristics of Romantic music

- ▶ Romantic music featured a greater variety of tone colors and harmonic colors, with greatly expanded orchestral forces and combinations of instruments (particularly in the music of Berlioz, Mahler and Strauss)
- ▶ The harmonic language of Romantic music became increasingly chromatic, using more altered and borrowed chords, much freer treatment of dissonances and frequently shifting tonal centers
- ▶ There was a preference for extremes, with either very short intricate miniatures for a soloist or extremely long, immensely dramatic works for large-scale forces

Romantic vs. Classical music

- ▶ Romantic music is less balanced and rational than music in the Classical Era, with a greater emphasis on lyrical expression and depth of emotion
- ▶ While Classical music is organized by tonal plans and common formal designs, Romantic music is frequently organized by ideas of cyclical repetition, thematic transformation, or the use of recurring leitmotifs
- ▶ There is a much freer sense of time in Romantic music, stemming from the frequent use of accelerandi, ritardandi and rubato

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