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# Romanticism and Program Music

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## LELAND ROBERTS

### *Romanticism and Program Music*

The development and extensive cultivation of program music, motivated by issues of style, form, and content, most central to the art, is one of the most distinctive expressions of Romanticism in nineteenth-century music. Neither song nor opera, program music emerged as a new genre in which composers attempted to express the affective essence of extra-musical ideas through purely instrumental means.

It is commonly acknowledged that Beethoven is the father of nineteenth-century Romanticism in music, the inspired genius who wrenched music from the Classical world of Haydn and Mozart into an age where it became the language of the emotions. Certainly contemporary writers saw Beethoven as a Romantic because of the turbulent emotions of his compositions. Yet, from the perspective of the present, one might see that the long shadow cast by this short, stocky giant over much of the age had its source in Classic as well as Romantic elements.

The polarity of Classicism and Romanticism can be witnessed through much of music history: music of the thirteenth century is seen as classic by contrast with the Romantic outburst of the fourteenth century "ars nova." In contrast to the classic poise of Renaissance music, the Baroque projects a romantic sense of exaggerated theatrical effects governed by the doctrine of the passions. In the two musical periods to which the poles of Romanticism and Classicism have given their names, the contrasts in content do exist; however, there are strains of similarity running through the two in both form and content which unify them and, at the same time, set them clearly apart from all earlier music.

In music written before the Classic Age of Haydn and Mozart, the governing ideas about musical expression seem to emphasize static effect. In text-guided Renaissance music, the longer forms are essentially episodic, although often seamless in their polyphony. Section by section, the text is set to music which interprets the mood of the moment, then moves on to the next. Baroque music, with the exception of recitative, is relentlessly single-minded. Each movement

42 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

“spins out” a single effect in an attempt to surround the listener with that effect in a kind of musical brainwashing, so that the listener actually takes on the mood of the moment.

With the Classic Age, music’s expression becomes dynamic. Instead of episodic change, an organic dynamism of effect prevails. This is one of the most significant changes in music aesthetic throughout history. The greatest accomplishment of the Classic composers was the creation of this new expressive style and the forms to facilitate it, most importantly that form now known as sonata allegro.

In the music of Haydn and Mozart, these striking new developments serve classicism. With Kant, the musician seeks an ideal and universal beauty which uplifts as it entertains. Certainly, emotion is a part of this ideal beauty. One has only to think of the music of the opening scene of the film *Amadeus* or of the poignant yearning of the second movement of Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto* featured in *Out of Africa* to be aware of the perfectly balanced union of emotion and form. The classic sensibility requires this balance, or, as Mozart put it, that emotions be presented in “good taste.”

Sonata allegro, the form which so characterizes the affective aesthetic of Classic period music, was employed in most first movements and in many second and final movements of the principal genres of instrumental music. In symphony, concerto, sonata, and chamber music, almost without exception, composers relied upon this organization to harness and facilitate a music of organic emotional development and change. In overview, the form is seen to consist of three major sections, exposition, development, and recapitulation, in which two themes are introduced, elaborated and restated.

In its realization, the form is a vehicle for a musical progression much akin to drama. The two themes are dynamic musical characters created, in Classic style, for development possibilities rather than as immutably complete melodies. The first theme is introduced in the tonic, or home, key of the movement; different facets of its personality may be revealed through repetition with changes in texture, tone color, or dynamics. Upon completion of this character’s introduction, its musical world begins to disintegrate; theme shatters into motives racing toward an unknown destination, the center of gravity (key) begins to shift, and the

## LELAND ROBERTS

43

original key-centered stability is lost. This transition section is a period of increased tension leading, finally, to resolution in the arrival at a new key center and the stable presentation of the second musical character or theme. This new theme usually is a new melody, but always acts in a new key. It is as if composers considered characters' actions, rather than appearance, their most important *distinguishing features*. With compact characters poised on the energy of contrasting key centers, act one ends.

In the development section, the dynamic potentials of the two musical characters are realized. Facets of their personalities (motives) emerge from the whole to be expanded, altered, and set into conflict with each other as they seek new identities and new destinies. New harmonies may alter a mood, dynamics and rhythmic pace may change a passage of tranquility into an extended shout of exuberance, a challenge to contrapuntal conflict may generate driving excitement. Always, the music is impelled by the pull of tonality as the drama is played out on a stage of shifting key centers.

With the recapitulation, the drama is resolved by a return to essentially the same themes presented in the exposition. Now, contrast and conflict are minimized as both themes affirm stability by appearing in the home key.

The great achievement of Beethoven was to infuse his inherited Classic forms and their organic dynamism with an emotional intensity that was both highly personal and inevitably convincing. In so doing, he created a musical legacy that was to preoccupy composers throughout the nineteenth century.

With nineteenth-century Romanticism, the aesthetic which generated this form and expression changes profoundly. No longer does the composer seek an ideal universal beauty. The search for *personal expression and freedom, aspirations to transcend the immediate, and yearning after impossible fulfillment* predominate. The personality of the artist tends to become merged with the work of art as music becomes the language of the emotions. It is this emphasis upon emotional communication which finds its most characteristic expression in both literature and music in the form of lyricism.

In the Lieder (German art songs) of Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Hugo Wolf and in the character pieces for piano of Schubert, Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, and Frederic Chopin one finds full expression of the lyric impulse. In these works the entire

44 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

emotional world of Romanticism unfolds in miniature. At the heart of these compositions is melody, the lyric spirit fulfilled in music: no drive of development here, but perfectly crafted melodies set one to the next, alternated, or brought back with just a touch of ornamental variation. These melodies, totally complete in themselves, would be violated by any attempt to place them as characters in the drama of sonata allegro form. Thus, Romantic lyricism is directly at odds with the most characteristic forms which nineteenth-century composers inherited from Beethoven. Problems arising from the need to reconcile traditional form with lyricism were of primary concern to composers of Romantic instrumental music. Comparison of the first movement exposition of Mozart's *Symphony No. 40* with Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6* provides a clear demonstration of lyricism's impact upon sonata allegro form.

In the Mozart symphony, the first theme is an intense melody in G minor which projects a dark, pessimistic mood through 16 measures. It appears to begin again, but tilts to the key of B flat major to begin an aggressive transition leading, in 19 measures, to the appearance of the second theme. Alternating between winds and strings, this melody has a plaintive quality. In its repetition, the roles of winds and strings are reversed and, after 6 measures, motives of the first theme appear to aid in the drive to a conclusion. In performance, this entire exposition takes just under two minutes.

Tchaikovsky prepares for the appearance of his first theme with an 18-measure slow introduction. Somber and brooding, the melody features a 4-note motive repeated in the dark tones of bassoon and viola. This motive, greatly expanded and developed, becomes the main material of the first theme. Fast-paced and agitated, the theme flaunts a wide-ranging personality as it builds over 50 measures to a fanfare-like climax in brass. A transition serves to calm the mood and prepare for the much slower pace of the second theme.

The second theme, or theme group, could be a composition in itself. It opens with a wonderfully luxuriant melody which the composer has marked "tenderly, very singing, with expression." This is followed by a second melody, lighter, more playful in spirit, which is carried out through conversation among the woodwinds. This melody, in turn, makes way for a return of the first, now lengthened and more impassioned. As the second theme group moves to an end, it is as if the composer could not bear to part with his melody; it

## LELAND ROBERTS

45

echoes again and again in a single clarinet, growing ever fainter as it floats to rest. In performance, without its introduction, this exposition takes about eight minutes.

Mozart's exposition creates a dynamic state demanding further elaboration. The melodic potential established, but not fulfilled, requires development. With Tchaikovsky, the wealth of melodic material has been so fully presented that there is little left to desire. The first theme has undergone extensive development in its presentation, and the second theme group consists of melodies which are so complete in themselves that they surely could not welcome fragmentation and development.

Striving for lyrical self-expression while laboring under the imperative of Beethoven's example, composers increasingly felt that the existing large forms of instrumental music had been stretched to their limits and were not adequate to serve fully the new sensibility. As a solution to the problem, some turned to a union of music and extra-musical idea, to program symphonies and overtures. The rationale for this music lay in the prevailing Romantic view of the expressive nature of music. In an 1823 review of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, E. T. A. Hoffmann, author and musician, spoke for much of the Romantic world:

Instrumental music is the most romantic of all the arts — one might almost say the only genuinely romantic one — for its sole subject is the infinite. The lyre of Orpheus opened the portals of Orcus — music discloses to man an unknown realm, a world that has nothing in common with the external sensual world that surrounds him, a world in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings to surrender himself to an inexpressible longing.<sup>1</sup>

English essayist Walter Pater was even more direct and succinct: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."<sup>2</sup>

Encouraged by this view of music as the ideal expressive art, composers could seek to reveal the higher, affective essence of literary works by linking the two arts. At the same time, the literary programs could provide a certain rationale for lyrical expansion and distortion of musical form.

Program music was not new in the Romantic Age. Isolated examples are found in the Classic period, an elaborate vocabulary of musical sign language was linked to Baroque vocal texts, and even Renaissance composers offered musical illustrations of obvious action. It was the amount and philosophy of Romantic program music which set it apart from earlier efforts to such an extent that it appears as a fresh, uniquely Romantic art form. In proposing music as a vehicle for thoughts and feelings which, ultimately, are beyond the power of words to evoke, Romantic composers rejected the attempt to mimic action, scenes, or events. Rather, they sought to evoke the feelings or “states of the soul” attendant to them. Hector Berlioz, responding in 1836 to criticism of his *Symphonie fantastique*, gave the composer’s viewpoint:

He [the author] knows very well that music can take the place of neither word nor picture; he has never had the absurd intention of expressing abstractions or moral qualities, but rather passions and feelings. Nor has he had the even stranger idea of painting mountains: he has only wished to reproduce the melodic style and forms that characterize the singing of some of the people who live among them, or the emotion that the sight of these imposing masses arouses, under certain circumstances, in the soul.<sup>3</sup>

In program notes handed out to the audience for the first performance of the *Symphonie fantastique*, Berlioz provided an opium dream story of impassioned and unrequited love. In the fourth movement, the subject, “a young musician of morbid sensibility,” dreams that he has killed the beloved one and is sentenced to death.

Starting out as if in sonata allegro form, the movement introduces a grim march in C minor as a first theme. Expanded by repetition in E flat major, the theme is intensified by a brittle bassoon countermelody, evoking images of a procession through the gloomy halls of the Bastille — or is it the despair of the condemned man? — before inverting to move abruptly to the second theme. The brilliant second theme in winds changes the mood. Is this the carnival-like street scene of public executions? Fragments of theme one interrupt,



and the brilliant theme resasserts itself only to become inverted, then fragmented in a developmental passage. The music becomes increasingly agitated and confused; perhaps Berlioz suggests the chaos of the condemned man's state of mind or his deranged perceptions of the scene. The music ends abruptly, without resolution, leaving only the melody of the beloved one sounding in a lonely clarinet. A single crashing chord from the orchestra cuts off this memory; the severed head bounces away on vulgar, pizzicato strings; the movement ends with fanfare cheering.

Throughout most of this movement, Berlioz evoked the emotions of his program through a music which progressed in a manner consistent with musical logic. In the final moments, the primacy of music is subverted; form and coherence are determined by the literary program. Furthermore, in resorting to literal word painting, Berlioz has contradicted his stated ideals. In this program symphony, the idea of symphony must, at times, give way to the requirements of the program. The shifting emphases, now upon musical form, now upon programmatic content, undermine the sense of a convincing whole, operating according to internal principles. A paradox arises as music, in exercising its supposedly superior powers of expression, becomes slave to that which it seeks to interpret.

The program symphony seems to be a compromise, a form created to serve the Classic aesthetic stretched to its limits in service to a Romantic sensibility. Clearly, a new form was needed to serve the nineteenth-century union of word and instrumental music. In the second half of the century, this new kind of music developed under the influence of a philosophy which reversed the earlier ranking of music and literature as Romantic arts.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) espoused the view that the arts shared a common content or spirit and differed only in form. His three characteristically Romantic arts, painting, music, and poetry, were ranked by the degree to which spiritual content dominated over form in each. In Hegel's view, poetry emerged as the highest of the Romantic arts. It followed, then, that poetry could only enhance the value and effect of music when the two were brought together. Hegel and his followers repeatedly expressed their preference for a music which was strengthened and clarified in spiritual content through an association with poetry.

Celebrated piano virtuoso and composer Franz Liszt en-

thusiastically joined the debate of issues raised by Hegelian philosophy. His musical response to the ideas resulted in the creation of a new form of instrumental music, the symphonic poem. In the symphonic poem, the program as "spiritual content" provides the principal rationale for the musical form. The multi-movement symphonic structure with its featured sonata allegro form is replaced by a single, long movement of linked, contrasting sections. Frequently, sections are related to each other through shared motives or thematic transformation. Despite such purely musical devices of unification, the overall structure, the sequence of events in most symphonic poems is generated by "spiritual content," the program. In the words of Liszt,

the return, change, modification, and modulation of the motives are conditioned by their relation to a poetic idea. . . . All exclusively musical considerations, though they should not be neglected, have to be subordinated to the action of the given subject.<sup>4</sup>

Liszt's own adaptation of *Meditations Poétiques* by the mystical poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) served as the program for the symphonic poem *Les Préludes*. It abounds with romantic imagery:

What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, issuing from one of these tempests, does not endeavor to solace its memories in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent stillness which he first enjoyed in Nature's bosom, and when 'the trumpet sounds the alarm' he takes up his post, no matter how dangerous may be the

## LELAND ROBERTS

49

struggle which calls him to its ranks, that he may recover in combat the full consciousness of himself and his powers.<sup>5</sup>

In this composition, musical structure is largely determined by the higher demands of poetic expression. In addition to the introduction, five thematically distinct and musically complete sections serve the imagery or emotions of "prelude to that unknown hymn, love, happiness, storm, and nature."

Musical devices of unification do exist. A 3-note head motive from the introduction underlies many of the melodies; in the final section of "self-knowledge through combat," transformed parts of the love and happiness themes join into a return of the first theme for a grandiose conclusion. Despite such devices, the profusion of melody demands a submission to poetry's order. Requirements of symphonic form are dismissed in favor of a poetic form which varies with the program of each composition.

To many younger composers, Liszt's symphonic poems seemed to offer a new point of departure, a means of extending the expressive powers of instrumental music with a new freedom from the overwhelming legacy of Beethoven. East European, Russian, French, and Scandinavian composers were enthusiastic cultivators of the new form. As the Romantic period drew to a close, Richard Strauss embraced the symphonic poem, becoming the most prolific and expansive practitioner of this music that was so fully a voice of Romanticism, so eloquently a language of the emotions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: The Romantic Era* (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 540.

<sup>3</sup>Hector Berlioz, footnote to program, 1836, in *Berlioz: Fantastic Symphony*, trans. Edward T. Cone (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Franz Liszt, *Schriften*, iv, 69. Quoted by Roger Scruton, "Programme music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), Vol. 15, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup>Franz Liszt, *Les Préludes*, trans. P. Cornelius (London: Ernst Eulenberg Ltd.), p. II.