

The Romantic Era in music

The romantic era was a complex, artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement originating in the late 18th century in Europe. Partly a revolt against the aristocratic, social and political orders and the age of enlightenment, it was also a reaction against the industrial revolution and the scientific rationalization of nature. Put more simply, it was a sweeping revolt against reason, science, authority and tradition, against order and discipline. It embraced intuition, imagination and feeling as opposed to the deductive reasoning of the age of enlightenment

It manifested itself in social, moral and political reforms, but above all in the arts. Germany and England were considered the leaders of the Romantic Era; Germany especially in the realm of romantic music. When applied to music, Romanticism has come to mean the period roughly from 1820 until 1900. During that period this radically new music flourished in Germany.

Any discussion of German music must start with Bach and the baroque period. There is consensual agreement that Bach is the greatest of all composers. He carried baroque music to its peak.. He incorporated all that had gone on before him and he anticipated much that was to come. He died in 1750. Six years later Mozart was born, yet another incomparable musical genius, and probably the most versatile of all composers. As Bach did with baroque style, Mozart brought musical classicism to its ultimate development and clearly anticipated the development of romantic music. He died in 1791 just as the romantic era was dawning. Seen in this way there is a seamless progression of musical style from Baroque through Classicism to Romanticism.

To emphasize the strength of the movement in Germany one need only look at the romantic composers beginning with Beethoven and ending with Mahler. Between these two giants came Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner and Brahms.

These new composers or “the radical fringe” became known as “artists of the future”.

The romantic musician followed a public career. He depended on middle class audiences rather than on a courtly patron, as had been the case earlier. He became idolized as the artist, the man of genius.

The starting point in the romantic musical era must be Beethoven, a genius who defies comparison. Born in Bonn and recognized as a child prodigy, he made his 1st public appearance at age 7; he was taken to Vienna at age 16 and played for Mozart who purportedly said to him:” you will some day make a big noise in the world.” That evidently was enough to send him on his way to making a big noise.

He returned to Vienna age 22 and studied with Hayden – outwardly they were on good terms but Beethoven was dissatisfied with what he learned or rather didn’t learn – the lessons lasted only weeks. 40- years older Hayden was horrified by the French revolution, but for Beethoven and his generation it was a matter of passionate interest. Beethoven disapproved of the outrages but the ideas of the revolution were his own all his life.

In Vienna Beethoven gained maturity during one of the greatest crisis in modern Western history. There was relative calm at the beginning and end of his life, but at the most impressionable stage of his creative evolution came the fall of the Bastille. It was against this background of strife and breakdown that he set out.

It is said that Beethoven was not only a symbol of liberty and equality but also the first great democrat in music.

Beethoven was a child of historical transition, he was at the dawn of this change and thought. As a man of politics, a champion of liberty, his every gesture was as much a manifestation of the romantic age to come as a farewell to the classical past of his predecessors.

In the *Pathétique*, *Eroica*, *Fidelio*, *Missa Solemnis* and the 9th symphony he expressed beliefs in the new age in which he lived. It is not possible to separate him from this period.

In 1799 he composed and performed the piano Sonata in C minor the *Pathétique* – it represented the burial of the past, a celebration of the future.

Symphony #3 or *Eroica* was completed in 1804 – the largest ever written and the 1st great symphony of the 19th century. Initially it was dedicated to

Napoleon as First Consul, but when Napoleon declared himself emperor, Beethoven erupted in anger and renamed the symphony *Eroica*.

An unknown when he arrived in Vienna in 1794, by 1804 he was a recognized member of the great triumvirate in Vienna - Hayden, Mozart, Beethoven.

His music, however, did not meet immediate approval or appreciation. It was new and hard to grasp.

Let me quote some examples of critics' reviews: "The last 5 sonatas passed for the monstrous abortions of a German idealist who does not know how to write for the piano". "The *Eroica*, if it is not somehow abridged, will fall into disuse". "The 7th indulges in a great deal of disagreeable eccentricity". The 9th is "long and wanting in intelligible design."

Beethoven first mentioned his growing deafness in correspondence in 1797. It took a relentless course and by 1814 he was forced to give up public appearances. He suffered from his deprivation and along with other difficult and frustrating parts of his life, he became bitter, suspicious and often irrationally angry. He easily fell out with friends, often losing them. He never owned his home and constantly haggled with land lords. Between 1815 and 1827 he changed abodes 30 times.

Beethoven died on March 26 1827 at the age of 57. At his funeral 15-20,000 people turned out to pay homage. Franz Schubert was among the many distinguished torchbearers. 200 carriages accompanied the coffin to the graveyard, all of this confirming Beethoven's immense fame. The funeral was in striking contrast to Mozart's sad death and burial just 38 years earlier, also in Vienna.

His fame only grew in time. In 1837 the Philharmonic Society included the 3rd and 5th piano concertos, the 2nd, the *Eroica*, the 5th, 7th and 9th symphonies in their season. In 1844 the Society presented his violin concerto, long dismissed as a "fiddling affair that might have been written by any 3rd or 4th rate composer". But that night with Queen Victoria's favorite Felix Mendelssohn conducting and the 12- year old prodigy Joseph Joachim "fiddling", it finally won the cherished place in the repertoire which it has held ever since. It is considered among the three greatest along with Mendelssohn's and Brahms's.

In the end he was recognized as the father of the symphony. His 9 symphonies have never been equaled, but perhaps his finest musical accomplishments were some of the 16 string quartets, the 4th and 5th piano concertos, some of the 32 piano sonatas and the violin concerto. His

outpouring of music was and is overwhelming. He changed the direction of musical composition and was recognized and worshipped as a giant by those who followed.

Franz Schubert 1797-1827

Schubert is considered the 1st pure musical voice of the romantic movement. With him the flood tide of the movement inundated all of music. Musical form became elastic and a servant to the idea rather than to form or structure.

His background was modest – his parents were honest and hardworking, though un-ambitious. Young Franz showed exceptional musical talent at an early age and formal training began at age 9. Music was a continual source of enthusiasm and excitement for him and he described the overture to *the marriage of Figaro* as the “most beautiful in the world”, but his most profound admiration – even awe – was reserved for Beethoven.

Schubert was the arch-typical romantic. He lived a Bohemian life, sharing rooms with one friend after another, basically in poverty, unlucky in love, greatly underappreciated for his musical genius and coping with the ravages of venereal disease from which he would suffer to the end of his life.

It is little wonder he had chronic and recurring bouts of depression. And yet in spite of his travails he continued to compose. Various observers have commented on how easily and quickly his compositions came about.

He wrote his 1st symphony at age 16 and would ultimately write 9 in total. The great *C major* and the *Unfinished* rank among the finest symphonies ever composed.

But it is the smaller compositions, the string quartets, piano quintets (especially the *Forelle* or trout) and the piano solos in which he excelled. With his piano music he set the stage for subsequent romantic composers such as Mendelssohn, Chopin and Schumann.

It is said that the Lied (German art song) was born on Oct. 19, 1814, the day he set to music *Gretchen am Spinnrad*, and this at age 17. Ultimately he composed 600 more songs or Lieder.

In spite of the gloom in his life, Schubert's music has a radiant joy of creation, sustained poetry and expression of beauty. The death of Beethoven was a terrible blow to him although there had probably not been any direct contact between the two men. Beethoven was, however, aware of Schubert and admired some of the composer's songs. He said: "there is a divine spark of genius in this Schubert!" From the time of Beethoven's death Schubert's

fervent ambition was to be buried next to him. When Schubert died in 1828 he was buried as close to Beethoven as could be arranged.

Tragically it was not until 10 years later that Schumann discovered the great *Symphony in C major* in the closet of Schubert's brother. He sent it to Mendelssohn who gave it its 1st performance at the *Gewandhaus* in Leipzig in March 1839. The *Unfinished* Symphony was similarly found in a stack of dusty papers 37 years later in 1865. Even later symphonies 1,2,3,4 and 6 plus many songs were found among neglected manuscripts and bundles of papers.

Finally Schubert was generally recognized for the genius he was, for his great gift of melody, his lyricism, his music's "mighty youth, freshness, optimism, its fullness of heart and vibrancy."

Robert Schumann 1810-1856

With Schumann romanticism came into full flower. He was the 1st of the completely anti-classic composers. Like Schubert, he was a tragic, romantic figure. All the important events in his life bore the marks of fierce and tortured struggle.

His piano study began at age 6 and almost immediately he began writing music. As his talent and skill developed he aspired to become the greatest pianist of his time. However, at one point he used some sort of mechanical device in an effort to strengthen his middle fingers and this resulted in partial paralysis of his fingers, thus effectively ending his virtuoso career.

He married Clara Wieck after a long and bitter struggle with Clara's father, who had been his teacher. Finally Schumann brought suit against Wieck to legally compel him to permit the marriage. The court sided with Schumann unless Wieck could prove that the composer was a drunkard. Wieck could not prove this although Schumann was a heavy drinker.

Clara became Schumann's advocate encouraging him in his compositions. In the meantime she and Liszt had become the two most eminent piano virtuosos in Europe. Between having 8 children in 14 years she

was off concertizing all over Europe, promoting Schumann's music. Most of his early work was for piano and Clara played it.

In early adulthood he began lapsing into intermittent periods of depression. At age 23 he attempted suicide for the 1st time. (These early signs of instability undoubtedly factored into the Senior Wieck's opposition to the marriage of Schumann and his daughter Clara)

But there was relief in work. In addition to his composing he was making his way as a conductor – though he was never a good one – and at age 24 he created a new music magazine: *die Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik*. It became a powerful influence on German music. Articles by Schumann in this magazine loudly proclaimed the genius of such young composers as Brahms and Chopin when these men were still unknown.

The marriage to Clara in 1840 was followed by relatively calm and wonderful years of musical creativity for Robert. For the next 14 years he was recognized as one of the greatest romantic composers and Clara the greatest woman pianist. It was during this period that he moved from piano to orchestral and vocal compositions.

By 1853 there were signs of impending tragedy. He wrote to his good friend the violinist Joachim: “the night is beginning to fall”. There were hallucinations and deepening depression. Some consolation came through his friendship with Joachim and young Brahms, but Robert knew he was doomed. He attempted suicide by jumping into the Rhine on a cold wintry night but was rescued. He was confined to an insane asylum near Bonn for the remaining 2 years of his life and died in July 1856. Of his friends only Joachim, Brahms and Hiller (an eminent conductor) were with Clara when he was buried.

Schumann’s greatest achievement was his piano music which he filled with whimsy, flights of fancy and wide mood ranges. Next to the piano his greatest contribution came in the song form. Here he was truly Schubert’s successor. He was less at ease with larger forms, relying too much on lyricism at the expense of development. He also lacked skill in orchestration and his contrapuntal technique was weak. These might be fair criticism if we were comparing him with Brahms, but taken as a whole, his 4 symphonies, the *Spring*, the C major, the *Rhenish* and the D minor stand among the greatest and appear regularly in the orchestral repertory.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy 1809-1847

In sharp contrast to Beethoven, Schubert & Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn was born to wealth. Recognized as a child prodigy, he was often referred to as “another Mozart”. He gave his 1st piano recital at age 9.

His grandfather was a famous philosopher and his father was a wealthy banker who often said: “First I was the son of my father, now I am the father of my son”. The family was Jewish, but converted to Christianity to shield Felix and his sister Fanny, also a fine musician, from anti-Semitism which might hinder their careers; hence the name Mendelssohn Bartholdy was adopted.

Mendelssohn’s first masterpiece was written at age 17, the overture to a *Midsummer night’s Dream*. He was largely responsible for a Bach revival when he performed the *St. Mathews Passion* at age 20. He was a close friend of the Schumann’s and attended salons in Paris with Chopin and Liszt. He traveled widely and was befriended by Queen Victoria and Goethe. Felix in Latin means happy man. The frustrations and conflicts of the other great composers make the life story of Mendelssohn. “as refreshing as sunshine”. Everything he did, he did well. He was handsome, even-tempered, poised and modest.

At age 34 he founded the Leipzig Conservatory. It quickly became the most renowned institution of its kind in the world. But before that, at age 26, he assumed directorship of the celebrated *Gewandhaus* orchestra in Leipzig. He was happily married and had 5 children. His music was popular and he was invited to conduct it all over Europe. In short, he was the most honored musician of his age.

When his sister suddenly died in 1847 he collapsed with a stroke. He recovered but suddenly he had aged, his spirit and energy lost. He died 6 months after Fanny's death.

Schumann admired Mendelssohn's music for its fusion of classical and romantic spirit. Felix had the romanticist's tenderness and sentimentality but also the classicist's respect for structural and traditional concepts of harmony and counterpoint. His music had breeding, taste and poise. He was unsurpassed in elegance and beautiful proportions of form and in clarity of writing. What his music lacked was profundity of either thought or emotion. His masterworks have incomparable lyricism, wonderful poetic moods, but they don't have the power to inspire or overwhelm us as the *Eroica* or the most spiritual parts in *Parcifal*.

Milton Cross wrote: “he succeeded in being a great composer and in writing great music because he was a genius. But he never quite succeeded in joining the elite.” Even today this is an often argued and debatable point of view.

Johannes Brahms 1833-1897

As with Bach, Brahms lived at the end of an era, in his case the romantic one. He added little that was new; had he not lived the evolution of music would have been unaltered. With Brahms the symphony form as handed down by Beethoven, Schumann & Mendelssohn came to an end.

Nevertheless the richness and majesty of his music was alive and vital. He was the only composer who could rival Wagner during the latter's lifetime.

Brahms was born in poverty in a very unhappy, quarrelsome family in Hamburg, hardly the setting for the development of a world famous composer. By age 10, however, he was an accomplished pianist and earned badly needed money in disreputable taverns along the Hamburg waterfront. His 1st recital came at age 14 and included one of his own pieces. The Hungarian violinist Eduard Remenyi heard Brahms and invited him to go on tour with him as accompanist. On tour he met important musicians like Jos. Joachim, Liszt and the Schumanns. With the latter he formed a life-long friendship, they virtually adopted him. Schuman was the 1st to recognize the genius of Brahms and wrote in his magazine *Neue Zeitschrift* praising

Brahms as “giving the most ideal expression to the tendencies of the times”. Schumann helped procure an invitation for Brahms to appear as pianist at *Gewandhaus* in Leipzig. When Schumann died, the affection Brahms felt for Clara ripened into unfulfilled love. He loved her for the next 40 years but they were never married.

He finally arrived in Vienna at age 32. One prominent musician there exclaimed after hearing his music: “this is Beethoven!” That comparison would haunt Brahms. When asked why he had never written a symphony he replied: “I shall never write a symphony. You cannot have a notion what it is like always to hear such a giant marching behind!” However, in 1876 at age 43 he finally completed a symphony and over the next 7 years 3 more followed. Some critics dubbed his Symphony #1 “Beethoven’s 10th”. His exquisite clarinet quintet was also written amid self-doubts as he feared comparison with Mozart’s clarinet quintet.

By midlife he was recognized as a master in Vienna always surrounded by disciples and admirers. He was a single man, living in a humble, cluttered, poorly furnished apartment for 25 years, eating at modest restaurants and traveling 3rd class. His clothes were inexpensive and sloppy.

At times kind and generous, he was also often brusque and rude. He worked hard and produced masterworks in every form of music except opera.

He died in 1877 and “all musical Vienna accompanied the great man to the grave.”

Many in Vienna, those who marched under the banner of “the music of the future”, regarded Brahms as dull and old-fashioned. Cosima, Wagner’s wife, described his character as gross, his music as boring. I suspect that Wagner shared this opinion. Others, however recognized his ability to combine the romantic with the classical. He had the classicist’s respect for form and tradition but did not neglect ardor and poetic expression. He used both forms to create beautiful music and holds his place firmly among the greatest composers of all times.

Franz Liszt 1811-1886

Franz Liszt ranks as somewhat less important among the German romantic composers. He was born Hungarian but moved to Austria as a small boy, spent time in Paris and at age 37 became Kapellmeister in Weimar. He spent most of his long life there and in Bayreuth.

Liszt was a man of contradictions, both spiritual and earthy, idealistic, humble and egocentric. He was a flamboyant showman as well as a generous and courageous Kapellmeister. He followed the Church and pursued sensual pleasures simultaneously. A man of the spirit he was never to deny the flesh. Someone determined that he had 26 major affairs which resulted in numerous illegitimate offsprings. Perhaps the most famous one was Cosima, eventually the wife of Richard Wagner.

In Paris he was a favorite of the salons. The Countess d'Agoult held lavish salons – Chopin met George Sand at one of hers– and eventually the countess became Liszt's mistress, bearing him 3 children, one being Cosima.

Liszt was a bravura pianist and originated the recital with orchestra in which he played in profile because it accentuated his handsomeness.

His years in Weimar were glorious. That city became one of Germany's greatest centers of music. He was courageous in presenting neglected works such as those of Berlioz. He championed Wagner and gave the world premier of *Lohengrin* at a time when Wagner was a political revolutionary sought by the Dresden police. After 10 years in Weimar Liszt became an abbey and entered the 3rd order of St. Francis of Assisi. His last years were spent in Bayreuth with Cosima and Richard Wagner.

We associate Liszt mostly with the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* and there is the universal appeal of *Liebesträum*. So much of what he composed on a large scale combines excellence with the inferior.

He could not be considered one of the giant romantic composers but the sheer force of his personality and his charisma pushed him into their company.

Richard Wagner 1813-1893

Wagner recognized his genius long before anyone else did. At age 22 he began writing every detail of his life for later use in his autobiography. Even then he felt he would become an immortal. He believed he was the greatest musician who ever lived and also one of the greatest dramatists and intellects of his generation. His egocentricity revealed itself early. He used everybody and every situation exclusively for his own advantage. Several other traits were evident early on, his ruthlessness, his selfishness, his driving perseverance and his contempt for existing mores. His genius, however, was late in revealing itself. Few of the world's greatest composers took so long to study music or so long to demonstrate their creative process.

Only as a teenager, having heard Beethoven's symphonies at the *Gewandhaus*, did music become an obsession. He struggled through a book of musical theory loaned to him by Friedrich Wieck, the father of Clara Wieck Schumann, acquiring for the 1st time a few tools of composition.

His early operas were failures, he got himself into an unfortunate marriage, on occasion he sunk to poverty level and twice he was imprisoned for debts. However, he never questioned his greatness.

Even though he was rejected and humiliated, he continued to compose and drew his inspiration from Germany's mythical past. Finally, his first successful opera *Rienzi* was performed in Dresden in 1842 followed by the *Flying Dutchman* in 1843. Soon afterwards Wagner became the music director of the Dresden Opera. *Tannhauser* was presented in 1845. *Lohengrin* was next in 1850. He could not attend that premier given by Liszt in Weimar because by that time he was a political exile in Paris. He narrowly escaped arrest by fleeing Dresden on a passport supplied by Liszt.

His successes had not alleviated his financial problems because he always lived beyond his means. He borrowed money with no intention of repaying it. His creditors were always just a step behind. *Lohengrin* became the most popular opera in Germany and Wagner lamented from Zurich, where he had fled from Paris, that he was the only German who had not heard *Lohengrin*.

While he was working on the *Ring of the Nibelungen* he wrote operas of more modest scope. *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* followed *Lohengrin's* success.

In 1860 he was given amnesty by the German government and in 1862 he moved to Munich where, under the patronage of mad King Ludwig II of Bavaria, life became much easier.

Even before the breakup of his unhappy marriage in 1862, Wagner had become involved with Cosima, wife of his intimate friend and champion, the eminent conductor Hans von Buelow, and illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt, another loyal advocate. There was no attempt to conceal this affair. In 1865 a child was born whom – with incomparable brazenness - they named Isolde. Later a 2nd child was born. Munich became intolerant of this scandalous affair and the couple fled to Lake Luzerne. An embittered von Buelow said:

“If it had been anyone else but Wagner, I would have shot him!” He continued to work devotedly on Wagner’s music. Liszt was equally horrified, but like von Buelow, he remained a protagonist of Wagner’s art.

Cosima provided needed emotional stability in Wagner's life. She bore him a 3rd child, named Siegfried, and finally in 1870 they were married.

After having put it aside for 12 years, Wagner went back to work on the *Ring of the Nibelungen*. In all he worked on it from 1848 to 1877. The 1st complete presentation of the *Ring* occurred in Bayreuth conducted by Hans Richter in 1876 (with the financial help of mad King Ludwig).

The Ring was not popular at first but reviewed with great respect. *Parsifal* was his last opera and Wagner died soon after it was performed in 1893.

He single-handedly changed the destiny of opera. His ideal was a synthesis of music, poetry, drama, scenery and acting. He freed opera of its many stultifying conventions, creating conventions of his own. He was one of the greatest opera composers who ever lived and the *Ring* stands at the center of his output. Taken as a whole it is surely the most imposing work in Western classical music. He brought romanticism to its final flowering. To remain a Romantic after Wagner was to imitate him. Perhaps only Mahler succeeded in writing romantic music which could not be called imitative. 18 years after Wagner died, so did Mahler.

Gustav Mahler 1860-1911

Mahler was the last of the great Romantics both in life and deed. The turmoil of the 19th century was in his blood. Pessimism, spiritual conflict, struggle for knowledge – all this was Mahler but he is quoted: “all my works are anticipation of the future.” He was undoubtedly searching for music that would take him out of the 19th into the 20th century, beyond Brahms and Wagner.

As Wagner did with his opera, Mahler concentrated his creative energies on the symphony, or as he termed it “great works”. Except for the 1st and 4th, his symphonies are oversized, 5 or 6 movements lasting 1 to 1½ hours. The #8th, *symphony of a thousand*, requires 2 mixed choruses, a boys chorus, 8 solo voices and a huge orchestra.

His works were attacked in his time both for their over-pretentious aims and philosophy. Mahler was a fighter with pride, integrity and uncompromising spirit, and for these qualities he was both hated and admired. There were those who detested him because he was a Jew. He was overly sensitive and vulnerable to attacks from his detractors. He was also egocentric!

Born in a small Bohemian village, suffering and tragedy stalked him from his childhood. He took to the piano at age 6 and was enrolled in the Vienna Conservatory at age 15. His rise as a conductor was fairly rapid, at age 37 he became director of the Vienna Royal Opera, recommended to the post by Brahms among others.

Earlier, his 1st symphony was heard in Budapest in 1889. The musicians, who liked neither the work nor the composer, sabotaged the performance. The audience was hostile and the reviews filled with vitriol. The 2nd symphony, presented by Richard Strauss in Berlin, found a more appreciative audience, but the reviews remained devastating. One quote says: “The cynical impudence of this brutal music maker.”

In his mid-30's he was diagnosed with serious heart disease, probably valvular disease from earlier rheumatic fever. Shortly afterwards he gave his last performance at the Vienna Opera, a beautiful *Fidelio*. He had been worn down by envy, malice and hypocrisy, was undoubtedly more vulnerable because of his worsening heart condition. He described himself as homeless three times over – as a Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans and as a Jew everywhere.

In 1907, aged 37, he came to NYC to the Metropolitan Opera and made his debut as conductor in *Tristan und Isolde*. In 1908 he became conductor of the NY Philharmonic Orchestra.

Overworked, he finally succumbed to a streptococcal infection., probably subacute bacterial endocarditis. He asked to be taken to Vienna where he died in May 1911. The last word he spoke was the name Mozart.

Alma Schindler Mahler, much younger than Gustav, had grown restless in their marriage, and after his death had a long liaison with Oscar Kokoshka before marrying two other world famous cultural figures, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel.

It took many years after his death before Mahler's music was fully appreciated as was the case with Beethoven and Schubert. It also took the indefatigable efforts of many disciples who included Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, Richard Strauss and later Leonard Bernstein, Sir George Solti and Eric Leinsdorf.

When in 1976 the NY Philharmonic became the 1st American orchestra ever to present a Mahler festival performing all of his symphonies, it was said: "the rise from obscurity to prominence of Mahler is the most

remarkable phenomenon of public musical life in America in the last decades of the 20th century.”

These men then, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms, Wagner and Mahler, were and have remained the great German composers of their time.

And so came to an end that remarkable, productive, innovative period known as the *Romantic Era* and with it a glorious musical period in Germany.