

# Nature and scope of romanticism in music music essay



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Essay topic: Critically compare the main ideas regarding the nature and scope of Romanticism in music as set forth by Warrack, Samon, Burkholder and Whittall. Then, choosing any three major pieces of 19th century instrumental music critically compare their structure and style in some detail in light of the ideas you have gathered about Romanticism and its influence on musical composition in the 19th century. To set your suitable context, you should also carefully consider the extent to which the formal, tonal, stylistic and aesthetic aspects of the works chosen for study show their indebtedness to the spirit and forms of the preceding Classical period and the ways in which they may comprise a continuation, or a significant modification or even a repudiation of these.

The Romantic period took its name from the ancient “lingua romana” of France. In the 18th century, scholars use the term to refer to free and imaginative (Samson, 2001). Warrack 1987, described Romantic as the period which was adventurous both in subject matter and in its invention. Unlike Classical, the Romantic represents a period of a domination of instinct over reason, of imagination over form, of heart over head. Whittall described in her article that Romantic does not move away completely from classical music, but it give more emphasise of element already present in classicism. Romantic composers tried to make music “speak” programmatically. There were many features of Romanticism that were distinct from the classical period, however many of them are derived from the Classical root. The most important of the many deriving from the key figure of Rousseau, was a new preoccupation with nature (Warrack 1987). Romanticism also saw an increased focus on melodies and themes. Orchestra was expanded and each

instrument had its own role. The emphasis on melody found expression in extensive use of cycle form. New attention was also given to national identity.

The Classical era was also one which was highly productive. Music became much more expressive, and the sound and quality of the instruments became more refined. This increasingly led to music being created which was able to evoke emotions and instill character such as none before its time. The combination of these elements has heavily influenced the subsequent development of music to the present time, from the very language of music to our increasing understanding of the link between music and emotions. In the following essay, I am going to discuss the main ideas regarding the nature and scope of Romanticism in music. Also three works of Romantic period will be compared in its formal, tonal and aesthetic aspects which show their repudiation and continuation to the spirit and forms of the preceding Classical period.

## **Part one**

### **French Revolution**

The late 18th and 19th century was a time of political and economic revolution. Napoleon Bonaparte became the leader of the Republic in 1799 and conquered most of Europe. Although the Revolution failed, its idea, which included the freedom, reform and a new concept of nation, spread across Europe (Burkholder, 2010). This Revolution had a significant impact on music, the French Revolutionary government supported large choral

works and opera with librettos on themes of the Revolution or concerns of the time.

## **Nationalism**

Because of the struggle of Revolution, Romanticism played an essential role in the national awakening of many central European people lacking their own national states. Revival and reinterpretation of ancient myths, customs and traditions by romantic poets and painters helped to distinguish their indigenous culture from those of dominant nation. The increasing importance of nationalism as a political force in the 19th century was mirrored in music and other arts. Many composers expressed their nationalism by incorporation elements unique to their native culture, such as folk song and dances. Composers used elements of rhythm, melody and modality characteristic of their respective nation (Kamien, 2003). The nationalist music echoed people's fears, hopes and aspirations; it was the voice of Revolution. This national flavor of Romantic music-whether Polish, Russian or German contrasts with the more universal character of Classical music.

## **Industrial revolution**

During the Romantic period, there were two major events that transformed Romanticism. New technologies began to transform the economy from a rural to an urban economy based on manufacturing by machines. It made major improvements in the mechanical valves and keys that most woodwind and brass instruments depend on. The new instrument often had a bigger, fuller and better tuned sound. They were played in new ways to produce different tone color. In addition, the development of piano enabled louder dynamic and more varied tone color.

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At the same time, there was a rise of the middle class. Whereas composers had previously lived on the patronage of the aristocracy, romantic composers often wrote for public concerts and festivals with large audiences of paying customers.

## **Individualism**

Romantic music puts unprecedented emphasis on self expression and individual equality of style. Many romantic composers created music that sounds unique and reflects their personalities. The Romantics presented boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint. They promoted the conception of the artist as "inspired" creator over that of the artist as "maker" or technical master (Kamien, 2003). Through individualism, the composer would reveal the world in expressing himself, hence the growing importance of expression as a source of aesthetic value, overriding the claims of formal propriety and convention (Samson, 2001). In addition, the changing economy not only made individualism attractive to the newly rich, it made possible a free market in the arts in which composers could play for audience who would pay for their performances.

## **The emphasis on emotion and expressive tone color**

Romanticism describes the expansion of formal structures, making the piece more passionate. While classical era had strict laws of balance and restraint, the Romantic era moved away from that by allowing artistic freedom, experimentation, and creativity. Expressive, and melody become the dominate feature. The increasing use of dissonance and extended use of chromaticism, the properties of the diminished seventh facilitate

modulations to many keys. Wagner and Beethoven also expanded the  
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harmonic languages with un-used chords. In addition, there is a greater harmonic fluidity and longer melodies. The pianos were being used which improved chromatic abilities and greater projection of the instruments of the symphony orchestra (Brooklyn, 2009).

The stress on individual also created greater reliance on instrumental color. While new instruments were constantly being added to the orchestra, composers also tried to get new and different sound out of the instruments already used and Berlioz was an expert in doing this.

## **Exoticism**

Romanticism reached beyond the rational and classicist ideals models. It attempts to escape the confines of population growth, urban sprawl, and industrialism, and it also attempted to embrace the exotic, unfamiliar and distant in modes. Of all the emotions celebrated by the Romantics, the most popular was exoticism. Just as Romantics responded to the longing of people for a distant past, so they provided images of distant places. The distances need not be terribly great: Spain was a favourite “ exotic” setting for French Romantics, for instance. North Africa and the Middle East provided images of “ Asia” to Europeans. Generally anywhere south of the country where one was resided was considered more relaxed, more colourful, and more sensual (Brains, 1998).

Romantic age was also a period in which Europeans travelled more than ever to examine far off lands of which they had read. Most native peoples were depicted as lazy. Many male travellers view the women of many foreign

lands and described them as more sexually desirable than the women at home, and so they are depicted in fiction, drama, art and opera.

At the same time, the imagination was elevated to a position as the supreme faculty of the mind. Not satisfied with the world as given, the artist meddles with reality and creates another reality. It is dynamic, uniting both reason and feeling. The emphasis on the activity of the imagination was accompanied by greater emphasis on the importance of intuition and instincts.

## **Part two**

### **Beethoven as a transitional figure**

Ludwig Van Beethoven was considered the greatest artist of all time. He was aware of Enlightenment ideals; absorbed the music of Haydn and Mozart and absorbed the French Revolution (Burkholder, 2009). His style opened new realms of musical expression and profoundly influenced composers throughout the 19th century.

For Beethoven, music was not just entertainment, but a moral force capable of creating a vision of higher ideals. His music reflects his powerful, tortured personality. More than his predecessors, Beethoven tried to unify the contrasting movements of a symphony, sonata, or string quartets. Musical continuity is heightened in his works in several ways. Sometimes one movement leads directly into the next, instead of ending with a pause, as was traditional. A musical bond between different movements of the same work is also created when their themes resemble each other. In his

compositions such as the Ninth Symphony, a theme from one movement is quoted in a later movement (Kamien, 2004).

## **Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 13**

Beethoven's thirty-two sonatas are far more difficult than the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart. They exploit the stronger, tonally improved piano of Beethoven's time. One of his most famous sonatas is the Pathétique. It was written in 1798 when the composer was twenty-seven. The title Pathétique suggests a tragically passionate character in this sonata. Beethoven's masterful improvisational powers are mirrored in the sonata's extreme dynamic contrasts, explosive accents, and crashing chords. At the early age of twenty seven, during his early period, Beethoven had already created a powerful and original piano style that foreshadowed 19th century Romanticism.

### **First Movement**

The first movement of the Pathétique is in the Classical sonata form, but the material is quite different from that of a traditional sonata form. It begins with a slow introduction common in symphonies. The dotted rhythm evokes the style of the French overture. In this movement, the tragic mood is intensified by dissonant chords, sudden contrast of dynamics and register, and pauses filled with expectancy. The slow introduction is integrated into the allegro that followed it in imaginative and dramatic ways (Kamien, 2004).

### **Second movement and third movement**

The second movement is in rondo form. One of the interesting features of the adagio is its range in texture. After having a thick four voice texture in



the principal themes, Beethoven temporarily reduces the texture to one voice near the closing B section.

The last movement, in C minor, is a rapid and energetic rondo.

This piano sonata is dramatic and intriguing. Beethoven drew many new effects from the piano; in addition, he experimented with compositional techniques that he would later expand in the symphonies and string quartets. The name perfectly catches the piece's character full of rhetorical gestures.

## **Hector Berlioz**

Another important genre of the Romantic period is program music—instrumental music associated with a story, poem, idea or scene.

Programmatic orchestral works such as Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony* depict the emotions, characters, and events of particular story or the sounds and motions of nature (Kamien, 2004).

The French Romantic composer Hector Berlioz is known for his symphonies *fantastique*. This symphony tells the story of “ an artist gifted with a lively imagination” who has “ poisoned himself with opium” in the “ depths of despair” because of “ hopeless love” (Oxford, 2002). He composed this work in 1830 which was his first major work, although there were few of the musical ideas derived from some of his earlier composition but the countless aspect of this score are representative of Berlioz's individual musical style.

Among them are his rhythmically flexible, characteristically long spun melody of which the *ides fixe* is a prime example, contrasting harmonies, use of dynamics and instruments (Boston, 2006).

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## **First movement**

The first movement is “ daydream-passions”. The melancholy, passion and fury and jealousy form the subject of the first movement. The form is similar to sonata form of the Classical composition. Through the movement, there is simplicity of presentation of the melody and themes. The most important element in the first movement is the idée fixes. As talked previous, Beethoven had found remarkable ways of unifying large multi movement works, especially in his Ninth Symphony, by recycling motives. Such “ cyclism” had a profound impact on romantic composer. One strategy Berlioz used to unify the symphonies fantastique is to have a melody, which he calls an idée fixe, appear in each of the five movements. The idée fixe were used to represent his beloved. This recurrence of the same theme in every movement of symphony was striking novelty in Berlioz’s day (Oxford, 2002).

## **Second movement**

The second movement was titled “ A Ball”. It has a mysterious sounding introduction that creates an atmosphere of excitement followed by harps dominated passage. The harp may symbolize the object of affection; provide the glamour and sensual richness of the ball being represented. The use of instruments to symbolize certain things is a special Romantic feature that was not used in classical period.

## **Third movement**

In the third movement, Berlioz evokes a mood of loneliness in the midst of nature: a solo English horn is encoded by an oboe an octave higher. No

previous symphonic movement had ever begun with a duet between these two instruments (Kamien, 2004).

He saves the heaviest orchestration for the last two movements where he depicts the fantastic and diabolical. Though the supernatural had long been dealt with in opera, this is its first expression in an important symphony.

### **Fourth and fifth movement**

In the fourth movement, Berlioz creates a menacing atmosphere with the opening orchestral sound, a unique combination of muted French horns and brass playing pizzicato chords. In the last movement, the high muted strings and basses begin a succession of fragmentary ideas in contrasting tone color, register and dynamic (Kamien, 2004).

From his work, we can see that Berlioz is no doubt the creator of new orchestral sound. He still maintained the form used in classical period, however he also understood the role of timbre and he made the music's importance not just in melody and rhythm but in sound. The weird, never heard before sound and the asymmetrical rhythm made this amazing work a truly romantic manifesto.

### **Brahms and his work**

Another important composer in the romantic period is Johannes Brahms. He was a master of creating piece of all the traditional form. One of his most famous works is Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98. The first movement of this work is in Classical sonata form and is dominated by this expansive opening theme. The second movement has an air of a requiem, it opens with

a melancholic sort of fanfare. The rapid third movement is a scherzo in sonata form. This movement is joyful and stomping, which resembled dancing tunes which was famous in Brahms's life time (Kamien, 2004). The fourth movement is the climax of the symphony. It is a type of theme and variation related to the Baroque ground bass form. His use of Baroque's variation form is unique in the Romantic symphonic and reflects his strong attachment to the musical past (Burkholder, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The Romantic was an important period of transformation into 20th century. The Industrial revolution, individualism, the emphasis on emotion and expressive tone color has all influenced composers in later centuries. In addition, they no longer view themselves as artists writing music to suit their patrons, as earlier composers saw themselves, but as artists expressing their own ideas and feelings (Burkholder, 2009). Romantic is truly an era of greatness.