Developing wider listening: the Romantic period

KS4/5

Simon Rushby

Introduction

The Romantic period, which lasted for most of the 19th century and left a strong legacy in the 20th and beyond, was a time of great change in all art forms. In this resource, which follows on from *Music Teacher* resources on the Baroque and Classical periods (November 2020 and April 2021 respectively), we will examine its style and characteristics through listening and practical activities.

Students studying GCSE and A level music need to have a broad overview of the context and style of their set works so that they can approach wider listening questions – which expect them to have experienced a diverse range of music – with confidence. In fact, all musicians benefit from developing their understanding of style through listening to music that they might not otherwise encounter.

Performers and composers will be able to work with greater insight if they know more about the development of musical style through the ages, and listening to music analytically or for enjoyment is far more fulfilling when there is awareness of stylistic context. Hopefully, this resource, like the others in the Developing Wider Listening series, can be valuable for students in all Key Stages.

The Romantic period

In the resource on the Classical period (April 2021) there was talk of revolution, as humans strove to exercise their rights to control their own environments and not be dominated by rich rulers. During the 19th century, European countries tried repeatedly to shake off foreign dominance and gain a greater sense of national identity. This was reflected in the spirit of **Romanticism**, which embraced **nationalism** as part of its character. It was also an age of great unrest, as those who led in the fight for national dominance became themselves too power-hungry for their own good.

Napoleon in 1812. A revered political and military leader of the French, he angered Beethoven by proclaiming himself Emperor of France.

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The 19th century was a time when art became seen as an entity in its own right, an ideal rather than some kind of functional servant of the nobility and the church. In other words, 'the arts' and 'artists' became valued as part of the fabric of society. Composers, painters and literary figures became acutely aware of their role in creating styles, fashions and legacies, taking their inspiration not only from the art of the past but also from each other, so that the cross-fertilisation between different branches of the arts became strong.

Composers also became far more autonomous, avoiding patronage from the upper classes or the church and making their income from selling and performing their own music. Therefore, it became more important for a composer to be publicly liked and well known. They achieved this by various means, including writing music using **folk tunes** from their own country, or commemorating national events (such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*) or landmarks (Smetana's *Vltava*). This nationalist approach aligned with the increasing sense of national identity felt in every European country during the 19th century.

In a nutshell, Romantic artists were interested in moving away from the perceived formality and order of the Classical period while retaining the beauty of its style. They were interested in art as an expression of the soul, a kind of escapism. It followed that fantasy, the supernatural, emotion and identity – concepts driven by the heart rather than the head – really took hold.

Affairs of the heart

Play these two extracts to show how Beethoven, often viewed as a Classical composer, paved the way for the rise of the Romantic style, and how this style was reflected in the music of a later composer, Grieg.

First, the fourth movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, the *Pastoral*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHFjeosKhr4**

First performed in 1808, the *Pastoral* Symphony was described by Beethoven, a lover of long walks in the countryside, as an expression of the feelings and experiences he gained on these excursions. The fourth movement describes a fierce thunderstorm, from the first drops of rain at the start to the parting of the rainclouds and appearance of the sun at the end.

As your students listen, get them to note and discuss their impressions, guided by these questions:

- How does Beethoven use the elements of music – **melody, harmony/tonality, rhythm, texture** and **sonority** – to convey the storm?
- What examples of **contrast** can you spot in the music?
- Thinking about your answers to the questions above, what do you think makes this music **dramatic**?

Statue of Edvard Grieg in his home town of Bergen, Norway.

Your students might be interested to see the scene in Disney's film *Fantasia* (1940) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTInBejxFWo**) that uses this music, depicting Zeus hurling thunderbolts at terrified, fleeing characters below.

Next, Grieg's 'Morning Mood' (often simply called 'Morning'), which comes from his music for Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, first performed in 1876. Grieg subsequently arranged some of the music into two suites from which 'Morning Mood' is the first piece. The pastoral character of Beethoven's music comes through in this musical evocation of sunrise: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCiQho5DzfY**

Get your students to compare this with Beethoven's music. What makes it so calming? What similarities and differences does it have with Beethoven's much earlier composition?

You could also show the dramatic, devilish 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nMUr8Rt2AI**) and get students to discuss the ways in which Grieg creates tension, drama and excitement in the music.

While Classical composers had seen the world as a model for balance, Romantic artists saw it as a source of unpredictability, mystery and legend. In literature, the 19th century was the age of the novel (the French word for which is the root of the word 'romantic'). Composers like Schubert, Weber, Berlioz and Wagner wrote music inspired by stories, dreams and supernatural experiences, and allowed these non-musical influences to dictate the form of their music.

This was a fundamental departure from the reliance on structure and symmetry seen in so much Classical music. The Romantic period saw the rise of **programmatic** music – that which relies on non-musical stories or descriptions to dictate its direction. Wagner, for example, used musical **leitmotifs** to represent characters, objects and emotions in his mammoth operas (which he called 'music-dramas') and Berlioz wrote a complete symphony – his *Symphonie fantastique* – based on his own dreams and hallucinations.

That's not to say that Romantic composers rejected the work that their Classical predecessors had done – far from it. There's plenty of drama and emotion in the music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – you could further underline this point by playing excerpts from the very start of Haydn's *Creation* or Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, for example. But the Romantic preoccupation with mood and drama took away much of the abstract nature of musical style and replaced it with something far more human.

Romantic musical style

Let's look at two famous pieces of music from the 19th century and start to build a clearer picture of what constitutes the Romantic musical style.

Two famous examples of Romantic style

Listen to the first two minutes or so of Smetana's **symphonic poem** *Vltava*, which is one of six programmatic pieces called *Má vlast* ('My Homeland'), completed in 1879 and evocative of the composer's homeland, Bohemia. Vltava is the Czech word for the Moldau River, and the piece documents the sounds and journey of this great river as it begins as a small spring, passes a riverside wedding, castles and palaces, travels through rapids and arrives in Prague.

The Vltava (Moldau) River in Prague

You can listen while following the score here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhAwqPBPIEM**

As you listen with the students, ask them to note down their observations, guided by the following questions:

- How would you describe the texture of the music and how it changes?
- How does Smetana create the sense of a fast-moving river in the music?
- When the melody appears, how is it similar to other melodies you've studied, particularly from the Classical period?
- How does Smetana create **mood** changes in his music?

Secondly, here's a piano piece by Mussorgsky, a Russian composer, written around the same time (in 1874). *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a suite of ten pieces based on a set of paintings by the artist Viktor Hartmann, a friend of Mussorgsky's. This one, known as 'Baba Yaga' or 'The Hut on Fowl's Legs' was inspired by a painting of a witch of Slavic legend who lived in a strange dwelling. You can watch it performed by Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA-MEgv1evg**

As your students watch and listen to this **virtuosic** showpiece, ask them to compare it with the Smetana piece in terms of its melody, harmony, rhythm and texture. It seems very different, but there are a lot of common features. The following questions might help:

- How would you compare the texture of the two pieces? What's going on underneath their melodies? Is it simple or complex?
- What examples of **repetition** can you hear? Can you pick out the simple structure of the piece as a whole?
- How does Mussorgsky create drama, and how does he change the mood in the middle?
- How do the pieces compare in terms of rhythmic interest?
- Would you say that one piece is technically more difficult than the other, or are they similar?

Having listened to these extracts, encourage students to find some common stylistic features, and perhaps suggest another piece to listen to from this list:

- Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), fourth movement 'March to the Scaffold' **www.youtube.com/watch?v=598i8b3HGrw**
- Chopin: Nocturne No.1 in B flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1 (1833) **www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtIW2r1EalM**
- Verdi: Requiem (1874), 'Dies irae' **www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_rVtFUkMus**

Having agreed on some key features, students could make a mind-map or word cloud. Here's a suggested list for guidance:

- **Lyrical** melodies, not always evenly balanced and longer than Classical melodies.
- A wide range of **colour** and **dynamics.**
- Looser, less balanced structures, with stronger influence from programmatic, nationalistic or emotional elements.
- Flexible tempo – more licence is given to the performer to apply **rubato** (expressive fluctuations of tempo).
- Large orchestras with more use of brass and percussion, and 'newer' instruments such as harp, cor anglais and contrabassoon join the orchestra.
- **Virtuosic** playing and singing in solo pieces, orchestral pieces and operas.
- Often highly **chromatic**, colourful harmony with more **dissonance** and tension.
- Great variety of texture.
- A sense of drama, through vivid contrast and use of tonal colour.

Creativity unleashed

Drama, tension and contrast were not new concepts to composers in the 19th century. Literary writers of the late 18th century, such as Schiller and Goethe, promoted these ideals in their works and influenced a great many composers. In the Classical period, however, it's likely that Haydn and Mozart felt a little restricted in terms of how much 'raw emotion' they could put into their music, perhaps with one eye on the aristocratic patrons for whom they often worked.

There's no doubt that Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven paved the way for the Romantic style by steadily including more dissonant harmony, more distant key changes, more varied instrumental colour, and more tension and relaxation in their music as they became more established and freer to experiment.

By the 1820s, composers such as Schubert had capitalised on the accepted need to loosen the formality of the previous era and push boundaries a little further. His songs, or **Lieder**, are good examples of the spirit of the time, revealing a new tonal language where, for example, **pivot notes** are used to change key rather than **dominant-tonic** progressions. You could examine 'The Erl-King', which is based on a legend, or 'Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel' for an example of clever musical imagery.

In the 1830s, it was Chopin and Berlioz who dominated, both based for much of the decade in Paris. Chopin wrote almost entirely for the piano, and Berlioz was a guitarist who liked to compose orchestral music – there are pieces by both in the suggested list above. Chopin was one of the first to write short pieces known as **miniatures**, with names such as 'Waltz', 'Nocturne' or 'Mazurka', while Berlioz set the bar in the realms of programme music.

Mendelssohn and Schumann followed on naturally, writing for small and large ensembles and for the piano, which was increasing in its tonal range thanks to a new iron frame and wider, seven-octave keyboard. We're going to 'deconstruct' a piano piece by Schumann next.

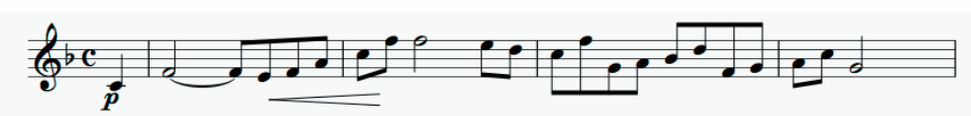
Romantic style deconstructed

In the resource on Classical music (April 2021), we deconstructed part of a piano concerto by Mozart in order to increase our understanding of the Classical musical style. Let's do the same now, with Robert Schumann's beautiful piano miniature 'Träumerei' ('Dreaming').

This was one of 13 short pieces entitled *Kinderszenen* ('Scenes of Childhood'), written by Schumann in 1838. 'Träumerei' is a poignant, expressive piece and you can follow the score as you listen here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RmuTuVWXy4**). The piece is in loose **ternary form** and we're going to deconstruct the first section, which is around 30 seconds long.

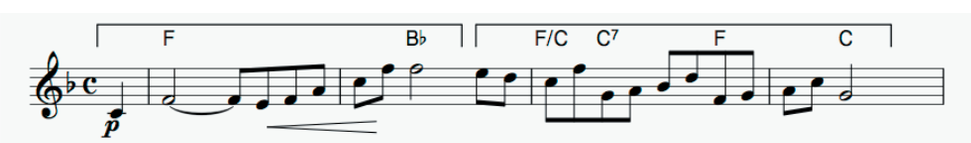
Schumann's melody

Here's the first half of the melody. Get your students to play it if they can.



What is the **key**? What's the **interval** between the first two notes? What **degree** of the scale does the melody end on?

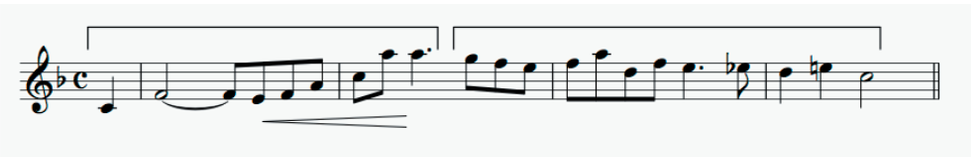
The annotations below show the main harmonies, and also the phrase lengths.



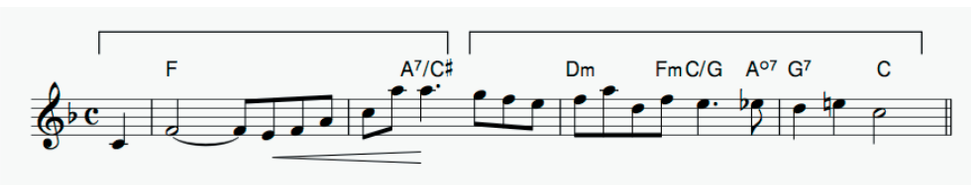
The melody is lyrical and has a balance of step and leap, and of rise and fall, just like its Classical predecessors. It also contains a mini **sequence** in the second half. But its lyricism and wide range are more in keeping with Romantic style, and though its two phrases are the same length they are not particularly well matched, the second one having more quaver movement than the first.

Its harmony seems simple in overview, using the three primary chords in F major, but notice how the chord changes increase in the second phrase. There are moving parts in the bass that mirror the right-hand melody.

Here's the second half of the melody – get your students to play it and see how it mirrors the first. What key does it end in?



Like a Classical melody, this one **modulates** to the dominant, C major. However, there's a wider range, with movement up to the note A, and much more colour on its way back down. Here it is again with the harmony indicated as chords – the chords are more distant from the tonic key and have become increasingly chromatic.



Other Romantic features

This short extract from 'Träumerei' has many other features that would be seen as Romantic. See if your students can spot them, perhaps with the following questions as prompts:

- What does the performer do with the tempo as the music progresses? Is it easy to hear the 4/4 metre? If not, why not?
- What does 'con ped' mean at the start of the score? Why is it important to use the pedal in this piece?
- Bars 7 and 8 contain a lot of flats, sharps and naturals. What does this tell you about the harmony at this point?
- Listen to the whole of 'Träumerei' and note where the B section begins and ends, and where the A section returns. Is the A section the same or different from before? Is the theme of the B section new?

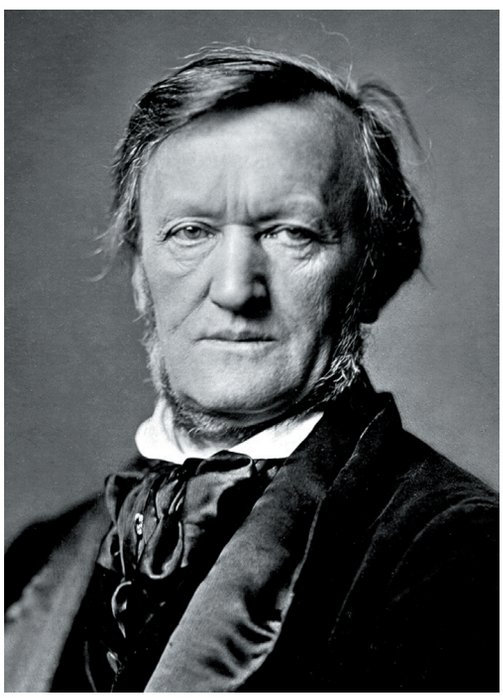
A composing idea

In the Classical resource (April 2021), we had students composing their own 'typically Classical' melodies. A great way to underline the differences in style would be either to adapt those melodies, adding Romantic features such as imbalanced phrases, greater range, intervallic leaps and more adventurous chords, or to compose new melodies with some of these characteristics. Can they find a way to include a **diminished 7th** chord, for example, as Schumann does in his final phrase?

Romanticism on the stage

Meanwhile, building on the legacy left by Mozart, opera developed rapidly in the 19th century, mostly in the hands of the Italians (many of whom were based in Paris) such as Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini. Opera was as popular then as musical theatre is now, with stories taken from well-known literature and legend, colourful orchestrations and lyrical Italian melodies based, often, on folk songs. By the 1840s a new composer, Verdi, was placing himself at the forefront not only of opera but also of Italian national pride.

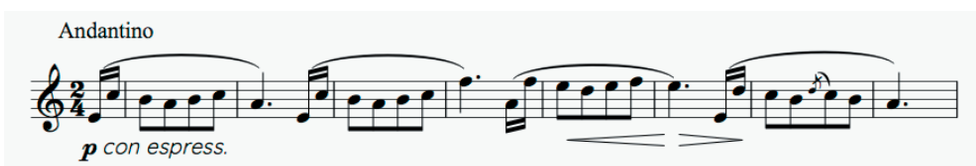
Nationalism was a key part of the Romantic ideal, and it was in opera that two distinct national styles emerged from the 1840s onwards. The colourful, lyrical, emotional human style of Italy contrasted with what was happening in Germany, where Wagner was pioneering his own music-dramas, exercising creative control over not only the music but also the story, words, design and costume. Wagner built his own opera house in Bayreuth, and wrote often lengthy, highly dramatic fantasy works based on legend. German audiences loved them.



Richard Wagner

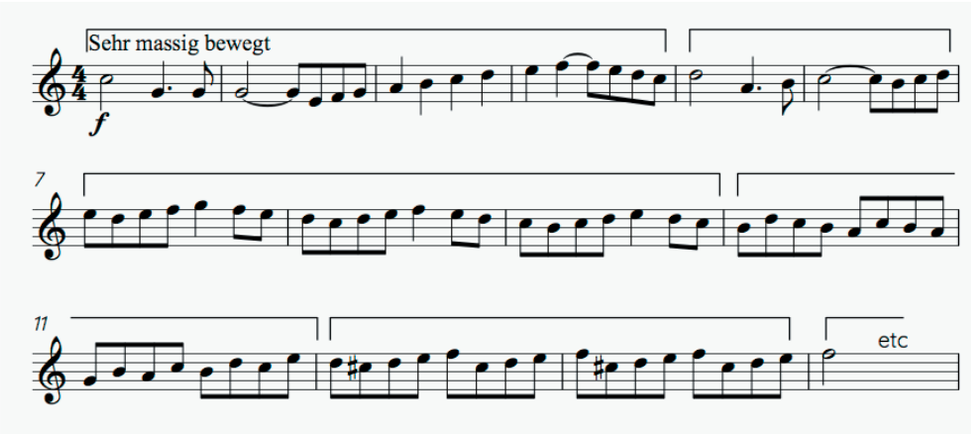
Verdi vs Wagner: a melodic comparison

Here are two melodies for playing and comparison. The first is by Verdi, from his opera *La forza del destino* ('The Force of Destiny'), first performed in 1862. It appears first in the Overture, at 0:55 in this video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lBI2wu4OIc**).



This famous lyrical melody is arranged into neat two-bar phrases, following a straightforward harmonic sequence that takes us from the tonic chord of A minor to its **subdominant**, dominant and back to the tonic. It could easily be a song, performed with mandolins to the diners in a Naples restaurant. This memorable lyricism made Verdi a very successful opera composer.

Now, here's an equally famous melody by Verdi's German counterpart, Wagner. It's the very first melody heard in his music-drama *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* ('The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), first performed just six years after Verdi's opera, in 1868. You can hear and follow it here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPI42ohngqw**).



Even the smallest glance will tell you that Wagner's approach to melody writing was different to Verdi's. It starts simply enough, with a rousing, balanced theme beginning in C major. However, the following phrases vary in length and the melody meanders through varied sequential passages before restarting in the subdominant key of F major. The orchestral texture and harmonic plan are more complex, too. Wagner became well known for his so-called 'unending melodies' and he was no less successful than Verdi. His control of tension and drama was unparalleled, and he was revered in Germany and beyond, influencing a great many composers who followed.

19th-century rock stars

It's perhaps no surprise to learn that the Romantic period was the time when phenomenally gifted virtuosos toured endlessly, giving stunning performances to enraptured audiences all over Europe and the wider world. Notable performers included the violinist Niccolò Paganini, so breathtakingly virtuosic that some believed he was possessed by the devil, and pianists Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann (who was married to Robert Schumann). All of these performers were composers in their own right and wrote pieces that in some cases only they could play.

Virtuoso pianist Clara Schumann in 1853

Music's industrial revolution

The second half of the 19th century was an exciting time to be living in Europe. Railways were expanding, industry was booming and the beginnings of telecommunication and long-distance travel allowed artists to be even more aware of what was happening elsewhere. There had been yet more revolution in the 1830s and 1840s, resulting in very strong nationalistic feeling that was capitalised on by composers of the time.

As well as Italy and Germany, more and more nationalistic music emerged from Russia, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. In Russia there were Glinka, Mussorgsky, Borodin and Tchaikovsky, to name just a few, in Eastern Europe there were Dvořák and Smetana, and in Scandinavia there was Grieg. All these composers wrote instrumental music, opera, and – in France and Russia – ballet. Later in the century, a very distinct French style emerged, thanks to the work of Fauré, Saint-Saëns and Debussy – the latter matching his style to that of the painters of his country, influenced by music from increasingly distant parts of the world.

Instruments benefitted hugely from advances in technology and industry, particularly in terms of their tone and expressive range. Late 19th-century composers like Debussy and Rimsky-Korsakov paved the way for 20th-century composers by focusing on colour and contrast, particularly in their orchestral music. We'll finish with a listening exercise based on part of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, whose exotic, colourful sound world influenced a number of composers of the early 20th century, not least Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil, Igor Stravinsky.

Listening exercise: late-Romantic texture and timbre

Listen just to the audio of this extract from *Scheherazade* from the beginning until 2:32 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhV78zLt3KE**) and answer the following questions. Don't watch the video until you've attempted them!

1. Name the two instruments playing at the beginning.
2. Describe the tempo and rhythm in this opening section.
3. Which woodwind instrument has a long solo from 0:37? How is it accompanied?
4. Which woodwind instrument repeats part of this solo at 1:19? How is it accompanied?
5. Describe the instrumentation, articulation and texture from 1:57 until 2:32.

Suggested answers:

1. Violin and harp.
2. The tempo is slow and free, with flexibility dictated largely by the violinist. Rhythms are intricate and decorative, in an almost improvisatory style.
3. Bassoon, accompanied by sustained notes from the double basses.
4. Oboe, accompanied by sustained wind and spread chords from the harp.
5. Violins play the melody with light staccatos contrasting with legato phrases. They are accompanied by pizzicato basses and light accompanying figures from the other strings. Wind continue to sustain chords.