KS5

OCR A level AoS5: Programme music

Jonathan James is a freelance music educator and conductor who is a discovery guide for orchestras, and leads workshops for venues across the UK.

by Jonathan James

INTRODUCTION

Teaching programme music should be the fun bit. It's where music is at its most descriptive and vivid, with an obvious narrative that offers an ideal launch point into the exploration of so many core elements, from form and compositional devices through to instrumentation and ideology.

Area of Study 5 in the OCR A level specification looks at the main flowering of programme music in the Romantic period (1820-1910). This resource builds on Jane Werry's excellent earlier resource (*Music Teacher*, December 2017) by placing Romantic developments in a wider historical context, before suggesting some deductive techniques and games to approach three pieces from OCR's list B of suggested repertoire:

- Schumann's *Kinderszenen*
- Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*
- Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

DEFINITIONS

The *Grove* dictionary is a good place to start for a definition of programme music:

> **'Programme music is music of a narrative or descriptive kind; the term is often extended to all music that attempts to represent extra-musical content without resort to sung words.'**

Programme music can therefore be used to depict an object (a waterfall or a decapitated goblin); a phenomenon, most usually of nature (eg a storm); a character (perhaps the devil); a sensation or emotion (insert the full Romantic range here, from love to loathing); or even an imagined sound (distant birdsong, angel's wings).

At one end of the descriptive scale, programme music can be used to suggest a vague notion of one or any of these things, or a poetic evocation of a scene or dream, as in the slow movement to Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata. At the other, it can give a blow-by-blow account of a story, such as in Dvořák's *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, where almost every line of music corresponds to a detail in the fairy tale.

Liszt coined the term 'programme music', and he was pivotal in the development of the 'symphonic poem' (or 'Tondichtung' in German), another one of his phrases. For him, the extra-musical programme was a means of guiding both the composer and the listener, 'guarding them [the listener] against a wrong poetical interpretation of the work'. This is an important distinction between music that is more generally representative and a work driven by a programme. For Liszt, the art of programme music was to convey directly and unequivocally the narrative intent of the piece. It represented a new ideal for the powers and expressive scope of music, particularly when applied to the world of orchestral music and the symphony.

> The Romantics in general were keen to guide their listeners towards particular interpretations, and this relied on the performer(s) observing every detail of the score. Berlioz once warned: 'Unfaithful interpreters are libellers and assassins!' The composer in the Romantic period might be enjoying new freedoms, but woe betide the performer who fudges a line or doesn't get the story right!

Programme music vs absolute music

The opposite to programme music is absolute or abstract music, where there is no direct or explicit extra-musical inspiration, and the work unfolds according to purely internal musical principles, such as in a fugue or a sonata.

The tendency among students is to stereotype absolute music as less expressive and more boring than its programmatic counterpart. We need to advocate how music of all kinds can be equally expressive, exciting and dramatic. The distinction is purely in the composer's intent and the level of explicit representation in the score. The slow movement from a Mozart piano concerto can speak just as eloquently about unrequited love as a Berlioz symphonic fantasy, for example.

This distinction became an important line in the sand during the so-called 'War of the Romantics', where both 'absolute' and 'programme' were used as pejorative descriptions in either camp. It ultimately came down to a question of aesthetics. Did you seek to extend the principles of the Classical period (predominantly absolute) and let form dominate the content, or throw out that rule book and be guided a new musical logic (programmatic)?

It was also a question of personal taste. Whereas some composers (Mendelssohn, Brahms and Schumann, for example) were happy to allow some storytelling function in their music, they balked at the more outlandish tales taken on by Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. Can you imagine how Brahms the academic would have reacted to some of these narratives?

- A man is stripped naked and is dragged behind wild horses as punishment for adultery (from *Mazeppa,* a symphonic poem by Liszt).
- The protagonist trips out on opium and has a grotesque vision of his own decapitation and torture in the underworld (*Symphonie fantastique* by Berlioz).
- A 16-hour epic that starts with a ring being stolen from a dwarf robber, with incestuous gods, giants that turn into dragons and heroes that speak the language of birds (Wagner's *Ring* cycle).

Mendelssohn described Berlioz's music as 'indifferent drivel, mere grunting, shouting and screaming back and forth'.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Programme music in its broadest (non-Lisztian) sense has existed from the Renaissance period onwards, and continues to thrive today. Composers have always been drawn to telling specific stories through their music. To name a few examples from outside the Romantic period:

- *The Battle*, a piece for virginal from the 1560s by William Byrd
- Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* (1723)
- Rameau's storm entr'acte from *Les Boréades* (1763)
- The instrumental accounts of the divine spark, or whales and donkeys from Haydn's *The Creation* (1798)
- Debussy's *La mer* (1905)
- Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* (1941)

The Baroque period, in particular, drew on the innovations of opera in depicting phenomena from nature, such as storms, sunrises and birdsong. There is much similarity in thinking between the Baroque and the Romantic periods, not least in the attraction to spectacle and theatricality. The instrumental forces and audiences may differ, but the same aim is shared of holding the listener enthralled to a captivating story.

That said, it was the particular values and ideals of the Romantic period that allowed programmatic music to thrive. The next section explores why.

What is Romanticism?

This question could usefully be put to a group discussion. Have the students deduce their answers about the character of Romanticism from the following quotes:

- 'What is classical I call healthy, what is Romantic, sick.' (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)
- 'I am sick and tired of the word "Romantic", even though I have not spoken it ten times in my entire life.' (Robert Schumann)
- 'Its overriding principle is that the poet's fantasy is subject to no agreed principles.' (Friedrich Schlegel, on Romantic poetry)

DISCUSSION POINTS

Note the irony that Goethe's breakthrough novella, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), was seen as shockingly Romantic.

The first quote by Goethe echoes the general sentiment of those Classical thinkers still wedded to Enlightenment principles of a rational, ordered world. Romanticism for them was a disease, a tumour on a civilised society. 'Romantic' was a by-word for excess and woeful exaggeration, and was used in the same pejorative sense as 'Baroque' was in the early 1600s. Programme music was, in this context, the result of an over-active imagination and of a desire to stretch music beyond its natural expressive bounds.

Schumann's quote reminds us that Romanticism as a term was mainly applied after the event and did not have currency until much later in the 1800s. ETA Hoffmann sees Romanticism as evident in the music of Palestrina and Bach onwards, arguing the case for a more universal understanding. Theorist Carl Dahlhaus in the 1970s also suggested that the 1800s was a century of *neo-Romanticism*, of re-exploring Romantic themes and playing styles that were already a century old. The intensity and, at times, urgency of Romantic music had its predecessors in:

- Music of the *Sturm und Drang* period of the 1760s to 1780s – eg Haydn's Symphony No. 49 *La passione.*
- The *Empfindsamer* ('sensitive') style of the 1730s to 1750s – eg symphonies by CPE Bach.

Certainly, themes of love, unrequited passion, death and redemption – so-called Romantic leitmotifs – are timeless and had been sung and played about from the beginnings of common practice (1600 on). Schumann clearly felt the same, and was wary of being tarred with same brush as the 'New German school' championed by Liszt and Wagner.

Schlegel's comment on Romantic poetry sums up in one word what it is absolutely fundamental to the Romantic movement: *freedom*. Beethoven's Ninth is as much about embracing freedom from Classical expectation as it is about freedom in the more societal, idealistic sense. Composers after the death of Beethoven (1827) had new freedoms:

- the freedom to question form and design, including using leitmotifs as a uniting principle rather than sonata form.
- the freedom to express their own ideals and assert their own identity in the music and not be dictated to by patrons.
- the freedom to reassess the function and shape of the main genres – symphony and opera – for maximum expressive scope.
- the freedom to respond to and treat stories that pressed into the far reaches of human understanding and emotional experience.
- the freedom to express political ideals and confront authority through music.
- the freedom to bypass censorship and reach a large audience and wider cross-section of society than before in the newly built concert halls and salons.

Romantic obsessions and themes

The themes and ideas that so gripped the 19th-century imagination were first introduced through painting and literature. For many, though, they reached their most sublime expression in music. As the writer Jean Paul noted: 'No colour is as Romantic as a musical tone.'

GROUP DISCUSSION

What can students deduce about Romantic themes from the Romantic painting by Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819)?

Lead their eyes to the sweeping composition, the agonised expression on each sailor's face, the level of drama and implicit heroism.

Humanity is shown here at the mercy of nature, with its implacable skies and roiling seas. And yet the sailors do not give up hope: there is the possibility of triumphing over adversity.

The poetry of Byron, Scott and Wordsworth picks up on this central theme of man battling nature and fate, and iterates other ideas, such as the lone explorer searching for truth, or of love being won and lost. There is a direct correspondence between the themes explored in all of the arts in this period, more so than ever before.

THE POWER OF FAUST

The Faust legend held a real fascination for Romantics of all artistic persuasions. Among the composers who responded to the tale were Spohr, Weber, Liszt and Berlioz.

Ask the students to research the legend and discover the arch-Romantic ideas that it contains:

- Mystery and man's place in the cosmos.
- The battle with the devil.
- Guilt and redemption.
- The quest for knowledge.
- Divine ideals and human failings.
- Salvation through persistence.

All of these ideas were ripe pickings for Romantic artists, and you can see why composers were so drawn to representing them and other, equally vivid stories in music. One uniting factor in all of these themes is *self-determination*: the ability of the individual to define their own course of action, to either stand up to or accede to the forces that confront them, whether a storm at sea, a mortal temptation, or the favourite nemesis of them all: Fate.

CREATE YOUR OWN ARCH-ROMANTIC STORY

Given these themes and the quest for self-determination, can your students come up with their own, quintessentially Romantic story that begs for a musical response? They should try to include:

- a medieval reference.
- a dream.
- a lead role for Nature.
- several broken hearts.
- at least one death.
- at least one redemption, whether in this life or the next.
- a defining moment where the central protagonists choose their own fate.

THE YIN AND YANG OF ROMANTICISM

So far, the impression may well be that Romanticism was all about large-scale concepts and the mantra 'bigger is better'. It's true that the Romantic period saw some of the more ungainly expansions in the history of music. Berlioz conducted an orchestra of hundreds, and Wagner created operatic 'Gesamtkunstwerke' that took a whole weekend to sit through.

However, an equal and opposite trend was to look for the intimate moment shared with the few. The image of Chopin playing a nocturne to a small gathering by moonlight is as Romantic as Mahler conducting mass forces in a musical resurrection.

The two ends of this spectrum form a creative continuum. The growth of opera fed into the development of art song, just as the technical challenges in ever more ambitious concertos found their way into writing for solo instruments. Equally, composers such as Brahms and Schumann tried to bring chamber qualities into their symphonies, and the symphonic into their chamber works. It was akin to the development of the novella and the novel: both nurtured and informed each other.

Thus, in a century where numbers in the orchestra broke into three figures, Grieg, Schumann and Liszt were writing delightful miniatures for piano that were over in under a minute. And programme music is represented at both these extremes, large and small, either in the epic vision or the brief distillation of a single moment.

Other influences on the development of programme music

INSTRUMENT MAKING

Industrial revolutions, particularly in metallurgy, meant that instrument makers could create stronger pianos, complex brass and woodwind instruments bristling with valves and keys, and a range of new percussion. Such developments provided a vastly expanded canvas and palette for the programmatic composer. It's not surprising that Strauss chose to depict the dawn of time or the might of the Alps with such resources. Suddenly new expressive possibilities were opened up, stimulating the composer to:

- write for more extreme registers of their instruments, as these were now more stable and reliable.
- create more agile parts, as articulation and accuracy were improved.
- experiment with more dynamic and tonal range than before, from a whisper to a scream.

All of these made for an even more exciting musical story. Couple this with the improvement in the printing press and the conditions were perfect for writing more adventurous scores for larger forces.

Also key was the speed with which ideas could now be communicated and parts could be distributed, thanks to faster modes of transport such as the train. This meant composers were more aware of the storytelling innovations of their counterparts, as well as having more ready access to literature and art for inspiration. Berlioz could easily pick up copies of Shakespeare to fuel his imagination, even though he couldn't understand most of the English. If Tchaikovsky used harps and celestas, then other composers felt bound to follow suit.

REVOLUTION IN THE AIR

The American Revolution (1776), French Revolution (1789) and ensuing Napoleonic wars (up to 1815) instigated social change on a profound level. The bourgeoisie had a greater voice and there was a groundswell of resistance to oppression, with the middle class demanding democratic ideals.

For the 19th-century composer, this meant:

- stories of resistance and protest could now be conveyed in their music.
- 'rescue operas' became popular (eg Beethoven's *Fidelio*), where a hero battles for independence and freedom.
- historical characters and Shakespearean heroes (Coriolan through to Macbeth and Hamlet) were widely used and sometimes treated symbolically, to comment on present injustices.
- more audience from the burgeoning middle class would attend the concerts, building numbers and support for new work.

NATIONALISM

As Russian and Eastern European composers played catch-up with their Western counterparts, so they wanted to define themselves in opposition to the predominant Western styles of writing. They did this mainly through drawing on folk material and ecclesiastical traditions (eg bells and chant) to create their own nationally distinct language. This source of inspiration was a boon to both opera and programmatic music. Balakirev, the mentor figure for the Russian 'mighty handful' of composers, insisted that every piece should be led by a tale, preferably Russian, in order to avoid the sterile trappings of Western European music. Why write another sonata when you could depict a sailor discovering an underwater paradise (as in *Sadko*, by Rimsky-Korsakov)?

Cui described Rimsky-Korsakov's First Symphony like this: 'The Symphony is good because it lacks the slightest trace of any stagnant *Germanness.*'

Nationalist composers such as Glinka, the 'Five' Russians, Smetana and Dvořák used the following devices to bring national colour to their music, much of which was programmatic:

- folk scales (often pentatonic) for the goodies, and new octatonic scales for the baddies.
- other folk harmonic colourings, such as drones, parallel 4ths and 5ths, progressions moving in 3rds.
- long melodic statements based on melismatic song (either traditional or chant) that could then be requoted in full or in part in a variety of new colours.
- exotic, sometimes oriental-inspired instrumentation and orchestration, including harps, celestas, bells, lustrous violin solos and anything that made the sound glisten.
- leitmotifs galore.
- tonal mutability: no need to stick religiously to 'home keys' if the story demanded a shift to a new tonal centre.

WAYS INTO SOME OF OCR'S LIST B SUGGESTED WORKS

Rather than repeat too much of the information that's readily available in Rhinegold's study guides, the following sets out some alternative ways in to understanding and analysing the works, with the aim of underlining the programmatic devices involved.

Schumann's *Kinderszenen*

These 13 'Scenes from Childhood' were written in 1838, during a period when Schumann was concentrating exclusively on piano music. They are mainly for the study of young pianists, although there is much depth for the older player to enjoy. They are miniatures with substance, poetic evocations of moments and moods from childhood that could be universally appreciated. The whimsical, epigrammatic style influenced Grieg with his volumes of *Lyric Pieces,* started 30 years later (also on the OCR specification), and quite possibly Debussy with his piano *Images* and *Préludes*.

Explaining their origin to his wife Clara, Robert wrote:

> **'You once said to me that I often seemed like a child, and I suddenly got inspired and knocked off around 30 quaint little pieces.... I selected several and titled them *Kinderszenen*. You will enjoy them, though you will need to forget that you are a virtuoso when you play them.'**

Here is a set of exercises and starter questions based on specific movements:

1. OF FOREIGN LANDS AND PEOPLES

- Sing the tune in the right and then left hand, making up words. It's definitely a song, isn't it?
- What happens if you substitute the diminished chord (eg first bar second beat) with a first inversion G major?
- Try playing it loud and without ritardandi. How does this change our aspect of the 'foreign land'?

2. STRANGE STORY

- Why are the four middle bars (bars 8 to 12) so different and magical? Is this the 'strange' part to an otherwise straightforward story?

3. CATCH-ME-IF YOU-CAN

- Do a harmonic analysis of bars 9 to 16. How does this new harmonic pace support the 'chase' in the title?

4. PLEADING CHILD

- Comment on the use of suspensions, chromatic harmony and lack of resolution to characterise the wheedling of the child.
- Play the middle line of semiquavers by itself. What does that tell you?

5. CONTENTED

- How does the harmonic language here contrast the 'pleading' of the previous scene?
- Schumann seems to be implying contentment comes from being together with another. How?
- What happens to the sense of contentment when you take the bottom octave off the left hand?

6. IMPORTANT EVENT

- Clara suggested that the metronome marking should be brought from crotchet equals 138 down to 120. Try both speeds and see if you agree.
- This is one of only two scenes where Schumann goes beyond a forte. What is the effect of the subdued dynamics in general?

7. DREAMING

- Look at the patterns here and what they say about dreaming: simple rising gestures that stop to ponder (aspiration) followed by falling, more complex phrases (doubt).
- Look at the wonderful spacing of the chords. How does this reinforce the dreamlike mood?
- What does it say about the person dreaming that the music always comes back to same F major gesture?
- Spot the minor 9th chords. What effect do these have?

8. BY THE FIRESIDE

- How does repetition and the use of pedal notes reinforce the sense of being cosily installed by a fire?

9. KNIGHT OF THE HOBBY-HORSE

- Try not doing the third-beat accent, or imagining the music without it. How does this take away from the scene?

10. ALMOST TOO SERIOUS

- The length and relative complexity mark this scene out in the set. What is it about the rhythm, textural arrangement and key centres that contribute to the 'serious' subject?

11. FRIGHTENING

- This scene shows the child confronting their fear in three different ways: mildly apprehensive, terrified, and running for cover and putting on a brave face. How does the music reflect this?

12. CHILD FALLING ASLEEP

- What about the melodic and harmonic treatment creates a gentle circular motion, lulling the listener into a sense of sleep?
- Discuss the 7ths in bars 21 to 24 and the final chord – what stages of sleep do they evoke for you?

13. THE POET SPEAKS

- How does the structure and syntax of this final piece reflect the thoughts of poet as they reach for inspiration? Consider the textural variety, the first-beat rests, the mini cadenzas and the use of register.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (1880)

Print the following ideas as separate cards and put the students into small groups for a competition to see who can identify all the elements in the score first:

Friar Lawrence chorale theme. The warning of Fate	Lines in close canon with each other to depict chase and fight	Three-part counterpoint as tension rises	Triplet wind to add weight to the love theme
Juliet angelic harp motif	Off-beat cymbals (*piatti*) as swords clash	Off-beat inverted pedal notes to suggest indecision	Climax of the love theme
Juliet flowing downward 3rds	Love theme	Fierce trumpet version of Friar Lawrence's fate theme	Final tragic versions of love theme
Marcato version of Friar Lawrence's warning	Horn couplets as breath quickens with desire	Furious extended unison scale passage for strings	Expressive minor 7th in lower strings: last gasp of lovers
Montagues skirmish with Capulets	Low woodwind solos after surge of passion	Juliet theme restated against violins still busy from before	Sword-clash rhythm as final nails in the coffin

Tchaikovsky wrote three versions of the Overture, and one of the main changes was the 'Lisztian chorale' that Balakirev had suggested should start the work. Below is the chorale from the opening to the first version. Discuss why the later version improves on this in terms of its melodic shape, intervallic motifs and instrumentation:

The ending is also more dramatic in the third version. Why? Here's the first version for comparison:

Another good discussion point is Tchaikovsky's structuring of the main themes and how he intensifies both the battle and love motifs on their subsequent entries. It helps build the tension in the overture.

Don't forget to point out how the final statement in the cellos, with its characteristic rising minor 7th, was used by Bernstein in his own adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet tale, *West Side Story*, most obviously in the opening shape to 'Somewhere'.

Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

Written a mere 13 years (1893) after Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, this tone poem belongs to a radically different world. The fluid, subtle score marked a new benchmark in orchestration, with Debussy taking the listener into the erotic dreams of the faun as much through his imaginative use of timbre as through the ephemeral quality of the content and his elusive harmonic ideas. Aside from the faun improvising on his flute at the beginning, there is little literal connection to the Mallarmé poem on which the music is based: Debussy evokes the sensual mood of the writing, rather than its detail.

Mallarmé was delighted with the work: 'I press your hand admiringly,' he said to Debussy after its first performance.

There is a superficial parallel to Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* in that the love theme is iterated twice, and more intensely on its second arch, with 'panting' horns in descending couplets adding to the climate of desire.

SMALL-GROUP EXERCISE

Debussy was a symbolist, drawn to the wider signification of the poem. However, there are some passages from Mallarmé's original that would seem to match the mood of the music and the trajectory of the work.

In four groups, discuss how the music reflects the mood of the following excerpts:

1. Beginning to figure 3

   Through the swoon, heavy and motionless,
   stifling with heat the cool mornings struggle…
   No water, but that which my flute pours

2. Figure 3 to 4 bars after figure 6

   These nymphs, I would perpetuate them
   So bright
   Their crimson flesh that hovers there, light
   in the air drawl with dense slumbers.

   Did I love a dream?

3. Four bars after figure 6 to figure 8

   O nymphs, let's rise again with many memories…
   Away to flee my fiery lip
   The secret terrors of the flesh-like quivering…

4. Figure 8 to the end

   I must sleep, lying on the thirsty sand.
   Farewell to you both: I go to see the
   shadow you have become.

FURTHER QUESTIONS AND SHORT TASKS

- There are two harps in this otherwise chamber orchestration. Just playing their parts by themselves, what do you notice about how they add colour to the story?
- Plot a line graph showing how the tension ebbs and flows before finally peaking in bar 70. What does this design tell you about Debussy's craft as a storyteller?
- Much of this work takes place either in the world of slumber (eg beginning to figure 3) or apparent wakefulness (figures 3 to 8). How does Debussy represent these two states through the brightness of the sound? Consider the use of mutes, articulation and use of accents, the length of notes and phrases, and the profile of the sound (eg a pizzicato compared to a bowed stroke).
- How does the choice of harmony and scale enhance the general feel of ambiguity? What is so fluid about a whole-tone scale, a minor 6th inversion or chromatic shifts?

CONCLUSION

These three pieces represent an interesting cross-section of programme music: a series of miniatures each expressing a universal memory; a symphonic poem in sonata form that is closely allied to a text; and a modernist tone poem that corresponds loosely to the flow and tone of its literary source. These examples may be used as templates for the students' own creative responses in the form of a composing brief. Or they may just give a good framework for deepening general analytical skills.

Programme music as a genre, or an area of study, offers not just a fun way into a deeper appreciation of a score with its helpful guidance of a clear external narrative, but also the chance to put the descriptive powers of music into a wider artistic context. Both can be tackled at different levels of understanding, whether new to analysis or towards the end of a course, when comparative thinking is more possible. This argues for spreading the unit across the two years, adding detail as you go. Start with a 30-second Schumann miniature and see where you end up!