

# The Romantic Era

## Composers

### **Brahms, Johannes (1833-1897)**

Johannes Brahms was born in 1833 of German heritage. He began his musical career by playing the piano. He met the important musicians Clara Schumann and her husband Robert Schumann when he was on a tour of Europe. Robert Schumann and Beethoven were strong influences on Johannes Brahms. His first published work, a piano sonata in C major, combined Schumann's tender lyricism with Beethoven's overwhelming energy. So inspired was he by Beethoven's symphonies that it took Brahms more than 10 years to write his first. It was instantly hailed as "Beethoven's Tenth."

Stylistically, as more time passed, Brahms music became more refined and distinctly stylized from other composers. He often achieved a balance between the Romantic exaggeration and experimentation of the era with the structural clarity of the Classical era. He was a composer of numerous [waltzes](#) : [No.1](#), [No.2](#), [No.3](#), [No.4](#), [No.5](#).

Another famous Brahms composition is Intermezzo Op. 117 [No. 1 in Eb Major](#), and [No. 2 in Bb Major](#). The most dramatic of Brahms' works was the *Cantata Rinaldo*. After this, he never attempted to compose another opera. His later works are characterized by their warmth and color.

### **Chopin, Frederic (1810-1901)**

Fredric Chopin was born in Poland in the year 1810. He began playing the piano at age four, and by age eight, was considered to be a child prodigy. He then toured Warsaw and was greeted by noble gentlemen and women, much like the childhood Mozart had experienced. He started composing music at age twelve. One of his first well-known compositions was the *Rondo in C Minor*, which was written when he was fifteen. He composed numerous etudes. One of these etudes, called the [Black Key Etude](#), was written in the key of Gb and used only sharps and flats. After he toured more of Europe, young Chopin fell in love with Vienna. After he moved to Vienna, his musical career seemed bleak, as his first public concert did not go well. He became depressed due to the fact that Warsaw had been attacked and occupied by Russia. However, this inspired the composer to write one of his most famous works, the *Revolutionary Etude, Opus 10, No. 12*.

Since Vienna did not suit him, he moved to Paris, France. When in Paris, his music grew more appreciated and was praised by the other well-known composers of the era. After his childhood sweetheart, Maria Wodzinska, refused his hand in marriage, he became depressed. Again, Chopin rose above his tribulation and wrote the famous waltz, *Les Adieux*, about lovers who part.

His last concert was held in the Salle Pleyel in Paris in February of 1848. Although he was sick, he finished the concert. Chopin died a year and a half later. Chopin was the master of the piano of his generation. In his lifetime, he composed over 200 piano pieces. He turned the piano into a more emotional tool than was ever thought possible.

### **Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Felix (1809-1847)**

Felix Bartholdy Mendelssohn was a famous German composer. Born in 1809, Mendelssohn lived a happy life from the start. Like other virtuoso composers, he was a child genius when it came to music. At age nine he gave his first piano concert, composed productively from the age of ten, and was ready to conduct the Sunday morning musicales that were the joy of his youth, by age thirteen. At age seventeen, he composed one of his well known works, *The Midsummer Night's Dream*. One part of this work was the ["Nocturne."](#)

Inspired by the music of J.S. Bach, Mendelssohn arranged for a performance of Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew*, which had not been performed in the eighty years since Bach's death. Along with his friend Devrient, Mendelssohn raised money, engaged the soloists, sold tickets, trained the chorus, and played the organ for what were three sold out shows. Mendelssohn continually promoted J.S. Bach throughout his lifetime and is partly responsible for the formation of the Bach Society.

Mendelssohn went on to complete the *Scotch* and *Italian Symphonies*, and a new piano concerto called the *Reformation Symphony*. One of his most famous works is *Elijah*, an oratorio that he composed and conducted. Mendelssohn also composed two other well known pieces, [Fingals Cave Overture](#) and the [Wedding March](#). Later in life he became the director of the first German Conservatory of Music in Leipzig, where he also taught. Mendelssohn's music is marked by a delicacy, sparkle, seamless flow, and clarity.

### **Puccini, Giacomo (1858-1924)**

Giacomo Puccini was a master of the Romantic Italian opera. He studied Opera at the Conservatory of Milan. He was able to go there due to a grant given to him by the Queen of Italy. He is well known for his opera *La Boheme*, which depicts the Bohemian lifestyle. He won 1000 Italian lire in a contest for his composition *Capriccio Sinfonico*. His other well-known operas are *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, *La Rondine*, and *Il Triptyh*.

### **Schubert, Franz (1797-1828)**

Franz Schubert was a very musically talented child. Of Austrian descent, he was taught to play the violin by his father and the piano by his brother. The choirmaster at his church trained his voice. At age eleven, he was sent to a private music school in Vienna. There he sang soprano in the choir and played second violin in the school orchestra. He grew to appreciate the music of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven.

When his voice changed, he left school and became a teacher in his father's school. After doing this for three years and feeling unfulfilled, he quit and focused on composing full time. Always living on the brink of starvation, yet always composing, Franz Schubert would spend the rest of his life in Vienna.

Schubert was eighteen when he wrote the masterpiece song [Der Erlkonig](#). It wasn't accepted right away, as the public was critical of the dissonance in the accompaniment and its strange sound. However, today it is considered one of the greatest songs ever composed. Some other very well known works of Franz Schubert are [Die Forelle](#), and [Ave Maria](#). He composed over six hundred songs; in 1815 alone, he wrote one hundred and forty-four songs. He has been quoted as saying "I complete one song only to begin another."

His last work was his *Unfinished Symphony* which is comprised of only the first and second movements. Schubert died at the young age of thirty-one. On his tombstone it reads, "Music hath here entombed a rich treasure but a still fairer hope."

### **Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich (1840-1893)**

Russian born, Tchaikovsky is regarded today as one of the greatest and most popular symphonists, second only to Beethoven. As a person, he was extremely fragile, sensitive, and charming but breakable. His first symphony was not well received which made him extremely upset, as he had labored so hard over the completion of this work. A similar thing happened to another work of his, the *B Flat Minor Piano Concerto*. His teacher of the time, Nikolai Rubinstein, criticized the piece. This outraged Tchaikovsky, and he grew so angry that he took back the dedication to his teacher on the piece, and moved out of Rubenstein's house.

Some of Tchaikovsky's most famous works are [The Romeo and Juliet Overture](#), the opera *Eugen Onegin*, and the *Violin Concerto*. Tchaikovsky also composed the score to the well-known ballet, *The Nutcracker*. This

piece is a multi-movement work and is typically performed around Christmas time. ["Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies," "Trepak," "Arabian Dance," "Chinese Dance," "Dance of the Reed Flutes," "Waltz of the Flowers"](#) are parts of this work. He is regarded today as one of the most expressive Romantic composers to come from Russia.

### **Verdi, Guiseppi (1813-1901)**

The Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi had a life full of trials and tribulations. At age twenty-eight, he was a happy man as he had just written his first opera, *Oberto*, and was living in Milan with his wife and his two small children. Unfortunately this happiness was soon interrupted, as his two children and his wife died within months of each other. Due to his extreme loss, he became depressed and did not work for many months. His first work after this tragedy, a comic opera entitled *King for a Day*, was not received well by the public. Giuseppe Verdi vowed never to write again.

Eventually, Verdi came into contact with a play that inspired him to write a musical score. This became one of his masterpiece operas *Nabuco*. The public instantly proclaimed it a success, and they gave it thunderous applause the first time it was performed. Verdi wrote additional operas entitled: *Attila*, *Macbeth*, *I Lombardi*, and *Ernani*. Other famous operas which he composed were *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Don Carlos*, *La Forza del Destino*, *I Vespri Siciliani*, *Il Trovatore*, *Simone Boccanegra*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Another famous opera of Verdi's was *Aida*. This opera was written for the opening of the Suez Canal and was performed in Cairo in 1871 for the first time. It was received with tremendous applause, and is one of the most emotional, lyrical, expressive, and skillful operas ever written. The last opera he wrote was *Falstaff*, a comedic opera that showed wit and charm (a surprising feat considering he wrote it when he was eighty years old). He is one of the greatest masters of opera.