

# THE ROMANTIC ERA

## INSTRUMENTAL

Beethoven was responsible for bridging the gap between the Classical and the Romantic eras. In his music, he tried to achieve a balance between the more structured, clear and strict Classical form and the newer exotic, innovative, and passionate of the Romantic style of music making. Other composers of this era followed suit, trying to maintain the balance that Beethoven's music displayed.

Music with a plot or which depicted a scene became important in this era as a way for composers to further display their artistic skill. Opera was not the only medium for expressing this; instrumental music was beginning to do so as well. Composers developed the tone poem, which was an orchestral work that conveyed a story without words.

The main instrumental musical traits of the Romantic Era were virtuosity, individualism, and *nationalism*. As chamber music became less and less popular, the orchestra and the piano emerged as the new popular trends of the musical world. As keyboard and symphonic instruments became commonplace, short piano miniatures and symphonic works became the main staple of the era.

## KEYBOARD MUSIC

### The Piano

Organ and harpsichord music, which were popular in past eras, began to diminish in importance. Piano music quickly stepped in to fill the void. The piano was an extremely versatile instrument, drawing both performers and composers to it at an increasingly rapid pace. The piano provided a wide dynamic range, the ability to distinguish between loud and soft, and a large capacity for *sonority*, which its predecessors did not have. This versatility enabled the performer to express artistic abilities that ranged from a quiet, delicate newborn kitten to that of a proud confident lion king. No other instrument to date matched the ability and endless possibilities that the piano suddenly gave musicians. The damper pedal allowed musicians to try new and exciting harmonic effects, and along with new keyboard mechanics, allowed them to fine tune their compositions in any number of ways.

## KEYBOARD FORMS

There were various musical forms that were composed for the piano. Some of the popular compositions were etudes, *character pieces*, *variations*, and stylized dances.

### Etudes

The etude was a study that showed off the performer's technical ability using *arpeggios*, octaves, scales, and chords.

### Character Pieces

The character piece was a short programmatic work that had descriptive titles, such as nocturne, ballade, rhapsody, intermezzo, and songs without words.

### Variations

A variation is a *virtuoso* piece that states a theme and then modifies it through changes of rhythm, meter, and structure.

### Stylized Dances

Stylized dances were popular dance forms such as the *waltz*, *mazurka*, *polka*, and the *gallop*.

## SYMPHONIC MUSIC

With the coming of the Romantic era, the orchestra grew in both importance, and size. More instruments were added, and gave this orchestra a wider range of sounds and emotions to put forth to the musical world.

### Instrumentation

#### Woodwinds

The woodwind section grew to include two or more bassoons, oboes, flutes, and clarinets. Additional color instruments such as the contrabassoon, the bass clarinet, the piccolo, and the English horn were added.

#### Brass

The brass section began to utilize instruments with valves, which gave this section a wider range and versatility. This section included trumpets, horns, trombones, and tubas.

#### Percussion

In addition to the use of timpani, there was now the use of percussion instruments such as bass and side drums, xylophones, celestas, gongs, cymbals, castanets, harps, bells, triangles, and chimes.

#### Strings

While no additional string instruments were invented during this era, the number of string instruments used in an orchestra increased in size to balance out the addition of the larger brass and woodwind sections.

### Orchestration

New musical ideas were expressed through the use of additional solo parts into an orchestral work. A woodwind instrument or horn was favored for a solo part. Additionally, the string section experimented with, created, and used mutues, [tremelo](#) , harmonics, [pizzicato](#) , and double stops.

### Forms

#### Symphony

Symphonies were composed by a number of Romantic composers. These symphonies were very different from the ones written during the Classical era. These differences included:

1. Freer form of the internal structure of the movement
2. Variation on the number of movements
3. The symphony evolved from a formal design to a creative means of expression
4. The inner movements had more contrasting keys within them
5. Solo voices and choral sounds were added to the symphony.

#### Concerto

A concerto was an extravagant showpiece for a virtuoso soloist and orchestra. The violin and piano were the instruments of choice. This form had three movements, which was similar to that of the concerto of the Classical era.

#### Symphonic Poem (Tone Poem)

This form was introduced in the mid 1800s by the composer Franz Liszt. It was a one movement, programmatic work based on a literary work or legend and usually had a descriptive title. Examples included Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn*, Smetana's *The Moldau*.

### **Concert Overture**

This form was a single movement work and was usually found in sonata-allegro form. It was somewhat programmatic and usually had a descriptive title. It was not an orchestral introduction to an opera. A few examples were Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave Overture*, and Brahms *Academic Festival Overture*.

### **Symphonic Variations**

Very few orchestral works were written in variation form. A few examples of this form are Brahms's Variations on the Theme of Haydn, Franck's Symphonic Variations for piano solo and orchestra, and Elgar's Enigma Variations.

### **Symphonic Suite**

These are programmatic works in several movements which do not follow the symphonic form. Examples of this were Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, Rimsky-Korsikov's *Scheherazade*, and Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*.

### **Dances**

Orchestral music written in dance forms in pieces composed by Johann Strauss Waltzes, for example.

## **CHAMBER MUSIC**

During the Romantic era, chamber music became increasingly obsolete. Chamber music did not possess the size, color, and sound of the symphony and could not match the piano's warmth or versatility in range and expression. As a result, almost no new chamber music was written by composers, and virtually no program music was written for chamber ensembles.

For the composers who still felt comfortable writing chamber music, the string *quartet* was their choice. The composers of chamber music tried the freedom of expression that came with the Romantic era by writing new music for the piano - in trios, quartets, and quintets. The rarest form of chamber music became the solo sonatas for the violin and other instruments. Chamber music was not as important as it once had been and would never reach the height it once had.