

The Romantic Era

(1850 - 1920 C.E.)

The Romantic era was a period of great change and emancipation. While the Classical era had strict laws of balance and restraint, the Romantic era moved away from that by allowing artistic freedom, experimentation, and creativity. The music of this time period was very expressive, and melody became the dominant feature. Composers even used this expressive means to display *nationalism*. This became a driving force in the late Romantic period, as composers used elements of folk music to express their cultural identity.

As in any time of change, new musical techniques came about to fit in with the current trends. Composers began to experiment with length of compositions, new harmonies, and tonal relationships. Additionally, there was the increased use of *dissonance* and extended use of *chromaticism*. Another important feature of Romantic music was the use of color. While new instruments were constantly being added to the orchestra, composers also tried to get new or different sounds out of the instruments already in use.

One of the new forms was the *symphonic poem*, which was an orchestral work that portrayed a story or had some kind of literary or artistic background to it. Another was the *art song*, which was a vocal musical work with tremendous emphasis placed on the text or the symbolical meanings of words within the text. Likewise, opera became increasingly popular, as it continued to musically tell a story and to express the issues of the day. Some of the themes that composers wrote about were the escape from political oppression, the fates of national or religious groups, and the events which were taking place in far off settings or exotic climates. This allowed an element of fantasy to be used by composers.

During the Romantic period, the *virtuoso* began to be focused. Exceptionally gifted performers - pianists, violinists, and singers -- became enormously popular. Liszt, the great Hungarian pianist/composer, reportedly played with such passion and intensity that women in the audience would faint. Most composers were also virtuoso performers; it was inevitable that the music they wrote would be extremely challenging to play.