Music 160: Introduction to the Romantic Period

[Keri McCarthy]: So the Romantic period we’ve talked about sort of straddles across Beethoven, who was both Classical and Romantic. Often times “when does it start?” is a big question- 1810 for some types of art, 1820 for others. We still have composers like Mendelssohn who we consider to be fairly Classical in style, writing in the 1830’s and the 1840’s. So there is no real good answer for when the Romantic period starts, but if you were on, say, an exam or something, to have to write 1810, 1820, those would be all good answers. Beethoven’s death date would be fine as well. We just have a lot of composer’s kind of shifting focus rather than rejecting what came before, and that’s a really important feature about the Romantic period. That we have people like Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and even people, scholars, and people like Mendelssohn are beginning to look back and look at the music of Bach and recognize that there is a history of musical change in the West that deserves to be maintained or canonized. The idea of a concert program that involves music from different eras, rather than, say, music composed by the performer himself, is brand new and created by Franz Liszt in the middle of the Romantic period. The idea of a public orchestra concert where you would expect to hear, say, a first-half that has sort of an introductory overture and then a soloist with a concerto and then a big symphony as the second-half- all of that is introduced in this time period. We start to see the creation of, say, musical dictionaries and collections of materials in the Classical period. It really extends into the Romantic period when we recognize that Western culture as a whole has a value historically as well as the right now, and that we should listen to music and philosophy provided by older artists and replicate what it is that they’re talking about in a new way because what they had is a value not only to us presently but as a historical marker over time for the West. So the Romantic period is sort of interesting for that purpose.

What else is happening? Well definitely patronage is just going down the tubes. France is in revolt for a large part of the century. Italy as well is fighting for its independence and doesn’t gain it for the first 70 years of this century. Germany and Austria are becoming bigger and more cohesive as a group of city-states and much stronger. We start to develop something that is a nationalist theory: Not to say that we didn’t have music that was Italian, French, or German, but that there are other nationalities outside of that that would be like Bohemian, Hungarian, Czech, that would have distinctive melodies of their own and that people might want to capture some of the scales being used, some of the dance movements or the flavors of those kinds of things, and put them into music that’s considered Western art music. And so we have a new school of nationalism that occurs- Russia is a part of that as well.

Why is it the Romantic period? Well there were a lot of writers writing really interesting kind of scary stories: stories about magic, stories about intrigue, stories that had a lot of blood and gore and a fair amount of love in there as well, and so we end up borrowing from the literary, romantic period, which actually started during our Classical period, very confusing so ignore that for your own sake. But the music tended to follow the literature, and so we start to hear about supernatural themes in operas and in songs.
We have the development of this new genre that is the song and it’s from Germany, so they call it “The Lead” or “The Leader” plural, and so there are these song cycles that are being developed that are not intended to be operas or staged or costumed, but they have themes that go together, or one narrator who will take you through a set of 15 or 20 songs and provide for you some sort of narrative story as they go through. Those are being provided by composers like Schubert and Schumann in particular. Those are very well-known. The role of the piano is rising and so in those song cycles we hear the piano become an instrument that is equally as important as the voice. We’ll talk about that a little bit later with a lead by Schubert.

In terms of musical forms, we’re still keeping sonata allegro, we’re still keeping theme in variations, we have scherzo, aminuet, and trio, we have the rondo. They’re all maintained, but often now they’re either given some sort of new term, programmatic association, meaning a literary association, that draws together these various elements into one either cohesive movement or cohesive symphony as in the case of Berlioz. They are longer, they are more powerful, they are less balanced for sure. The end of the piece is far more important than, say, the beginning. So we end up with something that looks a lot more like this [Keri McCarthy makes a hand gesture] that starts fairly gently and ends often times with a lot of aggressiveness within the piece. Phrases don’t naturally match anymore. If they did we have maybe a four-bar phrase but it’s additive with two extra bars or three extra bars, less predictable. And harmonies become less predictable as well. Now if you sing a melody and stop it in the middle, you may not be able to figure out what the end of it is going to be.

This period is often considered the role of the individual. We have composers like Beethoven, writing as they wished to, expressing as they want to and hoping that an audience will follow based on the quality of the music or the popularity of their music. So we get composers of varying quality. Robert Schumann was a composer who wrote for a magazine that was the “Neue Zeitschrift” that was intended to give an ear for the popular listener, to let them know what was coming out. And he would degrade some of the things that he found to be not well-constructed but that were very nonetheless popular, so even from this time period we end up with this argument about what is quality music or what has long construction and deserves to become a part of that musical canon.

What else do I want you to know? Instruments are being created and with the advent of better technology they’re becoming mass constructed, which may be a detriment to things like violins where there’s a lot of craft that goes into the construction of the individual instrument. But when thinking about wood winds, we are getting instruments that are far more consistent, that have better pitch, that have metal keys that cover with pads that are well-developed to cover holes. The holes are being machined in, and so they are being created with a lot more care in terms of the depth and the width and how far apart that they’re coming on the instrument, and so pitch ends up being a lot more consistent, tone ends up being a lot more consistent, and composers can write in far more varied keys even than they could in the Classical period.
We start to see a lot more instruments being played in the orchestra. Berlioz’s symphony *Fantastique* includes things like tuba, piccolo, English horn, and these add-ons to the initial instruments in the orchestral family give a lot of sometimes a surge of power, definitely a change in the color or characteristic sound of the orchestra as a whole. We start to see orchestras representing things that are literary in nature and not always beautiful like that supernatural or sort of, we’re a little early for psychological I suppose, but the supernatural qualities, the scary qualities are being brought out in the instruments, so that they’re being used in ranges that are not normally characteristic, so really high bassoon being used in symphony *Fantastique* to create a sense of fear in the listener rather than a sense of beauty. So we were leading away from the Classical period with proportion but were recognizing that those composers had value in and of their own.

So a lot of flexibility, themes are still singable but not predictable, harmonies are a little bit shocking. A piece that I would like you to be able to listen to- oh, tempo. Tempo is variable, highly variable, like in that Beethoven piano piece that you were listening to where the fasts get faster, the *rubato* or cello *rondo* happens with real regularity, where it sounds like a *virtuoso* is creating the piece anew.

The piece that I want to listen to to introduce you to the Romantic period is really one of my favorites. It is Schubert’s “Erlkonig,” the elf king. It tells the story- we have a narrator, a small boy being held by his father on a horse, and then the elf king himself who comes out of the trees to talk with the boy. The boy is quite sick, his father is carrying him in his arms riding through the night, and the boy starts to see this elf king coming out of the trees and at first the elf king is very seductive and says to him, “You know, you seem like a nice kid and I’d really like to take you home with me,” and the boy says to the dad, “Well, dad, this seems concerning to me. Do you see this guy, too?” And the dad says, “Nope, forget it, it’s just a cloud of mist.” And then progressively through the piece we hear this *erlkonig* return time and time again. The piece itself is in minor. We hear horses’ hooves in the piano section reflective of the father riding through the night and wind with his child, with his sick child in his arms. And as we continue on, the piece increases both- listen for the pitch level and the sound. It’s a very dramatic piece, far removed from sort of that balanced aesthetic from the Classical period, maybe a sanitized esthetic of the Classical period. From a Romantic person’s view they are adding on in terms of intensity the supernatural idea of this elf king coming out and talking to the son. The elf king is always singing in the major key trying to pull the son, trying to convince him to come with him. Then eventually, I believe it’s the third stanza, when the *erlkonig*, the elf king, comes in the third time and just, you know, says to him one more time, “Sweet child, come with me, I would love to have you come. Come with me to my magical land, it will be wonderful. But if you are not willing to come with me on your own, then I will take you by force.” Then the end of the piece is just this real devastating- where the father arrives at the inn. *Das kind ist der tod*, that’s it, the child is dead. This elf king, seeming so loving and so sweet through the whole thing and then we see at the end that it was really just another manifestation of death pulling the child from his
father’s arms basically. And so listen to this piece, listen to the quality of the piano, listen to the four voices that the same male singer must sing through in order to give this story its narration: father, son, and erlkonig, the elf king, talking with each other. The type of narrative, the intense drama, the beauty of the piece itself, listen for that. It’s a poem by Goethe. It’s really a sort of a national treasure of Germans in general. And I think it’s a great piece in terms of talking about what the Romantic period is about especially German romanticism. So please listen to that, look at the translation in the book as you’re listening, and really enjoy this piece of music.