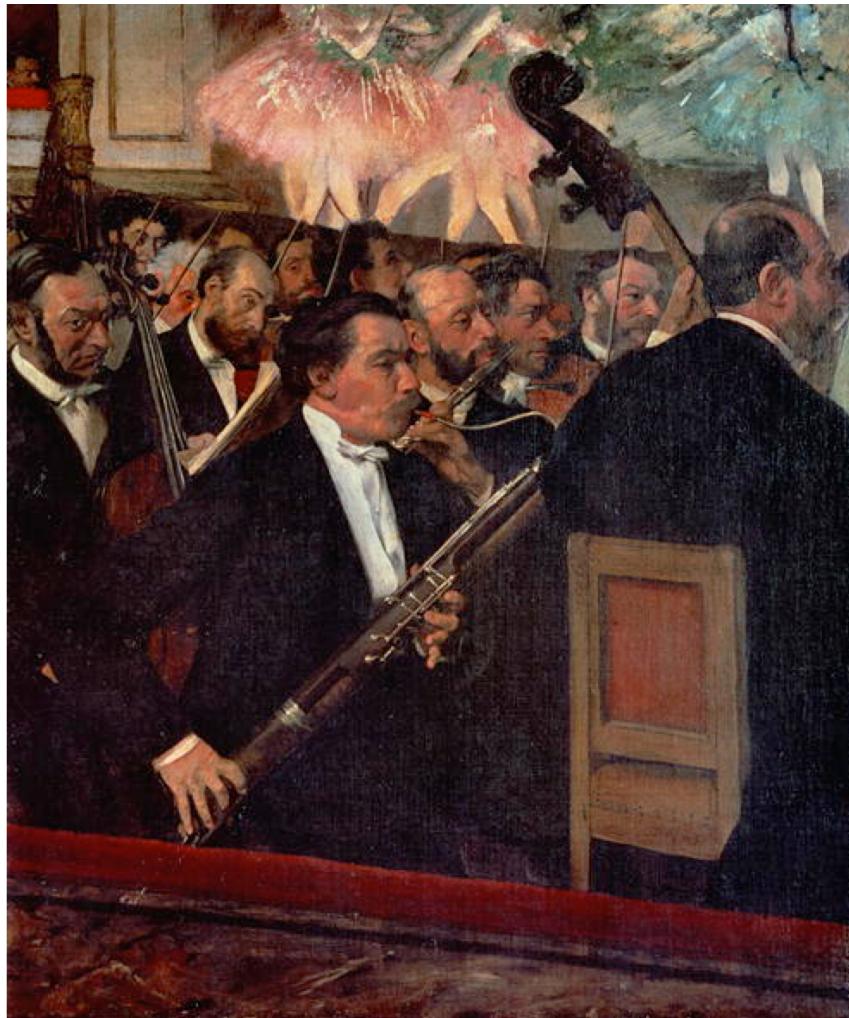


C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F I V E
19th Century Orchestral Music



*Cafe-Concert (Cabaret), c.1876-77 (pastel over monotype on paper & board), Degas, Edgar (1834-1917) / Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., USA / William A. Clark Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library
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Introduction

As with many musical terms (such as chorus, symphony, music), the word "orchestra" is of Greek origin. In ancient Greece, orchestra referred to the area in front of a stage where the chorus and dancers were placed during theatrical productions. With the development of opera in the 17th century, instrumentalists occupied this area; since opera was an attempt to re-create Greek drama, these instrumentalists were called "the orchestra."

Gradually orchestra became the term for a large ensemble of instruments. In an orchestra, multiple players are assigned to each line of music--for example, twenty violins might be playing the same part.

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This is in contrast to a smaller “chamber ensemble” in which a single instrumentalist plays each line of music.

Historical Development of the Orchestra

Although instrumental music has always existed, vocal music dominated Western music until 1600 because the leading political and social institution, the Christian Church, preferred it. The Church was wary of instrumental music because of its pre-Christian associations with secular and "pagan" rituals. For this reason, early instrumental music, most of which was dance and social music, was performed outside the auspices of the Church and therefore not written down.

Jean-Baptiste Lully

Instrumental music grew increasingly important during the Baroque (1600-1750), largely owing to the development of opera. The best and most famous Baroque orchestra was in Paris under the direction of Jean-Baptist Lully (1632-87). Lully's orchestra, which consisted primarily of viols (predecessors of the modern violin family), played at a level of precision heretofore unknown in large ensembles. After 1700, orchestras generally included flutes, oboes, and horns, with the violin family replacing the viols.

Prior to the French Revolution (1789), many aristocratic courts maintained their own orchestras. These orchestras served both as a means of entertainment and a badge of prestige--after all, who but the wealthiest could afford a standing orchestra? The great Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) spent most of his career as court composer for the fabulously wealthy Esterhazy family.¹ Some less affluent aristocrats maintained orchestras by finding domestic servants who could double as orchestral players, as indicated by the following *Vienna Gazette* advertisement of 1789:

Wanted, for a house of the gentry, a manservant who knows how to play the violin well and to accompany difficult clavier (keyboard) sonatas. ²

Largely due to the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the Classical Period orchestra became a standardized ensemble consisting of 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 timpani and strings. The strings were comprised of first and second violins, violas, cellos, and double basses.

The Symphony

The symphony grew out of the Italian opera overture (called a *sinfonia*) that consisted of three sections: fast-slow-fast. Since these *sinfonias* had no particular connection with the drama, they were sometimes performed as separate concert pieces. It was thus a short step for composers to begin writing independent concert symphonies along the lines of the opera *sinfonias*. Composers such as Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1701-75) in Milan and Johann Stamitz (1717-57) in Mannheim were important early composers of symphonies.

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The rise of the symphony was inextricably linked with Enlightenment sociology. The Enlightenment's egalitarian spirit created a growing middle class that in turn paved the way for public concerts. The first concert hall was built in Oxford in 1748 and others soon followed. The symphony became the focus of many of these concerts, and rose to become the leading instrumental genre of the Classic Period.

The Sonata Cycle

During the Classical Period, large-scale works frequently followed a standardized procedure known as the "sonata cycle." The sonata cycle consisted of four movements, which generally adhered to the following pattern:

First movement: Although sometimes preceded by a slow introduction, this movement was fast and written in the home key. For example, in a symphony in C major, this movement would be in the key of C major. It usually followed a formal pattern of Exposition-Development-Recapitulation called "sonata-allegro form."

Second movement: In contrast to the first movement, the second movement was slow, lyrical, and in a contrasting key. Taking again our hypothetical symphony in C Major, the second movement might be in A minor or G major. A variety of formal patterns were used here including theme and variations, binary and ternary forms.

Third movement: This was a Minuet and Trio, a stylized form that developed out of the minuet, a courtly dance in triple meter. It was typically in the home key, and followed a formal pattern of A (Minuet) B (Trio) and A (Repeat of the Minuet). The tempo (speed) of a minuet was moderate, and in keeping with its dance origin, was always in triple meter.

Fourth movement: The final movement was fast and energetic so as to bring the symphony to a rousing close and to get the audience hitting their hands together. It was in the home key and was often in sonata-allegro or rondo (ABACA) form.

During the Classical Period, sonata cycles were used for a variety of genres, and when written for orchestra, were called symphonies.

Beethoven's Symphonic Legacy

Beethoven was the last major composer from the Classical Period. His first symphony, written in 1800, was in the style of Haydn and Mozart, whose last symphonies dated from roughly a decade earlier. But Beethoven was a revolutionary, and in his subsequent works he expanded and changed almost every aspect of the symphony. More and more, he stretched the symphonic forms, imbuing them with a power and scope heretofore unimagined--the first movement of his 3rd Symphony is as long as the whole of many Haydn symphonies. He replaced the minuet and trio with a more assertive scherzo. He increased the size of the orchestra, even adding chorus and vocal soloists in the finale of his 9th Symphony. Beethoven transformed the symphony from an entertainment to a work of intellectual weight and personal expression. This then was his symphonic legacy, one that cast a long shadow over subsequent symphonists.

Tradition and Revolution in 19th Century Orchestral Music

Romantic orchestral composers struggled to find their place on the continuum between tradition and change. Interestingly, Beethoven had a foot on both worlds, having written both traditional and progressive symphonies. His more traditional symphonies (the 2nd and 4th for example) were absolute music--that is, abstract music with no extra-musical stimulus--and employed the Classical forms of sonata, rondo, theme and variations, etc. His progressive symphonies (the 5th, 6th, and 9th, for example) stretched the preexisting boundaries: the 5th Symphony has a psychological program of triumph over fate, the 6th Symphony has five movements instead of four, and 9th Symphony introduces the human voice into the symphony for the first time. Common to both types were Beethoven's personal expression and the incorporation of contemporary advances in harmony and orchestration.

Conservative composers such as Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, and Johannes Brahms felt that their creativity was best realized within the inherited conventions of the Classical Period. In general, their symphonies were absolute music, and embraced the symphonic forms of their predecessors.

Profile: Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)



*Portrait of Felix Mendelssohn, Duesseldorf, 1834-35
(oil on canvas), Hildebrandt, Ferdinand Theodor
(1804-74) (attr.) / Deutsches Historisches Museum,
Berlin, Germany / © DHM / Bridgeman Images*

Early Years

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on February 3rd, 1809. His paternal grandfather was the important Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, whose views played a significant role in young Felix's education.

Following the French Revolution, German Jewish families such as the Mendelssohns enjoyed greater civil rights. Felix's father Abraham became a wealthy banker and later a Town Councilor. His mother Lea also

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came from an affluent and cultured family. She was literary, musical, artistic, and spoke many languages (she could read Homer in the original). In 1816, Abraham and Lea baptized the children into Christianity (Abraham converted six years later), changing their name to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

The Mendelssohn household was a center of musical and intellectual thought. Valuing learning as they did, Abraham and Lea personally directed their children's education. The children would rise at 5 AM to begin working on their music, history, Greek, Latin, science, literature, and drawing.³ Felix's musical talent was amazing and suffers nothing in comparison with that of Wolfgang Mozart. The Mendelssohns were well to do, and there was no question of Felix suffering the exploitation that had befallen Mozart. At age 16 Mendelssohn composed his *Octet in E^b*, an undeniable masterpiece that exceeds anything composed by Mozart at a similar age. The following year he composed his *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream*, securing his place as one of the leading composers of the day. He went on to become one of the best pianists, best organists, and best conductors of his day.

In another interesting parallel with Mozart, Mendelssohn had an exceptionally talented sister. Fanny Mendelssohn composed some fine pieces--some under Felix's name, some not published during her lifetime--and one laments that lack of opportunity for women prevented her from exploring her talents to the fullest; nonetheless, she is one of the most important women composers of the 19th century.

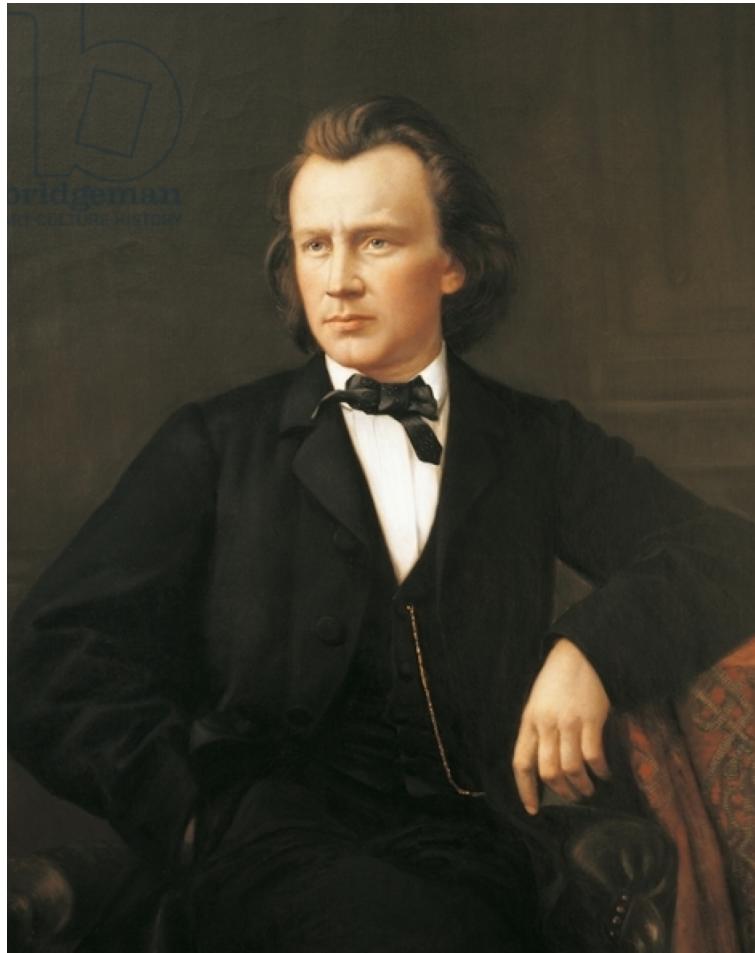
Artistic Maturity

In 1829, Mendelssohn supervised and conducted a revival of J. S. Bach's monumental masterpiece, the *St. Matthew Passion*. While listeners today would be horrified at the cuts and modifications, it was nonetheless a landmark in the renaissance of Bach's music. In that same year he embarked on several years of travel abroad, and a visit to the Scottish highlands inspired another masterpiece, the *Hebrides Overture*, Op. 26. Increasingly in demand as a conductor, he took over the reins of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra in 1835. During his five-year tenure he vastly improved the standards of orchestral performance, advanced the social position and the pay for orchestral players, and pioneered programs that included historical as well as contemporary music.⁴ It was through these concerts that he continued to promote the music of J. S. Bach. In 1843, he helped launch the Leipzig Conservatory, and helped found music festivals in Cologne, Dusseldorf, Schwerin, and Birmingham.

Last Years

Mendelssohn drove himself hard, causing friends and family to worry about his health. In May of 1847 his beloved sister Fanny died of a stroke. Following a visit to his sister's grave, Mendelssohn came down with an illness from which he did not recover. A series of strokes finally caused his death on November 3rd, 1847 at the age of thirty-eight. At his funeral several notable literary and musical figures served as pallbearers, Robert Schumann among them. A special train took his coffin to Berlin where he was buried near his sister. Memorial concerts in several German and English cities honored his passing.

Profile: Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)



*Portrait of Johannes Brahms (Hamburg, 1833-Vienna, 1897),
German composer, pianist and conductor / De Agostini Picture
Library / A. Dagli Orti / Bridgeman Images*

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg on May 7th, 1833. Hamburg was an independent city and a flourishing commercial seaport. Beneath its veneer of wealth, however, were slum-ridden waterfronts riddled with bordellos and drinking establishments that catered to itinerant sailors. His father, Johann Jakob Brahms, was the son of an innkeeper who had pursued a musical career against the wishes of his family. Johann played several instruments, but earned his living as a double-bass player. In 1830, he moved into new lodgings and within a week proposed to the landlord's sister-in-law, Christiane Nissen. It was superficially an unlikely pairing; Johann was 24, handsome, and in robust health, while Christiane was plain, sickly, slightly lame, and at 41 years of age, seventeen years his senior. She was also intelligent, practical, and literate, and the early years of their marriage were good ones. They took up lodgings in a notorious waterfront tenement known as "Adulterer's Walk," where Johannes was born three years later.⁵

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Growing up in a musician's house, Johannes was naturally surrounded by music, and from early on showed remarkable aptitude. He started the violin and cello at four, but was especially fascinated by the piano. Overcoming his father's insistence that he play an orchestral instrument, Brahms was given piano lessons. His first piano teacher, Otto Cossel, was a good one, and under his tutelage Brahms quickly developed into a fine pianist. After the ten-year old Brahms gave his first concert, an impresario offered the boy an American tour. The impoverished family was dazzled by the financial prospects, but the horrified Cossel feared such a tour would ruin the boy's budding talents. Cossel persuaded his own teacher, the famous Eduard Marxsen, to take Brahms as a pupil free of charge. The family was delighted and the American tour was forgotten.

Marxsen was a great and dedicated teacher, bringing Johannes up on a conservative musical diet of Bach and the classics. At the same time, necessity dictated that Brahms use his talents to help alleviate the family's acute poverty. Starting at age 13, Brahms began playing dance and popular music in the dives along the waterfront. As Brahms later recalled, prostitutes would gather around him at the piano, plying their trade or making crude jokes while waiting for clients. Such an environment was hardly healthy for an adolescent and most biographers suggest it caused his later difficulties in relations with women. Whatever the truth, these experiences no doubt left their mark.

Brahms had been composing steadily, and a friend persuaded him to show some of his work to Robert and Clara Schumann who were staying in a nearby hotel. Unfortunately, the Schumanns were too busy and the parcel containing his works was returned unopened.

Following the brutal suppression of a Hungarian uprising by the Austrians and Russians, a stream of Hungarian refugees passed through Hamburg, bringing with them their music. This music, some of it gypsy influenced, was embraced in Hamburg both for its own appeal and as an expression of sympathy for the rebels. Brahms never forgot the rhythms and flavor of this gypsy music, and its influence can be seen in some of his compositions. Among these refugees was the famous violinist Eduard Reményi, and in 1853 Brahms and Reményi embarked on a concert tour of northeast Germany. During this tour Brahms performed a legendary deed of musicianship. Scheduled to perform a Beethoven sonata, he discovered that the piano was tuned a semitone too low. Brahms transposed the sonata on the spot, astonishing even the egotistical and self-absorbed Reményi.

During this same tour Brahms met the famous violinist Joseph Joachim, and through Joachim was invited to join Franz Liszt's musical circle in Weimar. Liszt and his followers formed the vanguard of "the New German School," a group of progressives who advocated music that expressed emotional states and literary ideas. The 18-year-old Brahms, fresh from the slums of Hamburg, was understandably intimidated by the pomp, celebrity, and sophistication of the Weimar group. To make matters worse, the intellectual and affected Weimar group spoke only French--Liszt claimed he had forgotten his native tongue--placing Brahms at a greater disadvantage yet.

Brahms admired Liszt personally and like so many others, was bowled over by his pianism. But gradually Brahms realized that Liszt's artistic aesthetics were not to his liking. Raised on a conservative diet of Bach and Beethoven, Brahms disliked the emotional excesses and reliance on literary devices favored by the

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New German School. Serious and reserved, he was also uneasy with Liszt's flash and flamboyance. According to Reményi, Brahms actually fell asleep during a Liszt performance, and while this story sounds apocryphal--nobody fell asleep while Liszt was playing the piano--it nonetheless hints at Brahms' disenfranchisement from the New German School.⁶

Joachim suggested he try again to connect with Robert Schumann. Placing aside his hurt feelings over the previous rebuff, Brahms called on the Schumanns in September of 1853. Both Robert and Clara embraced him enthusiastically, recognizing at once Brahms' talent. Schumann published an article praising Brahms, and wrote a letter to his publisher Breitkopf and Härtel urging their support. Schumann's diary entry from September 30th of that year reads: "Brahms to see me (a genius)."

After staying with the Schumanns for some time, an elated Brahms returned to Hamburg, where he readied some of his previous compositions for publication. Meanwhile Schumann, who had been wrestling with mental instability for many years, began losing ground. More and more he was lost in reverie and claimed to hear voices of the dead. These voices gradually became more menacing, and in February of 1854 Schumann attempted suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine River. Rescued by the crew of a passing barge, he was placed in a mental institution.

Brahms immediately rushed to the Schumanns' side. Clara, pregnant with their 7th child, was in despair over her beloved husband. Brahms comforted her, taught her students when she was unwell, and served as surrogate father to the children. When Robert died in July of 1856, Brahms was among those escorting the coffin.

Thrown together as they were, it is clear that great feeling developed between Clara and Brahms. They were also torn by their devotion to Robert. A year after Robert's death, Brahms apparently expressed his love for her.⁷ It appears her response was negative, and later she moved back with her family to Berlin while Brahms returned to Hamburg. The extent of their relationship remains uncertain--they destroyed their correspondence by mutual consent. In any case, they remained lifelong friends.

The New German School, championed by Liszt and Wagner, had garnered much sympathy within the musical press, causing Brahms to issue a manifesto of protest. Joachim, against his better judgment, was also one of the signatories. This impulsive maneuver caused Brahms much grief. In a single gesture, Brahms made enemies, came under assault in the press, and placed tremendous pressure on himself as a guardian of the "great tradition." A gleeful Wagner immediately penned an anti-Semitic article aimed at Joachim, and in all, the manifesto was a complete disaster.

In 1862, he left Hamburg for Vienna, the musical center of the Classical Period. As Brahms put it, "I have made a move . . . and can drink my wine where Beethoven used to drink his." Relatively unknown in Vienna, Brahms had to start his career anew, all the while hoping that artistic triumphs there might cause the Hamburg musical establishment to recognize his worth and call him back. Through Clara Schumann's connections, Brahms made friends in Vienna and was soon moving in artistic circles sympathetic with his own views. Brahms made his living by teaching and conducting during the winter months, leaving his summers free to compose. As a conductor (apparently not a great one), Brahms championed the works of

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earlier composers such as Bach and Handel. Largely by the efforts of others, Brahms and Wagner were cast as foes. They in fact grudgingly admired one another (despite a few unkind comments by Wagner) and in general kept their distance.

Brahms had still hoped for a position in Hamburg but after his parents' deaths, his connections with Hamburg were minimal. Disappointed that Hamburg never honored him the way he had hoped, Brahms moved to Vienna permanently.

Brahms had been working on his 1st Symphony for several years, finally bringing it forth in 1876. Despite opposition from the New German School, the Symphony was well received, further bolstering his reputation as a composer. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Breslau, and expressed his gratitude to them with his *Academic Festival Overture*. Now famous, he earned a comfortable living from composing and conducting.

At age 57 Brahms decided to give up composing and set about dealing with any unfinished works (many of which he destroyed). However, after hearing clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, Brahms had a change of heart and composed several chamber pieces for clarinet. In 1895 the prestigious Meiningen Music Festival presented programs consisting solely of works by Bach, Beethoven and Brahms--a remarkable tribute to a living composer.

Clara Schumann died of a stroke in spring of 1896. Brahms attended her funeral in Bonn, and expressed his sorrow in the *Vier ernste Gesänge* (Four Last Songs). Worse news was yet to come: in June of that same year he was diagnosed with liver cancer. Just one month before his death, Brahms attended a performance of his Fourth Symphony on March 7th, 1897. Brahms was buried in Vienna and outpourings of sorrow came from all over Europe. In Hamburg, the source of so many rejections, the ships in the harbor lowered their flags to half-mast.

Revolutionary Orchestral Music of the Nineteenth Century

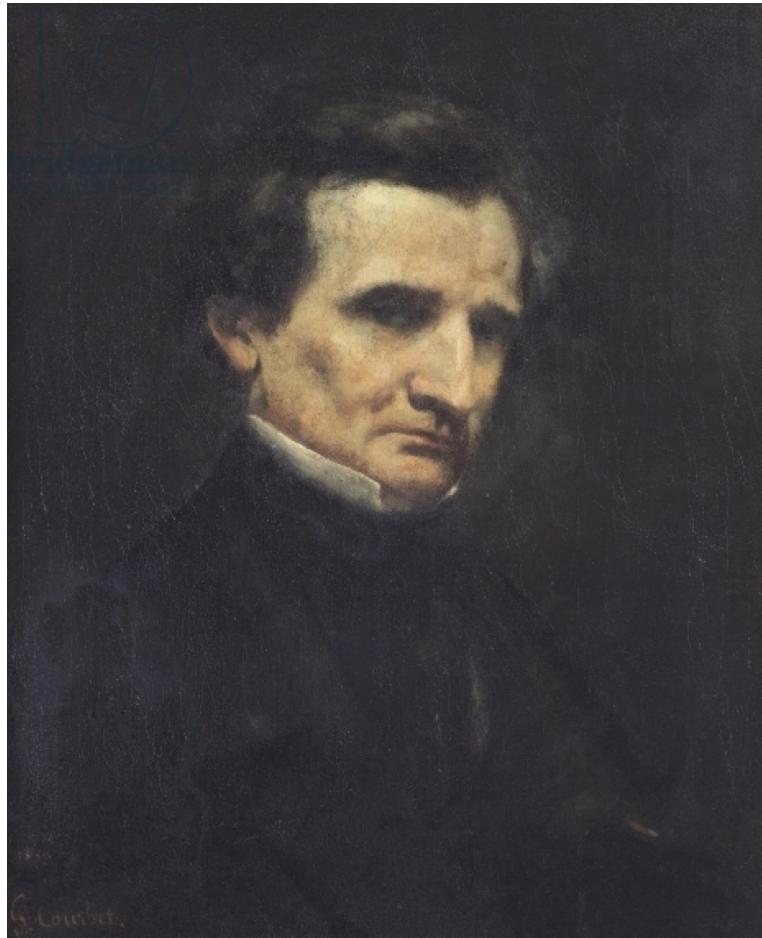
Just as traditional composers took their cue from Beethoven, so too did composers wishing to break away from the Classical model. These more "progressive" composers found their inspiration in Beethoven's Third, Fifth, Sixth and Ninth Symphonies, each of which has an extra-musical stimulus. Music inspired by such extra-musical sources is called "program music," and this was the direction favored by the Romantic Period's progressive composers.

In program music, the extra-musical idea influences the organization of the work, frequently resulting in a less conventional form than that of absolute music. For example, a composer wishing to depict the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* needs structural flexibility in order to follow the story; traditional forms, such as sonata-allegro or rondo, may be too rigid for such a purpose.

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Just as a song makes no sense without the lyrics, the program was inseparable from the program symphony. For this reason, composers of program music gave their works descriptive titles and sometimes included a programmatic commentary. Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is one of the earliest and most original examples of Romantic program music.

Profile: Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)



*Hector Berlioz (1803-69) 1850 (oil on canvas),
Courbet, Gustave (1819-77) / Musee d'Orsay, Paris,
France / Bridgeman Images*

Hector Berlioz was born in the village of La Côte-Saint-André, France, the eldest child of a prominent country doctor. As a child, Berlioz dabbled at learning several instruments but his real interest was composing, which he took up seriously in his early teens. Although wishing to pursue a career in music, his father insisted on medicine and sent Hector to the *Ecole de Medecine* in Paris. In his *Memoirs*, Hector recounts his lack of enthusiasm for medicine:

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"Become a doctor! Study anatomy! Dissect! Take part in horrible operations---instead of giving myself body and soul to music, sublime art whose grandeur I was beginning to perceive! Forsake the highest heaven for the wretchedest regions of earth, the immortal spirits of poetry and love and their divinely inspired strains for dirty hospital orderlies, dreadful dissecting-room attendants, hideous corpses, the screams of patients, the groans and rattling breath of the dying. No, No! It seemed to me the reversal of the whole natural order of my existence. It was monstrous. It could not happen. Yet it did."⁸

His studies at the *Ecole* did nothing to soften his antipathy for medicine, and Berlioz has left us a funny account of his first dissection:

"When I entered the fearful human charnel house, littered with fragments of limbs, and saw the ghastly faces and cloven heads, the bloody cesspool in which we stood with its reeking atmosphere, the swarms of sparrows fighting for scraps, and the rats in corners gnawing bleeding vertebrae, such a feeling of horror possessed me that I leaped out of the window and fled home as though Death and all his hideous crew were at my heels."

Not surprisingly, he neglected his medical studies, instead attending classes at the Paris Conservatory of Music. More and more wanting to become a composer, he finally abandoned medicine completely, prompting his parents to cut off his funds. Without their financial support, Berlioz survived precariously by teaching, writing, borrowing money from friends, and according to his *Memoirs* (much of which are tongue-in-cheek) eating a potato every other day. Three years later his parents relented and as Berlioz recalls:

"My father was grave, rather than angry, but nevertheless I stood expecting another attack when these words fell upon my shocked ears: 'After several sleepless nights I have made up my mind. You shall go back to Paris and study music but only for a time. If, after further trials, you fail, you will, I am sure, acknowledge that I have done what was right and you will choose some better career. You know what I think of second-rate poets. Second-rate artists are no better. It would be a deep sorrow and profound humiliation to me and to your mother to have you numbered among these useless members of society.' It might be remarked that my father was far more tolerant of second rate doctors, who not only are quite as numerous as bad poets or artists but are not merely useless, but positively dangerous."¹⁰

In 1826, he officially entered the Conservatory as a theory and composition major. Older than his fellow students, he quickly earned a reputation as opinionated and eccentric. He became an opera fanatic, and took to loudly voicing his opinions from the cheap seats in the balcony. Such behavior today would result in rapid ejection but things were different in Berlioz's day. During the Romantic Period, artists viewed themselves as unique, proudly announcing their individuality by living Bohemian lives, wearing their hair long, dressing outlandishly, and engaging in other unconventional behaviors (such as shouting from opera house balconies). Nineteenth century artists prized emotional outpourings and if these outbursts bordered on madness, so much the better--after all, hadn't Beethoven been slightly mad? Inadvertently, then, Beethoven launched an epidemic of eccentricity, a contagion that stricken Romantics wore as a badge of genius. Thus Berlioz's erratic behavior was in equal parts genuine eccentricity and Romantic posturing. While all this seems ridiculous today, it is nonetheless disarming in the case of Berlioz who rarely takes himself too seriously.

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As a student at the Conservatory, Berlioz competed for its prestigious composition award, the *Prix de Rome*. Finally, on his fourth attempt in 1830, he won first prize. In the midst of his Conservatory studies, he attended a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, starring the Irish actress Harriet Smithson.¹¹ Berlioz fell hopelessly in love with Smithson, which he expressed to her in passionate, desperate love letters. His love for her became a kind of madness--he wandered lost in the fields outside of Paris, causing friends to worry about him. When he saw her in the arms of another actor on stage, he rushed from the theater in jealous agony. Harriet Smithson did not reciprocate his love largely because she did not know Berlioz. All she knew about him was contained in those manic letters, and she was understandably disturbed.¹² His obsession for her continued for two years, abating only after Berlioz heard rumors that she was involved with another man. Berlioz then transferred his passions into music, resulting in the *Symphonie fantastique*.

As winner of the *Prix de Rome*, he spent two years in Italy. Upon his return to Paris in 1832, he organized a concert of his own music that included the *Symphonie fantastique*. Harriet Smithson was invited and at last Berlioz was introduced to his *femme fatale*. Berlioz soon proposed marriage and after a stormy courtship, they married in 1833 against the objections of both families. Having at last married his beloved, Berlioz was perhaps reminded of the old axiom, "be careful what you wish for." It was a troubled marriage from the start, not improved by the language barrier, their financial hardships, and her alcoholism. They had a son, Louis, but their estrangement was inevitable. Berlioz soon found consolation in the arms of another woman but continued to help Smithson financially after they separated.

Berlioz earned virtually nothing as a composer because his works were too radical for the conservative Parisian public. Indeed, his employment at the Conservatory as an assistant librarian rather than a professor gives some measure of his standing. Fortunately, Berlioz was a talented conductor and writer, and as such was able to earn a living. An unexpected gift of 20,000 francs from the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini was a godsend, but in general things remained bleak--his marriage was a disaster and performances of his music were few. However, his works were gaining success abroad, prompting him to follow up these successes in person. He traveled extensively for the next 20 years, and his works were warmly received in Vienna, Prague, Breslau, and elsewhere. During these travels he met Schumann and Liszt and renewed his friendship with Mendelssohn and Wagner. Paris, however, remained aloof.

The death of his father in 1848 was a crushing blow, but a modest inheritance relieved Berlioz's financial burdens. In 1854 Harriet Smithson died, and despite their failure together, he never wavered in his affection for her or in his gratitude for her moving interpretations of Shakespeare.

Berlioz had remained close with his sisters Nanci and Adele, and their deaths in 1850 and 1860 respectively devastated him. In 1864, he "retired" from composition and criticism. His depression deepened, accompanied by an obsession with death (he began spending worrisome amounts time at the cemetery). In 1864, he wrote:

"I am in my 61st year, past hopes, past illusions, past high thoughts and lofty conceptions. My son is almost always far away from me. I am alone. My contempt for the folly and baseness of mankind, my hatred of its atrocious cruelty, has never been so intense. And I say hourly to Death, 'When you will.' Why does he delay?"

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His wish to die would not be granted for another five years. Berlioz remained close to his son Louis, who had joined the French navy. Louis's death from yellow fever in 1867 was a crushing blow from which Berlioz never recovered. His health deteriorated and during a visit to Nice he collapsed on the seashore, dazed and bleeding. He returned to Paris where he died on March 8th, 1869.¹³

The Symphonie Fantastique

The *Symphonie fantastique* was inspired by Berlioz's unrequited love for Harriet Smithson. Berlioz created the work as an emotional autobiography, hence its subtitle: "Episode in the Life of an Artist." The *Symphonie fantastique* is a drama without words, a deliberate attempt to integrate poetic and dramatic ideas into the framework of a symphony. At its premier, financed by Berlioz, he distributed a written program to a somewhat bewildered audience. It read:

"The program should be regarded in the same way as the spoken words of an opera, serving to introduce the musical numbers by describing the situation that evokes the particularly mood and expressive character of each."

The story, as outlined in his program, tells of an exceptionally sensitive musician (Berlioz, of course) who, unable to drive from his mind the image of his beloved (Harriet Smithson), attempts to poison himself with opium. It's worth noting that while working on the *fantastique*, Berlioz had been reading Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

The Idée Fixe

One of the novel features of the *Symphonie fantastique* is its recurring melodic idea, the idée fixe. It is the opening theme of the first movement and in subsequent movements represents the hero's obsession with his beloved. Notice that even the melodic contour of the idée fixe is programmatic, first rising passionately higher before falling back with disappointment and sighs.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93)



Photograph Portrait of Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) 1863 (b/w photo), Metzger, P. (19th century) / Archives Larousse, Paris, France / Bridgeman Images

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was among the most important composers of the 19th century, and remains the most beloved of all composers in his native Russia. Born in the small town of Votkinsk in a remote Russian province, he was a precocious child, playing the piano at age 5 and speaking French and German fluently by age 6.

Despite his aptitude for music, it was neither a respectable nor a financially secure profession; this latter point was particularly important, as the family's financial situation had grown precarious. Thus at age 10, Pyotr was sent away to boarding school in preparation for enrolling in law school. An extremely sensitive boy, he was traumatized by the separation from his mother, and he never recovered emotionally from her death of cholera in 1854.

After graduating from law school, he worked for three years as a civil servant. But music remained his passion, and in 1862 Tchaikovsky enrolled in the newly formed St. Petersburg Conservatory. Though his

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progressive ideas sometimes brought him into conflict with the staid Conservatory, it nonetheless transformed him from a gifted amateur to a polished professional.

His early career was a struggle, not least because he found himself uncomfortably situated halfway between Russia's conservative European-influenced faction and its radical nationalist faction. For example, the conservative Nicholai Rubenstein lacerated Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto (now universally regarded as a masterpiece), while at the same time the composer was under constant critical assault from such nationalist composers as César Cui. Despite this factionalism, Tchaikovsky immense talent gradually prevailed, and by the 1870s he was increasingly successful.

His professional success stood in marked contrast to a fragile and tormented inner life. Acutely sensitive, he was prone to bouts of depression, hypochondria, and self-doubt. Too, Tsarist Russia was not a welcoming environment for alternative lifestyles, and fears that his homosexuality would be discovered compounded his anxieties. Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation has been much discussed, and it certainly offers insights into his life, his state of mind, and therefore his music. But it has also invited dubious forays into "armchair psychiatry." Worse, Soviet-era propagandists, in an effort to "protect" the reputation of Russia's greatest composer, destroyed or suppressed documents referring to his homosexuality.

In 1877, the attentions of two female admirers would radically alter the composer's life. The first was a former student named Antonina Miluikova. We might say today that she had a "crush" on her handsome former teacher, and Tchaikovsky responded to her impassioned letters by . . . proposing marriage! If this strikes you as implausible, you're not alone. Perhaps Tchaikovsky was hoping marriage would provide him with a veneer of respectability while quelling rumors about his homosexuality. Whatever the motivation, it was a complete disaster. Indeed, the match could hardly have been worse: Antonina was dull witted, and apparently possessed "an abundant sexual appetite."¹⁵ The marriage sent Tchaikovsky into despair, and ultimately the couple came to an arrangement--they would remain married in name only, and Tchaikovsky supported her for the rest of his days. She outlived him by 24 years, the last 20 of which were spent in an insane asylum.

His second admirer was a wealthy and music loving widow, Nadezhda von Meck. Her admiration was artistic, and she offered to subsidize his career, with the curious stipulation that they not meet in person. It was a godsend for the composer, and over the next 13 years, her generous annuity of 6,000 rubles freed Tchaikovsky from financial worry. They developed an intimate friendship through their some 1200 letters, and their correspondence has left us with valuable insights into the workings of Tchaikovsky's mind. Their friendship came to an abrupt and bitter end in 1890 when von Meck discontinued the annuity (she was concerned over her own finances), leading to some unfortunate misunderstandings. Tchaikovsky mistakenly felt that he was just a plaything to be dropped on a whim, while von Meck wrongly believed that Tchaikovsky cared only for her money.

By the time her support was terminated, Tchaikovsky was sufficiently famous to earn a good living from his compositions. He traveled a great deal, and in 1891 he was invited to the United States for the inaugural concert of New York City's Carnegie Hall. It was a huge success, as were his concerts in Baltimore and

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Philadelphia. This was followed by equally triumphant European tours, and by 1893 his fame was such that he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University.

Tchaikovsky's sixth and last symphony was completed by August of 1893, with the composer conducting its premier on October 28th of that year. Called the Pathétique, it concludes with a dark and brooding movement that left the St. Petersburg audience puzzled. Tchaikovsky would be dead nine days later, ostensibly from having contracted cholera. Alternative theories surrounding his death abound, and given the symphony's title and Tchaikovsky's state of mind, some have seen it as a kind of suicide note. Another theory has Tchaikovsky's liaisons coming to the attention of Tsar Alexander III, who then ordered the composer to commit suicide. These and other theories each have their proponents and detractors; however, most serious scholars doubt these stories, as well as the "symphony as suicide note" theory.

Tchaikovsky's highly emotional expression fell out of favor at the turn of the 20th century, with its inclination toward abstraction and objectivity. In particular, his symphonies were denigrated as saccharin in content and labored in form. In recent decades, however, Tchaikovsky's works have enjoyed a renaissance—his melodic gift was without peer, and his glistening orchestration ranks with the best. Tchaikovsky's long lyrical melodies, tinged with Russian melancholy, do not always fit comfortably into conventional symphonic forms and Germanic developmental procedures. While his first three symphonies are more "conventional" in design (reflecting his conservatory training), his last three are more experimental, and provide a more congenial vehicle for his aesthetic and style. All six symphonies remain in the repertoire, and the last three are now widely viewed as masterpieces.



Franz Liszt and the Symphonic Poem

Having taken the Western world by storm with his showmanship, magnetism, and astonishing virtuosity, Franz Liszt retired from concertizing in 1847. His reasons were many, among them declining health (the tours were murderous) and a desire to devote more time to composing.

Up to this point, Liszt had written almost exclusively for the piano, and now free from the rigors of concertizing, turned his attention to the orchestra. But there remained a question of what to write? The symphony, heretofore the most important genre of orchestral music, was increasing seen as a dead end. The masterpieces of Haydn, Mozart, and especially Beethoven cast subsequent efforts as pale reflections. Early Romantic composers such as Robert Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn temporarily resuscitated the symphony, but progressives were looking for new avenues, preferably one that married symphonic logic with the Romantic propensity for literary props.

Liszt's answer was a genre of his own creation: the "symphonic poem." Symphonic poems were large one-movement orchestral works based on a program. Unlike a symphony, Liszt's symphonic poems were freely composed, their structure dictated by the program rather than preexisting forms (e.g., sonata form). They tended to be episodic rather than developmental, and often employed "thematic transformation," a technique in which a theme reappeared in various forms, guises, and roles as a unifying element.

Liszt wrote thirteen symphonic poems, and as is often the case with groundbreaking works, their reception was mixed. Moreover, the latter 19 progressives. The former, represented by such figures as Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann, championed absolute music and were thus unfavorably disposed towards Liszt's highly programmatic works. And audiences, accustomed to conventional symphonies, were puzzled by the complexity, advanced harmonies, and unorthodox structure of the symphonic poems. Even today Liszt's symphonic poems are on the fringe of the active repertoire, but their influence on subsequent composers such as Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler was profound.

Conclusion

Beethoven's symphonic legacy included both conservative and progressive works, and subsequent composers struggled to find their place on the continuum between tradition and change. Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms were composers of genius whose temperament and talent inclined them away from the "New German School" in favor of a more conservative style. Brahms particularly came to symbolize the past, and rightly or not, was cast as a foe to the Wagnerian revolution. Brahms' reverence for the past can be seen in his *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, which not only draws its theme from an earlier composer but also reaches still further back in its compositional techniques.

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Following the course charted by Beethoven's programmatic symphonies, "progressive" Romantic composers championed program music--works inspired by an extra-musical stimulus. One of the pioneers of the program symphony was Hector Berlioz, whose supercharged imagination and unconventional ideas broke new ground and set the stage for the later programmatic works of Liszt, Wagner, Strauss, and others. His *Symphonie fantastique* is an emotional biography, a drama without words integrated into the framework of a Beethoven-style symphony. The *fantastique* is revolutionary for its five movements, its programmatic and subjective content, its orchestration, and its use of thematic transformation (the idée fixe).

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky ranks among the greatest symphonists of the 19th century. While less overtly radical than Berlioz or Liszt, Tchaikovsky created—particularly in his last three symphonies—a successful hybrid, one that retained the broad outlines of symphonic form while effectively housing his personalized expression and plaintive lyricism.

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Notes

¹Incidentally, Mozart spent much of his early life seeking a similarly wealthy patron. After the social upheaval of the French Revolution, musicians were increasingly forced to become “freelancers,” much in the way they are today. Mozart, one of music’s first “free agents,” was moderately successful. A generation later, Beethoven would flourish in the new music marketplace.

²Arthur Loesser, *Men Women and Pianos* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1954), p.119.

³*The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s. v. "Mendelssohn, Felix," by Karl-Heniz Kšhler.

⁴*The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s. v. "Mendelssohn, Felix," by Karl-Heniz Kšhler.

⁵Paul Holmes, *Brahms* (New York: Omnibus Press, 1984), p. 8.

⁶Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1998), p. 212.

⁷*The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s. v. "Brahms, Johannes," by Henz Becker.

⁸*The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, edited by Ernest Newman (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932), p16.

⁹Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1998), p. 154.

¹⁰*The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, edited by Ernest Newman (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932), p16.

¹¹Harriet Smithson had taken Paris by storm with her Shakespearean interpretations. Interestingly, she was not admired in Shakespeare's native England because of her Irish accent. In general, Shakespeare was enjoying a revival in the 19th century. His juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, his rapid scene changes, and his freely constructed prose appealed to the Romantic aesthetic. The Shakespeare revival inspired many Romantic composers, including Mendelssohn (*Overture to a Midsummer's Night Dream*), Tchaikovsky's (*Romeo and Juliet*), and Verdi's (*Otello*, *Macbeth*, and *Falstaff*).

¹²Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers*, p. 159.

¹³*The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s. v. "Berlioz, Hector," by Hugh McDonald

¹⁴Joseph Kerman, *Listen*, 3rd ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 249.

¹⁵Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers*, p. 369.