



THE ROMANTIC SPIRIT IN MUSIC

By John Toomey

The end of the eighteenth century witnessed a series of vast and far-reaching changes in European history. Political, social, economic, industrial, and technological, these changes were the beginnings of processes which served to bring about what we call the modern world. Their effect on the arts was also dramatic, and brought about a tremendous cultural phenomenon which in some ways continues even today: the Romantic movement.

To understand the nature of Romanticism it is first necessary to examine the cultural environment from which it emerged. The eighteenth century was a period of relative stability in Europe. Political power rested largely in the hands of royalty and the aristocracy. Reason was the motive force of the age; men put great stock in the power of intellectual judgement to solve problems. The rise of Science created great faith in Man's ability to control Nature. Progress, it was felt, could best be effected through existing institutions and societal structures.

In the arts, the spirit of the eighteenth century was embodied in a movement we call Classicism. The word "classic" (from the Latin word "classicus", which described the highest class of Roman citizens) originally was used in reference to the great artistic achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. Gradually, however, it began to be used to refer to any work which displayed those qualities thought to be the hallmarks of the Greco-Roman masterpieces, namely balance, objectivity, clarity, simplicity, and perfection of form. The Classical artist thought of himself not so much as one

who expressed his own innate urges, but rather as someone who unveiled the already existing beauty of the universe, guided by the dictates and rules of past Masters. In music, the Classical period extended from about 1750 to approximately 1820. During this time, the composer was thought of largely as a servant. Wealthy aristocrats provided the major means of support for musicians, who fashioned their works according to the specific demands of their patrons. With the exception of Church music, the composer's production was intended to accomplish nothing more than entertainment. Mozart and Haydn, the archetypal Classical composers, for the most part accepted their roles as talented functionaries whose success could be measured by how well they fulfilled the demands their society placed upon them.

But by the end of the eighteenth century, that society was coming apart. The violence of the American and French Revolutions proved to be only the first of a series of shocks that would change the character of Europe unalterably. Everywhere men were chafing under the rule of a despotic aristocracy. The Industrial Revolution, which had begun under such glorious promise, was now subjecting large numbers of the working classes to appalling work conditions. Increased free enterprise began to give the middle class greater economic and political power. And the turbulence within society brought forth a new kind of artist: the Romantic.

Unlike his predecessors, the Romantic saw himself as an outsider. He did not seek to work within the established conventions of society, but tried to change them, or to express

himself independent of the prevailing cultural tendencies. Above all, he was an individual; he viewed artistic communication as something intensely personal. The breakdown of social and class barriers which attended the beginning of the nineteenth century showed the Romantic that each man was responsible for his own destiny; he could no longer resign himself to accept the whims of Fate. On the other hand, Romanticism often sought escape from the ordinary world which it found either too horrible or too mundane; many artists used exotic, mysterious, or ancient subjects in their works.

Undoubtedly the man who bridged the gap between Classic and Romantic views of life was Beethoven. Though early in life his works exemplified the Classical ideals of proportion and grace typical of Haydn and Mozart, in later years Beethoven displayed an intense dissatisfaction with old forms and methods. His compositional notebooks show a constant struggle toward a personal artistic goal which always remained unattainable. Single-handedly, Beethoven created the Romantic conception of the composer as someone whose function is not to serve others, but rather to sacrifice everything in order to bring to full expression the products of his tortured genius. In his impassioned letter of October 6, 1802 which became known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, he expressed a sentiment of the type which came to be typical of the Romantic artist: "... only art it was that withheld me, ah it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence..." For the first time in history, the creative process

was seen as its own justification; Art for Art's sake was the prevailing doctrine.

Above all, the Romantic was an Individual. The breakdown of social and political institutions at the end of the eighteenth century showed him that Truth must be sought within. The rise of the Common Man elicited the realization that the deepest and most eternal feelings are shared by all human beings, and these the artist celebrated. He felt that if he could adequately express the very root of his own experience, he would be universally understood. This philosophy is behind the intimate, introspective art songs of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms.

The same kind of thinking led to a profound questioning of the values of civilization itself. Rejecting the previous era's faith in the reforming power of institutions, Romantics felt that modern society actually was a corrupting influence. They therefore sought a return to Nature, which they saw as representing the innocent, pure, and eternal side of life, as opposed to the ravages of the Industrial Revolution which they saw all around them. Taking their cue from Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 (Pastoral), which utilized instrumental imitations of birds, a rippling brook, and a thunderstorm, Romantic composers wrote many works based on natural subjects, such as Schubert's *Trout Quintet*, Schumann's *Rhenish* and *Spring* symphonies, and Bedřich Smetana's *The Moldau*.

Just as the poets and painters of the nineteenth century lost faith in a

rationalistic, objective view of the universe, the composer also rejected a purely external approach to his subjects. With utmost faith in the power of the untrammelled imagination, the Romantics ever pursued the unseen, the mysterious, the visionary, the magical aspects of existence. They wanted to delve beneath the surface of life to seek the hidden Truth within. Even in failure, they felt the nobility of the quest made the attempt worthwhile. Wagner's operas are perhaps the best examples of this intensely vehement striving after the infinite, but it can also be heard in the symphonic music of Mahler, Tchaikowsky, and Sibelius. Similarly, the Romanticist delighted in portraying subjects far removed in time and place from everyday life; Rimsky-Korsakoff went to the *Tales of the Arabian Nights* to find the story for his *Scheherazade*; Grieg used Norwegian folklore as a basis for his *Peer Gynt*, and Puccini found locales for his operas in Japan and the American West.

The Romantic epoch was an age of Nationalism. The liberalizing of political structures and the rise of the Common Man gave the composer a renewed interest in the traditions of his native land. Liszt, Dvorak, and Mussorgsky were among the more successful innovators who incorporated folk melodies, rhythms, and harmonies from their homelands into their works. In many cases these found their way into the musical mainstream, immeasurably enhancing its content and texture.

As composers increased the range of their subject matter, they also sought

to improve the tools of their trade. The quality of instruments improved greatly during the nineteenth century, and their prices declined. The pian acquired a much fuller tone and greater dynamic range; the brass instruments were given valves, which vastly increased their versatility. The higher number and better quality of musical conservatories meant more and better musicians. For one thing, this allowed the orchestra to expand mightily, and greatly augmented the kind and nature of effects it could produce. The man who carried this phenomenon to its peak was undoubtedly Hector Berlioz, whose *Grande Messe des Morts* calls for a chorus of 290 members, and an orchestra containing 108 strings, 20 woodwinds, 50 brass instruments, and 27 percussionists. The need for greater expressiveness was met with ever more elaborate harmonic schemes, until by the end of the century Classical harmony had broken down completely.

All in all, Romanticism accomplished a great deal for music. It freed the art from the creative and social strictures of the eighteenth century, broadened its appeal to encompass a types and classes of people, and provided a sturdy framework for the experiments of the twentieth century. The "intellectual and emotional associations, nurtured by the romantic movement," Machlis has said, "enabled music to achieve a commanding position in the nineteenth century as a moral force, a vision of man's greatness, and a direct link between his inner life and the world around him."*

*J. Machlis, *The Enjoyment of Music*, New York, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1963.