

Development of the Symphony 1830-90

During the Nineteenth Century, the development of Romanticism led to the emergence of two different strands in symphonic writing; there were some composers who decided to stick to the ideals of classical form (though with more Romantic styles of melody and harmony), while others began to incorporate elements of programme music into the symphony, with many innovations in terms of form, structure and an element of ongoing narrative.

The structure of the symphony was established in the later works of Haydn and Mozart. There were four movements, the first being in sonata form, the second being a slow, lyrical movement in either theme-and-variations, rondo, or ternary form, the third being a minuet in ternary form, or scherzo, and the finale being fast, lighter than the first movement, often in rondo form. The first and last movements were in the same key, with the slow movement in a related one.

This is not to say that the traditional structure was rigidly adhered to by all Classical composers. Indeed, Haydn in his 107 symphonies managed to innovate greatly in his treatment of form and thematic material.

By 1830, following the Ninth Symphonies of Beethoven and Schubert it appeared that all possibilities for the symphony had been exhausted. Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) decided to take a completely different approach, and composed his *Symphonie Fantastique*, a piece of programme music inspired by his own love life. He tried to unite the Beethoven conception of the symphony with his own partiality for descriptive music (something that Beethoven himself had done in his 6th symphony – the ‘Pastoral’) by means of a recurring theme – the *idée fixe*. This theme returns in each of the five movements, serving to unite the different musical ‘scenes’.

Another work by Berlioz, *Harold en Italie* (1834) was based on a poem by Byron. This also makes use of a recurring theme, representing the character Harold, but it is not subject to the variation given the *idée fixe* in the *Fantastique*. Much melodic material does however develop from the idea. Berlioz did admire Beethoven, and sought to extend the earlier composer’s unity of moods, thematic development and dramatic orchestration outside the restrictive sonata form, and with even more passion. An extension of the *idée fixe* is the leitmotif, used in many of Wagner’s operas and in Liszt’s work.

The *Symphony in D Minor* of the Belgian-French composer César Franck is a good example of the trend towards cyclical structure: the binding together of different movements by means of recurrent themes or motifs. Harmonically, it is influenced by Wagner’s chromaticism. Franck’s only symphony was one of the most important works of the Romantic era.

The nineteenth century saw the introduction of the symphonic poem. This abolished the traditional four-movement structure by establishing a work consisting of one single, extended movement. Symphonic poems, like programme music are based on a non-musical idea. Liszt is considered to have created the genre. One of his first works of this type was ‘*Les Préludes*’. Instead of the sonata form of Classical music, which was based upon a sequence of exposition, development and

recapitulation, symphonic poems derived their structure from the 'character' or 'plot' of the idea that they were describing. Many nationalistic composers used the idea in some of their most famous works such as Smetana's 'Ma Vlast.'

Composers of symphonic poems provided continuity and a sense of unity by using motifs, or recurring themes, which were developed and transformed according to the needs of the 'narrative'. Composers often used harmony and instrumentation for expressive and descriptive purposes, leading to many innovations in these areas of composition.

Despite the dawn of programme music, many composers were conscious of their debt to the Classical composers - Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. Although these composers used unmistakably Romantic melodies and harmony, they remained committed to traditional forms.

The Austrian composers Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler were both influenced by the music dramas of the Richard Wagner. Bruckner wrote nine symphonies which each achieve coherence in structure through the repetition of melodic and rhythmic patterns. He based his symphonies first on Beethoven's Ninth and secondly on the size and scale of some of Wagner's works. He also incorporated elements of Wagner's style and orchestration. He extended the traditional sonata-form tradition in some of his first movements to feature three rather than two themes; wrote long adagios, often with a huge orchestral climax, and some very fast scherzos though with contrastingly lyrical middle sections; and he extended finales, often again with three themes, and from no.3 onwards, ending with a recapitulation of the symphony's opening theme. Mahler extended the length of his symphonies and often included passages of vocal music.

Even more conservative Romantics, including Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms sometimes changed the number and order of movements in their symphonies, and even looked at ways of unifying them, by the use of recurring themes. The only element of programme music is perhaps the titles, which may indicate a work's inspiration, or the atmosphere intended – Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' and 'Italian', or Schumann's 'Spring', for example. Brahms attempted no such mood painting, but still made many significant innovations within the standard four-movement pattern. He uses motifs to link movements and incorporated Baroque-style complex polyphonic textures, still within the traditional sonata form. In his first three symphonies, he replaced Beethoven's scherzo with a lyrical, intermezzo-like movement in moderate tempo.

The Romantic period saw many composers try to break through the restrictive nature of traditional classical forms, through programme music and the symphonic poem. Others were happy to extend and develop what had been successful in the past. Few composers made no attempt at innovation; the Nineteenth century saw major changes in terms of harmony and style.

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