MUSIC IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD (1820-1900)

The term "romantic" is often used to describe feelings of love between people. But in the case of Romantic music, it has very little to do with that type of definition. The Romantic period in history came at a time of great development and strife in the world. It coincided with the Industrial Revolution, which created a tremendous amount of social and economic change.

The Romantic period stressed emotion, imagination, and individualism. As with many of the periods of music history, this period was a reaction or a rebellion against the period that preceded it—the Classical period. Composers in the Romantic period were free from the bondage of having to work for the aristocracy that many of the earlier composers felt, and they were therefore able to compose music more for their own individual and egocentric purposes. However, because they were not able to make as much money as the earlier composers did when they worked for the aristocracy, the composers of the Romantic period often worked on the side as teachers, conductors, music critics, or soloists. Most of the music of the Romantic period was written for the middle class by middle-class composers.

Several elements set Romantic music apart from music that had come before it and would come after it. The Romantic composer put a great deal of emphasis on self-expression and his or her own individual style. Whereas in the Classical period composers felt that they needed to write music that was understood and liked by everyone, composers in the Romantic period felt strongly that they should compose music that satisfied their own desires and needs as people and as individuals.

The subjects of the compositions often dealt with fantastic or dream-like characters. Nature also was very important to composers of the Romantic period in showing the difference between the individual man versus all of nature. Nationalism was a very important aspect of music in the Romantic period. Nationalism is a theme of specific national identity. The composers would use folksongs, legends, and the country's history as the subjects for these compositions.

In addition to nationalism, many composers in the Romantic period wrote music that dealt with far-away countries and lands and their exotic natures. Composers in Europe would write of peoples and musical Africa, the Mediterranean, or the Orient. One of the most important elements in all of Romantic music is its programmatic nature. Program music has a specific story, idea, or scene that the composer wants to portray through music.

Perhaps the greatest of all the differences between Romantic music and the music that had gone before was the change from miniature or smaller forms to the focus and emphasis on larger forms of music. Symphonies, concertos, chorales, and oratorios all became much longer pieces of music than they had been previously. It might take 15-20 minutes to perform all three or four movements of a piece that was written in the Classical period, but a Romantic symphony could take as long as two full hours.