The Romantic Period: c. 1820-1900

**Historical & Social Perspectives**

With the rise of the middle-class in the American and French Revolutions taking hold in the Classical period, the struggle for freedom continued to roll across Europe and the West. Changes were profound and ordinary people developed new hopes and aspirations for their countries and themselves. Faith in the their fellow man flourished as did the idea that freedom was truly attainable, although society had yet to achieve it. Popular uprisings occurred throughout Europe — more revolutions in France, various independent states of Germany and Italy — and subsequently fell short. Despite an aura of disbelief and dissatisfaction in the ability for democracy, self-determination and the improvement of daily life to take hold, the spirits of the people yearned for reform.

The Romantic period did witness the rise of imperial Europe. Where the Industrial Revolution began, the saying “the sun never sets on the British Empire” was already true as colonies spanned the globe from Canada, Africa, India and Australia.

Queen Victoria, the longest reigning British monarch, ruled throughout most of the 19th century. Along with her husband, Prince Albert, they led Britain with a sense of duty, personal integrity, patriotism and a strong commitment to church and family. Through their benevolence and virtue, they increased British influence around the world. In addition to Britain, Portugal, Spain and France increased their influence specifically in Africa.

The Industrial Revolution also had an drastic effect on the social status of populations. A new elite class of industrialists, factory owners rose to social prominence to rival the dwindling aristocracies. New money was discerned from old money; inheritance separated from earned income. One thing that did not change was the existence of hired help. The new elite upper-middle class had large homes, not quite as large as aristocrats, but large enough to employ servants: butlers, housemaids, cooks, gardeners and outdoor maintenance staff. Size of household staff was seen as marks of social status. However, as this new elite class grew so did a new class of poverty-stricken people. Now, in attempt to find new work, men, women and children flocked to growing urban centers living in squalor and working long hours in terrible conditions. The invention of gas lighting only added to the misery of the urban poor as work days could be extended to fifteen hours. Children were often employed to work in conditions that proved to small for adults, such as cleaning beneath large and heavy machinery and working in recesses of coalmines.

Due in large part to the confluence of the struggle for individual dignity, personal and political freedom and the plight of the urban poor, a wave of social consciousness swept through Europe. The establishment of charitable organizations, free public education, abolitionism and socialism led to reform movements to improve working conditions, nutrition and health of the laboring class. Perhaps the strongest voice of this socialist movement was the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx whose writings on the struggles between the ruling class (capitalists) and the working class (proletariat) led to remarkable shifts of thought throughout Europe over the ensuing decades.

**Artistic & Scientific Contexts**

With the burgeoning Industrial Revolution sprouting from western Britain and sweeping across Europe and North America, technology increased the ease of manufacturing goods and improved the daily lives of common people. New industries sprouted across Europe in proximity to the available resources. Likewise, smaller towns grew rapidly based on the arrival of new industry. In Germany, the
chemical industry flourished due to abundant mining resources. Power machines revolutionized the textile industry. With the advent of the Jacquard loom in France, the weaving of complex patterns by machine became possible. The movement of goods and people increased as railways laced across the landscape connecting towns and cities.

Perhaps one of the most important scientific books of the nineteenth century was *On the Origin of Species* by Englishman Charles Darwin. His argument that all species of life on earth was the product of “natural selection.” He coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” to describe why some species die out while others continue to exist. His theory of evolution was seen to be a challenge to the Biblical account of creation — a debate that still happens today.

Commonplace items that were introduced in the Romantic period were: electric motor (1821), chocolate bar (1828), sewing machine and lawn mower (1830), bicycle (1839), flush toilets (1840), can opener (1855), subway (1863), medical thermometer (1866), typewriter (1870), electric light bulb (1874), telephone (1876), automobile (1880), inflatable tires and record player (1888). Processes of photography, sterilization, welding, and radiology were pioneered throughout the 1800s as well.

Major influences upon artistic output were seemingly made of opposing pairs – fascination of the supernatural and macabre and attempts to capture the realism of life; a sense of nostalgia and breaking conventions of the past. Two themes that were not at odds at each other and had impacts on Romantic art were the glorification of nature and the exploration of emotion. Romantics built upon the writings of Goethe and Schiller and rediscovered the works of Shakespeare. This exploration of the human condition and led to development of the novel as a literary form. Examples would be Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Alexandre Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, and collected works of Charles Dickens.

Poetry that captured the imagination and emotion, freed from the confines of meter and form, became overwhelmingly popular as well. Englishmen Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, American Longfellow and Frenchmen Chateaubriand and Lamartine all embraced the freedom of folk poetry and balladry — forms popular more than 100 years previous.

**Music in the Romantic Period**

As time is fluid and no event truly marks the beginning of a new era, historians occasionally or arbitrarily assign importance to certain transitions. Such is the case with the transition to the Romantic from the Classical period. Most musicologists (music historians) agree that the two composers who bridge this gap and provide the impetus for change and growth into the Romantic period are Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert. However, a harbinger of events unfolding was Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6 ‘Pastoral’ in 1808. This work is one of the first to truly abandon purpose or service music. One of the earliest examples of “tone-painting,” it illustrates Austrian country life including a realistic thunderstorm, birdsong and a village festival.

Beholden to the Church and aristocracy for financial support, artists toiled for years under tight constraints. During the Romantic period, composers no longer had to defer to patrons with plentiful sources of income amongst the bourgeois. All artists now could create art for art’s sake, liberated to create their own standards. Overindulgence, enthusiasm and optimism often followed by deep depression and cynicism characterized this creative mode. Many were victims of exhaustion having thrown themselves into their work and many died young.
Self-sufficient and independent of patronage, the arts flourished and created great and energetic cultural centers across Europe—traditional cultural hubs of Paris, Vienna and London were now joined by regional centers of Prague, Budapest, Leipzig, Dresden and Amsterdam. Public concert associations, philharmonic orchestral societies, opera and ballet companies were established throughout Europe and into the Untied States and other European protectorates. In 1781, the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig was one of the earliest permanent orchestras. During the late Classical period and into the Romantic period, the rise of permanent professional orchestras is witnessed. Below appears a brief list of some important orchestras and their founding dates:

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<th>Year</th>
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**Romantic Opera**

No other period of music seems to embody the melodrama of opera than the Romantic period. The elaborate costumes and scenery, the multitude of characters, the overwhelming size of the cast and dancing—all accompanied by an orchestra—opera naturally epitomizes romanticism.

Audiences have been drawn to opera as a diversion from the everyday. However, Romantic opera, through its fantastic locales and eras, experimentation in magic, mystery and the supernatural, became an exceptional vehicle for composers during this period. Here are a few examples:

- **Fidelio** (1805) by Ludwig van Beethoven – Themes: heroism, love, death
- **Der Freischütz** *(The Freeshooter)* (1821) by Carl Maria von Weber – Themes: magic, mystery, supernatural
- **La Traviata** *(The Courtesan)* (1853) by Giuseppe Verdi – Themes: love, death, beauty
- **Die Walküre** *(The Valkyrie)* (1870) by Richard Wagner – Themes: heroism, supernatural, love
- **Carmen** (1875) by Georges Bizet – Themes: the common man, love, death, exotic cultures
- **Madama Butterfly** (1904) by Giacomo Puccini – Themes: distant lands, travel, exotic cultures, love, death
- **Turandot** (posthumous – 1926) by Giacomo Puccini – Themes: distant lands, travel, exotic cultures, love, death

Until this time, when an important aria was to take place, all action on stage would cease. The performers stood frozen in tableau, while the soloist crossed downstage and delivered his or her aria. Suddenly, the fair maiden, on the cusp of death in her bed, would throw off her covers, leap to her feet and sing. Following her aria, the death scene would continue. Likewise, the hero, about to vanquish the story’s villain, postponed the kill until after his aria. As opera developed, composers and performers became more skilled at working dramatic musical and plot development moments into one cohesive unit. This was aided by the composers search for existing or new quality texts to which to set their music. Composers and their skilled librettists (musical book or story writer—much like a lyricist) adapted stories by William Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas and Johann von Schiller for the operas.

During this time, three schools of opera developed centered on musically powerful traditions: Italy, France and Germany. Much like the Classical period, it may be helpful to study these schools and the operas produced by investigating the composers.
**Italian Romantic Opera**

Italian composers and the Italian language continued to dominate opera from its very inception with Monteverdi in the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods. Even Mozart used Italian in most of his operas. It was through the Italian language and composition that a style of singing known as *bel canto* (‘beautiful song’). Melodies became so complicated they required extensive vocal gymnastics that astonished audiences with the soloists’ virtuosity. Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini helped create this new Italian opera school, but three stand out as masters developing this new craft: Gioacchino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini.

**Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)**  
One of the last masters of *opera buffa*, or comic opera, Rossini spent his first thirty years in northern Italy; born in Pesaro on the Adriatic coast then moving to Bologna and on to Milan. By age 21, Rossini had composed ten operas only three years after his debut in the genre. Soon he was composing for the most important opera houses in Italy including the Teatro San Carlo of Naples and the prestigious Teatro della Scala in Milan. During his most prolific years in Milan, he produced 32 operas before age 30. Some of the best known of these works were *L’Italiana in Algeri* (The Italian Girl in Algiers, 1813), *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville, 1816) and *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella, 1817). Rossini was able to craft appealing melodies and combine them with comedic content and brilliant staging. These qualities made Rossini one of the most sought-after opera composers of the early nineteenth century.

In 1823, Rossini moved to another cultural center of Europe – Paris – as he married singer Isabella Colbran and became the director of the Théâtre-Italien. For the ensuing six years, Rossini continued his considerable compositional output. At age 37, after a series of disappointing relationships and bouts of illness, Rossini turned away from opera – the tale of *Guillaume Tell* (William Tell) would be his 39th and final opera. Much like the rest of his operatic overtures, the Overture to William Tell found renewed life as the theme to the radio and television Western serial drama, “The Lone Ranger.” Although Rossini continued composing, he spent the remainder of his compositional life in religious music and songs. Rossini, at age 74, found himself with remarkable success and financial security at the time of his death in Paris.

**Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)**  
Born in the tiny village of Le Roncole near Busseto, Italy on October 9, 1813, Giuseppe Verdi was one of two composers that transformed opera into a fully integrated art form. At age eighteen, he furthered his musical training at the Milan Conservatory, but could not pass entrance examinations due the perception of inferior piano skills. Instead, Verdi studied privately with Lavigna, the conductor at La Scala opera house. Between the ages of 26 and 80, Verdi composed more than twenty-five operas. His first, *Oberto*, premiered in 1839 at the famous La Scala opera house. What should have been a joyous year of Verdi’s success and emergence as a profound musical talent turned terribly sad with the mysterious and heartbreaking deaths of Verdi’s wife and children. This tragedy nearly turned him completely away from music. With the next commission from a wealthy and influential opera producer, Verdi reluctantly set to work on his next opera, *Nabucco*, which told the elaborate tale of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. From reading the text, music erupted from within Verdi. From that point, only innovative and extravagant work would be produced from his pen. “With this opera,” Verdi said, “my artistic career can truly be said to have begun.” *Nabucco* premiered at La Scala in March 1842 and was an overnight success. His innovations began to take shape as the quality of the libretto improved (adapted texts...
from Shakespeare - Macbeth & Othello, Hugo - Rigoletto, Dumas – La Traviata), the characters were authentic and convincing, arias blended with on stage action and orchestral overtures, interludes and accompaniment were of high quality, expressive and contributed to the development of the entire production.

Verdi’s operas, while made famous in Milan at La Scala, were often premiered in other cities: Macbeth (1847) in Florence, Rigoletto (1851), La Traviata (1853), Aroldo and Simon Boccanegra (1887) in Venice, Il Trovatore (1853) in Rome, La Forza del Destino (1862) in St. Petersburg, Don Carlos (1867) in Paris, and Aida (1887) in Cairo. His final opera, Falstaff (Milan, 1893) was in defiance of a comment made by Rossini, who proclaimed that Verdi could not write comedic opera. Falstaff is a brilliant tour-de-force of clever wit, powerful voice and inventive instrumentation.

Despite what appears as nonstop composition, Verdi actually took several respite from the rigors of operatic composition at his family’s estate near Busetto with farming and representing his district in the new Italian legislature. His name actually became a rallying acronym in the struggle for independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Vittore Emanuele Ré D’Italia (Victor Emanuel, King of Italy) was cried around the country. When Victor Emanuele became the first monarch of a united Italy, Verdi was appointed to the new parliament and elected to the senate. Through his toils in government, he helped establish a home for retired opera singers and musicians. Upon his death in 1901, the nation recognized his immense contributions to the foundations of a united Italy with nearly 200,000 Italians attending his funeral in Milan. Verdi wrote over 25 operas – not all great, some not even performed any longer. However, the masterpieces of Rigoletto, Il Trovatore, La Traviata, Aida, Otello and Falstaff are still heard wherever opera is performed.

**Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)** Born into a family of church composers in Lucca, Italy, Giacomo Puccini planned to follow the family trade early in his life. However, at age seventeen, he witnessed a production of Verdi’s Aida, and became hooked on opera. With considerable skills and talent, he enrolled at the Milan Conservatory to study opera composition.

Following his studies, Puccini began composing, finishing his first opera, Le villi, when he was twenty-five. A famous music publisher, Giulio Ricordi, attended the first La Scala production of his opera and immediately commissioned Puccini to continue writing opera. Puccini, keeping this profitable alliance with Ricordi the publisher, became the most important Italian opera composer of the late Romantic period. Many of Puccini’s opera are adapted tragic love stories set far from Italy: Madama Butterfly in Japan, Turandot in China, and La fanciulla del west (The Girl of the Golden West) in California. Perhaps his best-known work, La bohème (The Bohemian Life) has enjoyed successful performances since its debut in 1896. Based upon the novel by H. Murger, Scènes de la Vie de Bohème (Scenes from the Bohemian Life), the work has nothing to do with the Czech region of Bohemia. Rather the free-living artists and artisans who lived in the Parisian Left Bank were dubbed bohemians – a term used to describe their struggle against the establishment. It has enjoyed a renewed resurgence since the 1996 redevelopment of the storylines by young composer Jonathan Larson for his musical theater production of Rent. Instead of Paris’ Left Bank, Larson uses New York City’s East Village as the locale and borrows heavily from Puccini original, even quoting several measures of “Musetta’s Waltz” during one of the scenes.

**French Romantic Opera**

With aftershocks of the French Revolution, the tumult of the Napoleonic Empire and the rising of the bourgeois, Paris found itself to be a tempestuous and intriguing center for artistic development and found itself a serious rival to Milan as the opera capital of Europe.
Composers of all nations flocked to Paris to have their operas performed – Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842), Gasparo Spontini (1774-1851), Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini and Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864).

Designed to appeal to the somewhat unrefined middle class, French opera was known as grand opera. More than the music, the visual spectacle was of greatest importance to draw the crowds to the opera house. Elaborately costumed crowd scenes, immense choruses, a great deal of ballet and extravagant sets became the hallmark of French grand opera.

In addition, the less pretentious comic operas had considerable popularity. Fewer singers, smaller casts, and simpler staging, opéra comique emphasized humor and satire in both the libretto and music. Two composers stand out in this genre for very different reasons: Jacques Offenbach for his groundbreaking work, and Georges Bizet for his captivating work and retooling of the definition of opéra comique.

**Jacques Offenbach (1819-80)**

Jacques, the seventh of ten children, was born in Cologne, Germany on June 20, 1819. Jacques proved to be the most musical, learning violin by age six, composing at age eight and mastering cello at nine years of age. Jacques’ father was determined to have him study in Paris where they soon moved. Luigi Cherubini, director of the Paris Conservatory, was reluctant to admit young students to the school, but admitted 14-year-old Jacques, stopping him during his cello audition. Two years later, Jacques had left the Conservatory to follow his passion of the theater. He composed symphonic waltzes using Judaic liturgical material in a Viennese style. In 1847, he received his big break into successful composition with the production of his one-act comic opera *L’Alcôve*. From this production, he received another commission for another comic opera for the following season of the Théâtre-Lyrique. Unfortunately, the July Revolution disrupted these plans and two years passed before Offenbach, who had fled to Cologne, returned to Paris as the conductor of the Comédie-Française. This gave him the unique position to have his own works performed regularly.

Building his reputation for entertaining productions and building a reliable clientele, Offenbach had his troupe tour Europe including the opera houses of Vienna and London to rousing success. Buoyed by the success of the tour and a rewriting of restrictive French artistic statutes, Offenbach produced his first full-scale work, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. The two-act operetta created a sensation and played for 228 consecutive performances before an exhausted cast required a layoff of a couple weeks. Offenbach then sent some sketches of his next work, *The Brigands*, to a young W.S. Gilbert (of Gilbert & Sullivan fame) and a striking resemblance between that work and *The Pirates of Penzance* exists. At his death in 1880, Offenbach was in the midst of working on the last act of *The Tales of Hoffman*. Completed by Ernest Guirand, it maintains the distinctive witty flair of Offenbach’s own writing. Offenbach – while widely known for *Orpheus* and *Hoffman* – wrote more than 100 operettas and is one of the most performed composers even to this day.

**Georges Bizet (1838-75)**

Georges Bizet was born in Paris to parents who were professional musicians. His father was a composer and singing teacher; his mother, an excellent pianist. Like many before him, Georges exhibited his talent at an early age on the piano. When he was nine, his parents enrolled him at the Paris Conservatory. At fourteen, Bizet won first prize in piano. At age nineteen, he wrote his highly popular Symphony No. 1 in C as part of his composition and orchestration training at the Conservatory. That same year (1857), he won the Offenbach Prize for his one-act opera *Le Docteur miracle* as well as the Prix de Rome for his outstanding compositions. Upon winning the prize, this allowed Bizet to study in Rome, but accepting the prize required him to write a Mass for the Church. Bizet obliged and wrote his moving *Te Deum (To God)* in 1858.
Upon his return to Paris, Bizet immersed himself in opera composition. His first three operas, *Les Pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*, 1863), *La jolie fille de Perth* (*The Maid of Perth*, 1867), and *Djamileh* (1872) were disparaged by both audiences and critics. It was his final opera, *Carmen*, that Bizet scored a mixed review at the time. It was performed thirty-seven times at the comic-opera theater during its first season. At the end of that season, Bizet passed away. At only 36, he would never know the acclaim his works would eventually receive — especially *Carmen*, which is indispensable in the contemporary opera repertoire.

**German Romantic Opera**

The German composers of the Romantic period exemplified the bonding between music and literature. However, it was not with the traditional Italian — but with their native German tongue. This trend began with Mozart’s singspiel opera *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) and the magical opera of Carl Maria von Weber, *Der Freischütz* (*The Freeshooter*). German composers also explored mystery, the supernatural, exotic cultures, distant lands but in a more intense fashion. The middle-class German audiences flocked to the opera, especially since the advent of German language use, with these new storylines, rejecting the past offerings of contrived aristocratic fancies.

Ludwig van Beethoven wrote but one opera, *Fidelio* (1805), and Mozart dabbled in German singspiels. Carl Maria von Weber wrote three operas, *Der Freischütz* (1821), *Euryanthe* (1823) and *Oberon* (1826). By far, the giant of German opera composers was Richard Wagner.

**Richard Wagner (1813-83)** Born and raised in Leipzig, Richard Wagner claimed he was mostly self-taught in music. He did attend the St. Thomas’s School, where J.S. Bach had been choirmaster a century earlier. Later, Wagner continued his musical training at Leipzig University. After a two-year tempestuous affair, he married Minna, a soprano in a production he was directing, in 1833. The two lived in poverty while Wagner wrote his first operas, straining their marriage with infidelity on both accounts. Following the successful production of *Rienzi* (1842), Wagner’s work was noticed by the King of Saxony who appointed him the Saxon State conductor. As such, he produced *Der fliegende Holänder* (*The Flying Dutchman*, 1843) and *Tannhäuser* (1845).

Following a self-imposed exile in 1848 for sedition, a divorce of Minna, and a succession of affairs with married women, Wagner was summoned to Munich by “Mad” King Ludwig II of Bavaria to produce opera. There, Wagner met Franz Liszt and his daughter, Cosima, whom he married after another extended affair. Cosima, a shrewd businesswoman, was able to have Ludwig II finance the construction of Festspielhaus at Bayreuth. This new opera house would be devoted to staging solely Wagnerian opera. Once ensconced at Bayreuth, Wagner was able to stage many of the opera he had written during his Swiss sojourn. After premiering in Munich, *Lohengrin* (1860), *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, 1868) received numerous elaborate productions at Festspielhaus. However, the masterworks that would be Wagner’s crowning achievements, that were mere sketches in Switzerland would be created — *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) — a four opera cycle surrounding the Bavarian legend of Prince Siegfried and his quest for a treasure of gold that lies at the bottom of the Rhine River. Each more ornate and complicated than the one before it, *Das Rhiengold* (*The Rhine Gold*, 1869), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*, 1870), *Siegfried* (1874) and *Gotterdammerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*, 1874) were presented to an enraptured audience in 1876 at the first Bayreuth festival. In
order to recoup losses from the extravagant productions, Wagner wrote one final opera, *Parsifal* (1882), based upon the legend of the Holy Grail. Exhausted from composing, Wagner went for a sabbatical in Venice, where he died of heart failure at age seventy. Carried by gondola in a spectacular procession down Venice’s Grand Canal to the railway station, Richard Wagner arrived in Bayreuth a musical conqueror for his final rest.

**The Romantic Symphony**

As opera became more grandiose and cumbersome from the Classical to the Romantic period, so did the symphony. In the hand of the Romantic composers, the traditional four-movement symphony took on new proportions. The number and tempo of scheme of the movements was not strictly followed: Tchaikovsky ends his Sixth Symphony, the *Pathétique*, with a long expressive slow movement and Beethoven actually wrote five movements for his Sixth Symphony, the *Pastoral*. The first movements generally retain the basic elements of the sonata-allegro form. Deviations in this pattern might be a slow and elaborate introduction, and along expressive development section. The second movement may retain its slow and lyrical nature, but the gamut of emotions is expressed: from whimsical and playful to tragic and passionate. Forms used here are three-part or theme and variation. The third movement is where the minuet is intensified and becomes a scherzo – a fast jovial and occasionally mischievous sounding dance. Following more or less a three-part ABA form, its mood can range from elfin agility to demonic vigor. The fourth movement was also a source of experimentation for composers. Theme and variation, sonata-allegro, rondo and other forms are used to equal the weight and importance of the first movement. The work may conclude with an air of triumph or one of sorrow.

In investigating its development, four Romantic symphony composers are highlighted: Felix Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms, Piotr Tchaikovsky and Gustav Mahler.

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47)**

Born in Hamburg, Germany into one of the wealthiest families in all of Europe, Felix Mendelssohn was the son of a German banker, Abraham, and grandson of writer and philosopher, Moses, who served the court of Frederick the Great. His musical talents were often compared to Mozart’s, performing brilliantly on piano at an early age. Much like the famous Austrian master, Mendelssohn composed early as well, writing six symphonies by age twelve, seven more by fourteen, and one of his best known works *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture at age seventeen.

Traveling extensively throughout Europe, Felix incorporated his experiences into his musical compositions – as evidenced by Symphony No. 3 *‘Scottish’* (1842) and Symphony No. 3 *‘Italian’* (1833). The Italian Symphony is closer to the Classical period, but does have some qualities that show movement toward the expansive Romantic period. Keeping with the four-movement tradition (Fast-Slow-Moderate Dance-Fast), it has many hallmarks of the Classical period. The first movement is a long-established sonata-allegro form, but the second movement uses a rounded binary form – ABAB – in its lyrical presentation. The third movement is closer to the minuet than the pioneering Romantic scherzo and the final movement is based upon a popular Italian “jumping dance” known as a saltarello.

At age 26, he became conductor and musical director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig – a post he held for the remainder of his life. Additionally, he founded one of Europe’s greatest schools of music – the Leipzig Conservatory. It was through these two positions and his residency in Leipzig that Felix Mendelssohn rediscovered the genius of Johan Sebastian Bach. Until this time, much of Bach’s work remained unknown but to the church musicians where he once toiled. Mendelssohn crusaded to have Bach’s work be placed with the great composers of the Classical period – Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven – and due in large part to his efforts, the music of J.S. Bach is studied and enjoyed to this day.

**Johannes Brahms (1835-97)**

Born in Hamburg, son a of double-bass player whose love of music far exceeded his talent, Johannes Brahms was branded for his musical genius at an early age. Living in poverty for a great deal of his childhood, and
according to several accounts, Brahms aided the family income by playing piano in dance halls and brothels in the slums of Hamburg. Whether or not this tale is true, his early experiences in Hamburg under less than desirable conditions left their mark on him, leaving him remote, misogynistic and somewhat unrefined. Regardless, his enormous talent brought him significant attention and by age twenty, he was accompanying Hungarian violin virtuoso Eduard Reményi on a concert tour.

When Brahms decided to devote himself entirely to composition, he traveled to Düsseldorf to study with the highly respected Robert Schumann. Schumann, through his influential publication, Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, described Brahms as the “new genius of music.” As Schumann championed Brahms talent, he had grown progressively disoriented subsequently entering an asylum for more than two years. It was during this time and after Schumann’s death, Brahms developed a close and a rumored intimate relationship with Robert’s wife, Clara Wieck Schumann.

Brahms eventually moved to Vienna until his death at age 64. In Vienna, Brahms gained employment as the director of a women’s choir in addition to regular performances as a pianist and guest conductor of a variety of orchestras throughout Europe. Although he is generally celebrated as one of the world’s finest composers, information surrounding his life and works is obscured due to deliberate efforts on his part. Brahms went to great efforts to destroy much of his unfinished works, inferior compositions, rough drafts of published works and personal correspondence and other documents.

Johannes Brahms is perhaps best known for his chamber music – string quartets and quintet, piano sonatas, wind instrument quartets, and a variety of lieder (German song). These were usually collections of short, lyrical pieces to be performed in small intimate settings. However, his symphonies are masterful as well, despite numbering only four. Rumor has it that Brahms composed only four, in similar key areas to Beethoven’s first four symphonies, because no human could ever replicate the power and brilliance that was Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Part of the mantle of the “new genius of music” came the assumption of Brahms being the natural heir to Beethoven. Indeed, Brahms was fond of saying that it was no laughing matter to compose a symphony after Beethoven, which may explain why he did not even attempt the symphonic form, as far as we know, until after forty years of age and at the height of his compositional prowess.

His Fourth Symphony is significant for its nostalgic resignation and thematic beauty. The first movement marked Allegro non troppo (not too fast), opens with an elaborate yet sincere melody that only Johannes Brahms could write. Wide melodic leaps give a distinctive character of strength. The second movement is an Andante moderato (moderate walking pace) that offers one of Brahms’s most pleasant tunes, encapsulating the feeling of one who is the autumn of his life. Third is a scherzo, marked Allegro giocoso (fast and playful), full of mirth and limitless energy. The finale movement resurrects a form that flourished in the time of Bach, the passacaglia. A passacaglia is traditionally set in triple meter based upon a repeated melody, introduced in the bass then set in variation for other voices. Brahms departs from tradition however by having the wind instruments introduce the melody and then sets it in a variety of textures and tessitura throughout the movement. Marked Allegro energico e passionato (quickly with passion and energy), the fourth movement shows Brahms ability as a masterful orchestrator treating his eight-measure melody thirty times, each repetition building and increasing tension from its predecessor, before closing with a powerful coda section. The magnificent tapestry of sound that is woven into this work stirs the emotions with its rising conflict, challenges the ear with shifting moods and fascinates the mind with its technical skill.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) A favorite composer of audiences around the world, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinek, Russia, a son of a government official. Because of his father's occupation, young Piotr studied law at the aristocratic School of Jurisprudence in St.
Petersburg and grudgingly worked as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice. Not until he was twenty-three had he reached his decision to quit the law and study at the newly founded Conservatory of St. Petersburg. Tchaikovsky completed his studies in composition in only three years time, and was immediately recommended by Anton Rubinstein, his mentor and director of the school, for a teaching post at the recently established Conservatory of Moscow. Despite long hours and large classes, the young professor applied himself industriously to his composition. During his twelve years in Moscow, some of his most beloved and successful works were created (Symphonies No. 1, 1866; No. 2, 1872, No. 3, 1875; orchestral suite: Romeo & Juliet, 1870; symphonic poems: March Slav, 1876; ballet: Swan Lake, 1877).

Tchaikovsky was extremely sensitive and subject to attacks of deep depression aggravated by his guilt over his homosexuality. In hopes of gaining some degree of social and mental stability, he entered into an ill-fated marriage with Antonina Miliukov, a young student of the Conservatory, who was quite smitten with her professor. His sympathy for her affection turned to aversion and in a fit of depression, Tchaikovsky wandered into the icy waters of the Moscow River. On the verge of serious breakdown, he left for St. Petersburg only to find a benefactress who enabled him to go abroad until he had salvaged his health, alleviated the burden of his teaching assignments and sent him onto the most productive period of his career. Nadezha von Meck, a widow of an industrialist, was a imperious and emotional woman. A recluse by nature, she ran her business interests and the lives her children from seclusion in her Moscow mansion. Her passion was music, particularly Tchaikovsky's. Bound by rigid social conventions of imperial Russia, her patronage of Tchaikovsky was done anonymously — for her enthusiasm was for the music no the man. However, substantial correspondence remains of this fruitful relationship — indeed, Tchaikovsky dedicated his Fourth Symphony to her. The duration covered by his letters to his anonymous benefactress saw the spread of Tchaikovsky's fame. He was the first Russian whose music truly appealed to Western taste. In 1891, he was invited to participate in the open festivities of Carnegie Hall in New York City. He once wrote, "I am convinced that I am ten times more famous in America than in Europe." However, they also chronicled his growing depression and suspicion that his talent was running dry. "Is it possible that I have completely written myself out? I have neither ideas nor inclinations!" His two finest symphonies and the famed Nutcracker (1892) ballet still lay ahead of him.

Immediately following his Sixth Symphony (1893), the Pathétique, he went to St. Petersburg to conduct it. Tchaikovsky conducted his music with a painful reticence, lacking any sort of conviction. The audience, sensing his shyness and almost ambivalence, offered a lukewarm reception. In the days that followed, and in spite of warnings of the spread of cholera in the capital, he carelessly drank a glass of unboiled water, thus contracting the disease. Within the week, he was dead at age fifty-three. Due to the circumstances that surrounded his death, many believe he committed suicide. Nevertheless, the drama accompanying his Sixth Symphony has led to this work being perhaps Tchaikovsky's most beloved work.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)  

Gustav Mahler was into a family living next to a military barracks at a time when Bohemia was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In his youth, two kinds of music captivated Mahler: military, with its strong emphasis on brass; and folk music heard in neighboring towns and villages. These two genres of music would have immense impact on his writings as they were both incorporated into his symphonies.

Like most musically gifted youth, Mahler was sent to Vienna at age fifteen to study at the Conservatory. After three years, his diploma in composition was conferred. Mahler's career as a conductor followed. He progressively obtained important conducting positions in Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, and Hamburg and then in Vienna at the State Opera. His final two conducting appointments
were in the United States with the Metropolitan Opera Company (1908) and the New York Philharmonic (1909-11). Although his spent a majority of his life conducting operas, he never wrote one.

Mahler's compositional output was one of extremes; he perhaps as recognized for his bombastic and extravagant symphonies as he is for his intimate and heartrending songs. Mahler represents either the logical conclusion of the growth of the symphonic form or, as the case of his Eighth Symphony – Symphony of a Thousand (1909), its excessive disproportion.

Mahler's demanding temperament quickly gave him a reputation as a tyrannical perfectionist. Mahler fought other more pernicious social problems beyond his control. As anti-Semitism developed throughout Europe, Mahler reluctantly converted to Christianity to secure his appointment at the Vienna State Opera. Even then, he was the victim of the rising tide of anti-Semitic Viennese critics.

Mahler married in 1902 and had a daughter, who fell ill and died in her youth. This death strongly affected Mahler and his compositional output – a song cycle, Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the Death of Children) was written in 1904. Mahler himself fell ill during his second season with the New York Philharmonic. He returned to Vienna, seeking medical help, where he died at age fifty.

**Nationalism**

As empires were consolidated and built around the world, music became a great means of inspiring patriotism, national unity and identity for citizens. Composer already covered contributed greatly to the nationalistic movements of their respective countries: Wagner based his operas upon German mythology, Verdi inspired by his very name the independence movement of Italy. However, there were other movements across Europe that took the music of the people and brought it to new audiences within and outside of their homelands.

**Czech Composers**

Bedrich Smetana (1824-84) and Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) were the most famous Czech composers of the time in Bohemia, now a part of the Czech Republic. Smetana is best known for his opera The Bartered Bride and the symphonic poem, The Moldau that depicts the Moldau River as it rambles through Bohemia. The Moldau is only a portion of the larger work, Má Vlast (My Country), which portrays scenes from various Czech towns and peoples. Dvořák is widely recognized for his Symphony No. 9 in E Minor – “From the New World.” Written while serving as Director for the American Music Conservatory in New York, Dvořák wrote his New World Symphony based upon American folk tunes, specifically Native- and African-American music – even loosely quoting “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the first movement. Many musicologists believe this was not originally designed to be a symphony at all, but rather an operetta based on Longfellow’s epic poem “The Song of Hiawatha.” While living in his native Bohemia, he wrote his Slavonic Dances, which are drawn from the dances of Bohemian country folk.

**French Composers**

Many of the famous Romantic composers working in France were not French: Liszt was Hungarian and Chopin a Pole. In response to the lack of native talent being cultivated in France, the National Society for French Music was established. Other than Georges Bizet, the most renowned composers to manifest from this effort were Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) and Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). Many young music students know the music of Saint-Saëns from his Carnival of the Animals as well as the “Bacchanale” from his opera Samson and Delilah. Gabriel Fauré is best known for his art songs based upon French poetry. Other lesser-known composers helped establish a French school of composition. Léo Delibes (1836-91) who, like Offenbach, became known for his operettas. Jules Massenet (1842-1912) who specialized in opera and oratorio – his operas Manon...
(1884, based on a story by Prévost later developed by Puccini) and Werther (1892, based upon the early novel by Goethe) are still in the repertoire. Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-91) wrote three sporadically produced operas: L’etoile (1877), Gwendoline (1886), and Le roi malgré lui (King despite himself, 1887). Chabrier’s most performed work is the sparkling, Iberian-influenced orchestral rhapsody, España (1883). Edouard Lalo (1823-92) drew inspiration from other parts of Europe as well. Symphonie espagnole (1874) drew inspiration from south of the Pyrenees, while the landscape of Norway inspired the Fantasie norvégienne (1880). He wrote several operas and ballets, only Le roi d’Ys (The King of Ys, 1888) was successful.

Russian Composers

Russian composers had always been influenced by music of other countries. Mikhail Glinka (1804-57) set traditional Russian folk music to the conventions of classic western European music conventions to produce the first Russian nationalistic compositions. Glinka wrote two operas based on typical Russian stories, A Life for the Czar, telling the tale of a Russian ruler, and Russian and Ludmilla, based upon a poem by Pushkin, which is still performed frequently by opera companies. Following Glinka’s example, Russian composers began to look inside their own country for inspiration for opera – Russian folklore and literary works wrote the libretto of the operas. Five Russians emerged as the most skilled and influential composers and became known as the “Mighty Handful” or the “Russian Five.”

Alexander Borodin (1833-87) wrote the opera Prince Igor about a legendary folk hero. Modest Moussorgsky (1839-81) wrote Boris Godounoff based on a story by Pushkin, wrote the piano collection (which has been transcribed for orchestra by Frenchman Maurice Ravel) Picture at an Exhibition around a fictitious art display in Moscow and Night on Bald Mountain found new popularity following the release of Disney’s Fantasia. Two others members of lesser distinction were Mily Balakirev (1837-1910) and César Cui (1835-1918). Of the five, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) became the most influential. He composed several operas based upon Russian folk tales and several significant instrumental works, including Scheherazade, a four movement symphony based upon the stories, Arabian Nights. Some of his most important work was done as a professor of composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and as director of the Free Music School in Moscow. He also wrote an orchestration book, still used today by many universities around the world.

Scandinavian Composers

While Scandinavia is not a country, but a region within Europe; it still produced several notable composers. From Norway, Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) received his first music lessons from his mother in the seacoast town of Bergen, and then traveled to Germany for composition study. He focus even from the start of his career was to write Norwegian music. With his wife a trained singer, he settled into a life of composition and concert production with a distinctive Nordic flavor. His Piano Concerto in A Minor is his most ambitious work, but he is best known for his two Peer Gynt Suites, orchestral suites based upon a classic Norwegian folk tale. Norway produced two other composers worth mentioning. Johan Svendsen (1840-1911) spent time in Paris and became a close associate of Richard Wagner. He wrote two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, a Romance for violin and orchestra and a series of Norwegian Rhapsodies. Christian Sinding (1856-1941) spent most of his life in the capital city of Oslo. Much like Svendsen, he is noted for his instrumental works, which include four symphonies, three violin concertos, a piano concerto and assorted chamber works. In Finland, Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) was one of the last great nationalist composers. His tone poems and seven symphonies
recall ancient legends, impart native traditions and capture the grandeur of the Finnish countryside. His most popular work is undoubtedly the symphonic poem, *Finlandia* (1899). His *Karelia Suite* (1893) is still among the standard repertoire along with his symphonies. Though he lived well into the 20th century, he wrote in his distinctive Romantic style and produced no music whatsoever during the final 30 years of his life.

**Other Important Composers**

**Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)**

Born in Lyon, Berlioz began studying music at age nineteen, much later than his contemporaries. Because of this late start, he was not selected as a student at the Paris Conservatory; ironically, he would later serve as a professor of orchestration and composition there. He struggled mightily giving private lessons, until 1830 when he won the Prix de Rome for his *Symphonie fantastique*. Following his studies in Rome, he returned to Paris and found acceptance in the artistic community of Paris, which included fellow musicians Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt, artist Eugene Delacroix and author Victor Hugo. He wrote the first important textbook on orchestration, *Treatise on Instrumentation*.

**Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)**

Four years older than brother Felix, Fanny Mendelssohn was often described as equally talented to her younger sibling. An excellent piano player, by age thirteen she could perform Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* from memory. Despite marrying painter Wilhelm Hensel, Fanny remained an excellent pianist and composer though most of her compositions were unpublished during her lifetime. In fact, six of her songs that were published were credited to her brother due to heavy discrimination against female composers. Fanny's death at age 41 was dramatic and tragic – during a rehearsal of brother Felix's *Walpurgisnacht* cantata at the Elternhaus. Felix died several months after – many believe unable to cope with the sudden loss of his sister.

**Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)**

Born outside of Warsaw, Poland, Frédéric Chopin gave his piano first recital at age eight. He then moved quickly on to the Warsaw Conservatory concentrating mainly on piano performance. As the political climate was severely unstable in Poland due to mounting Russian and Prussian hostility, Frédéric left Poland on an extended concert tour of Vienna, much of Germany before finally settling in Paris. Here, he found himself among the cultural elite – and became involved with famed writer George Sand. Sand was actually a woman – Aurore Dudevant – who was forced to assume a man's name in order to get her books published. They lived together for years and she cared for him as his health declined suffering from tuberculosis. Chopin left a legacy of piano compositions among the greatest and largest ever written – two concertos for piano and orchestra and hundreds of short form piano selections: ballades, preludes, fantasies, impromptus, nocturnes, polonaises, scherzos, mazurkas, études, variations and waltzes.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

The youngest child of a bookseller near Bonn, Robert Schumann was raised with a love for literature – which became evident in his compositions. Although he began studying piano at age 10, he went to Leipzig University to study law. While in Leipzig he continued, his piano lessons with prominent teacher Frederick Wieck. Before long, he moved into Wieck's home to completely devote himself to the instrument. Soon after he moved in, Schumann met his teacher's daughter, Clara then only 10 years old. She was a brilliant pianist in her own right and Schumann was taken with her – the two falling in love. Despite the protests of Frederick Wieck, they married the day before Clara turned 21. Schumann's performance career was destroyed by a crude mechanism designed to lengthen the reach of
one's fingers, but it did not stop his composing career and another that he found quite enjoyable. Schumann began the music journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and was its chief critic and editor. He wrote and critiqued under assumed names – his most popular being “Florestan” and “Eusebius.” His composing career consisted of four symphonies; several chamber works and many collections for piano – most notably *Carnaval* and *Scenes from Childhood*. His main compositional output was the German *lieder*, or song. Writing over 300 and putting them into collections, or cycles, his most famous and performed are *Dichterliebe* (*The Poet’s Love*) and *Frauenliebe und leben* (*Women’s Loves and Lives*).

**Franz Liszt (1811-86)**

Native of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Franz Liszt grew up in the shadow of the Esterhazy Palace where Franz Joseph Haydn had worked. Liszt displayed considerable talent as a pianist and was sent to Vienna to study with Antonio Salieri and Karl Czerny. Following his debut in London at age eleven, Liszt soon toured musical capitals of Europe and was considered the piano virtuoso of the nineteenth century. Upon arrival in Paris at age sixteen, he found himself among the cultural elite – moving in circles with Berlioz, Chopin, Hugo, Delacroix and George Sand. He did not give up touring as a concert pianist however. With Paris as his primary residence, he visited central Europe, Russia, Turkey, Britain, and Iberia. In 1849, he accepted a position as the music director to the Grand Duke of Weimar in Germany. He introduced several works of his friend and colleague Richard Wagner, who eventually married his daughter, Cosima. Later, Liszt accepted a minor religious post in Rome in the Catholic Church. He continued to travel and give concerts until his death at age seventy-four in Bayreuth, Germany. His music, written primarily for piano and orchestra, has extraordinary flair. His best-known works for orchestra are the *Faust Symphony* (1854), the *Dante Symphony* (1856); for piano, *Transcendental Studies* (1851) and the Hungarian Rhapsodies.

**Clara (Wieck) Schumann (1819-96)**

“I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?” These were the words of a maturing Clara Schumann – already recognized for her talent on the piano before age 21. Despite the protests of her father – who cast public aspersions against Robert’s character – she married Robert Schumann after a court ruling dissolved her father’s parental right of protest. Clara became one of the finest concert pianists and composers of piano music of her time – much to the consternation of her devoted husband. However, Clara returned Robert’s insecurity with inspiration and imagination, acting as muse, confidant and critic of his music. Following her husband’s untimely death at age 46 in an asylum, Clara continued performing and teaching. Although she never remarried, she maintained a long friendship with Johannes Brahms. Before her death at age 77, she had composed a piano concerto, and piano trio, and a large number of smaller chamber works and songs for piano. An integral figure to the Romantic period, she is one of the landmark women in music.

**References**


