Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Classify nineteenth century life and the effect of the rising middle class in the arts.
2. Classify nineteenth century vocal and instrumental chamber music, as well as Romantic opera.
3. Identify and explain program music and how it guides the listener through a literary work, or piece of art.
4. Identify nationalism in music and the composers associated with this musical style.
5. Identify all genres of both absolute and program music, along with the composers in the Romantic Era.

Written Lecture

The Romantic Era: (Nineteenth Century)

The Romantic era witnessed many new innovations in technology that affected numerous facets of society. Music was no exception to this, and it developed very rapidly in the nineteenth century. The rising middle class citizens of the western world now had more income to purchase goods which were made more cheaply than in the past. Pianos became a common household feature that fueled publishing of many orchestra favorites transcribed for piano that had only been heard previously in the concert hall. Instruments were of much better quality than in earlier periods, which allowed for the achievement of technical improvements heard in the playing of nineteenth century. The orchestra grew to its largest in history and was used in new and exciting ways. Opera composers of the nineteenth century produced the most famous productions in opera history, which are still some of the most popular works today.

Ludwig van Beethoven was the first truly romantic composer. His style of writing was not as subdued as his contemporaries and his music contained violent mood swings not present in the elegant music of the classical period. Beethoven began to add a storyline to which his instrumental music would follow, creating an exciting and thought provoking listening experience that would flourish in the hands of composers that would follow him. This program music is music that is based on literary or pictorial associations. We have discussed word painting in previous units. This was an attempt by earlier composers to explain or describe words or thoughts with musical sounds. This is one of several techniques used by romantic composers to fully exemplify words in sound.

The art song was quite popular among the composers of this period. Writings by popular poets and authors in response to the French Revolution influenced the romantic intellectuals of society. The dramatic texts were used as lyrics to these songs and fit perfectly with the emerging dramatic sounding music. These art songs or the German equivalent, lieder, were a favorite compositional medium.
for composers in the nineteenth century. The songs were mostly for solo voice (any range) and piano. The first formal structure we will discuss for this genre you already know, but the name will probably be unfamiliar. Strophic form is based on a repetitive melody that is sung to different texts in each verse of a song. The verse in popular music is usually where the story is told. The chorus is usually the title of the work and is sung many times through the course of a song between each verse. If the tune is the same in every verse, the form of the song is strophic. An example of this can be heard in many Christmas songs including, “The twelve days of Christmas.” Think of the tune in the beginning of each verse, “On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me...”, “On the second day of...”, “On the third day of...” Each verse’s melody remains the same throughout.

The form of the art song that we will listen to is called through composed. As the name of the form suggests, the music will follow the text from the beginning to end rising and falling just as the dramatic content of the poem will rise and fall. Franz Schubert’s *Elfking*, is an exciting song in which the singer must portray four different characters in the poem. Use the iLG in StudySpace when listening to this piece. Pay close attention to how the composer sets the mood of the eerie story with the piano. Tonality places an important role in depicting both the overall effect of the poem and each character’s depiction in sound.

The piano was now being built much stronger than before using a metal frame instead of wood to secure the instrument. This new strength allowed for more strings that held more tension and could be played much louder fitting right in with the dramatic tendency of the era. Frederic Chopin and Clara Schumann were among the finest pianists in the nineteenth century who created short, one movement pieces that were very popular in their day. Many titles were used including the waltz, mazurka, prelude, impromptu, nocturne, and polonaise among others. Chopin’s *Mazurka* in B-flat minor is a Polish dance type, which through the composer’s pride for his heritage became a nationalistic statement. Nationalism is another very important social and musical topic that will be discussed later.

Hector Berlioz was a true master of the orchestra. His groundbreaking program symphony, the Symphony *Fantastique* surrounds a very interesting and peculiar real life story. The reoccurring theme, the idée fixe, is heard throughout the work and is the musical representation of his beloved, Harriet Smithson. Berlioz creates a piece of music like no other and his clever use of the orchestra will be an inspiration for composers to follow. When listening to this musical example, try to hear the story unfold. Does the composer’s use of instruments evoke the mood of the program? In the fourth movement, a march is heard, reflecting the title of the movement. The lovesick artist is being led to the scaffold to be executed. The guillotine is the execution device, and at the end of the movement a chord is played by the entire orchestra depicting the fall of the blade. Next, plucked (pizzicato) low strings play two notes portraying the head falling into a basket. This is pretty grizzly, but incredibly imaginative, and is exemplary of the type of fantastic subject matter that was popular in the era.

Political unrest in Europe in the nineteenth century caused people to look inward to their own culture for a kind of moral support. Many countries invaded their neighbors in attempts to increase power and land area. Nationalism was the artistic response to the political and social issues of the day. Nationalistic music stirs patriotic pride for one’s country and uses folk tunes (local songs) to represent the homeland. Bedřich Smetena’s *The Moldau*, which represents a river that runs through Czech, is a wonderful example of nationalism and program music. In this case, the music follows the beautiful landscape of the composer’s country. As the program flows down the river, different elements of
nature can be heard in the music. The most obvious of these is the rippling of the streams and the crashing of the St. John rapids. Use the iLG in StudySpace to follow the musical story.

The symphony remains an important genre through the nineteenth century, though it is overshadowed by the importance of exciting instrumental program music. Many major composers of the era continue to write symphonies, and just as Beethoven, they continue to expand the genre to reflect deep human emotion. The size of the orchestra and the length of the pieces are a hallmark of Romanticism in art. Johannes Brahms was one of the composers who held on to conventional musical forms. His Symphony No. 3 in F Major is a perfect example Romantic absolute music. The third movement is the listening example for this unit, and it is a dance. Remember the third movement of the multimovement cycle of the Classical period was usually a dance. A memorable tune is heard in the beginning of the piece that returns at the end. The middle section gives the feeling of a kind of self-reflection, or a memory from the past. Does this piece sound romantic to you? Does the dramatic shift in volume through the piece affect your thoughts? Have you ever heard this tune played in another context? Use the iLG in StudySpace to help follow the music.

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Listening Activities: Listen to the musical examples using both the Interactive Listening Guides in StudySpace, as well as the listening guides in the textbook. The musical examples will need to be heard multiple times.

- Schubert: Elfking, (Erlkönig), (art song/lied) (required)
- Robert Schumann: In the lovely month of May, (art song/lied)
- Chopin: Mazurka in B-flat minor, Op. 24, No. 4, (piano piece)
- Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: September, (piano piece)
- Berlioz: Symphony Fantastique, movement 4, (program symphony) (required)
- Smetena: The Moldau, (symphonic poem)
- Brahms: Symphony No. 3, movement 3, (symphony)
- Verdi: Rigoletto, Act III, excerpts (opera)
- Wagner: Die Walküre (The Valkyne), Act III, (music drama) (required)
- Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker, Two Dances, (ballet)
- Pucinni: Un bel di, from Madame Butterfly, Act III, (opera)

There are listening examples included in almost every chapter of the textbook. Though they are all not required, it is strongly suggested that you listen to as much music as possible to gain a true appreciation for music.