

Introduction

Music and meaning

In his autobiography, published in 1936, Igor Stravinsky asserted that

music, by its very nature, is essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. . . . *Expression* has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention – in short, an aspect which, unconsciously or by force of habit, we have often come to confuse with its essential being.¹

This view of music – its nature, limits, and impact on the senses and intellect – was controversial, but not new. Twenty years earlier, author Jean Cocteau, composer Erik Satie, and impresario Sergei Diaghilev collaborated to produce the ballet *Parade*, a conscious experiment in non-expressive, non-meaning art.² Sixty years before that, critic Eduard Hanslick professed that “the content of music are forms moving in sound.” And almost a half-century earlier, the writer E.T.A. Hoffmann voiced preference for instrumental music, “which scorns all aid, all admixture of other arts – and gives pure expression to its own peculiar artistic nature . . . [It] leaves behind all feelings circumscribed by intellect in order to embrace the inexpressible.”³

The backlash against music as an agent of expression and conveyor of fixed meaning during the “long” nineteenth century, 1789–1914, can be partly attributed to the rise of program music. Program music sought a dialogue with other arts, especially literature, a pursuit that led to depictive character pieces, programmatic symphonies, symphonic poems, and tone paintings. In the eyes of critics, however, these generic hybrids diluted music’s uniqueness and transgressed its natural, time-honored hermeneutic boundaries. Program music remained a contentious issue for as long as it did because, as Carl Dahlhaus notes, “The battle over program music was waged . . . with changing arguments resting on changing premises.”⁴

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Music does not limit interpretation, programmatic or otherwise, but certain premises and types of interpretive analysis arouse more suspicion than others. Take the idea that music can be a vehicle for narration. At least in Western instrumental music from about 1700 to about 1900, the tonal system in conjunction with forms like the rondo, theme and variations, and especially the sonata (with its tripartite design of exposition, development, and recapitulation) yields a set of expectations that produce what Susan McClary has dubbed a “narrative effect.”⁵ This effect can intensify when a composer actively manipulates conventions of form, tonality, instrumentation, and the like, since those elements routinely participate “in the composer- and listener-activated process of measuring what one hears against what one is invited to expect.”⁶

The leap from effect to fact is fraught with danger, as it often involves committing to a set of practices outside of music’s purview. McClary calls this a “verbal tale,” and like most tales, they are easily prone to embellishment and exaggeration, as well as a shadowy genealogy that is often difficult to trace to the composer. Probably the most famous example of such a specious program comes from Beethoven’s amanuensis and early biographer, Anton Schindler, who claimed that Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony opens with “Fate knock[ing] at the door.”⁷ Indeed, Jean-Jacques Nattiez emphasizes how “The narrative, strictly speaking, is not *in* the music, but *in the plot imagined and constructed by the listeners* from functional objects.”⁸ In short, music means, but whether a given meaning is intrinsic to the music is – and long has been – open for debate.

This is the point where program music considerably muddies the waters. At least as practiced by Berlioz and Schumann, Liszt and Strauss, program music is not just music. Rather, it is music plus a title, a poem, a person – that is, something extrinsic to the music itself. Thus, the decision for the analyst and listener becomes whether to accept that extrinsic element as part of the work’s identity and, by extension, how then to involve it in the search for a work’s meaning. Indeed, as James Hepokoski notes,

Essential to the production of programmatic musical scenes is an assumed generic contract between composer and listener whereby musical ideas are agreed to be mappable onto aspects of specific characters or situations: let motives A, B, and C represent narrative-images X, Y, and Z. Without an initial agreement to accept this principle of musical metaphor, the tone-poem premise collapses. To suggest that it might be appropriate to listen to these works as absolute music⁹ or that they are adequately comprehensible in terms of pure music alone is to blind oneself to the historically controversial and witty aesthetic game that the tone poems are playing.¹⁰

While technically limited to the tone poems of Richard Strauss (see Chapter 7), Hepokoski’s observation is – with a few modifications – extendable to the nineteenth-century programmatic enterprise as a whole.

Repertoire and scope

To be sure, examples of program music exist prior to the late eighteenth century. One of the most well known is Antonio Vivaldi's *Le quattro stagioni* (*The Four Seasons*), the first four violin concertos of *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione*, op. 8, published in 1725. In its traversal of the year, Vivaldi references birds of several varieties, storms, barking dogs, and sleeping lushes – events and characters concretely referenced by a complementary set of sonnets that Vivaldi may have authored. The same year that his concertos appeared in print, a French contemporary, Marin Marais, issued his fifth book of *Pièces de violes*, whose one hundred and eighth entry is entitled “Le tableau de l'opération de la taille” (“The Bladder-Stone Surgery”). Above Marais's graphic music sits a bevy of graphic prose descriptions: the poor patient trembles before the sight of the operating table; serious thoughts fly through his head as attendants strap him down; an incision is made, his voice falters, and blood flows; he descends the table and is taken off to bed.

Such examples remain extraordinarily interesting curiosities, however, as they neither characterize the output of their respective composers nor the prevailing artistic interests of their day. By contrast, a significant portion of music by composers of the post-Beethoven generation – including Felix Mendelssohn, Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt – is programmatic. Moreover, the programmatic experiments of this generation were developed or fiercely contested by those that followed: hence the New German School of the 1860s, Johannes Brahms's “classical,” four-movement symphonies or Camille Saint-Saëns and the Société nationale de musique in the 1870s and 1880s, and Richard Strauss's tone poems toward the end of the century.

The volume of programmatic compositions and attendant theorizing in the nineteenth century suggest several trends that shape the scope of this book:

- Program music developed out of an urgent need to address issues of Beethoven's musical legacy and music's future direction, especially in the wake of his Ninth Symphony. Schumann wrote of a symphonic crisis, an assessment underscored by the emergence of the symphony-cantata (Mendelssohn), programmatic symphony (Berlioz), symphonic poem (Liszt), and music drama (Wagner). All of these new genres took Beethoven's music as a model, in that they further challenged traditional notions of form and expression.
- By extension, program music began as an Austro-German phenomenon that was subsequently adapted to local needs. French and Russian composers of program music arguably eclipsed their German colleagues in both qualitative and quantitative terms by the beginning of the twentieth century, but the roots of their respective programmatic traditions were not indigenous.

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- While Bedřich Smetana's two string quartets and César Franck's *Les djinns* are clearly programmatic, the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century program music was written either for the orchestra or solo piano. The prestige of the symphony and its community-building abilities notwithstanding, by the middle of the century composers could enlist English horns, harps, bass tubas and clarinets, a battery of percussion, and other new or long-neglected instruments to produce levels of sound and timbral variety that directly impacted a work's form, character, and programmatic message. Likewise, the piano grew into a design and size consistent with today's models, and became the domestic instrument of choice.
- In terms of source material, literature enjoys primacy of place in program music, with nature (e.g., the seasons or natural phenomena like mountains or oceans) coming in second. Visual arts, such as painting or sculpture, tend to be referenced rarely, and when they do, there is often either a concomitant literary component,¹¹ or the model artwork is embedded with strong processual qualities, such as Mihály Zichy's drawing *Du berceau jusqu'au cercueil* (*From the Cradle to the Grave*; Figure 0.1), which served as inspiration for Liszt's final symphonic poem. That being said, while Felix Draeseke's *Fata morgana. Ein Ghaselekrantz* and the "Pantomim" movement from Ravel's Piano Trio draw on arcane literary procedures to shape their formal profiles, they do not explicitly adopt a programmatic premise.
- Finally, program music remains intimately tied to developments in opera and the theatre, be it in the use of topics by Dittersdorf, Bartók, and Debussy, the uninterrupted composition of dramatic overtures by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Joachim, and others during the nineteenth century, or the more general aesthetic debates surrounding the relationship between text and music.

Historiography and structure

Program music is both an idea and a specific repertory, yet relevant publications to date tend to focus only on one aspect or the other. Leslie Orrey's *Programme Music: A Brief Survey from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (1975), for instance, pays little attention to the music itself, and instead focuses on the composition's extra-musical program. (Moreover, excerpts from primary sources are given in their original language without translation.) Lawrence Casler's two-volume *Symphonic Program Music and Its Literary Sources* (2001) is more an analytic catalogue than a stylistic and historical synthesis.

The best English-language study of program music remains one of the earliest: Frederick Niecks's 1907 *Programme Music in the Last Four Centuries: A Contribution*



Figure 0.1 Mihály Zichy, *From the Cradle to the Grave (Du berceau jusq'au cercueil)*

to the History of Musical Expression. While Niecks adopts a very loose definition of program music that allows him to incorporate works by Monteverdi, Handel, Mozart, and even Brahms, his presentation of the material abides by a nineteenth-century philosophical model (adapted from Hegel) in which the sixteenth century witnessed “early attempts,” the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “achievements in small forms and serious strivings in larger forms,” and the nineteenth century “fulfilments.” Beyond this outmoded historical framework, his coverage ends around 1900, his text lacks music examples completely, and citations and bibliographies are non-existent. The majority of material on the New German School and the Strauss–Mahler generation that followed is to be found mostly in German publications, as are the remaining few monographs on the subject of program music itself.

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While this book is structured in roughly chronological order through the long nineteenth century, it occasionally interrupts the timeline in order to highlight themes and practices that run across several periods and geographical boundaries. Thus Chapters 2 and 7 feature brief considerations of Shakespeare's treatment by composers of program music through stylistically diverse instrumental settings of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The excursus on Goethe's *Faust* in Chapter 6 illustrates how composers lavished attention on one particularly programmatically pregnant topic across the entire period under consideration.

Even when defined conservatively, the repertoire of program music is exceedingly vast, numbering well into the thousands. Thus, given that catalogues of program music are readily available, this book does not seek to be repertorially comprehensive. Nor does it take the opposite approach by exclusively profiling "famous" pieces of program music. Instead, it draws attention to composers of program music and programmatic compositions that displayed experimental tendencies and/or were highly influential. Thus composers like Niels Gade and Joachim Raff appear for their creative approaches, as do Liszt's lesser-known orchestral pieces, which were fiercely debated in his day even though they have since fallen into relative obscurity. Similarly, other names and compositions appear in the following pages in order to put other, more famous pieces in larger contexts. It is hoped that this design will add much-needed flesh to a history and repertory that has long remained skeletal.

Chapter 1

Characters, topics, and the programmatic battlefield

In his massive *Musikalisches Lexikon*, the German theorist Heinrich Christoph Koch described the curious, niche genre of “Simphonies à programmes,” or “programmatic symphonies,” as follows:

A category of music, which remains little explored, whereby the composer sets for himself the goal of representing or depicting by tone painting alone certain historical events without the assistance of the poetic arts. Despite apparently being a German invention – since [Carl Ditters von] Dittersdorf, [Antonio] Rosetti, and [Joseph] Haydn were undoubtedly the first to tackle it – there has yet to be agreement on an appropriately artistic German name for the genre. Moreover, with the exceptions of Dittersdorf’s “Four Ages,” “Phaethon,” and other [“Ovid” Symphonies], Rosetti’s *Telemachus*, and Haydn’s *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze*, no other examples of this genre are known, at least among the public.

In order for this genre to be afforded due respect, however, the question must first be answered: whether it is within the limits of music to represent historical topics, or at the very least, to what extent a historical event can serve as the basis for expressing musical sentiments (aroused by the historical event) without the assistance of the poetic arts.¹

Published in 1802, the *Lexikon* sits at a crossroads: It assesses numerous developments in music of the recent past, especially the last fifty years, in which the symphony and string quartet came into their own, serious opera underwent radical reforms, and music had abandoned affect and mimesis in favor of sentiment and rhetoric. At the same time, Koch’s tome anticipates many of the issues that would occupy musicians and critics for the rest of the nineteenth century and even beyond, including the relationship between poetry and music, the aesthetic and social position of instrumental music (especially in relation to opera), and the role of folk and national music in the arts, among others.

Koch’s take on programmatic symphonies is similarly bidirectional. He sees their promise, especially given that symphonic heavyweights like Dittersdorf and especially Haydn have seen fit to produce them, yet he casts doubt on whether instrumental music can adequately narrate specific events, and – more importantly – if such music could

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even fulfill its most important role of portraying sentiments and provoking them in listeners (Rosetti's *Telemachus* Symphony is lost). Even his reluctance to provide the phenomenon with a tentative name for the benefit of his readers speaks to a fundamental problem of establishing boundaries for program music at the turn of the nineteenth century. Nor was he alone: An anonymous report in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* from July 1800 on recent developments in French music translated "Les Symphonies à programmes" as "symphonies that paint" ("die malenden Symphonien"), although the journal's editorial team saw the need to note that "one might also call them 'historical' [symphonies], although perhaps that might be too restrictive."²

Koch's ambivalent report also speaks to a widespread reassessment of the musical status quo that was currently taking place. By about 1800, certain philosophers, authors, and even musicians centered primarily in Germany had come to the conclusion that instrumental music, and particularly the symphony, eclipsed vocal music in purity of expression because it, through a type of wordless rhetoric, could better approach the realm of pure thought, of the sublime. While taking aim primarily at opera, and to a lesser extent the oratorio, these apologists were also involved in a smaller civil war of words over the validity of recent "Symphonies à programmes." The article from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* mentioned above is one such document. Its author eagerly lists the genre's shortcomings and exposes the deleterious interpretive snowball effect that it has already created:

- The audience would be completely unaware of the symphony's specific narrative content were it not for the presence of a written program, regardless of how successful the work itself may be.
- Critics have gotten into the bad habit of finding specific objects or historical events apparently being represented in Haydn's symphonies, or "discovering subtleties contained within them that [he] certainly never put there." Such critical zeal does the composer a disservice, however, since Haydn is more than competent and willing when necessary to provide them with interpretive cues.
- While the reviewer's emphasis on Haydn as "one of the most celebrated German symphonic composers" stems primarily from national pride, the use of a program or supplemental media to support or complement a piece of music seems to be a cultural/national proclivity.

Without doubt, Haydn – by virtue of a symphonic catalogue that numbers over one hundred works, spans almost forty years, and reached all corners of western Europe – was chief architect of a robust musical discourse network that flourished during the second half of the century and set the stage for the aesthetic reassessment of instrumental music in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, both the critic and his adversaries could agree that Haydn incomparably used music as a vehicle for artistic communication and expression. Yet the question remains: How did his symphonies,

or, for that matter, those of his contemporaries, communicate? Or put another way: How did a contemporary listener generate meaning from them? According to the reviewer, it was not the presence of supplemental programs, but rather the composer's skilled manipulation of musical referents, which could yield music that ran the expressive gamut. For him, Haydn's music was "serious, proud, military, or fiery; then cheery, comfortable, *galant*; then serious and sublime."

Program music's building blocks: topics and character pieces

Scholars have grouped many of these various effects, gestures, and style markers under the umbrella term "topic" or "topos" (plural: "topoi"). A topic is both literal and associative, a gateway through which music expresses and creates meaning. In Leonard G. Ratner's classic definition, topics are simply "subjects for musical discourse."³ For instance, the "French overture" topic sports a two-part structure, employing over-dotted rhythms in the first and fugue in the second, and projects a dignified and composed character. As such, it is often found in music with a strong theatrical component. The *Sturm und Drang* topic, however, has no structural dimension, as its chief characteristic is unpredictability, and is suitable in a wide variety of musical media. Cataloguing topics inevitably limits their discursive freedom and their interpretive potential – some topics, for instance, employ other topics in order to achieve their full effect. Moreover, as the anonymous reviewer suggests, the best composers, like Haydn, skillfully blend several topics within a single composition, movement, or even passage.

Take a work that the reviewer would have considered to be new, Haydn's Symphony no. 100, known colloquially as the "Military" Symphony. The military topics come primarily from the famous second movement: triangles, cymbals, and bass drum appear; duple-time march rhythms abound; and the trumpet signal at m. 152ff and the timpani's response invite the surprised listener onto the battlefield. But the symphony also offers plenty of other topics, such as the singing style of the first movement, the *Sturm und Drang*-like perversion of the dotted figure in the trio of the third movement (mm. 69–73), or the examples of learned style in the fourth (chains of suspensions: mm. 189–198; imitative counterpoint: mm. 312–318). And even though the second movement's supplemental band returns in the finale, the military component is largely absent; instead, the group plays a supporting role in something more celebratory and folksy. When the reviewer criticized audiences for allowing their interpretations to run amok, he probably had in mind their proclivity to latch onto the more superficial topics of a composition and extrapolate general meaning or truth from them. Indeed, while the enduring appeal of titles like Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet, K458, or Haydn's "Military" Symphony is understandable, their presence potentially

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limits interpretation as much as helps shape it by topically pigeonholing an entire composition on the basis of what usually amounts to only a memorable few measures or single theme of music.

The topic appears in its most unadulterated form in the character piece. While isolated examples of the character piece have been traced back to the earliest days of notated instrumental music, and while François Couperin's four books of *Pièces de clavecin* (1713–1730) and various keyboard works by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach speak to the vitality of the genre in the eighteenth century,⁴ it was not until the nineteenth century that the character piece truly saturated all corners of the musical marketplace. Felix Mendelssohn's eight books of *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Songs without Words*; 1829–1845), Franz Liszt's *Consolations* (late 1840s), most of Charles-Valentin Alkan's piano music, Edvard Grieg's *Lyriske stykker* (*Lyric Pieces*; 1867–1901), and most of Johannes Brahms's solo piano music from op. 10 onwards sit atop a huge mountain of nineteenth-century character pieces that overwhelmingly take as their starting point a single musical topic. This repertorial explosion paralleled the repurposing of many eighteenth-century topics,⁵ as well as the creation or identification of several new ones. By the end of the nineteenth century, the topical lexicon had grown to encompass exotic dialects such as the folkloric or *style hongrois* and – in the wake of Ludwig van Beethoven and Carl Maria von Weber – the heroic and demonic styles.

For instance, Adolf von Henselt's popular *12 Études caractéristiques*, op. 2, features a mixture of the old and the new (see Table 1.1). The storm dominates nos. 1 and 5, although both titles reflect the transferal of the eighteenth-century

Table 1.1 *Adolf von Henselt's 12 Études caractéristiques, op. 2*

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1. "Orage, tu ne saurais m'abattre!" ("Storm, you cannot keep me down!")
 2. "Pensez un peu à moi, qui pense toujours à vous!" ("Think a bit of me, who always thinks of you!")
 3. "Exauce mes vœux!" ("Grant my wish!")
 4. "Repos d'amour" – Duo ("Love's rest")
 5. "Vie orageuse" ("Stormy life")
 6. "Si oiseau j'étais, à toi je volerais!" ("If I were a bird, I would fly to you!")
 7. "C'est la jeunesse, qui a des ailes dorées!" ("Youth has gilded wings")
 8. "Tu m'attires, m'entraînes, m'engloutis!" ("You entice me, lead me, engulf me")
 9. "Jeunesse d'amour, plaisir céleste, ah tu t'enfuis! mais la mémoire nous reste" ("Young love, heavenly delight, oh! how you vanish! But the memory of us remains")
 10. "Comme le ruisseau dans la mer se répand, ainsi, ma chère, mon coeur t'attend" ("Like streams in the ocean spread out, so too, my love, does my heart wait for you")
 11. "Dors tu, ma vie?" ("Are you sleeping, my life?")
 12. "Plein de soupirs, de souvenirs, inquiet, hélas! Le coeur me bat" ("Full of sighs, memories, anxiety, alas! My heart beats")
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