PART I

Horizons

1 Defining the Indefinable: Romanticism and Music

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Whatever else it may be, Romanticism is hardly unknown: its characteristic features are in fact familiar to many of us. Take the 1832 painting by Carl Gustav Carus, *Goethe-Denkmal* (Goethe Memorial), reproduced as the cover to this Companion. A wild, lonely landscape of mountains and ravines calls forth the sublimity of nature, the lofty peaks standing out as islands within the mysterious sea of mist. It is already late: the sun has apparently set and evening is drawing on; a full moon, peeping out for a moment from behind the clouds above, provides nocturnal illumination through its refulgent, reflected light. Art and religion are near at hand (even the stylised framing of the picture suggests an altar panel). Two sculpted angels perch on the tomb in the foreground, imparting an aura of sanctity to the scene's already otherworldly quality: alongside the presence of death there is a promise of something beyond. In barely legible, almost hieroglyphic script the name 'Göthe' can be made out on the medieval-looking sarcophagus. The Romantic vision is built on the remains of the classical past, while sequestered within the protecting mountains high above the rest of humanity, the poetic genius has been returned to nature, from whence he arose. (This, lest the national provenance be overlooked, is a distinctly Germanic backdrop too – albeit the Romantic 'Saxon Switzerland' rather than mercantile Frankfurt am Main.) Not the least of these Romantic features is the harp, a favourite symbol for music in Carus's paintings. While the angels pray for the soul of the poet, the harp already suggests the potential for transcendence (note the gleaming star, a flash of gold amidst the surrounding sheen of crepuscular silver and blue, the illuminating lamp of poetic imagination, a second sun), as if the now liberated spirit might rise from the tomb to communicate directly with nature, attaining eternal life through his art. Calling to mind the Romantic cult of the aeolian harp on which the wind would play its natural melodies, the instrument suggests the organic interconnection of self and nature through sound, the living breath of a pantheistic world infused by spirit.

Carus's picture serves as a virtual compendium of Romantic images and themes; indeed, for many observers its Romanticism might have passed well beyond exaggeration into cliché. Yet its creator embodies many of the

apparent contradictions of Romanticism. No ill-adjusted artist at odds with the world around him, Carus – a former friend of Goethe – was himself a medical doctor and *Naturwissenschaftler*, a respected professional within civil society and leading man of science. An expert in melancholia and pioneer in studying the unconscious, he was consulted by no less a figure than the ailing Robert Schumann (Carus's recommendation of energetic morning walks appears to have had little effect, however; with paintings like this how could he have hoped to cure any Romantic artist?). For all the Romantic excess, the quotidian worlds of science and society lie not far away. And while few would have difficulties in identifying Carus's painting as 'Romantic', Romanticism itself has long proved strangely recalcitrant to definition.

Romanticism: In Search of a Definition

> Weary of analysing and pondering, finding always empty phrases and incomprehensible professions of faith, we came to believe that this word *romanticism* was no more than a word; we thought it beautiful, and it seemed a pity that it meant nothing.[1]

Romanticism is easy to recognise, but notoriously hard to define. When even undoubted Romantics like Alfred de Musset (quoted above) treat the attempt with ironic condescension, we might well despair of adequately formulating a definition, let alone ever extending our understanding to its relation with music – an art form that has similarly often been found to be beautiful, and yet to mean nothing. No doubt a similar problem haunts attempts to theorise other comparable wide-ranging movements, such as the Enlightenment, modernism, or postmodernism. But the irony for Romanticism is that this endeavour seems to coalesce into one of the critical objectives of the Romantic movement itself: how to define the indefinable; and the inevitable failure of this attempt is perhaps the most Romantic feature of it. This is a movement, after all, which not only resists easy encapsulation (most such general terms do), but in which the search for completion, for a unified whole, truth, or ultimate meaning, is as commonly present as the insistence that this goal is for ever unreachable. To rework a famous fragment by Friedrich Schlegel, the foremost spokesman of German Romanticism, a definition is both impossible – and necessary.[2]

Nevertheless, the difficulties should not be exaggerated: such scruples, while satisfying scholarly consciences, are little use to the student wanting

some direction within this topic. In broad terms, of course, some basic outlines can easily be sketched. Romanticism is usually taken to refer to a range of movements arising in Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and start of the nineteenth, concentrated originally in Germany and Britain but also finding expression in France soon after.[3] More generally, it can refer to an ethos, aesthetic, or worldview often associated with these movements, though this is where the problems of definition soon become apparent. It might typically include an emphasis on feeling and emotion, with increased value placed on subjectivity and self-expression, on nature and organic growth, the power of the creative imagination and the unconscious; the prizing of art and the aesthetic, the spiritual and fantastic, self-consciousness and freedom, pantheism and the universal power of love; yet also a sense of alienation or even spiritual homelessness that is the flip side of the longing to be part of a larger whole. Recurring themes and images include night, darkness, or twilight, death, loss, memory, and distance, and above all, yearning or longing for something (often undefined) beyond our finite world of experience. The longer the list continues, however, the further we seem to be from ever reaching any end, and the more contradictions emerge. Thus, fragmentation exists alongside a longing for the whole, the systematic alongside the unsystematic; the nostalgic looking back on the past is found alongside a purposeful resolve towards creating a new future, deep pessimism found against high optimism. Romanticism can appear to be politically progressive and yet conservative; the idea of Romantic art as a form of escapism sits strangely alongside Shelley's famous claim of poets being 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. Some of these dichotomies are of course only surface contradictions, and it could be just as persuasive in several cases to see Romanticism as arising from the desire to reconcile antithetical positions bequeathed by modernity and the Enlightenment. Still, the difficulty in trying to define the movement through its associated qualities becomes readily apparent.[4]

The multiplicity of features viewed as belonging to Romanticism, and the seemingly impossible task of finding a single unifying theme or essence behind the different manifestations, is indeed the overriding problem for scholars. In an oft-cited article from 1924, the literary historian Arthur Lovejoy famously dismissed attempts to find a unitary definition for Romanticism; short of discarding the term altogether (which he conceded would never take off) he suggested 'that any study of the subject should begin with a recognition of a prima facie plurality of Romanticisms', each of which could be more or less circumscribed by date, representatives, and

constituent elements.[5] Still, this has not stopped scholars ever since persisting in trying to find common features underlying Romanticism's multifarious forms. It may be sought in the common norms of 'imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'; in 'the revolution in the European mind against thinking in terms of static mechanism and the redirection of the mind to thinking in terms of dynamic organicism'; in the movement from the model of the creative imagination as a mirror to that of a lamp.[6] In philosophical terms, Romanticism might be grounded in a scepticism towards the idea that reason can explain everything, an anti-foundationalism that questions whether incontrovertible first principles can be found that might ground reason itself, a critique of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Thus Romanticism marks a turning point in history when two sets of values may be equally right – and yet incompatible; a world where reason cannot be reconciled with reality, and we are thrown back on sincerity and personal integrity as the only arbiters of truth.[7] Some go further in arguing that in its unremitting perspectivism, fragmentation and anti-rationalist thrust, Romanticism is essentially pre-empting postmodernity; others disagree, holding that it carries further the project of the Enlightenment, seeking to reconcile reason with ethics and aesthetic sensibility, not abandoning the belief in an ultimate truth but admitting that we may only ever approach it without ever actually reaching it.[8] The Romantic spirit – the tension between the urge for a meaningful whole and the insistence on the fragmentary and incomplete – lives on, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes self-consciously, in the attempt to define Romanticism itself.

Romanticism and Music

Even greater problems arise, however, when musicological use is introduced. While music is unquestionably an important part of many Romantic formulations, Romanticism as a concept applied to music often bears at best an oblique relationship with Romanticism as more generally understood. The most commonly encountered use of the term is to describe a certain type of music – namely as 'Romantic music', as an adjective on the cusp of forming a compound noun. Thus, as many standard textbooks over the last century will tell us, 'Romantic' refers to European music from Beethoven's late works and Schubert to the rise of Schoenberg and Stravinsky – in other words, almost a century of musical composition, roughly correlate to the nineteenth century, pushed back by a decade or so. But it is often unclear in these

accounts whether 'Romantic' is being used to refer to a historical period or as a style – if not an uneasy mixture of the two – and in neither case is the relation with other cultural manifestations of Romanticism straightforward.[9] The entry in the *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music* from 1978 is a case in point, defining 'Romantic / romanticism' both in chronological terms (music from roughly the 1820s to 1910) and as a distinct 'movement' with a geographical centre (Germany), while also offering some of its typical stylistic traits (an emphasis on subjective expression, formal freedom) and characteristic genres (character piece, song, symphonic poem).[10] More rewarding, perhaps, is to take Romanticism as an aesthetic – as a mode of perceiving music and category of reception. Romanticism becomes less a constitutive element 'in' a musical work, and more a way of understanding music. In this situation, though, the term's chronological and geographical bounds become inevitably loosened; almost any music can potentially be seen as 'Romantic' as a result (which is indeed how music is usually treated in Romantic writings).

Romanticism as a Historical Period

Let us start with the historical question. One of the problems with musical Romanticism as a historical-stylistic category is that it is largely non-coetaneous with the literary and philosophical movements going under that name. Those looking for a starting date for the latter often consider the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 as a convenient initial boundary; more precisely, the gathering of an influential group of thinkers in Jena and Berlin around 1797 (including the Schlegels, Novalis, Wackenroder, Tieck, Schleiermacher, and Schelling) is often taken to mark the onset of the *Frühromantik* in Germany, with their journal the *Athenaeum* its mouthpiece, and the publication in 1798 of the *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge the beginning of a specific ('Lakeland') Romantic movement in England. The situation in France is less straightforward, though some time in the first decades of the nineteenth century is often proposed as a starting point. But these Romantic movements were relatively short-lasting. German Romanticism is conventionally divided into 'early' (1797–1802), 'high' (1802–15), and 'late' (1815–30) forms; by 1830, then, it is largely over, while the early 1830s also mark a standard cut-off point in the narrative of English literary Romanticism (Keats, Shelley, and Byron had all died the previous decade, Coleridge would soon follow, and Wordsworth had written all the work for which he is celebrated). French Romanticism is normally considered passé by the later 1840s.

In music-historical terms, of course, 'Romanticism' is supposed to have hardly started by the time its most influential manifestations have finished in other arts. The one period which almost all music histories agree on terming 'Romantic' – the years from around 1830 to 1850, marked by the emergence of the figures sometimes designated 'the Romantic Generation' – is the period after the primary Romantic impulses in England and Germany had already faded.[11] What is more, Romanticism appears to persist much longer in music than in most other art forms. As Carl Dahlhaus notes, the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe is an age of scientific positivism and realism in most other arts; while a good case could be made for considering some of the music in this period under the aegis of Romanticism (or 'neo-Romanticism'), the disparity is nonetheless striking.[12]

Geographically, too, the tendency to use 'Romantic' as a blanket label for all nineteenth-century music runs the risk of imposing a centre/periphery model on national styles across Europe: music from countries strongly influenced by Romanticism and Romantic aesthetics (most evidently, the German-speaking lands) becomes thereby privileged, along with particular associated genres and aesthetics (instrumental music or 'national' opera; the idea of 'absolute' or 'pure' music), while the music of cultures less marked by Romanticism is either marginalised or misrepresented through misprision within a purported Romantic aesthetic. Romanticism thus easily becomes a normative category: the music of other cultures must either be accommodated within it, or run the risk of being seen as peripheral to a nineteenth-century mainstream. The relationship, for instance, between various national movements in the second half of the nineteenth century and certain Romantic ideas is not in dispute; but whether all nineteenth-century national movements should simply be reduced to a larger monolithic 'Romanticism' – and whether all music from outside the Austro-German sphere should be understood as 'nationalistic' – is much more questionable.

Romanticism as a Style

In the absence of any clear chronological and cultural intersection it would at least help if Romanticism in musical terms were a robust stylistic category that would enable the connection to other 'Romanticisms' to be justified, but even here the link can often be tenuous. 'Romantic music' is typically viewed as denoted by an emphasis on emotion and subjective expression, by a freedom from formal constraints and the introduction of 'extra-musical'

or programmatic elements, by increased harmonic complexity and richness, the use of song-like melodic material, and the development and expansion of instrumental resources including an emphasis on the colouristic use of sound. Certain genres are seen as Romantic innovations – the lied, song-cycle, characteristic piano miniature, concert overture and symphonic poem, and the notion of opera as a fusion of all the arts or *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Some of these features undeniably do relate to Romanticism as more generally understood: in some cases the Romantic quality arises from the subject matter (the lied and Romantic lyric poetry; the themes of Romantic national opera); the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* famously sought by Wagner in his later music dramas relates to earlier discussions by Romantic writers such as Friedrich Schlegel and E. T. A. Hoffmann (although it must be remembered that opera, from its beginnings, has held up a comparable ideal). Specific stylistic and aesthetic features of the earlier Romantic movements – organic, evolving forms, the aesthetics of the fragment, the mixing and fusion of genres – can also be connected to certain aspects of nineteenth-century musical style, which may thus be justified under the stylistic label of Romantic.[13] In such cases, though, the proportion of music from the nineteenth century that can be considered specifically 'Romantic' decreases – often drastically – as the application of the term becomes more refined. Many of the traits commonly associated with Romantic music (such as harmonic richness, lyricism, looser syntax, the colouristic use of sound) could, however, simply be considered stylistic characteristics of nineteenth-century music more generally; they have little intrinsic connection with other cultural manifestations of Romanticism. In certain cases, indeed, the supposed link is rather more deceptive than initially appears. This applies to what are probably the two most popular preconceptions of Romantic music: its emotional expressivity and freedom from classical form.

First, while subjective expression is indisputably an important aspect of Romanticism more widely, the idea of music as 'the language of the emotions' is actually a pre-Romantic aesthetic characteristic of the eighteenth century (Romantic aesthetics are generally distinct in emphasising music's formalist aspects, or when based on emotional qualities, imbuing them with significantly greater metaphysical aspirations than the primarily physiological and ethical basis of earlier eighteenth-century viewpoints). Thus the popular view of music as primarily the expression of emotion has no more connection with Romanticism than with the aesthetics of sensibility or *Empfindsamkeit*, and would apply to C. P. E. Bach at least as well as to Chopin over half a century later. Moreover, one would be entering

hazardous territory if venturing to suggest that other music is generally less expressive than that popularly termed 'Romantic'. The gestures and rhetoric of nineteenth-century music have become established in modern Western culture as the pre-eminent language of the emotions, but there is no reason to believe that earlier music was not heard as expressive to a comparable extent. Most problematic of all, though, is the idea – widespread since the late nineteenth century – that Romanticism is inherently opposed to 'purely musical' qualities, emphasising (often 'extra-musical') content over form. This has been partially responsible for introducing a new concept into music historiography, the 'Classical', as an imagined antipode to the 'Romantic'.

It is undeniable that Romantic aesthetics following Schlegel see the Romantic as being manifested in a literary art that is to some extent incomplete, fragmentary, open, evolving, stylistically heterogeneous, in contrast to the perceived formal unity of the works of classical antiquity. To this extent, the dichotomy here constructed between 'Classical' and 'Romantic' could plausibly be extended to musical works embodying such opposed formal qualities. Yet the very idea that music – textless instrumental music specifically – can be considered a work of art in its own right, as an object of aesthetic contemplation, is the most significant contribution of Romantic thought to the history of music aesthetics. In a word, the 'purely musical' is a Romantic invention; listening to instrumental music as a meaningful language, one embodying its own type of logic and form, is the lasting legacy of Romanticism. The 'extra-musical' – the idea that music needs the support of verbal language or conjunction with other arts for its meaning – is an earlier viewpoint, against which Romantic aesthetics form the strongest opposition. It is this that separates the Romantic view of music from that of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. If we hear the symphonies, quartets, and sonatas of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as embodying purely musical values, we are hearing them Romantically. To put it in pointed form, to see music as 'Classical' is essentially to view it from the perspective of Romanticism.[14]

To be sure, one might propose that, as a stylistic category, 'Romantic' music can still be opposed to 'Classical' music, even if the latter is inherently a Romantic aesthetic. Romanticism – an idea with a tendency towards infinity – may be broad enough to contain both types within its copious contradictions. This is the point, however, when the use of 'Romantic' as a stylistic category is in serious danger of obscuring more than it illuminates. By allowing two contradictory stylistic designations into a single broader aesthetic that shares one of their names, the whole matter becomes

irredeemably confusing. This is responsible for one of the most futile debates in music history: whether, and to what extent, 'Classical' music is different to Romantic music; when 'Classicism' ends, when Romanticism starts, whether Beethoven (who always seems the pivotal figure) was 'Classical' or Romantic, et cetera. Both terms are fictitious concepts, heuristic labels that outlive their use when taken too literally as implying a coherent and antithetical historical, stylistic, or aesthetic position.

It is clear that 'Romantic' is typically used in a mixed and rather loose sense, as a broad historical-stylistic label to designate an epoch in Western art music in terms of some of the prominent stylistic characteristics of this music and its associated aesthetics. There is nothing inherently wrong with such broad labels: it should just be remembered that the use of this word to designate all nineteenth-century music may well contradict other, more specific uses of the term. Problems may arise when the various meanings are conflated and it is assumed that Romanticism, in the stricter meaning of the term, is an essential quality of all music from this period – that certain genres, formal principles, and styles constitute a norm against which the music of this era should be evaluated.

Romanticism as an Aesthetic

It may be more productive to approach Romanticism as an aesthetic, a mode of understanding music rather than a style or historical era. After all, Romanticism is often associated with the otherworldly and transcendent: there is an unintended irony in seeking too exact a location in time and space for its musical manifestation. This means, for instance, taking seriously the claim E. T. A. Hoffmann made in 1810 when he described the music of Haydn and Mozart as 'Romantic'. But it also means that the music of other composers not even remotely overlapping with the European movements that go under the name can equally be heard Romantically, as when Hoffmann elsewhere praises the choral music of Leo and Palestrina, or when Kleist treats the Gloria from the Mass of an unknown (and no doubt imaginary) early Italian master as the instantiation of the power of music.

Underlying this is the belief that speaking of 'Romantic music' is less valuable than seeking to understand what Romantic writers heard in music, what they meant when they spoke of music, the role music played in Romantic philosophy and aesthetics. For while Romanticism is on the one hand just as diffuse, contradictory, and confusing in its musical as in any of its other manifestations, two things appear certain: that music is