

# ROMANTIC PERIOD

## Era Overview

When you listened to the music of the Classical era, it was probably difficult to tell Mozart from Haydn. There is a great deal of stylistic similarity in the music of that period, and a strong sense of a shared musical language. All this seems to disappear with the advent of the Romantic style. Composers developed distinct "voices" that set them apart from one another. As we listen to this music, no matter what the genre, we are listening, in part, for these voices.

The nineteenth century was a period of both conservatism and radicalism. Franz Schubert, for all his ties to the early Romantics, sounds almost like Mozart in some of his symphonic writing. Hector Berlioz, on the other hand, turned his orchestra into a vast playground of sounds in his *Symphonie fantastique*. And by the end of the century, Claude Debussy was creating a new musical language, as we can hear in his tone poem *La Mer*. But with Debussy, we are really at the door of the twentieth century.

Virtually anyone will concede that the Romantic era was one in which melody was primary. Composers, however, can be distinguished by both the nature of their melodies, and how they treated the melodies over the course of a piece. If we turn to Schubert, we can see one example of this. The fourth movement of his "Trout" Quintet is a set of variations on a melody he had used earlier as a song. Even as he varies it, the melody really doesn't depart much from its basic character. If we listen to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, however, we see a completely different kind of melody handled in a radically different way. The melody, representing the woman loved by the protagonist of the story, first appears in the opening movement of this programmatic work. Its long line and series of surging high points perfectly defines the ideal of Romantic beauty (and thus depicts the woman in her purest, idealized state). By the end of the piece, the nature of the woman, and her melody, have radically changed. We witness a witches' Sabbath, and here the melody is brutally transformed to reveal her true character. These transformations are radical; however, most important, they are used for dramatic and psychological representations. Berlioz's method of variation is as diametrically opposed to Schubert's as Liszt's music is to Chopin's.

These examples might lead you to assume a chronology of Romantic style—the later, the more daring. But that is another one of the paradoxes of the style. Composers late in the century, such as Johannes Brahms, created very conservative music. As an example, listen to a theme from the final movement of Brahms's First Symphony, written more than forty-five years after Berlioz's work.

So, as we listen to the music of this period, we listen for the individual voices of the composers. They form a rich tapestry of the period, even if it seems a bit confused at times. It was a period in which intense emotion existed side by side with gentle reverie, in which massive works competed with miniatures for the attention of the listener. With all these conflicts, and perhaps because of them, the Romantic era presents us with a rich body of art and music. It is no wonder that it is the favorite era of many music lovers.