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Programmatic Music of the Nineteenth Century

CHRISTINE SPODNICK

The Schirmer *Pocket Manual of Musical Terms* defines program music as “a class of instrumental compositions intended to represent distinct moods or phases of emotion, or to depict actual scenes or events. It is “descriptive music.” Throughout the 19th century, composers have debated over the ability of music to express particular emotions or narrate specific episodes. Some composers attached detailed programs to their music, requesting their audiences to visualize a particular scene. Many simply attempt to provoke a specific emotion in their listeners. Still others denied the merit of these assertions and maintained that music cannot express anything. Music simply exists as it is – a series of sounds. Each of these arguments possesses value, but they also are contradictory. There is no one correct answer.

One of the most devoted adherents to program music was Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). His *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) included a detailed program which, at his request, was distributed to the audience prior to the performance. This program included a brief description of each movement of the symphony which related the story of a young musician in love. Berlioz writes, “It has been the composer’s goal to develop different situations in the life of an artist, insofar as they are susceptible of musical treatment. The plot of the instrumental drama, lacking the help of the spoken word, needs to be presented beforehand. The following program must accordingly be viewed as the spoken text of an opera, serving to introduce musical pieces whose character and expression it motivates.”

The first movement introduces the young musician who falls in love with the ideal woman. Musically this is represented by the *idée fixe*, or obsession. This melody regularly reappears in the symphony, and changes as the story progresses. The second movement reveals the young musician at a ball, where the image of his beloved haunts him. In the following movement, the artist finds himself in the country, where he comes upon two shepherds. He becomes lonely, believing that his love has left him, and takes opium, hoping to kill himself. The funeral march which ensues reveals him in a nightmare in which he kills his love, and is sentenced to death. The *idée fixe* reappears, but in a distorted form. The symphony concludes with the musician find-

ing himself among spirits and monsters. His beloved joins in the horrible festivities, and it concludes with a dark *Dies irae*. This is an incredibly specific program, and Berlioz recommended it for performances to assist his audience in their understanding of the piece.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was also a adamant believer in program music. He composed a series of pieces he labeled symphonic poems. He would not call them symphonies because of their abbreviated length and their unconventional form. Rather than composing separate movements, Liszt wrote in continuous form about a variety of topics, including poems, plays, and pictures. The structure of his symphonic poems was very free, allowing him to repeat themes and create contrasting tones at will. One of his most famous programmatic pieces is his *Faust Symphony*, composed in 1854, which he dedicated to Berlioz. The symphonic poem is based on a book by Goethe, and consists of the three movements: *Faust*, *Gretchen*, and *Mephistopheles*. Each movement is a 'portrait' of one of these three characters, complete with themes for each character. Liszt composed by phrase sequencing, which consists of thematic transformations throughout the work. For example, in *Mephistopheles*, both Faust and Gretchen's themes are altered to create a distorted, disturbing melody. Although Liszt did not write a detailed program for his piece, he titled his symphony *Faust*, which was enough for 19th century audiences to interpret his work as he intended.

Even Beethoven encountered the issue of program music in his lifetime. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (1808), also called the Pastoral Symphony, contained a short program which revealed the thoughts which inspired Beethoven to compose it. Each movement had a brief description of the scene associated with it in its title. Although the story is not very detailed, it does disclose a specific goal that Beethoven had when he set out to write it. The first movement is called "Awakening of Cheerful Feelings upon Arrival in the Country." It is followed by "Scene by the Brook," "Merry Gatherings of Country Folk," and "Thunderstorm." The final movement is "Shepherd's Song: Happy and Thankful Feelings after the Storm." Beethoven clearly had some image of what he wanted to accomplish in his symphony, and he strived to create music that would express this. Of his Sixth Symphony, Beethoven said, "It is left to the listener to find out the situations. All painting carried too far in instrumental music loses its effect. Anyone that has formed any idea of rural life does not need many titles to imagine the composer's intentions. Even without a description, the whole thing, which is feeling more than tone-painting, will be recognized." Beethoven would likely have disapproved of the detail included in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, and might have even objected to Liszt's *Faust Symphony*.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) interpreted the term "program music" in a slightly different way. In his Fourth Symphony, Tchaikovsky used "fate motives" to express particular feelings. He composed works that he considered "confessional," from his soul. Of his Fourth Symphony, he said, "Most assuredly my symphony has a program, but one that cannot be expressed in words: the very attempt would be ludicrous." In a letter to his patroness, he attempted to describe the emotion he

poured into his work, and described abstract feelings and events, such as “the force of destiny, which ever prevents our pursuit of happiness from reaching its goal, which jealously stands watch lest our peace and well-being be full and cloudless, which . . . ceaselessly poisons our souls. It is invincible, inescapable. . . .” Although Tchaikovsky did not literally attach a program to his piece, he was inspired by a particular idea, and he composed music which expressed this image.

Brahms, by contrast, was a strict believer in “absolute” music, or music which was to be accepted on its own terms rather than tell a story. He vehemently opposed program music, and composed pieces that did not necessarily express a particular emotion or relate a specific story. Despite Brahms’s beliefs about program music and his implementation of these beliefs, his symphonies were acclaimed by critics and enjoyed by the public. Eduard Hanslick, a music critic, praised Brahms’s Third Symphony, calling it great instrumental music.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was ambivalent about his feelings concerning program music. He once stated outright that “just as I think it a platitude to invent music to a program, so do I consider it to be unsatisfying and sterile to wish to attach a program to a musical work.” Mahler felt that his symphonies expressed something that cannot be expressed with mere words, and that the creation of a program would do the symphony a great injustice. However, Mahler also once wrote to a friend, revealing a basic program for his Symphony No. 2, which would contradict his statements. It is clear that even at the end of the Romantic era, the issue of programmatic music was still debated.

Some critics opposed program music because they felt it ruined the piece by taking away their independence of thought. Others enjoyed the help in understanding the inspiration for the music. Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was a composer, concert pianist, and music critic who initially objected to the use of a detailed program in symphonic music. In his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1835), he criticized Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, which came to be known as one of the greatest examples of program music. He wrote that the Germans would oppose such disclosure of Berlioz’s most intimate thoughts. However, the French, for whom the piece was initially intended, would likely applaud their compatriot because “the music by itself does not interest them.” Schumann found himself unable to determine whether or not a listener unfamiliar with the program might be able to conjure up those images on their own since “once the eye has been led to a given point, the ear no longer judges independently.” Of the program itself, he wrote, “At first the program spoiled my own enjoyment, my freedom of imagination. But as it receded more and more into the background and my own fancy began to work, I found not only that it was all indeed there, but what is more, that it was almost always embodied in warm, living sound.”

Berlioz, Liszt, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Mahler, and Schumann were all well-respected composers of the 19th century, whose works continue to thrive to this day. However, they presented very different views concerning program music, wa-

vering between both extremes. So what can music really express? Is a program a good, evil, or neutral part of symphonic music? How successful are each of these composers in their attempts to express emotions or describe events?

Musical expression is affected by three people involved in its process: the composer, the performer, and the listener. Each of these three people contribute their personal experience to the musical work. The composer often has a particular idea that he wants to express in his music, and he struggles with both himself and the notes to create a work which can fully manifest these feelings or ideas. However, the intention of his music is not necessarily carried out by the performer. Each performer may interpret the music as he/she desires, and as a result the initial meaning of the piece may be somewhat lost to the listener. The listener is the final step in the understanding of music. The listener, too, contributes personal experience and previous knowledge in his interpretation of the piece.

Can music actually express particular feelings or events without a program? The answer is: maybe. It is highly unlikely that Berlioz could form the exact detailed images he set out to create in the minds of his audiences without the aid of a program. The program, therefore, serves as Berlioz's safety net, ensuring that his audience will understand his intent in the composition of the piece. As for Schumann's criticism of the program, that is also warranted. Each individual listener must make his own decision whether or not to read a program prior to listening to the piece. For some, it may increase the overall effect enormously. For others, the confinement of thought might be too unpleasant to bear upon first hearing a work.

Liszt did not enlist the aid of a detailed program like Berlioz, but the titles of his symphonic poems lend themselves to a particular interpretation. The simple act of calling his piece a symphonic poem rather than a symphony seems to justify the use of these revealing titles. It is unlikely that audiences (especially modern ones) would recall the story of Faust without the hint given in the titles of the movements. Similarly, the brief description of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony is just enough to give the audiences a glimpse into Beethoven's mind when listening to the piece. In contrast to Liszt's symphonic poem, it is likely that a listener may in fact envision the scene painted by Beethoven because of its simple, unspecific program. It is much easier to ask audiences to imagine an unspecific picture rather than a detailed narrative.

Both Tchaikovsky and Mahler ask their audiences to enter their realm in their music. Tchaikovsky did not include "fate motives" in his piece to necessarily beseech his listeners to question their own fate. Rather, that was the inspiration for his composition, and audiences can draw that from the music, or they can find their own personal meaning in it. Mahler invited his audiences to enter the "world" of his symphonies. Once inside, each individual may find their own understanding of this world. Because neither of these composers used specific words in the form of a program to express their music, the exact intent may not be attained. However, they do allow the listener to find an interpretation on their own. The true measure of a great

composer may in fact be this ability to express in music something that cannot be understood with words.

On the other hand, does Brahms express anything in his music which he may not have initially intended? Because music is such a subjective thing, it is likely that performers and audiences may interpret a message in Brahms' pieces. Part of what draws people to music is the emotional surge one receives when listening to a beautiful work. For different people, this feeling may be associated with different events in their own personal lives, and as a result, even Brahms may express something he did not initially intend.

In conclusion, the use of a program does not seem to be a necessarily reprehensible aspect of 19th century music. It merely ensures that audiences will understand the composer's meaning of a piece. However, despite all attempts of composers to express particular emotions or events, each individual listener's personal experience also greatly influences the interpretation of a musical work. For some, a program may be too inhibiting, cutting off the listeners' imaginative flow. For others, a program can significantly increase their enjoyment and understanding of the music. The composer must decide to include a program, but the listener has the freedom to heed or ignore all such programmatic suggestions.

Works Cited

Baker, Theodore, ed. *Schirmer Pronouncing Pocket Manual of Musical Terms*, 4th ed. New York: Schirmer, 1978.