

Romantic Era

Romantic music came into its own at the beginning of the 19th century. Music from this era sounds almost boundless and free from any limitations of form. Much of this music is programmatic—that is, it is meant to describe something, perhaps a scene in nature or a particular feeling.

During the Romantic era, the composers started to break free from the rigid rules and forms of the classical period. As the music grew more expressive, the regular instruments of the classical orchestra were not enough to express the composers' music. Instruments such as contrabassoon, bass clarinet, and piccolo made their way into the orchestra. The percussion section also saw the addition of xylophones, drums, celestes, bells, and triangles.

Frédéric Chopin

March 01, 1810 - October 17, 1849



Frédéric Chopin was one of the greatest pianists of his day. Chopin was born in a town just outside of Warsaw, Poland. His mother introduced him to the piano; by the time he was six, Chopin played extremely well and was starting to compose. He gave his first concert at the age of eight.

When Chopin was 20, he left Poland to seek fame and fortune in other European cities. When Chopin got to Paris, he decided to stay.

There's a story that when Chopin left his native country, his friends gave him some Polish soil, which he carried around with him for the rest of his life. That's probably not true, but Chopin did continue to be passionately patriotic about Poland, even though he never went back there.

Chopin was never healthy, and he was only thirty-nine when he died of tuberculosis. When he was buried -- in France -- a special box of earth was brought from Poland to sprinkle on his grave. But Chopin's heart is in Poland -- literally. His heart was put in an urn and taken to the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

May 07, 1840 - November 06, 1893



Piotr (or Peter, as we would say in English) Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, a town in Russia's Ural Mountains. When he was 8 years old, his family moved to the capital city of St. Petersburg. Even though Tchaikovsky was a good musician as a kid, that wasn't considered an "acceptable" profession, so his parents made him study law instead.

But even in law school, Tchaikovsky continued to study music. Eventually, he gave up his legal job and went to the St. Petersburg Conservatory. After he graduated, he moved to Moscow to teach at the new conservatory there. It's now named for him.

For years, Tchaikovsky had a patroness named Nadezhda von Meck -- a wealthy widow who was a big fan of Tchaikovsky's music. She regularly sent him money so that he could concentrate on composing without having to worry about making a living. But Nadezhda von Meck didn't want to meet Tchaikovsky. For 14 years, they only communicated by writing letters to each other. Tchaikovsky dedicated his Fourth Symphony to his patroness.

Tchaikovsky traveled all over Europe for performances of his music. In 1891, he even came to America for the opening of Carnegie Hall, where he was invited to conduct his music.