Unfamiliar Listening Question 1: Instrumental Music for Chamber Ensemble

This piece of music for Piano Quintet was composed in the 1860s. Described as 'at times anguished, at times demonic, at times tragic', discuss how the elements of music are used by the composer to heighten the expressive qualities of this extract. Relate your discussion to other relevant works. These may include set works, wider listening or other music. (20 marks)

The following extract, unfamiliar listening extract 1, will be played as you answer the question above.

*The composer heightens the expressive qualities of the music in this extract through his choice of instruments and their use. The composer has written for a very popular combination of instruments in the 19th century: a piano quintet consisting of 2 violins, viola, cello and piano.

*This expands on the more popular form of the classical period: the string quartet, with one of the instruments greatly favoured by Romantic composers: the piano, not least because of its recent development making it a more expressive and dramatic instrument.

*Typical of the Romantic period, the extract begins with discursive lines of music between the upper strings and piano: playing in imitative counterpoint with each other.

*Similar dialogue between instruments can be heard in Clara Schumann's Piano Trio in G minor, the effect of which is to involve and give pleasure to the performers (as well as the audience) as the most important musical material is shared between them).

*The opening demonstrates the wide range of expressive sounds achievable by string instruments including both lyrical arco (expressing the romantic style melodies) and mysterious pizzicato played by cello (especially during the opening pedal note). The passage diminuendos to its quietest point with a staccato dotted motif in octaves between strings (creating a sparse texture).

*Extremes of emotion in the Romantic period were achieved in music with similar extremes of timbre and dynamics. This also can be heard in Romantic symphonies such Mahler's Symphony No. 5, exploiting a wide range of timbres in all orchestral instruments.

*The composer contrasts the quiet staccato passage the the following tutti, chordal homophonic, fortissimo thematic passage: a dramatic and expressive contrast. The dialogue between these passages and the monophonic (unison) piano fanfare in antiphony with the strings increases the drama.

*The melody of this movement is built from many repeating motifs often organised in sequences: for example the opening melody based on an ascending arpeggio and, later a descending sequence, on a descending triad. This is contrasted with a fanfare like dotted motif on a single note (a monotone) ending with a conjunct turn motif concluding it.

*When composing memorable themes, such as this one and the first subject found in Schumann's Piano Trio in Gm Mvt. I, composers rely on sequences to build expressive melodies. Schumann uses the same device in B.4-5.

*The composer other repetitive devices to develop motifs including rhythmic augmentation: the turn motif is repeated immediately but with extended note lengths, now in the bass. They also repeat the main theme in a similar way: rhythmically the same but an octave lower.

*The device of rhythmic augmentation is very common in earlier works such as Taverners Dum Transisset, where a plainchant melody is heard as a cantus firmus: augmenting the note values of the original chant so that it can be decorated with surrounding, faster polyphony.

*The turn motif usually appears at the end of the dotted fanfare motif in this work, but to raise tension, as the composer nears cadences they use foreshortening, in which only the turn is stated in quick succession.

*Fragmenting motifs in this way is important in many works, such as Liszt's Totentanz (Dance of the Dead) in which he aptly quotes fragments from the Dies Irae (Day of Wrath from the Requiem Mass) in this work.

*At the end of the extract the composer combines the fanfare and turn motif, decorating them with rapid tremolo semiquavers in the piano.

*The turn motif is used in many different contexts, not least in the minor mode (usually in shorter note lengths) and major mode to signal the triumphant climax of the phrase in chordal homophony.

Unfamiliar Listening Example Answer 1 -
Romantic Chamber Music

Discuss how this excerpt is characteristic of the Romantic period referring to the composer's use of the elements of music. Relate your discussion to other relevant works. These may include set works or wider listening (20 marks).

Context
*There are many features of this excerpt which suggest that this is a piece of chamber music composed during the Romantic period (probably between the years 1820 and 1900).

Use of Instruments and Texture (including dynamics)

*This piece may be described as chamber music because it uses a small number of instruments, in this case piano and strings: most likely two violins, viola and cello, a group known as a piano quintet. Unlike an orchestra, this chamber music is played with one player per part.

*As chamber music, this may be played to an audience in a concert hall, but may also be played by amateur musicians in their own homes for their enjoyment. As a more virtuosic piece, a concert hall performance may be more likely.

*The effect of this small number of players is to allow each to play the principal melodic material with an expressive impact on the music as a whole.

*In Schumann's Piano in G minor, she uses only violin, cello and piano, giving each player in this smaller group an even more important role.

*The composer contrasts the use of instruments between piano (quiet) passages: in which the instruments play soli (fewer instruments at a time), often with lower tessitura (lower in their registers), sometimes with pizzicato, often in dialogue or imitation, and forte (louder) passages in which the instruments tutti, arco, higher tessitura with sustained accented bowing leading to terraced dynamics.

Melody
Tempo, Rhythm and Metre
Structure
Tonality
Harmony