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The Evolution of the Piano and How it Influenced the Romantic Period

The further development of the keyboard through the Romantic Period presented opportunities to explore new possibilities with keyboard instrumentation. Until the Classical Period, the piano and its ancestors were most commonly used as basso continuo and ostinato instruments, with the exception of a few solo harpsichord works by composers like Bach. While the Classical Period prided itself on simplicity, the Romantic Period once again delved into virtuosity and expressivity. During the late 18th century into the 19th century, there was a considerable rise in solo piano repertoire and new musical styles. Featuring famous piano composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and others of the like, the Romantic Period produced some of the most well recognized music and styles. In this paper, I will discuss how the further development of the piano, such as the use of heavier strings, made the instrument capable of fully standing on its own in solo performance and created a new demand for music that appealed to the public.

The piano had seen many transformations up until the Classical period. During the Romantic period, the piano continued to be developed, eventually leading up to the modern day piano. Instrument makers across Europe had their own unique ways of building pianos. In Vienna by the 1820s, pianos had expanded the octave range to about six octaves, and each had anywhere from two to six pedals.¹ Viennese pianos later had to become more structurally sound to accommodate the highly demanding playing styles of the Romantic Period. This included

¹ Edwin M. Ripin, *The New Grove Piano* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 33.

making the strings heavier and thicker, making the casing of the piano more structurally sound, and making the dampers heavier. The Viennese pianos prided itself on crisp and delicate sound which later changed after these alterations were made, making it less desirable to play on.² In England and France, much of the innovation that was done to the piano was foundational to the modern day piano.³ A major development was the use of iron bracing. This development was important to the modern piano given the tension of its strings and the size of the hammers. This allowed the instrument to withstand heavier strings and tensions.⁴ Another advantage with the use of metal in the instrument included reducing the amount of times the piano became out of tune due to external forces such as humidity or temperature. The iron would expand with the strings to match and prevent the strings from becoming slack. Hammers were made bigger to produce a louder sound. The hammers included a piece of felt to lessen the intense sound produced from them.⁵ The piano became a much heavier instrument with these adaptations. This required the action of the instrument to be altered to match. A piano maker by the name of Sébastien Erard is particularly well known for his contribution. He made the repetition action, which allows the player to repeatedly play the same note in succession. His contribution allowed for the keys of a piano to be played over and over without it returning to its original position first, thus creating a faster action.⁶ In the later Romantic Period, at around 1860, the piano had grown to encompass seven octaves.⁷ Unlike the Viennese pianos, the newer pianos didn't use six pedals. They were narrowed down to three with those being the damper pedal, the *una corda* pedal, and the *sostenuto* pedal.⁸ These three pedals are still used on modern pianos of today.

² Ripin, *The New Grove Piano*, 34.

³ Ripin, *The New Grove Piano*, 38.

⁴ Ripin, *The New Grove Piano*, 39.

⁵ Ripin, *The New Grove Piano*, 41.

⁶ Ripin, *The New Grove Piano*, 41.

⁷ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, (New York: Free Press, 1966), 206.

⁸ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 207.

After these developments, piano virtuosity became an ever growing interest for people. These improvements to the piano were equally stirred by the new demand for piano proficiency of the Romantic Era as well as created the demand itself.

This advancement in the piano allowed for new musical styles to be developed. During the Romantic Period, music's importance in human expression spiked. Many literary works expressed this interest in music, claiming it to be the only art medium that could express ideas beyond just music.⁹ While older musical forms were still being used in composition, new forms were developed that pushed the Romantic idea of expressing emotions through some medium. Some new piano genres included character pieces, etudes, nocturnes, and ballades. Character pieces, not to be confused with character songs for voice, were short instrumental pieces that expressed an experience or portrayed a specific character.¹⁰ Similar to video game and movie music, character pieces were like a character "theme". Composers associated with character pieces from the Romantic Period include Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. The etude was developed during the Romantic Period as an instructional piece that focuses on a particular piano technique. Etudes were used to teach piano students intense piano techniques in the form of music rather than aimless repetition. Etudes were inspired by the works of Paganini, a Romantic virtuoso violinist.¹¹ Paganini's mastery of the violin influenced piano composers to desire mastery over the piano. The etude is associated with a few popular Romantic composers including Schumann, Chopin, and Liszt. Every one of the composers listed added their own unique style to these genres, in turn making the compositions different from one another despite their similarities in structure and purpose.

⁹ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 137.

¹⁰ F. E Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 138.

¹¹ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 179.

There are a few piano composers who stand out during the Romantic Period. Frédéric Chopin was a revolutionary composer whose music, to this day, stands out as the ideals of Romanticism despite having pre-Classical roots. His execution of expression is unlike any other composer of the time. Having been born in Poland to French parents, Chopin was not nearly as connected to the musical world as other countries. However, he was still heavily inspired by composers of the Classical Period such as Mozart. Much of the music composed by Chopin represents the style and notation of the Classical Period.¹² In terms of his own feelings towards music, he listened with the ears of a Baroque-trained composer and with this had contrasting opinions on composers like Beethoven and Schumann than other musicians of the time did.¹³ Chopin achieved mastery over the piano and, uniquely so, composed strictly for it. Chopin's compositional style is seen by music historians as being influenced by the deficits of the piano itself.¹⁴ The deficit in the piano's sonority, as stated by music critic and composer, Daniel Gregory Mason in his book, *The Romantic Composers*, is the piano's ability to sustain. Once a key is pressed on the piano, it quickly begins to fade away. This required composers to write in such a way that they could overcome this, including techniques like the Alberti bass or simply breaking up chords and playing their individual parts. What makes Chopin's execution of this noteworthy is his lack of muddiness in his harmonies, which is achieved by not writing harmonic chords too low in the piano's range. Despite this, his compositions do not lack bass. Along with this idea, Chopin also created unique harmonies by including intervals like the fourth and the

¹² Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard: Individual Style Elements in the Piano Music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 201.

¹³ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard*, 205.

¹⁴ Daniel Gregory Mason, *The Romantic Composers*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), 200.

sixteenth into his chords.¹⁵ Chopin exhibited immense knowledge of the piano and its strengths and weaknesses, allowing him to exploit these characteristics.

Chopin is most recognized for the many nocturnes he composed, but wrote many different styles of piano music. Originally written for small ensembles, Chopin adapted the style of the nocturne to the piano, making stylistic changes along the way that made the form stand out as more artistic and expressive than it had been.¹⁶ Many of Chopin's nocturnes are notated with *rubato*, meaning "stolen time". This allows the performer to interpret the music in their own way and stretch the bars to display their own emotions while maintaining the rhythmic structure. Unlike previous piano nocturnes, of which there are few, Chopin altered the simplistic and repetitive structure to include key changes, new themes, and different writing styles.¹⁷ Chopin nocturnes are written in *bel canto* style, making them operatic while not possessing lyrics.¹⁸ Many of Chopin's nocturnes use dissonance tastefully, and have been compared to the impressionist paintings of Monet by Daniel Gregory Mason.¹⁹ The use of dissonance in Chopin's nocturnes are not meant to be heard individually, but are meant to be heard as the blurring and blending of the harmony. Similar to the nocturne, Chopin expanded the style of the etude, making it sound like more than just an educational piece. His etudes bordered on virtuosic with some representing character pieces with their expressivity. The interesting feature of his etudes lie in his ability to maintain strong harmonies and exploit the piano's capabilities.²⁰ Unlike his other compositions, Chopin's etudes feel more structured. Their appearance doesn't exactly represent Chopin's unique style, but they serve the purpose he intended while continuing to

¹⁵ Daniel Gregory Mason, *The Romantic Composers*, 205.

¹⁶ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 185.

¹⁷ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 185.

¹⁸ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard*, 228.

¹⁹ Daniel Gregory Mason, *The Romantic Composers*, 213.

²⁰ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 190.

maintain beautiful melodies and harmonies.²¹ On the other side of this, there are the four ballades written by Chopin. Chopin was the first to use the name “Ballade” for instrumental pieces. The name “Ballad” is commonly used in vocal pieces. These four ballades are all related to each other beyond the name. Each one is written in six beats per measure. It is speculated that the reason for this commonality is the fact that music written in six is described as a narrative meter, meaning it has storytelling properties.²² Chopin’s ballades are structured differently than his other musical genres. Each of the four ballades has their own particular narrative property, telling a different story than the others. Chopin slowly introduces a theme in this style, making it almost impossible for common listeners to realize how the piece developed to its climax. These ballades demonstrate an interesting texture in the piano, and as the ballades each began to be written, Chopin’s execution of musical content, texture, and structure of form developed to even further push the instrumental ballade into the forefront of his piano compositions.²³ Chopin is also well known for his other styles of composition such as his impromptus, preludes, and scherzos, but his musical prowess and piano mastery can be distinguished just from the aforementioned genres.

Another famous Romantic composer is the virtuosic Franz Liszt. Liszt’s fame as a composer and performer stems more from his virtuosity rather than his compositions. Liszt took inspiration from Paganini, who, like himself, was accused of making deals with the devil for his virtuosity. Beyond theories of that sort, Liszt was the first pianist to play alone in a concert. He in turn created the standard of the modern piano recital. Liszt’s style of playing was vastly different from those that came before him. While many previous composers used scalar techniques, Liszt found his interest in intense octave passages, heavy chords, arpeggios, modulations, and other

²¹ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard*, 243.

²² Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard*, 229.

²³ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard*, 230, 233.

virtuosic techniques of the sort, which made a noticeable impression on an audience.²⁴ Despite the beautiful music that came from Liszt, there were many negative opinions on his compositional style, particularly his earlier compositions. His earlier compositions, having been written at a young age, were heavily criticized for being boring and lacking the qualities that make music great. He had been regarded as “cheap” and “flashy” by many musicians both past and present.²⁵ Given this, Liszt’s early compositions are still more highly regarded and remembered than later pieces. As stated in Charles Rosen’s book, *The Romantic Generation*, “Liszt may be compared to an old ancestor who built up the family fortune by disreputable and shameful transactions in his youth and spent his last years in works of charity...”.²⁶ This quote sums up the general opinion on Liszt’s compositions. The later compositions that came from Liszt were tame compared to his earlier pieces, but they still weren’t highly regarded as being great pieces of music. Liszt is well associated with his collection called the Hungarian Rhapsodies. These pieces included many virtuosic passages while containing what he thought of as Hungarian gypsy melodies. These pieces also incorporated elements of Hungarian folk music.²⁷ These compositions have a similar structure to all of them, although the form is quite loose in this genre. They generally include a slow section followed by a faster section, or something similar in a different order. The Hungarian Rhapsodies have been compared to Italian opera in that the heavily virtuosic passages appear similar to mad scenes in Romantic opera.²⁸ Another popular genre of his, for both good and bad reasons, were his etudes. Liszt is known for transcribing some of Paganini’s violin caprices. Some of these transcriptions were later revised to make them more reasonable to play. These piano transcriptions were not the only case of

²⁴ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 209.

²⁵ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 472.

²⁶ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 474.

²⁷ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 213.

²⁸ F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music*, 214.

revision. Liszt had written etudes in his adolescence, which later in his life were further developed. At the same time as the revision of the Paganini caprices, these were also stripped down to make them playable by anyone but Liszt himself; however, they still remain as some of the hardest repertory to exist for piano.²⁹ The first iterations of his etudes that were written in his adolescence were seen as uninteresting and mediocre at best. The developments and improvements he made later on gave these same etudes a more musically distinguished quality. Many of these changes were inspired by the etudes being composed by other composers of the time, including Chopin. This gives the impression that he copied the works of other composers and altered it to fit his style, yet his originality in these “copies” overpowers the fact that they are similar to other compositions.³⁰ An example of this is Liszt’s Etude in f minor. He had created an original composition; however, after hearing Chopin’s own Etude in f minor, he made some alterations to his own version that very closely resembled Chopin’s piece. The difference in the two pieces lies in the way they are performed. Liszt’s own compositional technique makes it starkly different from Chopin’s piece.³¹ Similarly, Liszt is potentially best known by musicians and music historians for his invention of piano techniques that far surpass other composers’ ability to create a new sound on the piano. For instance, Liszt was the first to play scales in a musical context with five fingers. This quick succession gives the impression of a quick glissando. This technique allowed Liszt to play with immense speed. Other composers of the time and even before had not implemented this idea.³² Franz Liszt, although not as beloved as other composers of the Romantic Period, is highly regarded for his immense virtuosity, and will

²⁹ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 493.

³⁰ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 496.

³¹ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 494-496.

³² Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 508.

always be remembered as the composer of some of the most difficult piano repertory to still exist today.

While there are many renowned composers of the Romantic Period, Chopin and Liszt show the duality of piano composition, from technical beauty to intense virtuosity. Had the piano not developed further, musical compositions of this scale could not have been made. The Romantic Period produced some of the most well known and beloved pieces of music in all genres and instrumentations. The piano repertory composed in the Romantic Period strayed away from simplicity and became more expressive with composers like the virtuosic Franz Liszt and the expressive Frédéric Chopin. Much of the music in all genres stood out as storytelling devices and appealed to people's interest in an emotional and psychological way. The Romantic interest in the human's capacity to love and expression of emotions through outside mediums allowed for the role of music to expand beyond just entertainment. The advancement of musical technology forged the way for composers to create beautiful and emotional music.

Annotated Bibliography

Ripin, Edwin M. *The New Grove Piano*. First American edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988.

This book covers the history of the piano from its beginnings to the most recent concert grand pianos. It also includes some information on piano repertory throughout the ages. This book is used to trace the further development of the piano through the Romantic Period.

Kirby, F. E. *A Short History of Keyboard Music*. New York: Free Press, 1966.

This book gives an in-depth overview of solo keyboard works leading up to the 20th century. It deals heavily with the Romantic Era. This book is used to examine the repertory and styles of piano music during the Romantic Period.

Rosen, Charles. *The Romantic Generation*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995.

This book covers the musical styles of the Romantic Period, focusing mainly on the piano styles and composers of the time. This book is used to focus on the developments of piano styles during the Romantic Period.

Wolff, Konrad. *Masters of the Keyboard: Individual Style Elements in the Piano Music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms*. Enlarged edition. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990.

This book covers the musical styles of many different composers spanning over many different musical eras. This book is used to examine Romantic composers and their piano styles in comparison to styles of previous times.

Mason, Daniel Gregory. *The Romantic Composers*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906.

This book recounts many famous Romantic Era composers and their compositions. It discusses the styles and structures of different composers and pieces. This book is used to examine the newer styles of piano music during the Romantic Period.