



# Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition

By Jon W. Finson

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This up-to-date view of nineteenth-century classical music places a strong emphasis on the history of opera and on schematic representations of musical structure and form. The book presents a highly concise survey of nineteenth-century music tailored for the increasingly limited amount of time available to readers for the study of any one period, and focuses specifically on the central repertory heard today in the concert hall and at the opera house. The volume provides an overview and background information on nineteenth-century music including the Viennese ascendancy, musical drama in the first part of the nineteenth century, the styling of the avant-garde, operatic development from mid century, the life of the concert hall after mid century, the diversity of nationalism and the new language at century's end. For musicians and music lovers interested in an introduction to classical music.

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### Editorial Review

#### From the Back Cover

**Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition** provides a guide to the basic literature of European art music from which we still draw the majority of our repertory in modern concert halls and opera theaters. The study explores standard works by composers such as Beethoven, Schubert, Rossini, Bellini, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Berlioz, Wagner, Verdi, Bizet, Brahms, Strauss, Franck, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Mahler, and Puccini, tracing the various artistic threads woven through Western music between 1800 and 1900. Frequent and detailed tables serve readers as guides to examination of musical scores from this period or as roadmaps to listening, and the text provides relevant biographical background on the composers whose work we most often enjoy today. Students will find this history to be a succinct and accessible introduction to a central period in Western classical music, and other readers may enjoy its concise summary of the nineteenth century's musical milieu.

#### About the Author

**Jon Finson** serves as Professor of Music and Adjunct Professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he has taught music history and musicology to undergraduate and graduate students for over twenty-three years. An expert in nineteenth-century music, he has published books on the symphonies of Robert Schumann and the history of American popular song, and articles on subjects ranging from Bach to Barry Manilow in the United States and abroad. He has lectured in the United States, Asia, and Europe, and he is currently working on an edition of Robert Schumann's D minor Symphony in its 1841 version for Breitkopf & Hartel as well as on a book about Schumann's Lieder for Harvard University Press.

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The nineteenth century retains a singular place in the history of Western music. It marks the advent of many features in musical life we still take for granted, among them the recognized distinction between "classical" and "popular" music, the rise of widespread subscription concerts, the emergence of the middle classes as the primary consumers of music, and the establishment of international musical copyright. Not the least of the nineteenth century's legacy is a body of classical music so diverse and compelling that it dominates modern concert life.

The musical diversity of the nineteenth century presents the historian with myriad choices, the first of which concerns coverage. The "complete" approach demands a kind of detail that will verge at times on the trivial, and in an age blessed with two truly fine encyclopedias of music (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in its second edition and the revised *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*) there seems little point to this strategy. I mean this book, moreover, to address mainly students taking a survey course in music history. They deserve a study that will acquaint them with music they will most likely play or hear. For both of these reasons I have decided to write a selective introduction to the period focusing primarily on "classical" music. It would be a mistake, however, to present the notion of a "classical" music as somehow inevitable or divinely inspired, especially for a century that developed the concept of "classical" music. We can explore this construct as an aspect of history just like any other.

An introduction to nineteenth-century classical music invariably engages the issues surrounding "the canon." My quotation marks around "the" as well as "canon" highlight a misconception on the part of some music historians, that we can identify one monolithic central repertory upon which all would (mysteriously) agree. In fact, there are several canons, one for the concert hall, one for the opera, a different one for the radio, one for academics, and so forth. Even these generalizations would apply locally to the United States. Different core repertoires would appear in Europe, and vary, in fact, from country to country. Though these various standard repertoires overlap, to be sure, I mean to address an American audience in this book, and I will sample both the publicly performed and the academic canons. To give an example of the contrast between the two, Tchaikovsky's orchestral music plays a relatively large role in the canon of the concert hall but receives fairly brief treatment in most academic accounts, whereas Meyerbeer's opera, rarely performed on these shores, nevertheless plays a prominent role in academic accounts because of its influence. The concept of a canon aids a historian: It helps him or her reduce the vast repertory of the nineteenth century to manageable size. Were there no canon, we would need to create one, for such constructs are inevitable in the writing of art history. But we need not pretend that "the canon" is irrevocable or universally valid.

This book takes one convenient approach to dividing music history, based on calendar chronology. We could make a very good argument for beginning such a history around 1750, including all of the nineteenth century, and ending around 1950. Most expectations of genre, many fundamental aesthetic premises, and a set of common compositional assumptions (in spite of widely divergent style) would be valid for much of the music written during this two-hundred-year period. If style diverges drastically toward the end of it, it must be seen as just that: deviating for artistic reasons from some commonly accepted norm known to all composers. But in the end, a two-hundred-year history would be either unwieldy or cursory, and thus I have chosen the simple expedient of beginning about 1800 and leaving off about 1900, as arbitrary as that may seem. In the end, Carl Dalhaus's suggestion that a coherent segment begins around 1814 and ends around 1914, for all its political logic, produces no better results than the seemingly more arbitrary calendar approach.

I have pointedly avoided suggesting a cohesive nineteenth-century aesthetic theme like that found in books such as Leon Plantinga's worthy *Romantic Music*. A study on musical Romanticism should probably start with the 1780s. After all, most of the aesthetic tenets of Romanticism appear in the late eighteenth century. And no less than E. T A. Hoffman considered the older Haydn and the mature Mozart Romantic, while finding the acme of Romanticism in Beethoven. Charles Rosen's recently acclaimed *The Romantic Generation* would be more aptly titled *The Second Romantic Generation*. Music throughout the period exhibits both "Romantic" and "Classic" qualities, and in a sense the concept of one requires the other to define it. Fredrick Blume's view of "Classic" and "Romantic" as two complementary antitheses in an ongoing synthesis proves in the end the most satisfactory conceptualization, the only one that allows us to embrace composers as diverse as Beethoven, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Verdi, Brahms, and Mahler in one period. But such a solution only emphasizes the problems inherent in trying to find one pervasive, aesthetic "spirit of the times" in the nineteenth century.

Finally, musicologists have recently encountered some criticism from within their own ranks for ignoring the emotional impact and sonic beauty of music. I will not be shy about reflecting what I find moving and beautiful about nineteenth-century music. By this same token, I will feel free to point out what I consider to be the great music of this period. The sophisticated edifice of theory, aesthetics, composition, history, and performance constitutes one of Western civilization's most magnificent intellectual constructs. We encounter many striking achievements of Western art music in the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Rossini, Berlioz, Chopin, Schumann, Wagner, Verdi, Brahms, and the other composers of the nineteenth century. The magnitude of their accomplishments deserves, indeed demands, recognition among the *fiesta humanorum*.

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*Jon Finson*

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