Symbolic poem

An orchestral form in which a poem or programme provides a narrative or illustrative basis.

1. Introduction.

The form flourished in the second half of the 19th century and was generally in one movement; 'poetic symphony' is a name sometimes given to the kindred form in more than one movement. Although some piano and chamber works are effectively symphonic poems, the form is almost exclusively orchestral. Though related to opera and sung music in its aesthetic outlook, it is distinct from them in its exclusion of a sung text. In many ways it represents the most sophisticated development of instrumental programme music in the history of music. Like a number of other ephemeral forms, such as the madrigal and the concerto grosso, it had a relatively short life, lasting from its origins in the late 1840s until its rapid decline in the 1920s: it enjoyed the extreme favour of fashion and suffered consequent severe eclipse. It is thus typical of its period in a way that opera and symphony, for example, cannot claim to be, and it satisfied three of the principal aspirations of the 19th century: to relate music to the world outside, to integrate multi-movement forms (often by welding them into a single movement) and to elevate instrumental programme music to a level higher than that of opera, the genre previously regarded as the highest mode of musical expression. By fulfilling such needs it played a major role in the advanced music of its time, and was a vehicle for some of the most important works of the period.

2. Origins.

Programme music in the 19th century took a decisive step forward with such works as Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique, and most subsequent 'poematic' symphonies derive to some extent from these two works. The origins of the symphonic poem, however, can be seen more clearly in Beethoven's overtures, which display a concentration and expressive power characteristic of many later single-movement works. The Egmont and Coriolan overtures, for example, and the third Leonore overture, with its explicit enactment of dramatic events, show an independence of their theatrical origins which was to lead within a few years to the designation OVERTURE for purely concert works such as Beethoven's own Namensfeier (1814–15) and Die Weihe des Hauses (1822) and for more dramatic pieces such as Berlioz's Waverley, Rob Roy and Roi Lear overtures (1827–31). Though none of these three portrays an explicit sequence of action, all are related to their literary sources. Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream overture (1826) is more strictly programmatic, with clear references to characters and incidents in the play, and his overtures Die schöne Melusine, Meerestille und glückliche Fahrt and Die Hebriden, of a few years later, are direct prototypes of the Lisztian symphonic poem; indeed in 1884 Hans von Bülow described them as attaining the perfect ideal of the symphonic poem. Schumann's overture to Manfred (1848–9) and his three concert overtures of 1851, Julius Cäsar, Die Braut von Messina and Hermann und Dorothea, may also be seen as encapsulating a literary source within a single orchestral movement on lines followed shortly afterwards in innumerable symphonic poems. The closest Berlioz came to the narrative symphonic poem was in the 'Chasse royale et orage' in Act 4 of Les Troyens (1857), even though it calls for stage representation and has a part for chorus. Wagner's Faust Overture (1840, revised 1855) had an important formative influence on Liszt and indicates how closely Wagner's imaginative world might have approached the symphonic poem had he not devoted himself so single-mindedly to music drama.

3. Liszt.

Liszt foreshadowed his own adoption of the symphonic poem in a number of piano works, especially in the Album d'un voyageur (1835–6), later published as Années de pèlerinage. Chapelle de Guillaume Tell, for example, is a portrait of the Swiss national...
hero, and both Au lac de Wallenstadt and Vallée d'Obermann bear literary quotations in the manner of the later orchestral pieces. Après une lecture du Dante, in the second book, is an extended paraphrase of a poem by Victor Hugo. Liszt’s preference for one-movement form was already evident by the time he made his first ventures into orchestral music along similar lines, and his invention of the term ‘symphonische Dichtung’ indicates his desire that the form should display the traditional logic of symphonic thought, even in one movement. Although his period at Weimar from 1848 to 1861 saw the composition of the Faust and Dante symphonies (1854–7), the B minor Piano Sonata (1852–3) and many other works, it is the series of 12 symphonic poems written between 1848 and 1858 that most clearly represents his style and outlook in this period and most vividly illustrates his far-reaching ambitions as a composer.

Liszt had an idealized view of the symphonic poem to which few of his followers aspired. He refrained on the whole from narrative and literal description, and although the meaning of individual passages is usually plain his imagination was more poetic than visual. He only rarely achieved in his symphonic poems the directness and subtle timing that narrative requires. Mazeppa (1851), one of the most descriptive of them even though it is an expanded version of an earlier étude illustrates Hugo’s poem about the wild horse that carries the banished Mazeppa tied to its mane, until he is rescued by the Ukrainians and enthroned as their chieftain. Les préludes (1848) was not given its title, after Lamartine’s poem, until after it had been composed. The first and longest, Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne (1848–9), named after a poem by Hugo, takes as its basic idea the contrast between the voice of Nature and that of Man and describes at the beginning the immense, confused sound out of which the voice of Nature is born. Die Ideale (1857) is based on Schiller’s poem of that name, from which quotations are printed in the score at appropriate moments. Hunnenschlacht (1857) is vividly descriptive of the battle between Huns and Christians in 451, the victory of the Christians being symbolized by the appearance of the hymn Crux fidelis. This work, like the later Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe (1881–2), was inspired by a painting. Héroïde funèbre (1849–50) and Feststätige (1853) are occasional pieces, the one mournful, the other festive, neither with programmes. Hamlet (1858), one of the best of the series, includes a passage descriptive of Ophelia but is otherwise a general evocation of Hamlet’s character. Prometheus (1850) and Orpheus (1853–4), which are also among the best of these works, are musical elaborations of poetic themes. In Orpheus the theme is the uplifting power of art, in Prometheus the suffering of creative genius. Both of these works, and Tasso (1849) too, can be seen as reflections of Liszt’s own problems as an artist and his search for expressive truth.

Liszt’s Faust and Dante symphonies adopt the same aesthetic stance as his symphonic poems, even though they are divided into separate movements and call upon a chorus. Two Episodes from Lenau’s Faust (c1860) should also be considered with the symphonic poems. The first, ‘Der nächtliche Zug’, is closely descriptive of Faust as he watches a passing procession of pilgrims by night, and the second, ‘Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke’ (also known as the ‘First Mephisto Waltz’), tells of Mephistopheles seizing a violin at a village dance. Narrative pieces such as these dictated their own forms, but the problem of organizing longer and more allusive pieces was considerable. Liszt relied on a loose episodic form in which sections follow one another without overriding musical logic, and he used motifs and their transformations in a manner akin to that of Wagner. Many of his dramatic gestures in the symphonic poems – for example the short dropping phrase with isolated chords that stress the angularity and expressiveness of the melodic line – are to be found both in Wagner and in the large corpus of music prompted by the example of Liszt himself. A forceful theme stated in the bass instruments, unaccompanied, is also a common mannerism, looking back to Berlioz’s Roi Lear and beyond that to the opening of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Unequal in scope and achievement though Liszt’s symphonic poems are, they looked forward at times to more modern developments and sowed the seeds of a rich crop of music in the two succeeding generations.

4. The Czech lands.

Liszt’s successors in the cultivation of the symphonic poem were more conspicuous outside Germany – in Bohemia and Russia on the one hand and in France on the other – than in Germany itself. These were the nations that took the symphonic poem most assiduously to heart, with the added potential, in the former case, of using it as a vehicle for the nationalist ideas that were then beginning to burgeon. Smetana visited Weimar in 1857, was befriended by Liszt and immediately embarked on a group of symphonic poems on literary subjects, Richard III (1857–8), Wallensteins Lager (1858–9) and Hakon Jarl (1860–61), after Shakespeare, Schiller and Oehlenschläger respectively. They clearly illustrate both his admiration for Liszt’s music and a straightforward approach to musical description. A piano work of the same period, Macbeth and the Witches (1859), is similar in scope and bolder in style. Smetana’s greatest achievement in this genre is his set of six symphonic poems under the general title Má vlast (‘My Fatherland’), composed between 1872 and 1879; in thus expanding the form he created one of the monuments of Czech music. The cycle presents selected episodes and ideas from Czech history and embodies his personal belief in the greatness of the nation, which he also expressed in his opera Libuše. Two recurrent themes are used to unify the cycle, one representative of Vyšehrad, the fortress overlooking the river Vltava (whose course provides the material of the second work in the cycle), the other an ancient Czech hymn, Kdož jste Boží bojovníci (‘Ye who are God’s warriors’), which unites the last two of the cycle’s poems, Tábor and Blaník. Šárka, relating a bloodthirsty episode from Czech legend, is the most narrative, From Bohemia’s Woods and Fields the most lyrical. The whole cycle is a masterly application of new forms to new purposes and was succeeded by a profusion of symphonic poems from his younger compatriots in the Czech lands and Slovakia: Dvořák, Fibich, Janáček, Foerster, Novák, Suk and Ostrčil.

Dvořák’s principal symphonic poems, dating from the 1890s, fall into two groups, the first of which forms a cycle after Smetana’s example, with a single theme running through the three constituent pieces. Originally conceived as a trilogy, entitled Příroda, Život
a Láska (‘Nature, Life and Love’), they finally appeared as three separate overtures, V přírodě (‘In Nature’s Realm’), Kameňal and Othello. The last has notes in the score to indicate incidents in the play, but the sequence and characters are scarcely Shakespeare’s. Of the five works making up the second group, four – The Water Goblin, The Noon Witch, The Golden Spinning Wheel and The Wild Dove – are based on poems from K.J. Erben’s Bouquet of Folk Tales. Dvořák intended incidents and characters to be clearly represented; indeed he arrived at some of the themes by setting actual lines of the poetry to music. By symphonic standards these works may seem diffuse, but their literary sources define the sequence of events and the course of the musical action. Heroic Song is the only one of the group not to have a detailed programme.

Zdeněk Fibich and Vítězslav Novák were prolific composers of programme works of many kinds. Both, for example, wrote symphonic poems on the Czech tale of Toman and the Wood Nymph, and Fibich’s Othello preceded Dvořák’s by 20 years. Suk’s Prague (1904) opened a series of works by him of increasing abstraction and personal significance. Asrael and Summer’s Tale are descriptive symphonies in separate movements; The Ripening, completed in 1917, is an elaborate picture of the harvest as a projection of human life, written in a complex, advanced idiom, and Epilogue, although entitled ‘symphonic poem’, is a choral work, once again of great personal significance. Janáček’s symphonic poems belong to his late creative flowering. His subject matter is more traditional than that of Suk, but the musical style is more original. In The Fiddler’s Child (1912) he used individual instruments, violin and oboe, to depict the fiddler and his child in straightforward narrative, in Taras Bulba (1915–18) he turned Gogol’s poem into an expression of Czech heroism in full orchestral dress, and in The Ballad of Blaník (1920) he returned to one of Smetana’s subjects; he planned The Danube in four parts but did not complete it. Despite his attachment to the form it is hard not to see these works as overshadowed by the Sinfonietta and the operas of the same period.

5. Russia.

The cultivation of the symphonic poem in Russia reflected that country’s admiration for Liszt and a devotion to national subjects similar to that found among Czech composers. ‘Virtually all Russian symphonic music is programmatic’, wrote V.V. Stasov, and the Russians’ great love of story-telling found wide expression in the symphonic poem. They regarded Glinka’s Kamarinskaya (1848) as a prototype of descriptive orchestral music, despite his denial that it bore a programme; his Taras Bulba, had he completed it, would have been nearer to the spirit of the descriptive symphony and the symphonic poem, both of which Stasov and Balakirev embraced with ardour. Of Balakirev’s three symphonic poems the most successful is undoubtedly Tamara (1867–82), closely based on a poem by Lermontov: it is full of atmosphere, well paced and richly evocative of the fairy tale orient. In Bohemia (‘Overture on Czech themes’, 1867, 1905) and Russia (‘Second overture on Russian themes’, 1884 version) are looser gatherings of national melodies without narrative content. Musorgsky’s St John’s Night on Bald Mountain (1867) and Borodin’s In Central Asia (1880) are powerful orchestral pictures, each unique in its composer’s output. Rimsky-Korsakov, perhaps surprisingly, wrote only two works that can be classed as symphonic poems, Sadko (1867–92, later reworked into the opera of the same name) and Skazka (‘Legend’, 1879–80), originally entitled Baba-Yaga; Antar (in its third version) and Sheherazade are both entitled ‘symphonic suite’ and are akin to these two works in conception. Baba-Yaga, the witch of Russian folklore, also provided material for symphonic poems by Dargomižsky and Lyadov. The latter’s Kikimora and The Enchanted Lake (both 1909) again show a deep feeling for national subjects, as does Glazunov’s Sterka Razin (1885).

Tchaikovsky, as in much else, stands a little apart from his compatriots. None of his symphonic poems has a Russian subject (The Voyevoda is on a Polish original). Romeo and Juliet (1869; rev. 1870, 1880) is entitled ‘fantasy overture’ and Francesca da Rimini (1876) ‘symphony fantasia’, but both are in fact highly developed symphonic poems in which the exigencies of musical form and of literary material are held in masterly balance. These are deservedly pillars of the orchestral repertory, and the fantasy overture Hamlet (1888), though less well known, is scarcely less powerful. Tchaikovsky’s attitude to programmes was equivocal, but at least in these symphonic poems he had no doubts about the propriety of clothing literary material with music. In treating Byron’s Manfred (1885) in four movements as a symphony he looked back more to Berlioz than to Liszt.

Of later Russian symphonic poems it must suffice to indicate Rachmaninoff’s evident debt to Tchaikovsky in The Rock (1893) and the masterly independence of The Isle of the Dead (1909), inspired by Böcklin’s famous painting. Stravinsky’s debt is rather to his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov in his symphonic poem The Song of the Nightingale (1917), which he deftly extracted from his opera The Nightingale. Skryabin’s Le poème de l’extase (1905–8) and Prométhée (1908–10) are the twin peaks of his orchestral output, remarkable in detail, in their advanced harmonic idiom and in their projection of an egocentric theosophic world unparalleled elsewhere in the symphonic poem. Since realism was applauded in Soviet aesthetics, programme music survived in favour in the USSR longer than in the West, as Shostakovich’s symphonic poem October (1967) shows.

6. France.

A tradition of illustrative music existed in France, especially in the music of Berlioz and Félicien David, before Liszt’s ideas were taken up there, and César Franck had written an orchestral piece on Hugo’s poem Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne before Liszt himself used it for his own first symphonic poem in 1848–9. The symphonic poem came to life in the 1870s, supported by the newly founded Société Nationale and its promotion of younger French composers. In the year after its foundation, 1872, Saint-SAëNS composed Le rouet d’Omphale, soon followed up with three other symphonic poems, of which the best-known is the Danse...
Symphonic poem in Oxford Music Online

macabre (1874) and the most ambitious – and the closest to Liszt in style – La jeunesse d’Hercule (1877). Niecks justly called Saint-Saëns’s symphonic poems ‘illustrations, not translations’, for they attempt no deep penetration of their subjects. Saint-Saëns was followed by d’Indy, whose trilogy Wallenstein (1873, 1879–81), called ‘three symphonic overtures’, may be compared to Smetana’s Má vlast. Significantly, he began it in the year, 1873, in which he visited Liszt. Duparc’s remarkable Lénore (1875) introduced the warmth of Wagnerian harmony into French music, and it is there allied to a bold musical imagination. Franck returned to the symphonic poem in 1875–6 with the delicately evocative Les Étoiles, and he followed it in 1882 with the step-by-step narrative of Le chasseur maudit, based like Lénore on a ballad by G.A. Bürger peculiarly well suited to musical illustration. Les Djinns (1884), on a poem by Hugo, uses a piano soloist in a manner similar to that found in Liszt’s Totentanz and Malédiction, and the second part of Psyché (1887–8) includes a three-part chorus; he also applied the term ‘poème symphonie’ to his choral work Rédemption. The lesser composers of Franck’s circle found the symphonic poem much to their liking, and they often displayed a penchant for mythological subject matter in deference to Wagner. Chausson’s Viviane (1882) is a good example, and among the others are the numerous symphonic poems of Augusta Holmès, several of which, for example Irlande (1882) and Pologne (1883), have national themes.

Three works hold a special place in French music in this genre. Debussy originally intended his Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune (1892–4), drawn from Mallarmé’s poem, as a triptych. In his own words the music is ‘a very free illustration … a succession of settings through which the Faun’s desires and dreams move in the afternoon heat’. It is explicitly decorative, not narrative, and the originality of its idiom, its tonal ambiguity and the delicate, fragmented orchestral style look forward to a new world of musical expression. By contrast Dukas’ L’aprenti sorcier (1897) is a brilliantly executed example of the narrative type of symphonic poem, with distinctive musical material and an assured orchestral style. Third, Ravel’s ‘poème chorégraphique’ La valse (1919–20) is parody of the highest order, a portrait of Vienna in an idiom no Viennese would recognize as his own.

Two French composers carried the symphonic poem well into the 20th century. Roussel’s first major orchestral work was a symphonic poem on Tolstoy’s novel Resurrection (1903), and he soon followed it with Le poème de la forêt (1904–6), which is in four cyclically related movements. Pour une fête de printemps (1920), originally conceived as the scherzo of his Second Symphony, is an unusually reflective celebration of spring. Koechlin wrote several symphonic poems, extending in time from En mer, la nuit (begun in 1899) to as late as the 1940s. La cité nouvelle (1938) is called a ‘dream of the future’; part 2 of Le buisson ardent (1936) is related to Romain Rolland’s novel Jean-Christophe. There is a group of three symphonic poems, Le livre de la jungle, after Kipling; the third of them, Les bandar-log (1939), is a satirical sketch of 20th-century musical styles and is probably Koechlin’s most familiar work.

7. Germany.

Although Liszt, working in Germany, and Strauss represent respectively the inception and the culmination of the symphonic poem, the form was cultivated less enthusiastically in Germany than in other countries. The reason for this lies in the domination of German music at that period by Wagner and Brahms, neither of whom – though for opposite reasons – wrote symphonic poems. Single-minded devotion to music drama on the one hand and to symphonic thought on the other led them away from Liszt’s brilliant compound of the two. Bruckner and Mahler also ignored the form. Thus, apart from the work of Strauss and numerous programme overtures by lesser figures, there are only isolated examples by German and Austrian composers, among which should be mentioned Bülow’s Nirvana (1866), Wolf’s Penthesilea (1883–5) and Schoenberg’s Peileus und Melisande (1902–3). Schoenberg’s Verklärte Nacht (1899), in which there is a clear structural relationship between poem and music, is a symphonic poem for string sextet and thus a rare non-orchestral example of the form.

Strauss’s symphonic poems brought orchestral technique to a new level of complexity and treated subjects that had previously been considered ill-suited to musical illustration. He extended the boundaries of programme music, taking realism to unprecedented lengths as well as widening the imprecisely expressive functions of music. In the years before World War I these works were held to be in the vanguard of modernism, an indication of how rapidly the symphonic poem had taken hold of public imagination within half a century.

Strauss began to write programme music under the direct influence of Alexander Ritter – who himself composed six symphonic poems of Litztand mould – and arrived at the form of the symphonic poem through a descriptive symphony, Aus Italien (1886). His first essay, Macbeth (1886–8), is a bold, characterful work with little more than a hint of sonata form, yet it is overshadowed by the series of masterpieces that followed: Don Juan (1888–9), Tod und Verklärung (1888–9), Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche (1894–5), Also sprach Zarathustra (1895–6), Don Quixote (1896–7), Ein Heldenleben (1897–8) and Symphonia domestica (1902–3). The range of subject matter is wide and embraces literature, legend, philosophy and autobiography. The seriousness of Tod und Verklärung contrasts sharply with the high spirits of Till Eulenspiegel, while Don Quixote cleverly captures Cervantes’s worldly vision behind the ridiculous exploits of his knight. Also sprach Zarathustra attempts to give musical expression to eight selected passages from Nietzsche’s philosophical poem rather than to the poem as a whole. Strauss said of the work: ‘I meant to convey in music an idea of the musical expression of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche’s idea of the Übermensch’. This ambitious idea may seem to have been tempered when he turned to himself as subject, yet in Ein Heldenleben he attempted to give his own existence a higher significance, portraying himself as the archetypal hero-artist in conflict with his enemies. But it has too an unmistakably personal element in the character of the wife and in her mellow contemplation (at the age of 34) of the hero’s past achievements. For all its musical interest and expertise the Symphonia domestica has been bedevilled by its unashamed treatment of the trivial in domestic life, although Strauss believed
that the very universality of family life makes such scenes of interest to everyone. In the portrayal of character, however, it is with the legendary figures, Don Juan and Don Quixote, rather than in the projection of himself, that Strauss succeeds best.

In his handling of form Strauss called upon his abundant skill both in the transformation of themes and in interweaving one with another in elaborate orchestral counterpoint. The variation form of Don Quixote is specially felicitous; Till Eulenspiegel, though described on the title-page as in rondo form, is in fact as episodic as the story it depicts, with a single, compressed recapitulation, the whole neatly enclosed in a prologue and epilogue of touching simplicity. Tod und Verklärung resembles Liszt's Tasso in presenting glorification as an ecstatic programmatic goal. Strauss liked to use a simple but descriptive theme – for instance the three-note motif at the opening of Also sprach Zarathustra, or striding, vigorous arpeggios to represent the manly qualities of his heroes.

His love themes are honeyed and chromatic and generally richly scored, and he is fond of the warmth and serenity of diatonic harmony as balm after torrential chromatic textures, notably at the end of Don Quixote, where the solo cello has a surpassingly beautiful D major transformation of the main theme.

The vividness and descriptive power of these works is directly due to the virtuosity of the orchestration. In the first place Strauss usually requires a large orchestra, with extra instruments such as the quartet of saxophones in the Symphonia domestica or the offstage brass of Ein Heldenleben. Secondly, he used instruments for sharp characterization, best exemplified by Don Quixote’s cello and Sancho Panza’s tenor tuba or by the shrill woodwind of the critics in Ein Heldenleben. The portrayal of sheep with cuivré brass in Don Quixote is deservedly famous for its uncanny skill. Strauss had the confidence, the effrontery even, of a composer whose mastery of technical means was complete, and he succeeded best in those works, such as Till Eulenspiegel and Don Quixote, where his pretensions were less exalted and where wit and imagination were of more value than profundity.

Strauss wrote one more programmatic work, Eine Alpensymphonie (1911–15) – actually a symphonic poem. The orchestral requirements are immense, the scoring brilliantly imaginative and the picture of alpine scenery magnificently captured. In form it over-extends itself, and many fine passages are spoilt by Strauss’s reluctance to bring them to an end. But by now he had outgrown the symphonic poem, having contributed a unique body of great works to its repertory.

8. Other countries.

The symphonic poem did not enjoy as clear a sense of national identity in other countries as in the Czech lands, Russia and France, even though innumerable works of the kind were written elsewhere, for example by William Wallace, Bantock, MacCunn, Mackenzie and Bax in Great Britain, Loeffler, MacDowell and Howard Hanson in America, and Pizzetti, Respighi and Malipiero in Italy. Elgar’s Falstaff (1913) is an exceptionally fine orchestral portrait, and was preceded by three programme overtures, of which Cockaigne (1900–01) is the most distinctive. As a portrait of London it makes an interesting comparison with, say, Suk’s Prague, Ravel’s La valse and Delius’s Paris (1899). Delius later wrote a number of descriptive orchestral pieces closely allied to the symphonic poem and to the Impressionist style of Debussy. Frank Bridge was similarly drawn to nature painting, as in his symphonic poems Summer (1914) and Enter Spring (1927).

Sibelius, with well over a dozen symphonic poems and a number of similar, shorter orchestral pieces, showed exceptional dedication to the form. These works span his whole career, from En saga (1892) to Tapiola (1926), and express more clearly than anything else his identification with Finland and its mythology. The Kalevala provided ideal episodes and texts for musical setting, and his natural feeling for symphonic concentration is clearly demonstrated by the taut, organic structure of many of these works, Tapiola especially. Pohjola’s Daughter (1906) – called ‘symphonic fantasy’ – is the most closely dependent on its programme but has at the same time a sureness of outline that was rare in other composers. Yet it is surpassed by the powerful landscape of Tapiola, composed at a time when Sibelius’s own creative life was coming to an end and when the symphonic poem as a form was rapidly disappearing from view.

9. Conclusion.

The decline of the symphonic poem in the 20th century may be attributed to the rejection of Romantic ideas and their replacement by notions of the abstraction and independence of music. The expressive function of music came under widespread attack, and the assumptions that had made the symphonic poem such a satisfactory vehicle for musical expression were swiftly supplanted. It should be said too that the problem of matching music and literature was, in the end, insoluble and that both had made severe assumptions that had made the symphonic poem a form that the very universality of family life makes such scenes of interest to everyone. In the portrayal of character, however, it is with the legendary figures, Don Juan and Don Quixote, rather than in the projection of himself, that Strauss succeeds best.

The apt use of variation in Don Quixote has already been mentioned. The element of contrast implicit in sonata form was constantly attempted to reconcile classical formal principles with external literary concepts. Perhaps the nearest the symphonic poem came to finding a satisfactory form to match narrative was the long and gradual growth of an idea in pace and intensity, leading to a climax or solution, perhaps in triumph, perhaps in despair. Dukas’ L’apprenti sorcier is a good example of this continuously developing form. The other elements of contrast implicit in sonata form was sometimes usefully adapted, as for example in Liszt’s Hamlet, where masculine and feminine elements are clearly placed in opposition. An even clearer case of this is d’Indy’s Max et Thécla (1881 revision of Les piccolo mini, part of the Wallenstein trilogy), whose...
virile first theme portrays Max and the contrastingly supple second theme represents Thécla. But in general, rather than embracing balance and repetition, symphonic ideas were confined to the development of musical material, with a predilection for short malleable thematic elements. Indeed, Strauss firmly called his symphonic poems 'Tondichtungen' to avoid any symphonic implication, and 'tone poem' enjoyed considerable currency as the English term at the beginning of the 20th century.

From the point of view of its subject matter the symphonic poem was as successful in depicting imprecise ideas, such as heroism, lamentation, creativity and so forth, as in narrative, for too detailed a programme may burden or distract the listener. In general the dramatic poetry of Goethe, Bürger, Lenau and Hugo provided excellent material, and no source was as frequently drawn upon as Shakespeare's plays. Legends, historical events, cities, countries, seasons, philosophical concepts and much else besides were subjected to musical illustration, and the wide acceptance of some kind of linguistic equivalence between music and ideas resolved the aesthetic problem of how such pieces should be interpreted. The elaborate conventions of programme music, developed to a high point in the late 19th century, supplied the composer with working material and the listener with an immediate point of reference. Once the validity of these conventions had been called in question, the symphonic poem was bound to lose its vitality and popularity. Yet its flowering was spectacular and its fruit includes some of the finest and most enduring works in the orchestral repertory.

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