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Programme music

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Programme music.

Music of a narrative or descriptive kind; the term is often extended to all music that attempts to represent extra-musical concepts without resort to sung words.

1. The term and its meaning.

The term 'programme music' was introduced by Liszt, who also invented the expression SYMPHONIC POEM to describe what is perhaps the most characteristic instance of it. He defined a programme as a 'preface added to a piece of instrumental music, by means of which the composer intends to guard the listener against a wrong poetical interpretation, and to direct his attention to the poetical idea of the whole or to a particular part of it'. Very few of the programmes of Liszt's own symphonic poems are of a narrative character. He did not regard music as a direct means of describing objects; rather he thought that music could put the listener in the same frame of mind as could the objects themselves. In this way, by suggesting the emotional reality of things, music could indirectly represent them. Such an idea – already familiar in the writings of Rousseau – was also expressed by Beethoven when he described the Pastoral Symphony as 'mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerey' ('more the expression of feeling than painting').

The close connection in some of Liszt's thinking between 'narrative' and 'emotional' depiction has led to confusion over the use of the term 'programme music'. Some prefer to attach the term purely to instrumental music with a narrative or descriptive 'meaning' (for example, music that purports to depict a scene or a story). Others have so broadened its application as to use the term for all music that contains an extra-musical reference, whether to objective events or to subjective feelings. The responsibility for this broadening of the term lies partly with Friedrich Niecks, whose romantic enthusiasm caused him to overlook, in his influential work on the subject (1907), the vital aesthetic distinction between representation and expression. It is the narrow sense of the term which is the legitimate one. The other sense is not only so wide as to be virtually meaningless; it also fails to correspond to the actual usage of composers and critics since Liszt's invention of the term.

Programme music, which has been contrasted with ABSOLUTE MUSIC, is distinguished by its attempt to depict objects and events. Furthermore, it claims to derive its logic from that attempt. It does not merely echo or imitate things which have an independent reality; the development of programme music is determined by the development of its theme. The music moves in time according to the logic of its subject and not according to autonomous principles of its own. As Liszt wrote: 'In programme music … the return, change, modification, and modulation of the motifs are conditioned by their relation to a poetic idea …. All exclusively musical considerations, though they should not be neglected, have to be subordinated to the action of the given subject' (*Schriften*, iv, 69).

Liszt thought of himself as putting forward a new ideal for symphonic music, an ideal that had been foreshadowed in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and in certain works of Mendelssohn, Schumann and Berlioz, but which he nevertheless thought to be absent from the body of classical music. He considered the idea of exalting the narrative associations of music into a principle of composition to be incompatible with the continuance of traditional symphonic forms. The term 'programme music' came to be applied not only to music with a story but also to music designed to represent a character (Strauss's *Don Juan* and *Don Quixote*) or to describe a scene or phenomenon (Debussy's *La mer*). What is common to all these is the attempt to 'represent' objects in music; but a certain confusion has entered the use of the term by its application to any form of musical 'depiction', whether instrumental, or vocal, or incidental to an action on the stage. Properly speaking, however, programme music is music with a programme. Further, to follow Liszt's conception, programme music is music that seeks to be understood in terms of its programme; it derives its movement and its logic from the subject it attempts to describe. On that view it would be wrong to call, for example, Couperin's *Le tic-toc-choc* a piece of programme music. The logic of Couperin's piece is purely musical, even if its thematic material is derived from the imitation of a clock. By contrast, the logic of Liszt's symphonic poem *Tasso* is (according to the composer) derived from the events of Tasso's life: it is the sequence of those events, and their intrinsic nature, that dictate the development of the music. (But it should be said that Liszt's own programme music did not always follow his own theoretical precepts.)

However the term is used, it is clear that the idea of music's representing something is essential to the concept of programme music. It is important to understand, therefore, what might be meant by 'representation' in music. The first distinction to make is

that between representation and **EXPRESSION**. It is only recently that attempts have been made to formulate the distinction with any precision, and there is no agreement as to the relation between the terms. But that a distinction exists seems obvious to any lover of the arts. A painting may represent a subject (the Crucifixion, say) and it may also express an emotion towards that subject. To represent a subject is to give a description or characterization of it: it is to say (in words or in images) what the subject is like. Such a description may or may not be accompanied by an expression of feeling. Furthermore, there can be expressions of emotion that are not accompanied by representation. Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music* is certainly an expression of grief, but it contains no attempt to represent or describe the object of grief. It has been argued that all music expresses emotion. If that is so, then, unless some distinction can be made between representation and expression, all music would have to be regarded as representational. To say that would lead to the conclusion that there is no essential distinction between music and painting in their relation to the world.

It is a matter of dispute whether music is capable of literally representing its subject, in the way that painting and literature represent theirs. What passes for representation might often be more accurately described as 'imitation', for instance when a piece of music mimics the sound of a cuckoo. That there is a difference between representation and imitation is clear. An architectural detail can imitate the curve of a seashell without becoming a representation; or a man can imitate another's manner without representing it. Representation is essentially descriptive: it involves a reference to objects in the world and an attempt to describe them. Imitation is merely copying, and its intention may be no more than decorative. Examples of musical imitation have abounded from the very beginning of music. Indeed, both Plato and Aristotle ascribed an imitative character to the music of their time. It is nonetheless debatable whether music is made representational by imitation alone. Certainly Liszt had more than mere imitation in mind when he introduced the concept of programme music.

It is seldom clear what is meant when it is said that music can represent things. The question arises whether music can actually describe the world or whether it is merely evocative. If representation in music were merely a matter of evocation, it would be misleading to describe it as representation, for that would imply an unwarranted analogy with the descriptive arts of literature and painting. That is why Liszt insisted that true programme music had a narrative or descriptive element which was essential to the understanding of it. In other words, for Liszt the subject has become part of the meaning of the music; to listen to the music with false associations was, in Liszt's view, actually to misunderstand it. Whether or not there is 'programme music' in Liszt's sense, it is clear that it would provide the most plausible example of representation in music. It is further clear that in its strictest sense programme music does not include music that is merely expressive, imitative or evocative. It is doubtful even whether Debussy's *La mer* is a description rather than an evocation of its subject, although the titles of the movements seem to suggest a certain 'narrative' component to its meaning (for example, one of the movements is entitled 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer', which prompted Satie to remark that he particularly liked the moment at 11.15).

Programme music must further be distinguished from the 'representational' music that accompanies words, whether in lieder, in oratorio or on the stage. While all these share devices with programme music and have influenced it continuously throughout the history of music, it is still necessary to distinguish music that purports to carry its narrative meaning within itself from music that is attached to a narrative arising independently, whether through the words of a song or through the action of a dramatic work. The distinction is not absolute, but, unless it is made, the idea of programme music as a separate genre must remain entirely illegitimate.

2. History of the concept.

When Liszt invented the term 'programme music' he was aware that he had not invented the thing that he sought to describe. Berlioz's symphonies are essentially narrative in conception; so too is Weber's *Concertstück* for piano and orchestra, a descriptive work in one continuous movement (made up of several sections in different tempos) which was one of the first Romantic examples of the symphonic poem. One of the difficulties involved in tracing the history of programme music lies in the elusiveness of the distinctions discussed above: whether all representational music should be considered programme music; whether 'imitation' should be counted as a species of representation; and whether a deliberate expressive character is sufficient to rank as a 'programme' in Liszt's sense. Clearly there are many different ways of deriving a history, depending upon the way in which those fundamental critical (and philosophical) questions are answered. For example, the French harpsichord composers of the 17th and 18th centuries were in the habit of giving titles to their pieces. To some writers on this subject the presence of a title is sufficient to bring a piece under the rubric 'programme music'. But to others that way of thought involves a confusion, for it seems not to distinguish a piece that expresses some emotion suggested by the title from another that either evokes its subject or (in some more concrete sense) actually attempts to describe it. Many critics of Couperin's music, for example, would prefer to speak of the relation between his keyboard pieces and their ostensible 'subjects' as one of expression and not one of representation. The borderline between expression and representation is a hazy one, and it is often impossible to say of a piece by Rameau or Couperin on which side of the borderline it might lie.

If mere imitation is not regarded as a sufficient criterion of programme music, it must be concluded that the history of the genre is considerably shorter than might otherwise appear. It seems to have no medieval examples. Even Janequin's famous chanson *La bataille* or *La guerre* (published in 1529 and thought to refer to the Battle of Marignano of 1515) is hardly to be considered true programme music: while it imitates the sounds of battle, there is no narrative sequence to those sounds and no attempt to subordinate the musical structure to the evolution of an extra-musical theme. Less certain cases are provided by suites in which the titles of each piece form a narrative sequence. Byrd's *The Battle*, a suite for keyboard of 15 pieces – entitled (for example) 'The

Marche to the Fight', 'The Retraite' and 'The Burying of the Dead' – does, in a sense, have a programme, but the programme serves to unite the separate musical units and to explain their expressive characters; only in a very limited sense do the pieces attempt also to describe the scenes referred to. (*See* BATTLE MUSIC.)

Other puzzling cases are those in which a composer declares himself to have been inspired by some literary or artistic source. Again there are Renaissance and Baroque examples of composers who have written pieces under the inspiration of pictures. Biber, for example, wrote about 1671 a set of 15 mysteries for violin and keyboard after copperplate engravings of Bible themes; there is an earlier instance by Froberger. Such cross-fertilization between a representational art (such as engraving) and music is a familiar feature of more recent music. Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* provides a Romantic example of the same kind of musical device. Here, though, there is the added representational refinement of a 'Promenade' linking some of the pieces, indicating the presence of a 'narrator' in the music, a kind of 'reflector' in Henry James's sense, who remains the true subject matter of the narrative. By that device Musorgsky's work comes near to the central examples of programme music such as the symphonic poems of Liszt. An even more remarkable example of cross-fertilization is the quartet by Janáček composed after reading Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, itself inspired by Beethoven's violin sonata. The mere fact that Janáček's quartet was so inspired no more makes it into a programmatic narrative of the events in Tolstoy's story than it makes Tolstoy's story into a 'representation' of Beethoven's sonata. Inspiration, even when consciously referred to, cannot suffice to make music into programme music.

There is no doubt that programme music was established by 1700, when Johann Kuhnau published his six Bible sonatas. Each of them is preceded by a summary of the story that the music is meant to convey, and each is divided into recognizable parts, corresponding to the events of the narrative. The pictorialism is naive compared with the symphonic poems of Liszt and Strauss, but there is no doubt that the music lays claim to a narrative significance nor that the composer intended that significance to be a proper part of the understanding of the music. Later examples of similar narrative music are Vivaldi's concertos the 'Four Seasons', which are prefaced by short 'programmes' in verse, and Couperin's *Apothéoses*, extended representations of Lully and Corelli ascending to find their proper places of rest upon Parnassus, in which each section refers to a separate episode in their apotheosis. Comparable pieces were written by Telemann and other French-influenced composers. The development of such programme music was affected by the French *ballet de cour*, which required just such pictorial accompaniments to its solemn and dramatic performances; but there is no doubt that by the mid-18th century programme music had emancipated itself from any connection with the dance. A notable example is the long orchestral work by Ignazio Raimondi called *Les aventures de Télémaque dans l'isle de Calypso*, based on Fénélon's epic poem. This, published in 1777, includes one of the first attempts to diversify the 'narrative' by representing its several characters in different ways: Calypso, for example, is represented by a flute, and Telemachus by a solo violin.

By the time of Beethoven even the most abstract and classical of musical forms had become capable of bearing a programmatic meaning. The Pastoral Symphony is but one example of a piece that seems to be straining to break free of the constraints imposed by its Classical format in the interests of a pictorial idea. The 'Lebewohl' Sonata op.81*a* is another. Both have precedents, in the 18th-century depictions of Nature and in Bach's capriccio for his departing brother. Like Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' and Dittersdorf's symphonies based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, they attempt to combine a narrative depiction with a rigorous musical form. This led Beethoven's admirers to suppose that the idea of a 'purely musical' structure was after all an illusion, and that the greatness of Beethoven's symphony, in particular its architectural perfection, was of a piece with its profound extra-musical meaning, and that great symphonic writing was but the expression of an independent poetic idea. This impression was enhanced by Beethoven's hint that an understanding of his sonata op.31 no.2 could be induced by a reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Schering (1936) attempted to explain Beethoven's entire output as programmatic reflections on themes from Shakespeare and Goethe.

Whatever one thinks of those speculations, which have been further extended to the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart (the French theorist Momigny even set a verbal text to a Mozart quartet movement as an interpretation of it), there is no doubt that the greatest step towards true programme music in the Romantic sense was made not by Beethoven but by Berlioz, who introduced into musical representation for the first time a distinction vital to any true narrative portrayal of things in the world, the distinction between subject and object. By his use of the solo viola in his symphony *Harold en Italie* and by his exploitation of its deeply subjective tones he was able to create a sharp division between the individual protagonist – the feeling, suffering and rejoicing being at the centre of the narrative – and the external circumstances of his experience. Berlioz also introduced the device of the IDÉE FIXE, a melody representative of a character or feeling, which reappears in a variety of forms and develops with the changing circumstances. This was a substantial step towards the Wagnerian LEITMOTIF, through which device the narrative pretensions of music were to receive their most striking confirmation. The leitmotif, a theme that is associated with a character, a circumstance or an idea, and which develops sometimes out of all recognition in order to convey the evolution of its narrative idea, permitted representation in music without a hint of imitation. By means of this device later composers, in particular Liszt and Richard Strauss, were able to associate specific themes with a fixed representational meaning. The traditional devices survived, and with Strauss imitation was carried to extremes never previously envisaged. But it was through the leitmotif above all that music was able to emulate the descriptive range of language and that Liszt was able to approach the ideal he had set himself, the ideal of a music that could not be understood even as music unless the correct poetic conception was invoked in the hearer's mind.

It is possible to doubt that Liszt ever realized that ideal, or indeed that it is capable of realization, because the conception of musical understanding underlying the theory of programme music may not be a coherent one (for further discussion, *see* ABSOLUTE MUSIC). Nonetheless, once the theoretical foundations of the genre had been laid, programme music became highly important. Indeed the 'programme' survived as a basic determining idea in symphonic music until well into the 20th century,

receiving no serious intellectual setback until the reaction led by Schoenberg in Vienna, by Bartók in Hungary, and by the cosmopolitan Stravinsky. It influenced many of the great works of Czech and Russian nationalism, the symphonies of Mahler and the French school of orchestral writing.

There is no doubt too that the concept of programme music influenced the **IMPRESSIONISM** of Ravel and Debussy. But it is doubtful that their music should be regarded as truly programmatic in the Romantics' sense; Impressionism may rather have constituted a partial reaction against the narrative pretensions of the symphonic poem – it was another attempt to put evocation in the place of narrative. In that sense it would be better to compare Debussy's *Préludes* with the *ordres* of Couperin and to consider that the titles (which Debussy was at pains to put not at the beginning but at the end of the pieces) serve to indicate an expressive atmosphere rather than a definite descriptive significance. Indeed, it seems that Debussy did not intend a knowledge of the subject to be essential to an understanding of his music. It is from Debussy's pure style and clean textures that much of the most abstract of modern music has taken its inspiration.

By the end of the 19th century the increasing afflatus of Romanticism had served once again to destroy the distinction between representational and expressive intentions in music. So long as music aims to capture a particular episode, a particular sequence of events or a particular human character, then its representational claims are not in doubt. When, however, it attaches itself to a programme phrased entirely in emotional or quasi-religious abstractions, it is doubtful that it can be considered to be a depiction rather than an expression of its subject matter. For example Tatyana Schloezer wrote a programme for the Symphony no.3 'Le divin poème' by Skryabin (whose mistress she was) beginning:

> "*The Divine Poem* represents the evolution of the human spirit, which, torn from an entire past of beliefs and mysteries which it surmounts and overturns, passes through Pantheism and attains to a joyous and intoxicated affirmation of its liberty and its unity with the universe (the divine 'Ego')."

That is an example of the 'programme' at its most self-important. It is also an example of the degeneration of the concept from something relatively precise to something entirely vaporous. For Skryabin, Mahler and their contemporaries the 'programme' was on the verge of becoming irrelevant to an understanding of the music. The entire burden of the musical movement lay now in expression; depiction had been cast aside. In so far as the programme continued to exist it was a source of exasperating literary preciosities rather than of genuine musical ideas. It is hardly surprising that composers soon began to turn their backs on programme music and find their way to expression through more abstract musical means; but in the later 20th century some revival of programmatic or semi-programmatic devices could be noted, for example in the works of Maxwell Davies, Leeuw, Norby and Schafer.

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