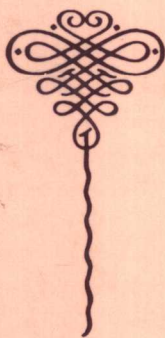


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# ROMANTIC MUSIC.



SOUND AND SYNTAX

And Syntax

LEONARD C. RATNER

# *ROMANTIC MUSIC*

## *Sound and Syntax*



**Leonard G. Ratner**

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# *Acknowledgments*

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# Introduction

This book investigates the interaction of sound and syntax in Romantic music. It considers the ways in which qualities of sound affect the unfolding of form on both large and small scales, and thus it offers an approach in which sound figures as a factor in the analysis of this music.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, profound changes took place in the nature and scope of musical sonority—what we may call the *climate of sound*. Thanks to modifications in the structure of instruments, many dimensions of sound were expanded. The pitch range increased, reaching extremes in the high and low registers with telling effect. Instruments were capable of more extreme dynamics, opening areas of expression at *ppp* and *fff* levels. The palette of timbres grew in richness, in subtlety of shading, and in the variety of effects. Instruments developed greater resonance and sustaining power, while greater precision of intonation gave freer range of action in keys remote from the ancestral C major. Expanded sound resources in instrumentation added new values to harmony by allowing a chord to express itself as a color in addition to acting as a function in a cadential formula.

The effect of these changes—of this new climate of sound—was pervasive. It affected every aspect of musical form and expression. Melody could take a broad, sweeping manner; harmony could intensify in richness and color; rhythm could cover articulations with a steady flow of sound; the more deliberate rate of change arising from the savoring of the new and more colorful sounds allowed, or even demanded, the alteration of musical form. For the listener, colorful sound was an immediate clue to the expressive content of a composition. Broad declamations, misty veilings, brilliant and bold gestures, seductive envelopings, firm stabilities, troubling instabilities—these and other affective qualities and stances were given vivid presence by the great palette of sound available in the Romantic style. Whether the message was intensely emotional, sentimental, or colorfully pictorial, it was carried on a flow of sound that could be generated only by nineteenth-century means.

The new qualities of sound invaded the world of traditional practice. Compositional procedures were being fully codified, in theory and in practice. This codification, based on eighteenth-century models, spelled out all the details of syntax—key-centered harmony, fundamental bass and its laws of root movement, complementary melodic and rhythmic configurations, the shape of phrases and periods—and gave explicit descriptions of what had become standard forms.

The codification of traditional syntax formed the basis of the training of all composers in the nineteenth century. In their studies, in the models they followed, traditional syntax controlled much of the music they wrote, especially the music based on popular song and dance types.<sup>1</sup>

## *Interaction of Innovative Sound and Traditional Syntax*

While innovative sound and traditional syntax have been recognized as basic processes in Romantic music, heretofore there has been no formal consideration of the action of these two processes upon each other in the music of this era. Studies of nineteenth-century music to date have given scant attention to the question of how sound values operate together with other rhetorical components. This book addresses that question; it factors sound into the rhetoric of nineteenth-century music.

The spectrum of color, both instrumental and harmonic, in Romantic music is so rich and varied in its nuances and gradations that quantification and categorization would require immensely detailed descriptions. Yet when we link sound qualities to firmly established, fixed compositional processes, we have a method by which the fluid play of sound can be evaluated in terms of its effect on syntax. The deployment of sound was an important strategy of composition in Romantic music, equal in significance to strategies and processes that have received attention in analytic studies—layout of themes, organicism, developing variation, harmonic processes, *Ursatz* and *Urlinie*. This book undertakes to explore this aspect of Romantic music, to examine the ways in which the new values of sound can affect the shape and size of structures that were traditional and familiar, such as the phrase, the period, two-reprise form, and sonata form.

The music discussed in this book was written in the period roughly from 1815 to 1900. These approximate time limits enclose the following developments:

circa 1815–1820: the emergence of the new climate of sound as a decisive factor in musical technique and expression

circa 1820–1900: the decisive shift away from traditional syntax as an organizing principle in composition: when cadential harmony loses much of its power to direct musical action—this trend is exemplified

by the works of Debussy, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky composed shortly after the turn of the twentieth century

Within these time limits, the interplay of innovative sound and traditional syntax was active and pervasive. Indeed, composers produced works of strikingly diverse character and sharply profiled individual styles; yet they all drew from the palette of tone colors available, and they all proceeded from traditional premises of texture and form. Whatever an individual work may embody—a touch of color and a familiar, easy symmetry, or a bold splash of color and an involuted phrase structure—the distinctive mix of sound and traditional syntax in that work provides a set of clues to its form and expressive content.

Throughout this eighty-five-year period, we find both progressive and retrospective uses of sound and syntax. Both the Sonata in D Major, Op. 53, by Schubert (1825) and the *Italian Serenade* by Wolf (1887), although written more than sixty years apart, recall the lightness of texture and the smooth part writing that characterize Classic music. On the other hand, both Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) and Mahler's Symphony No. 2 (1894), also written more than sixty years apart, manipulate orchestral sound in strikingly innovative ways, with corresponding modifications of traditional syntax.

The material in this book is presented according to the ways in which Romantic composers deployed the compositional processes of scoring, texture, harmony, and phrase and period structure. The points raised herein could be set forth in chronological order or be employed to determine trends in the evolution of style; such approaches imply a diachronic historical point of view. This book, despite the great range of styles among various works, takes a synchronic view: it looks to ways in which music of the middle and late nineteenth century shared common approaches in some basic aspects of rhetoric, and especially in its treatment of sound. Alfred Einstein implies this synchronic view when he writes:

The unifying principle that links all the composers from Weber and Schubert to the end of the neo-Romantic movement and brings together such seemingly antipodal composers as Wagner and Brahms is this: their relationship to the most direct and perceptible element of music, its sound.<sup>2</sup>

Chronology is relevant, of course, when the material shows historical progress or change. The nationalisms of the later nineteenth century, the influence of Wagner, the political changes during the century, the time lines of musicology—these and other manifestations must find their places in the historical perspective. But in music the phenomenon that retains a basic consistency throughout the century—the affective use of sound qualities in combination with an adherence to traditional syntactical processes—is best viewed in terms of its manifestation in individual works as an expression of the *ars combinatoria*, the ways in which sound and syntax can be combined to make arrangements and permutations.

In this synchronic view of Romantic music, the sense of history is indeed present. Seen from a broad perspective, the Romantic era emerges as a dialect of the eighteenth century, somewhat like Jakob Burckhardt's characterization of the baroque in art as a dialect of the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> Much of what strikes us as typically Romantic in music was prefigured in the later eighteenth century, then carried over and colored by the new climate of sound, with the result that all terms were modified, all affective stances altered. This study takes cognizance of the stylistic continuum as an integral part of the synchronic historical picture.

The music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven occasionally focuses attention on qualities of sound as primary values (e.g., the Prelude to Haydn's *Creation*; the opening of Mozart's Piano Concerto in D Minor, K. 466; the principal part of the development section in the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in F Major). But their music did not live in the new climate of sound; it was embodied in the thinner, lighter, and more articulate sounds of eighteenth-century instruments. For this reason, earlier music does not enter into the present consideration, although its influence on Romantic sound values can be shown.

### *Physical, Critical, and Internal/Syntactical Evidence*

This book draws on three kinds of evidence which bear witness to the changes in the climate of musical sound that took place around the turn of the nineteenth century. These are physical, critical, and internal/syntactical evidence.

Physical evidence provides a great deal of specific information. It offers descriptions of musical instruments, specifications of their construction, and pictorial representations. It gives ranges, indicates what kind of music the instruments could preform, the manner in which they were used, and how they were modified and improved over the years. Full and detailed documentation of such physical evidence is available in encyclopedias and in histories of musical instruments. To this evidence can be added the actual sounds produced by instruments that have survived from the nineteenth century, by their reconstructions, and by their modern replicas.

Still, physical evidence is not sufficiently reliable, especially for the purpose of determining the sound-syntax relationship in a given work. Marked differences among instruments, as well as among performers, can result in widely different readings of a given piece, even to the extent of affecting its overall shape and length. Although we know much about the general climate of sound in the Romantic era, we can only speculate on the specific sounds produced in a performance in the nineteenth century.

Critical evidence reveals contemporary attitudes toward the new values in sound. This kind of evidence appears as incidental comments in reviews of compositions and performances and in surveys of stylistic trends. Critical



evidence offers intriguing clues to what music was heard and how it was received. Scattered among journals, reminiscences, treatises, essays, and letters are comments that refer to the pervasive effect of the new qualities of sound (see Chapter 1).

Physical and critical evidence both testify abundantly to the presence of new sound values in Romantic music. But neither type of evidence pinpoints the actual sound-syntax relationship in a given piece or passage. Moreover, we cannot find such evidence in the vast corpus of theoretical writings on music in the nineteenth century. While entire sections of theoretical treatises during the century deal with details of orchestration and their effects at particular moments, the actual incorporation of sound values into formal processes was left to the composer.

To pinpoint the sound-syntax relationship in a given work, we turn to internal/syntactical evidence, the actual notation of the music, the score itself. This notation is a set of instructions given by the composer for the realization of a work of musical art. Of the three types of evidence cited here, the internal/syntactical evidence is the most exact. The score is the blueprint of the music; from this set of symbols all performances proceed, whatever differences in musical instruments or circumstances of performance there may be. From the blueprint we can extrapolate a whole series of decisions made by the composer; we can see how sound and syntax have worked on each other in specific details of composition. Internal/syntactical evidence, therefore, provides the basic material for the analysis in this book. It is the clue to the composer's conception of sound.

The analysis itself proceeds along familiar lines. It examines textures, harmonies, phrase and period structures, and typical formal plans, with the addition of one component—the new sounds. The addition of this factor alters the relationships among the basic components of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical language; it gives them a different coloring and affects the very sense of the passage of time within a phrase or period.

## *Rhetorical Reduction*

From time to time in the course of this book, a process of reduction is applied wherein sound is thinned to two-part textures, with melody, harmony, and texture simplified to match popular song and dance types of the nineteenth century. Then, by extrapolation and reconstruction, we can pinpoint the specific decisions of the composer regarding texture and gesture that distinguish the original from which the reduction was made. Thus we can put the unique features of the original into sharp relief; we can appreciate these unique touches and turns of the original against the simplified common-places of the reduction. This process is here designated *rhetorical reduction*.

Rhetorical reduction is precisely that: the reduction of the melodic-rhythmic continuity (the rhetoric) of a passage in order to isolate the principal figures and to locate the places where they appear in the periodic continuity.

In this manner, rhetorical reduction draws on the analytic processes of traditional rhetoric. Whether or not this reduction reflects or approaches the original concept of the composer is immaterial. Such reductions enable the observer (analyst, performer, listener) to identify the unique processes and gestures that characterize the original.

Rhetorical reduction differs from other reductive procedures, such as *Umlinie*, thematic derivation, and harmonic analysis, in that it retains something of the quality of the original—its melodic manner, its affective stance, its integrity as a musical statement. Such a reduction addresses itself to the rhetorical content of the original, its musical persuasiveness. In examples where the figured material is reduced to simple alla breve melody, the lines themselves represent patterns typical of eighteenth-century alla breve counterpoint—conjunct lines, cadential formulas, sequential configurations. These formed the foundation on which so much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figured music was built.

## *Modus Operandi*

The analysis in this book addresses the questions: to what extent and in what manner do sound qualities of a given excerpt or work represent traditional or innovative procedures? how does innovative sound affect syntax?

This approach reflects traditional rhetoric in that it deals with the two basic aspects of rhetorical communication—the establishment of coherence, represented by the heritage of the eighteenth century's common musical language, and the promotion of eloquence, to which sound made a significant contribution in the nineteenth century. Since it proceeds along rhetorical lines, the analysis focuses attention on the relationship of figures. It shows how sound can affect syntax and how syntax can channel sound in measure-to-measure and phrase-to-phrase continuities. This approach differs from methods of analysis that bring to light overarching configurations but leave sound itself out of the analytic picture.

Chapter 1 surveys critical comments that deal with qualities of sound and shows the extent to which sound was a concern of composers, performers, and listeners in the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 demonstrates the continuity that existed between Classic and Romantic textures. These textures form the basis for the samplings of scoring for piano, orchestra, and chamber music in the Romantic era, illustrated in Chapters 3–5. Chapter 6 explores the uses of harmonic color in the nineteenth century. Chapter 7 reviews the tradition of the period form in Western music and its continuity in Romantic music. Chapter 8 deals with rhetorical reduction. The succeeding chapters discuss period structures and musical forms.

Briefly, the *modus operandi* of this book involves characterizing the sound of a given example by range, texture, scoring, and harmonic color, and analyzing the effect of these sound values on the expressive implications and

the syntax of a given example. The perimeters of phrase and period structure are used as points of reference. The basis of this approach is in the procedures that define the idiom of Romantic music. Those procedures reflect the language of that time, the materials and syntax used by Romantic composers. By extrapolation, by induction, this analysis arrives at the consideration of the individual work of musical art, the choices made by the composer to achieve unique, felicitous arrangements from music's common materials. In this process, sound quality plays a vital part; whether by subtle touch or by profound saturation; it colors every configuration and affects the extent and import of every gesture. To approach Romantic music by way of its qualities of sound enables us to focus either on affective stance or on structure; indeed, it effectively coordinates these two aspects.

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PART ONE



***NEW SOUNDS***





## CHAPTER ONE



# Sound as Criterion

Sound qualities became a major area of attention in nineteenth-century writings about music. Critical comments, letters, essays, concert reports, biographies, and theoretical and technical studies offer a substantial body of evidence for the importance of sound as a special value in Romantic music. This was a new emphasis in the history of Western music. While earlier writers had considered sound in various ways—temperament, instrumental and vocal qualities, even pictorialism—they made few comments directly focused on sound as a special attribute. Before the nineteenth century, critical concern with this aspect of music was incidental to matters of style, form, and expression.

With the change in the climate of sound, we find writers giving special attention to the effects that tone color can produce. Berlioz's comments reflect this change in emphasis. His *Treatise upon Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration* begins with the following statement:

At no period in the History of Music has there been greater mention made of *Instrumentation*, than at the present time. The reason of this is doubtless to be found in the completely modern development which has taken place in this branch of the Art; and perhaps, also, in the multitude of criticisms, opinions, different doctrines, judgments, rational and irrational arguments spoken or written, for which the slightest productions of the most inferior composers form a pretext.<sup>1</sup>

The theorist Adolph Bernhard Marx (1795–1866) had a strongly negative view of the trend toward fuller scoring current in the mid-nineteenth century: