

WLe The Rise of Romantic Opera

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EDWARD J. DENT

Edited by WINTON DEAN

THE RISE OF ROMANTIC OPERA

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PREFACE

These lectures, the typescript of which is preserved in the Rowe Music Library at King's College, Cambridge, were delivered at Cornell University (the Messenger Lectures) in the winter of 1937-8. Although Dent lived for another twenty years, he made no attempt to publish them. During this final period of his life he often spoke of a substantial work he was contemplating on Romantic Opera, with specific reference to Weber; and it seems probable that he withheld the lectures with a view to expanding the material into a broader and fuller treatment of the subject. Ill-health and other work prevented the fulfilment of this plan.

Dent would not have printed the lectures as they stand. He drew a firm distinction between a course of lectures and a book. 'The function of lectures is not to convey information, which we can now obtain far better from books, but to stimulate interest in a subject.' He does in fact convey a great deal of information, much of it recondite; but his principal aim was to serve as a kind of *agent provocateur* to goad his listeners into thinking for themselves. He was capable, in lectures as in private teaching and conversation, of making outrageous pronouncements and deliberately overstating a case to this end. I remember him girding at Beethoven and even his beloved Mozart when he thought that Haydn was underestimated, and irritating the fashionable worshippers of J. S. Bach by maintaining the superior merits of Handel.

This propensity accounts for a number of generalized statements that may strike the reader as rash or even perverse: for example his claim that the melodies of Cherubini's *Démophoon* have much more charm and grace than Gluck's, his relative estimate of Weber and Schubert as opera composers, his dismissal of all Rossini's serious operas except *Guillaume Tell* and a single scene of *Otello*, and his remark that E. T. A. Hoffmann's musical technique was not far short of Weber's. Something must be

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allowed too for his chronic itch to take a shy at certain favourite *bêtes noires*, notably the church and the Germans; this was part of his rebellion against the conventions of the society in which he grew up.

Many such passages might have been modified, at least in emphasis, had Dent prepared the lectures for the press. He would unquestionably have filled a number of gaps, pursued to their conclusion many stimulating ideas thrown off as casual asides, and enriched his discussion of the music with printed examples, especially from the operas whose plots he analyses in detail. He might have softened his rather harsh treatment of Weber and Rossini, and would scarcely have ignored the use of *Leitmotiv* in *Euryanthe* (which he censures for formlessness) and *Fierrabras*, or in discussing Spohr have omitted all reference to his chromatic harmony.

The reader must also bear in mind the date at which Dent was writing. After nearly forty years a few – surprisingly few – of his utterances have lost their force. The operas of Berlioz, Rossini (other than *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and Bellini are no longer strangers to the theatre, though the French operas of the Revolution decade to which he rightly ascribes such significance are still (apart from Cherubini's *Médée*) as unfamiliar as ever. It is difficult to imagine Dent finding nothing to admire in *Le Comte Ory*, which he does not mention; and he might have been less censorious of the inability of modern singers to do justice to Rossini and Bellini.

Despite these reservations there seem to me three potent reasons for publishing the lectures now, in the centenary year of Dent's birth. In the first place, they explore an important turning-point in musical history that has still not received full or even adequate study in print. Comparatively little of Dent's work, based on a detailed examination of scores and librettos and a wide knowledge of cultural history, has been overtaken by later research. Only in very recent years have musicologists extended their concentration on earlier periods to take in the nineteenth century. Dent reached conclusions that may still startle musicians and others brought up on accepted traditions: that the true initiators of Romantic Opera were the French, that it derived not from serious but from comic opera, and that it was the principal source of the nineteenth-century German symphonic and in-

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strumental style. If a detail here and there is exaggerated, I believe the main conclusions to be sound.

Secondly, the lectures are full of characteristically sharp perception, clearly and often entertainingly expressed, on composers familiar and unfamiliar and on the relationships between them. Readers of Dent's other books, and students who had the good fortune to be taught by him or to hear him speak, will recognize many examples of that provocative wit, compounded of penetration and paradox, with which he forced them to confront the music of the past. Those who never knew him may discover, if they have not done so already, why he enjoyed a reputation as one of the world's foremost musicologists and the man who raised British musical scholarship to an international level.

Thirdly, by their demonstration, implicit and explicit, of the methods of a great scholar and a great teacher, the lectures convey an important message to critics and historians of music. For Dent the primary value of research lay in 'a training of the imagination', and he was always urging that 'we must sharpen our critical faculties'. The chief obstacle to this exercise he considered to be the cult of 'the classics', which he mentions in the second paragraph of Lecture 9 and to which he returns at the end of Lecture 12. It was not that he himself thought little of the classics; but he distrusted the uncritical acceptance of traditional standards. 'Our minds are rendered sluggish by the constant habit of veneration'; this was the attitude he was concerned to shake. He urges his listeners to put their imaginations into training, 'to cultivate imaginative experience for the enrichment of memory and life, and at the same time to develop a habit of perpetual scepticism and criticism as regards all so-called acknowledged masterpieces. If you have ever allowed yourselves to reverence the great masters, I hope you will abandon that attitude, which is merely a polite mask for lazy-mindedness.' Only thus, Dent was convinced, can we clear our ears of the lumber of the past and 'have mental space as well as freedom of judgment to welcome and enjoy the art of today and tomorrow'.

The editing of the lectures has presented certain difficulties. They were composed straight on to the typewriter and only lightly revised. The revision generally took the form of mar-

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ginalia hastily scribbled in pencil, sometimes modifying and sometimes supplementing the text, and occasionally marking a point for reconsideration. I have incorporated this material in the text where it involved little disturbance, and elsewhere placed it in footnotes indicated by Dent's initials. Other footnotes are my own. In delivering the lectures Dent used live illustrations performed by students, and sometimes played and sang examples himself. With one or two exceptions, neither their placing nor their content can be identified, and I have made no attempt to supply the deficiency. The two brief musical examples on pages 12 and 22 were notated in Dent's hand.

Dent was a fastidious writer of English. The lectures contain occasional solecisms of syntax, awkward sentences and repetitions of words and phrases that he might have tolerated in speech or not bothered to alter, but would never have admitted to print. Following a number of his own amendments, I have slightly modified such passages, and shortened a few others where he repeats a point in almost identical terms. I have regularized titles of operas and names of characters, corrected a few slips and wrong dates, and omitted or adapted an occasional sentence where Dent bases a statement on premises now known to be erroneous. Provided his argument remains unaffected, a pedantic insistence on the letter would have done no service to his memory. I have not however interfered with generalizations which some scholars might wish to qualify, and only annotated them when they seemed to me likely to mislead. The lectures should not be regarded as a complete statement of Dent's views; the script probably served to some extent as a basis for improvisation and spontaneous elaboration. But while the style never received a final polish, its tone of urbanity seasoned with wit and a touch of *malizia* is unmistakeable, and will surely be relished by all admirers of its erudite and idiosyncratic author.

My thanks are due to Dr David Charlton and Mr John Warrack for many helpful suggestions, and to my son Stephen for subjecting the material to a testing scrutiny that would have elicited Dent's amused approval.

WINTON DEAN

February, 1976

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1

INTRODUCTION

The historical phenomenon known as the Romantic Movement is one which it is very difficult to define. Even if we were to limit its scope to literature alone, we should find no clear understanding of when it began or when it ended, and when we come to consider its relation to drama, music and the plastic arts, to say nothing of religion and morals, the study of it in detail is obviously beyond the comprehension of any one historian.

Let us try to make a start by considering what are the ordinary educated person's general conceptions of the Romantic Movement. Here we are at once faced by the question of that ordinary educated person's nationality. If he is English, he will probably pick out Wordsworth as the representative Romantic; in an earlier generation he would have named Byron. But in any case his first associations with Romanticism will be literary: Romanticism for him means first of all poetry – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats – and then perhaps the Romantic novelists: Scott will be the first name that he mentions, and then, if he is something of a literary connoisseur, Mrs Radcliffe and Horace Walpole. A Frenchman, on the other hand, will say at once that the Romantic Movement began with Victor Hugo's plays; but he will probably maintain that the Romantic Movement in France was pictorial rather than literary. Painting means more to him than it does to the average Englishman; he might even go so far as to mention a musician – Hector Berlioz. Ask a German: he can hardly ignore his Romantic poets, but he will probably feel that even Schiller is less of a Romantic than Weber. The Romantic art of Germany is music, and it is almost safe to say that the characteristic of Romantic literature in Germany is its close association with music, its interpretation of music and its attempt to produce the effects of music with words.

Many writers have said that music is the essentially Romantic art. Susceptibility to music is eminently characteristic of Romantic

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poets, even such as were from a musician's point of view almost unmusical. Byron, Keats and Shelley seem to have known practically nothing about music, but their poems show that they at least enjoyed listening to it and were capable of being moved by it in some sort of way. The other extreme of devotion to music is to be found in the German poets and writers, such as Wackenroder, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Grillparzer. The French poets may have had less technical knowledge of the art, but there can be no doubt about their appreciation of it.

It ought surely to be obvious then that no study of Romanticism can be complete without an understanding of its musical aspects. Unfortunately historians of literature are very seldom musical enough to realize the importance of this musical side of Romanticism. They at least remember the dictum of Beaumarchais, '*ce qui est trop sot pour être dit, on le chante*', and it is generally an axiom with them that any words which have been set to music or have been written to be set to music must be beneath contempt. Historians of drama wash their hands completely of opera and all allied forms of it,¹ with the result that they sometimes arrive at altogether erroneous conclusions.

Let us leave the men of letters for a moment and ask some questions of the musicians. As the literary historians seized on Byron as the representative Romantic poet, so it has been customary to select Weber as the typical Romantic musician. Along with Weber we shall find associated Berlioz, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. Whether Beethoven is to be regarded as a Romantic is as difficult a problem as that of Goethe. It will be observed that the names which I have mentioned are not those of operatic composers, with the exception of Weber. Beethoven wrote one opera, and so did Schumann, but we are accustomed to think of these operas as almost negligible compared with the rest of those composers' output. Berlioz wrote three operas – one might almost count them as four – but performances of them are so exceedingly rare that most musical people, including most professional musicians, have practically no knowledge of them.²

The selection of names which I have put forward as typical for modern audiences – typical certainly for England, and I think for

¹ This is no longer true: see for instance Heinz Kindermann, *Theatergeschichte Europas*, 9 vols (Salzburg, 1959-70).

² Dent himself was largely responsible for invalidating this statement.

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Germany too – is due to the fact that opera, at any rate in Germany and England, is for some reason regarded as a rather inferior branch of music. The neglect of opera in England is notorious; one cannot say that it is neglected in Germany and Austria, where the number of theatres is very large and the standard of performances still astonishingly high. Why then should opera, at any rate in Germany, be regarded as not quite on a level with concert music? It would be outside the scope of these lectures to pursue this question in serious detail, but I am obliged to mention it, because one of the fundamental principles on which this course of lectures is based is that opera, at any rate for the Romantic period, is by far the most important of all musical forms. The German attitude towards opera is not difficult to explain. As we shall see in the course of these lectures, Germany was a long way behind Italy and France in the development of opera. Throughout the eighteenth century opera in Germany – whether at Hamburg or Vienna – meant French or Italian opera, either in the original languages, or translated into German;³ the number of original German operas produced before 1800 is simply negligible compared with the enormous quantities composed in Italy and France. The nineteenth century was the great age of German opera, at any rate as we foreigners see the history of that century; but inside Germany French and Italian opera were and are still dangerous competitors. No German theatre of to-day can afford to ignore Verdi and Puccini, Gounod and Ambroise Thomas, and to the ordinary German music-lover opera is still very largely a luxury imported from abroad. Symphonies, on the other hand, are an almost exclusively German product. Moreover, during the latter half of the nineteenth century there grew up in Germany, as also in England, a sort of religious attitude to music; music has now come to be regarded by many people almost as a substitute for religion – at any rate, people who go to concerts are expected to behave as reverently as they would in church.

In the early days of Romanticism there were fewer concerts,

³ This is not true of Hamburg in the early years of the century. German operas were produced there between 1678 and 1738, and the leading composer, Reinhard Keiser, enjoyed a European reputation. See H. C. Wolff, *Die Barockoper in Hamburg* (Wolfenbüttel, 1957) and Basil Deane, 'Reinhard Keiser: An Interim Assessment', *Soundings iv* (1974), 30–41.

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and such as there were were of a less solemn type.⁴ We must remember too that most concerts were given in theatres; the building of large concert-halls was the achievement of much later generations.⁵ Nowadays, serious-minded musicians are inclined to be almost shocked if they are asked to go to a concert in a theatre; it makes them as uncomfortable as it would to attend a church service in a theatre. The history of music is determined to a very large extent by the conditions under which music has been performed. In the Middle Ages we find church music on a vast scale, because churches were the only buildings available in which a large audience could be assembled to listen to music constructed on a large scale. There was nothing that could be called chamber music in the modern sense of the word, until people began to live in conditions of suitable comfort; there could be no chamber music before a large class of people inhabited houses that were reasonably warmed and lighted, with living-rooms set apart for indoor pleasures.

Even in the Middle Ages, music was divided into the two categories of church and chamber, it being assumed that music was an appanage of great princes. Martin Luther said that it was the positive duty of princes to maintain 'chapels' – that is to say, bodies of singers and players, performing music both sacred and secular – in order that ordinary people might enjoy the benefit of hearing them. Evidently at that date, the ordinary citizen had no chance of hearing music unless he and a few friends made music in their own houses, or went to worship at some royal chapel.

It was in the seventeenth century that opera came into being; and the whole of seventeenth-century music is dominated by it. During the course of that century opera became firmly established, first at Venice, then in Paris, Vienna, Naples and other centres. An attempt was made to develop a national school of opera in England in the days of Purcell, but his untimely death brought it to an end, and from the beginning of the eighteenth

⁴ This is not wholly true of Paris, where the Concerts du Conservatoire, started in 1800, included new as well as traditional music played by the students; Beethoven's first three symphonies were performed in 1807–11. Habeneck, who championed Beethoven and other Romantic composers in France, and in 1828 founded the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, cut his teeth as a conductor there.

⁵ The concert-hall at the Paris Conservatoire, opened in 1811, had 966 seats as well as standing room.

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century opera – that ‘exotic and irrational entertainment’, as Dr Johnson defined it⁶ – was for London mainly Italian.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and most of the nineteenth, opera is historically the most important kind of music there was. The opera-house was the place where all the arts met: not only music, but poetry, painting, architecture and the dance. The opera is the source of all real musical expression. If we attempt to study in detail the history of musical form, the shapes of musical movements, we may have to pursue that study among symphonies and sonatas. Historians are easily tempted to believe that instrumental music is a thing apart, and that there is something peculiarly sacrosanct about the great instrumental forms. But it is an indisputable historical fact that these forms originated in the theatre; what is called sonata form may be traced in operatic arias long before its appearance in harpsichord music, and the symphony for orchestra is well known to be nothing more than what we should nowadays call the ‘overture’ to an Italian opera.

People often talk of musical form as if it meant formalism: a set of rules constructed by academic pedantry, which it is the first duty of genius to shatter. This is complete nonsense; the people who say that sort of thing simply do not know what form is. Musical form is in itself expression; so far from being destructive of true expression, it is nothing more nor less than the device by which human expression is made artistic, that is, made to convey the maximum of expression with the minimum of effort. Every piece of music, like every poem, however short it be and however simple, must contain somewhere an emotional climax; what we call form is merely the arrangement by which this climax is put in the most effective place.

The musical drama naturally requires emotion to be expressed in the intensest as well as in the subtlest possible manner, and it is for that reason that opera has always been the workshop in which methods of human expression in music have been created. After they have made their first appearance in opera they are utilized for concert music, or it may be for church music too. We often hear it said that certain types of church music are too operatic, and the criticism is occasionally made about concert

⁶ Johnson's definition, in his life of John Hughes, was confined to Italian opera in London.

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music also; but what this criticism really means is that the so-called operatic phrases or passages are reminiscent of phrases which have already become stale and purely conventional in the opera-house itself. Musical critics sometimes express opinions on questions of this kind which the serious historical student of music can only find ridiculous.

In recent years the Catholic church music of the eighteenth century has been severely condemned for its secularity and its theatrical style. Theatrical it certainly is, in so far as it makes use of emotional effects learned first by musicians in the theatre. The historian can only say that in its own day it met with the approval of ecclesiastical authority. But there are exceptions to this general condemnation, and among the few sacred works of that operatic century to escape censure is Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, which is always spoken of in terms of devout respect. It is interesting to note that Padre Martini, who lived only half a century after Pergolesi, and who was also himself a Catholic priest, a man of devout life and at the same time a musician of enormous learning, said plainly that Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* was written in the style of a comic opera. Anyone who studies the comic operas of Pergolesi himself and his contemporaries can see at once that Padre Martini was perfectly right; the style is unmistakeable.

If we go back to the sixteenth century – that century in which (as I have heard it said) church music reached its perfection of devotional expression, a century which some people will maintain to have been completely dominated by the ideals of the Church – we shall come across a number of motets to sacred words which make a powerful appeal to modern audiences by the intensity of their verbal expression. Much has been written about their mystical inspiration and so forth; modern research has shown clearly that this so-called mystical expression is simply an imitation of the style employed by the composers of secular madrigals, especially in the expression of erotic emotions.

Religious emotion, if it is not imitated directly from the erotic emotion of the theatre – I need hardly say that I speak only of musical expression and make no attempt to analyse the actual emotions themselves – is generally conveyed in music by a suggestion of antiquity. A modern composer who wishes to create a religious atmosphere in an opera or in any kind of music, secular or sacred, can easily do so by introducing a succession

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of chords such as he might find in the works of Palestrina. He will find the same chords in some madrigal of Marenzio, but his audience will know nothing about that; it sounds old, and therefore it sounds sacred.⁷ This method of producing a religious atmosphere has been practised for many generations; it was practised even in that wickedly theatrical eighteenth century, by such composers as Haydn and Mozart. I need hardly point out that it can be observed plentifully in the nineteenth, in Beethoven, Liszt, Meyerbeer and Wagner. I draw your attention to this well-worn dodge of faking religious emotion, because it is a very useful piece of stage scenery for opera, and we shall find it eminently characteristic of the type of opera that we call Romantic.

The purpose of these lectures is to study Romantic opera. The composers whom I select as typical Romantics are Weber and Bellini. You might expect me to talk to you about Donizetti, Wagner, Verdi and perhaps Berlioz; but I may tell you at once that I do not intend to discuss any of these directly at all. I invite you rather to pursue with me an inquiry into how the Romantic style of these early Romantics – Weber and Bellini – originated: whether we cannot perhaps find traces of Romanticism in much earlier composers. It will be generally agreed, I think, that Weber and Bellini are Romantic; but what constitutes their Romanticism? The stories of their operas are Romantic, of course; but in what sense is their music Romantic?

I began once to try to think out this problem, but I soon came to the conclusion that it was hopeless to attack it in so direct a way. It is easy enough, as we listen to an opera in the theatre, or play it through on the pianoforte at home, to pick out some one phrase which seems to be the very essence of Romantic expression; but when we try to analyse the whole opera cold-bloodedly, and ask ourselves on every page, bar by bar, 'is this Romantic or not?', the task becomes impossible, and even if we could answer the question by mere instinctive feeling, we should have no sound basis for a scientific judgment.

I came to the conclusion therefore that the best way to study the problem was to begin some hundred years earlier, and follow the gradual development of opera in different countries, keeping

⁷ Play 'Matona mia cara' (E.J.D.). The reference is presumably to the opening bars of Lassus's *villanella*.

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an eye carefully open for anything in the earlier operas which seems in any way to foreshadow effects and methods generally considered characteristic of the acknowledged Romantics. I must tell you frankly that I mean to talk to you about a number of composers whose works you are never likely to see on the stage. As I studied their scores, many of which have now become museum rarities, I always asked myself whether I could possibly endeavour to get them put on the stage again; and I confess that in practically all cases I came to the conclusion that a revival would be out of the question. But I hope you will have at any rate an opportunity of hearing a few extracts from some of these forgotten operas, and I present these specimens to you, not as master-pieces, but as experiments and studies in the technique of emotional expression. I present them to you also as exercises for yourselves, exercises of the imagination, asking you to call up before you the vision of a stage, with its appropriate scenery, its singers, and the dramatic situations which the music is intended to illustrate.

The more closely I studied these old operas, the more difficult I found it to decide in my own mind what was to be considered 'Romantic' in style – that is, in purely musical style. Even as regards the literary subjects and the pictorial accessories I found it difficult to come to any conclusion. When I read Le Sueur's opera *La Caverne* (1793), with a delightful picture on the title-page representing the cavern, in which a band of brigands has imprisoned a noble lady, while her distressed husband wanders about in a forest planted on the roof of the cavern; when I found that the husband entered the cavern disguised as an old blind minstrel and that after his followers had fought a battle with the brigands (in which they destroyed most of the cavern itself) it was discovered that the brigand chief was the lady's long-lost brother – then I thought that here surely was typical Romanticism. But I reflected that the whole opera might have been set to music by Handel, with words in Italian instead of French, and with slight changes of names and situations. Prisons, ruins, robbers, repentant villains, are common enough in the operas of Handel's day; the only difference is that the scene is set in ancient Greece or mediaeval Antioch instead of seventeenth-century Calabria. We are told that Gluck reformed the opera by getting rid of the long formal arias of Handel's time; but what was the good of that if

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he only led the way for Cherubini to burden his operas with still longer and more formal trios and quartets? Can we not reasonably say that Handel's operas are no less Romantic than those of the early nineteenth century? Schumann wrote an opera on the story of patient Griselda, and the story of Weber's *Euryanthe* is very much the same; how truly Romantic, say the critics, because the story of Griselda is taken from a mediaeval romance. But they forget, or perhaps they do not know, that Griselda was the heroine of an opera by the elder Scarlatti in 1721 – an opera, too, in which there are some startling dramatic effects. If Schumann is Romantic and Scarlatti is Classical when they both treat the same story, then there must be some essential difference of musical style, apart from the obvious difference between two composers who lived more than a hundred years apart.

We are faced at once with deeper psychological problems. It is generally acknowledged that Shakespeare is in many ways Romantic; some of his contemporaries, such as Webster, are even more conspicuously Romantic. But once we acknowledge Romanticism in the early seventeenth century we can begin looking for it at any period. Monsieur Hazard of Paris, lecturing last year at Harvard, showed us a Romantic of 1730 – the Abbé Prévost – a hundred years before the official Romantic, Victor Hugo. There are romanticists and classicists in all periods of history; it is not a question of epoch but of personal temperament. Admit this, and we at once quote the well-known line of Goethe about the two souls in our own breast; we are all of us Classical and Romantic by turns.⁸ It is the Nietzschean doctrine of Apollo and Dionysus.

I have suggested this line of thought to you merely in order to show how futile it is as a guide to the study of our own subject. But we must not dismiss the whole idea without further consideration. It has been suggested by certain writers that *all* music is Romantic. The other arts may be Classical or Romantic at different times or in different places, but music, even when it is officially called Classical, is of its innermost essence invariably a Romantic art. Music deals with pure feeling and nothing else; the other arts deal with facts, even if they falsify them.

This view of music has been held, I believe, by composers; but

⁸ Faust's 'Zwei Seelen leben, ach, in meiner Brust' is however not a reference to Classicism and Romanticism.