

The Demons of Romanticism

This paper is based on a Lecture-Recital given at the Sydney Schubert Society Inc, Sydney on March 2 2008, featuring Goetz Richter, violin, Jeanell Carrigan, piano and Simone Easthope, soprano.

Introduction

Romanticism and the romantic: today we associate with this term a fascination with subjective emotionality, a desire for excitement, an intoxication with romantic love and desire. In fact most of what our contemporary TV-culture conveys under the cliché of the “romantic” is in reality a narcissistic obsession, a transformation of a fundamental human condition and its corresponding attitudes which in their primordial form shaped originally an entire age into our times. The term “romantic” is today so wide and thus so vague that almost anything that is remotely stimulating our emotions can qualify for it. But the original romanticism of which we experience now only a tepid reflection in a world that is demystified goes originally back to a human stance in which man experienced himself and the cosmos completely differently from today.

In the following I will make an attempt to portray this difference and try to expose the original importance of romanticism. I will do so with the help of musical illustrations and with the help of some reference to poetry and music¹. Romanticism, this much is clear from the outset, is a complex phenomenon. I will only be able to search for aspects. But I hope I will at least inspire a further exploration of the idea of romanticism - particularly in regard to the music of Franz Schubert but also in exploring its contexts- the poetry of Novalis, of Ruckert, of Eichendorff, the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, of Schelling, of E.T.A. Hoffmann, of Schleiermacher or of Friedrich Jacobi. For Schubert was a paradigmatic romantic artist and his music will remain unexplored if we do not situate it in this time and influence. Not only was he a contemporary of the “early romantics” – of poets like Novalis, Schlegel, Hoelderlin, Tieck, of the philosophers Wackenroder, Schelling, Fichte, Jean Paul and the young Hegel – his music absorbs and finds voice in many of the characteristics of romanticism which absorbed the attention of his age.

Romantic Art

The notion of romantic art finds its definition in the first instance in the context of an opposition and a development: Romantic art develops as a reaction to classicism. Romanticism embodies a generational challenge- the challenge of young people to an established generation, their refusal to follow seemingly straightforward answers to pre-established questions and their refusal to accept the paradigms of a traditional way forward.

The German philosopher Hegel – historically a child of romanticism himself- defines romantic art and romanticism in his Lectures on Aesthetics. According to Hegel art arises from a tendency of nature to elevate itself towards spirituality. While originally this tendency remains caught in a mere search for abstraction, in a symbolism, classical art constitutes a completion of art in so far as the spiritual transformation of the natural is achieved completely: Nature is dissolved in the completeness of an idea. Nature is idealised. The realm of the spirit permeates the external appearance and

¹ Originally this paper was given as a lecture-recital and the relevant music was performed.

establishes the congruence between beauty in nature and beauty in art. This supreme achievement within the realm of appearance, the achievement to embody the ideal within sensible reality, is however further transcended in art with the advent of the subjective consciousness. Classical art remains essentially external to the human consciousness. However, where the human subject reaches a reflective consciousness of its achievement to represent the natural within the determinations of the spiritual it dissolves in fact into a “double totality”. While classical art achieves a complete representation of the natural in the realm of the spirit, spirit itself is able to reflect this completion upon itself and reaches further, towards a completion within itself. This brings to the fore the inner sense, the reflection of the soul. Hegel writes:

“The spirit ... can only find a correspondence of an appropriate existence in the world of feeling, of inner sense (Gemuet), in essence in its inner-ness (Innerlichkeit). Through this, spirit reaches a consciousness to possess its otherness, its existence, as spirit for and in itself and thus only enjoy its eternity and freedom”.

We have in this definition of romantic art the essential determinations of the romantic: Art within the realm of the inner sense, within feeling and the importance of “inner-ness” (Innerlichkeit). Art - as a reflective, spiritual meditation in which the spirit - reaches for itself and thus achieves transcendence, eternity and freedom. Art as a reflection of feeling- How does this fundamental view show itself in music?

The pathos of subjectivity

If we follow Hegel’s definition of romantic art in his Lectures on Aesthetics (1835) we can see the importance that music is to play in the transformation from classical to romantic art. Music, in fact, together with poetry, seems to be a paradigmatically romantic art on Hegel’s terms. Its realm is “subjective innerness” itself. Music denies spatial objectivity – it leaves the realm of objective appearance behind. The main aim of music is to “resound the way in which the inner self is moved in accordance with its subjectivity and its ideal soul” (Hegel, III, 135) – an extraordinary statement affirming the essence of music as an art of “inner-ness without object”. Hegel says about music:

“Its content is the subjective itself, and its utterance does not achieve a permanent, spatial objectivity, but shows through its fluid, free evaporation (haltungloses freies Verschweben), that it is a form of communication, which rather than have existence for itself is only supported by the innerness and subjectivity and is only supposed to be there for the subjective inner-ness (Innere).” (Hegel, III, 136)

Music achieves both the reflection and articulation of subjectivity and the subjective- it enables “subjectivity to grasp the subjective” (die Innerlichkeit dem Innern fassbar machen), an achievement which we now see as the transcendence of the classical ideal of objective beauty.

We may appreciate that this level of consciousness of music opens interesting and artistically productive opportunities in its realm when it comes to reflecting the human condition and the life of the spirit. In the reflection of itself, which Hegel considers the essence of spirit, the human condition is formed through the perception of itself.

Spirit is essentially complete and self-referential. For the human context it means that self-consciousness is a necessary attribute of consciousness. Hegel will call this condition a tragedy, the tragedy of consciousness. Wherever we are, we encounter ourselves as separated. Man experiences himself as exposed, as incomplete and as fallen away. This experience, a fundamental experience of self-consciousness, becomes the seed of the romantic experience, a seed which grows into an overpowering plant through the 19th and 20th century.

The experience of “fallenness” is an ancient human experience. In the consciousness of romanticism it becomes amplified into a Promethean experience: Man is not only expelled from the paradise but subject to the wrath of God, isolated from his grace. He has two options: to pursue defiance or to seek redemption outside the religious redemption. Both answers inform romanticism and romantic projects. In the first instance, the fallenness from grace of human existence leads to a shift in the balance between Good and Evil- it leads to an ascendancy of the demonic. With this ascendancy comes the challenge to the human being to respond to the demonic. The romantic spirit will pursue the demonic in two ways: in the fascination with- and the service of the demonic it recognises an overwhelming power and submits to it in order to transcend its own individuality. In the flight from the demonic towards an original unity with nature, beauty or the Good it attempts a transcendence towards the ideal. Romantic man is fundamentally ambiguous in his relationship with the demonic: unable to resist and unable to withstand it, it inspires him towards seeking forgetting and flight.

Consciousness of the Demonic (Byron)

The romantic consciousness becomes pre-occupied with the demonic. In art, in literature and in music, romantic art is characterised by a resurgence and obsession with gothic imagery. Schubert's/ Goethe's “Erlkoenig” powerfully is a characteristic example as are some of Schubert's other songs (eg. “Der Zwerg”). For the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th century death and the longing for death become themes of artistic experience. The poet Heinrich von Kleist kills himself with his fiancé in Berlin. Karoline von Guenderode, one of the most talented young female poets in the early part of the 18th century, commits suicide in the Rhine by knifing herself in the chest- a gruesome and potentially messy experience. While the taking of one's own life was condemned by Christian religion as sinful, it now seems to become an existential experience of “subjectivity”. The demons of death and the abyss of non-existence call to the subjective consciousness and demand satisfaction: Death is to be an adventure and an escape.

Romantic man comes to see himself to be exposed to the storms of life, thrown upon the sea of his earthly journey without any prospect of reaching land. The romantics will become fascinated by the themes of wandering, of homelessness, of journeying and of never arriving; by an eternity which is not promising relief but in fact is present here and now and signifies our very inescapable existence in the present.

Hitherto, man's quest for knowledge projected a hope that life – no matter how short- could be meaningfully explored, that the human condition could at least be partially understood and that upon completion man would reach some form a destiny. The enlightenment philosopher Kant dedicated his entire life to finding boundaries of

knowledge. Goethe pronounces that in “the limitation shows itself the master.” The romantics fractured these aspirations, these boundaries and limitations. They affirm that in the extreme and truthful consciousness of human fallen-ness, knowledge and life do not match up. Byron’s Manfred (1817) is an excellent example of this unrestrained, romantic experience. Manfred, a Faustian figure, has lost any illusion of destiny. All that is left is a longing for oblivion and for self-forgetting. For Manfred, the journey of the spirit leads to despair, the flame of consciousness illuminates an abyss and a human tragedy because knowledge and life cannot be reconciled. At the same time we are chained to a wakefulness of consciousness, to a torturing experience of the demonic which is never ending and inescapable:

“...in my heart, there is a vigil, and these eyes but close to look within; and yet I live, and bear the aspect and the form of breathing men. But grief should be the instructor of the wise; Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth, The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.” (Byron, Manfred)²

Yearning

The consciousness of the human condition, man’s loneliness, homelessness or fallen-ness naturally establishes a characteristic attitude to the world. Man reaches out towards the absolute, as it were, only to find that it essentially eludes his grasp. In fact, metaphysically speaking the absolute is recognised by romantic consciousness as that which is forever fleeing. It is not difficult to recognise in this peculiar relationship of human consciousness to the world and to the absolute, the attitude of a kind of unrequited cosmic love, a form of metaphysical eroticism which remains, however, unconsummated. This attitude becomes known as Sehnsucht or yearning. Interestingly the English “yearning” trivialises what the German “Sehnsucht” overstates: we are dealing with a “Sucht” – an addiction to yearning (“sehnen”). The second term of the composite noun does not only relate to an addiction, perhaps, but also to the search (suchen) which is precluded from coming to fulfilment- we suffer from an addiction to searching. Man’s search which is both eternal and remains unfulfilled is in fact a compulsion, a curse.

A poem by the poet Emmanuel Geibel (1815-1884) (set to music by Robert Schumann³) expresses this condition admirably:

“I look into my heart and I look to the world, until the burning tear falls from my eye. The far captures me with golden light, but the north holds me, I do not arrive. Oh, the world so wide, the limits so close. And time so fleeting! I know a land, where among sunny green groves in sunken temples the grapes glow, where the purple wave laps the shore, and where the laurel dreams of future singers. It lures me away and greets my desiring sense, but I cannot come! Oh, had I wings, through the blue air I would bathe in the sunny air. But in vain- and hour after hour disappears – grieve about youth and hurry the song- oh the limits so close, the world so far and the time flees so fast!” (Geibel, Sehnsucht)

² Schubert, Sonata A minor D 385 (1816)– Allegro Moderato

³ Schumann, Sehnsucht (Geibel) op 51, 1

Yearning here encompasses the fleeting nature of the cosmos and of time itself. The very presence of consciousness and spirit seems to exclude us from a paradise, the “shore, where laurel dreams of future singers” which flees on account of the very constitution of time itself. All we have left is the consciousness of the escape, of this fleeing of the absolute, of the elusiveness of beauty and of perfection. We are left to yearn – in fact through yearning we transcend ourselves, we apprehend the eluding absolute.

Nature and the Idyllic.

In Geibel's/Schumann's poem, nature is both a symbol of hope and a symbol of the elusive. In fact, for the romantic spirit the realm of nature is a symbol of the complexity of the human condition. Nature gives us relief from the eternal wandering, from the winter of our existence but it also forces us into submission and exiles us from it. This is never clearer than in the human experience of the overwhelming forces of nature - the weather, the season, the planets and the heavens. The seasons hold a special, symbolic significance: we only need to think of Schubert's “Winter's Journey”: Man is exposed to a foreboding, icy and austere cosmos and isolated condition. In this situation, the project of hope and relief becomes a yearning for spring: Spring brings sensuous awakening, it brings relief and warmth. Spring brings hope and becomes synonymous with an idyllic redemption.

In Eduard Moerike's poem Er ists the romantic obsession with spring becomes in fact the erotic symbol of a cosmic infatuation: “It is him”, the title translates, thus evoking the impression of welcoming a lover. Primroses- together with roses the romantic symbol of the feminine- “are dreaming already”. “Sweet, well-known scents, permeate suggestively the land”⁴.

The joy in welcoming relief from the winter of our existence, from loneliness and alienation, encourages the romantic spirit to turn towards the ideal and towards the idyll. If we cannot find perfection, fulfilment and redemption in our exposure to the world, then perhaps we can search within and find it in our own reflection or in a denial of the world altogether? The world forces us into an inner exile, into an exile of our imagination. Schumann's “Roeslein” displays this phenomenon of denial of reality and escape into our own perceptions: We wish to see a rose without thorns. However, the illusion is shortlived. The hero picks it and kisses it- the thorns are there to be sure. There can be no rose without thorns. The human nature (in this case the feminine as symbolised by the rose) is complex and equivocal. No matter how much we wish to imagine it, it will be both sweet, alluring but also damaging and foreboding⁵.

Night and Dreams

A central phenomenon of the romantic spirit is its fascination with the night. In a world where electricity illuminates the night and dissolves the difference between night and day almost entirely such fascinations are less compelling for us now. Illuminated by powerful energy and bustling with activity, the night of the modern city affords little of an originally romantic experience. Moon and stars pale and remain obscure when competing with street lighting and luminous advertising. But

⁴ Schumann, Er ists (Moerike), op 79, 24

⁵ Schumann, Roeslein (v.d.Neun), op. 89, No. 6

those who occasionally travel in the Australian bush at night will know what I mean: the beauty of the starry sky, the remarkable light of a moon that is not disturbed by electric city lighting fills us with a sense of awe.

We must remember that when in the 19th century night fell the darkness was complete. Night could only be illuminated by meagre lamps, by candles and by wind-lights and of course by the moon and the stars. This did not only create a particular mood on account of the ghostly, shadowy images that such light produced, but it also meant that life had to take on particular patterns: full-moon for example meant the possibility to travel at night, whereas no moon precluded this. Darkness could spell disaster for anyone caught in it; Travellers would get lost, fall down cliffs, disappear into abysses or sink into moors. The demons of night would constantly threaten lives.

The night brought mystery and danger through its darkness. But the night also brought community: at night any inn, any house which was illuminated was a welcoming sight for the traveller and signalled the presence of humans and of relief and security. A light at night thus became a symbol of hope, of comfort and of relief.

The night also naturally brought sleep and with this dreams and memories and the demons of our sub-conscious. The sub-consciousness of the dream, with its divine dimension of revealing circumstances, visions and realities that are not open to conscious reflection has a twofold importance: The human participates in the divine, perhaps the demonic and at the same time transcends its isolated, lonely existence. The dimensions of the past and the future collapse: temporality is transcended. The oppressive existence of the present, with its never ending toil is denied. The dream is an escape. Man experiences a fundamental self-forgetting in memory as well as in illumination. Towards the end of the 19th century the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche will call forth the “Dionysian” quality of dreams and draw our attention to its closeness to intoxication, to communion and to metaphysical experience of unity.

The human connection with the divine is pronounced in the phenomenon of the sleep walker, in the somnambulist who travels at night without conscious control and in a state of mind which seems to be guided by supernatural forces that are not present in the day. To the romantic mind-set the night in fact appears to be “sacred”: it is both forbidding and mysterious- it is the giver of community, of dreams and of a quietness that envelops man and sends forth forces which – under certain circumstances- guide man. The night is more powerful than man. It is an ambiguous demon, charitable and threatening, mysterious and revealing, a force that affords rest and redemption from the abysmal truth of consciousness but also confronts us with frightening challenges and incomprehensible dangers. Like a powerful drug it has the possibility to cure or kill us.

Its therapeutic qualities are summoned in this Schubert Song, with a text by Matthaeus Kasimir von Collin, Night and Dreams:

Holy night, you sink down;
Dreams, too, drift down
Like your moonlight through space,
Through the quiet hearts of men;
They listen with delight

Calling out when day awakens:
Return, holy night!
Fair dreams, return!⁶

Night, intoxication and homecoming

The romantic intoxication and fascination with the night gives rise to a specific musical work, the Notturmo, the Night-Music or the Nocturne. The night transforms the hierarchy of our senses: sight gives way to smell and sound. Thus music becomes more important and music played at night or invoking the presence of the night intensifies our musical experience itself. Music of the night takes on a symbolic representation of the inner experience, the subjectivity of the night itself. Through its falling away of consciousness, this subjectivity assumes a fundamentally different temporal experience than afforded by daytime and light. Night denies time. In sleeping and dreaming we no longer are subject to temporal experience of the day which is determined by the clear distinction between past, present and future. Like the transience of music itself, the night abolishes temporal determination to make way for a contingent experience of eternity, perhaps. Novalis, the romantic poet par excellence, articulates an obsession with the dissolving characteristics of the night. His famous Hymns to the Night, a fragment that was to haunt German literature until Thomas Mann and beyond calls forth the anaesthetic qualities of the night:

“Must morning always return? Does the power of the earthly never end? Cursed busy-ness divulges the heavenly arrival of the night. Will the secret sacrifice of love not burn for ever? Time was apportioned to light: but timeless and without space is the rule of the night – eternal is the duration of sleep” (Novalis, Werke, 42)

Music offers itself to capture this temporal transcendence of the particular. In fact, through its transient characteristics, through– as Hegel called it- its “suspended free transience” music is ontologically congruent with the night. The romantic composers will see an opportunity here: akin to the night, music has a relieving quality. Like an opiate it liberates us from the struggle of the everyday, from the useless toil of daily existence and from the struggle with its impossibility of reaching the limits of consciousness and of finding redemption from alienation and particularity.⁷

Night & transcendence

Perhaps the most profound and metaphysical, cosmic vision of the night is contained in a poem by Joseph Eichendorff which is set to music congenially by Schumann (and also Brahms). Let us look briefly and carefully at the text:

Es war, als hätt' der Himmel
Die Erde still geküßt,
Daß sie im Blütenschimmer
Von ihm nun träumen müßt'.

Die Luft ging durch die Felder,

⁶ Schubert, Nacht und Traeume, (Collin) op 43, No 2

⁷ Chopin, Nocturne, c# minor

Die Ähren wogten sacht,
Es rauschten leis die Wälder,
So sternklar war die Nacht.

Und meine Seele spannte
Weit ihre Flügel aus,
Flog durch die stillen Lande,
Als flöge sie nach Haus.

Eichendorff commences with a cosmic metaphor which reaches back to the images of antiquity: “It was as if the heavens silently kissed the earth”. The erotic tension between heaven and earth alludes to the Greek myth of Ouranos (heaven) and Gaia (earth). According to classical mythology Ouranos is both son and husband to gaia. Their offspring includes six sons and six daughters including the titans Cronus (time) and Oceanus, the daughters Themis (divine order) and Mnemosyne (remembrance). In Eichendorffs poetic picture, the erotic metaphor produces the night – the night as a reflection and dream of the love between heaven and earth. Eichendorff’s first stanza reads: “It was as if the heavens had silently kissed the earth, so that in the shimmer of flowers she must now dream about him”. The feminine earth (sie) must dream of the masculine heavens (ihm) in the “shimmer of the flowers”- this latter term suggests the light of night, the shimmer produced by the moon. To the cosmic metaphor of heaven and earth is added air in the next stanza (“The air blows through the fields”). This air is the breathing wind. Breath is the Greek psyche or soul. The air that blows through the fields is a symbol of the cosmic soul. To this symbolism is added that of water in an associative manner: The second line of the second stanza suggests the sea: “the gentle waving cornfield”. The stanza is completed with a reference to the human condition: “The forests murmured softly, so starry and clear was the night”. It is a remarkable tension which Eichendorff creates here: the starriness of the night alters – as we have said - our perception. The soft murmur of the forests is only perceived under certain conditions, namely, the clarity of the stars which heightens our attention to the sounds of the forests. The forests murmur because the night is starry! The third stanza commences with an “and” – this is important as it establishes a conclusion to the cosmic metaphors introduced so far. “And my soul unfolded widely its wings”- we recall the invocation of psyche as the air which blows through the fields. However, it is now the human soul which soars through the cosmic psyche and – the poem concludes “flies through the silent land as if it flies home”. A remarkable conclusion in many ways: the metaphorical, conditional atmosphere is maintained- “as if it flies home”. The homewards movement of the soul is achieved (in the night, the dream of the earth), as a result of the fundamental cosmo-ontological forces of the love between heaven and earth, ouranos and gaia, and the presence of psyche- a world-soul which shares its breath with the human breathing and which carries the human being homewards.⁸

The transcendence of Subjectivity: Freedom and Beauty

It is tempting to assume that the romantic condition is ultimately nihilistic: a denial of reality and presence in its yearning for that which it can never reach. However, this is not so, and there are significant affirmative characteristics in this spirit. One such

⁸ Schumann, Mondnacht, (Eichendorff), op 39, 5.

characteristic is the view that the human condition can be transcended with a steadfast pursuit of the ideal. The belief is this: In the intense contemplation of the ideal, the human condition will become transformed. The human soul can fly home- not just conditionally. We find this in a number of contexts: in the revolutionary tendencies of the romantic, in the insistence on human freedom which accompanies the romantic period and in the view that beauty, especially in music and art have transformative characteristics. It is a view advocated firstly by Friedrich Schiller and here as the conviction that we reach freedom through beauty. It is not a large step from here to the paradigmatic notion of the “art-religion”. Art (and in the case of the romantic poet Wackenroder in particular music) replaces religion as the revelation of- and encounter with the divine. This encounter brings transcendence of the human condition and it brings music into a central metaphysical position that is able to fundamentally transform our experience and existence.

Rueckert’s poem Mein Schoener Stern set to music by Schumann affirms this need for the presence of the ideal in the ideal world imploringly. The “beautiful star” must not be dulled by the “smoke in me” but instead to contribute to the transfiguration of this pollution into light. The poet implores the star: “Do not sink down to the earth” merely because that is were the human condition is. Rather, the pleading asks for an elevation of the human existence towards the ideal: “Lift me to the heavens, my beautiful star were you already are”.

Mein Schoener Stern! Ich bitte Dich
Oh lasse Du Dein heiteres Licht
Nicht trüben durch den Dampf in mir
Vielmehr den Dampf in mir zu Licht
Mein schoener Stern verklaeren hilft

Mein Schoener Stern, ich bitte Dich
Nicht senk herab zur Erde Dich
Weil Du mich noch hier unten siehst
Heb auf vielmehr zum Himmel mich
Mein Schoener Stern wo Du schon bist!⁹

The Romantic Concept of Freedom

I have briefly alluded above to the importance of freedom to the romantic spirit. This importance is evident in a number of contexts: the experience of an exposure of the individual to cosmic forces, the realisation that such an exposure brings dangers but also possibilities and the further engagement with transcendence on a variety of levels, including a yearning to transcend ordinary boundaries of political and personal authority. Freedom becomes a central romantic concept, in fact, the late 18th and early 19th century will be characterised by political revolutions, by movements which insist on the freedom of the individual and on the right towards autonomous determination. The French revolution in 1789 starts a process of political change which becomes unstoppable and moulds modernity into the 20th century. Its root is the notion of the enlightenment: the consciousness that human beings must think for themselves, that autonomy of the human spirit is fundamental and that the submission and obedience

⁹ Schumann, Mein Schoener Stern (Rueckert), op 101, No. 4

to absolute authority must be rejected in the human struggle for and with the absolute. The concern for freedom in romanticism arises from an extrapolation of an essentially critical exercise to establish the limits of human consciousness and knowledge. Through describing such limits the realm beyond those limits starts to exert the forces of a transformational relationship. Man becomes free and sceptical – but also lonely.¹⁰

Exoticism and Nationalism

Freedom – romantic freedom is a complex term. It incorporates personal, spiritual and of course political dimensions. In particular it implies a specific consciousness of the connection between the individual and its rootedness in history, in community and in its origins. Romantic freedom is a freedom that returns to origins- the origins within human subjectivity, the origins within history and the origin within national determination. That is a reason why romanticism also revives nationalism. Once awoken, the individual reflection and search for itself shines the light of consciousness into the origins, including the tribal origins of its existence. And a further aspect contributes to the emerging nationalism: the exotic, the distant and remote, the unusual and the eccentric become features of romanticism. Poets like Novalis even speak about a necessity to “romanticise” the sciences, human knowledge and human understanding in order to transcend ordinary understanding. What is meant by this is a transposition according to extreme, exotic and imagined principles of a subject matter – a transposition which brings out what is real in the first instance. The romantic develops a fascination for the eccentric, for the grotesque- the fascination for the gothic has already been mentioned.

The romantic longing for freedom returns the human subject towards origins- hence the 19th century’s concern for folk-music and for native simplicity. The romantic period resurrects an earthy simplicity, a musical communion with nature and a love for simplicity and a directness which is born from the keen awareness that the human subject is fallen from the tree of knowledge and seeks to return to the comfort of the all, of the earth and of nature. The combination of a yearning for transcendence and freedom, of the return towards earthiness, towards simplicity and of an awakening of the power of the human being to determine its own future increasingly projects an enhanced confidence in the political area which leads to increasing political emancipation. Wars of liberation and national affirmation become common features of the 19th century. National identities are constituted with a growing consciousness in belonging and in cultural identity which arises from an increasing familiarity with history and culture as a result of an exploding literature, poetry and fiction that documents identity and identifies historical and national characteristics. Music, too becomes the voice for national sentiment and national identity. It does so in a stylised sense and to an extent that turns an original struggle for national identity into a symbolic quest for a human homecoming¹¹.

The sacred and human emancipation

The political consciousness of the romantic age is naturally a result of the human being’s perception of himself in the realm of the cosmos and it is the result of a metaphysical intuition. The political concern for freedom and the political

¹⁰ Brahms, Scherzo from FAE Sonata

¹¹ Schubert, Hungarian Melody

participation of the individual is not merely an outcome of an emerging bourgeoisie but in the first instance a result of the established self-consciousness of the subjective individuality and autonomy. It follows a process of emancipation and a period known as enlightenment. But the spiritual roots of romanticism can be traced further towards a pietism that develops as a consequence of the reformation.

Lutheran reformation in particular commenced a process of emancipation from authority by emphasising the central importance of conscience as a moral and spiritual guide. Conscience represents the human connection with the divine and for the necessary autonomy of the person in determining his own moral and religious direction. Conscience, however, is only partially a “rational” and reflective capacity. In fact the central role of conscience is its connection with sentiment and with feeling. Thus conscience suggests that the core of the human, religious experience is not conscious reflection but religious feeling and sentiment. This sentiment takes on the form of sympathy, of a resonance with the divine, particularly relevant to the resurrection of a classical problem in the romantic age, namely the congruence between man and nature.

This congruence is a challenge which had resurfaced in a famous dispute towards the end of the 18th century when the philosophers Friedrich Jacobi and Moses Mendelsohn quarrelled about the relevance of Spinozism. The famous Spinoza-dispute highlighted the problem of enlightenment, namely, to what extent human reason can become a grounding force for human existence. For Spinoza, the 17th century thinker, truth and reason are ultimately self-evident and are to be grasped on their own terms. This makes them strictly speaking “groundless” and at the same time subject to a nihilistic challenge. Spinoza’s solution to this is to affirm an ontological identity of man, nature and the divine which is anchored in one substance- thus affirming the absolute status of truth and reason. However, any human connection with this substance occurs through “intuition”.

For the romantic spirit, this conception of the contingency of –particularly discursive- reason creates the necessity for a renewed grounding of human being – this time in feeling or faith. When the philosopher Jacobi published this conclusion in 1785 in the first edition of his famous Spinoza letters the reaction was immediately hostile: after all it turned against some of the most fundamental tenets of the enlightenment and its belief in the all pervasive, supreme guiding force of reason. A further consequence of the Spinoza-dispute was not only the famous affirmation of pantheism but in fact the affirmation of atheism as a valid outcome of Spinoza’s monistic conception of substance. Through its all-encompassing quality, Spinoza’s substance simply cannot be personal and will thus lack any attributes of deity that is demanded by traditional religion.

The Spinoza-dispute is only one example how the 19th century becomes famously a century which struggles with religion and Christianity. From its beginning, from the famous Spinoza-dispute between Jacobi and Mendelssohn about the question of Lessing’s alleged pantheism or atheism, through Schopenhauer’s famous pessimism to the end in Nietzsche’s famous dictum that “God is dead”. It is not surprising that

this struggle is not only seen and felt but heard in the music- in Schubert's music of all people.¹²

Rhetoric

We have said above that much of romanticism is conservative, even backward looking- despite the "storm and stress" (Sturm und Drang) that is emitted by it. Without its desire to draw roots in the beginnings of civilisation as they were known then, romanticism is not able to be understood adequately. One such root is the romantic orientation towards antiquity and classical Greece. We have alluded to this in the mythological foundations of "Mondnacht" above. The late 18th century saw a classical revival, especially in central Europe. Large amounts of classical Greek texts, classical dramas and philosophical works were translated- Schleiermacher and Schlegel form an ambitious project to translate Plato for example at the turn of the century. The German art historian Winckelmann studies and describes the attributes of classical beauty and art. Classical concepts commence to replace Christian dogma in the education of an increasing secular society. At the same time, classical civilisation becomes the focal point for romantic ideal and escape. The German poet Hoelderlin epitomises this in his projection of the German political struggle in his classically inspired and framed novel Hyperion.

With the return to classical roots of civilisation comes a renaissance of rhetoric. Rhetoric occupied an important position in the classical canon of learning. The ability to persuade, to use and create language in such a way as to reveal and conceal perhaps even at the same time was recognised as immensely important and as philosophically and metaphysically significant. The conviction which underpins this is the Platonic understanding that truth does not only reveal itself in what we say, but more importantly in what we do not- and perhaps cannot - say. This resonates strongly with the romantic sensibility which – as you recall- is informed by the experience of the evaporating absolute, of the ineffable. If indeed this is an authentic experience then any articulation of it, any communication of it presents us with a formidable challenge: We need to find ways to communicate a simultaneous, perhaps comprehensive condition of presence and absence.

Romantic sensibilities re-discover the significance of rhetoric and create literary genres which in themselves contain dynamic properties of disclosure and concealment. Dialogical series of letters start to appear. The aphorism becomes a romantic medium of choice for the early romantics as it does for the –arguably – last romantic Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Friedrich Schlegel, the author of the romantic cult-book Lucinde and a romantic poet and philosopher, an aphoristic, incomplete expression has the function of the seed that grows within the consciousness of the reader and thus is more complete than the attempt to say everything that can be said. What we say must necessarily stay incomplete, just as our existence is incomplete and left yearning- what is required from language is dialogue, development, communication – and that presupposes in the first instance a sympathetic ability to internalise and dialogise content of thinking, of feeling, of perception and of experience so that the individual's consciousness can reconstitute it in their own authentic consciousness. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the outstanding language scholar, describes this when he insists that language is not to be studied like

¹² Schubert Andante, from Sonata A minor D 385, (1816)

a dead insect but that it is at-work, an *energeia*, and consequently should be understood in a historical, generic description.

The incomplete, referential characteristics of language, its dialogical comportment quickly affirm themselves in music, which in itself is seen to be a “language of the emotions”. But what kind of language is this? The poet Goethe – upon hearing a Haydn String Quartet- comments perceptively that it was to him as if four distinguished people were holding a sophisticated conversation. The so-called classical period, Haydn, Mozart and then in its completion Beethoven become masters in the art of writing musical rhetoric. The early romantics take this idea forward and they start to romanticise it. Now, the emotionality of the rhetoric itself becomes a decisive moment until Richard Wagner was to dwell in it infinitely in his vision of a “eternal melody”.

Romantic Irony

In circumstances where the expressible cannot be expressed, either for reasons of an absent medium and of an ambiguous subject matter which does not allow an unequivocal, discursive grasp or for reasons of external restrictions, language and communication have to search for means to overcome such challenges. While the spirit of the romantic age kept soaring upwards and expanding towards new horizons, society and every-day circumstances lagged behind its most lofty aspirations. Political circumstances at the time mostly did not favour progressive attitudes: A brief period of empowerment suggested by the French revolution quickly turned to murderous oppression by a few, then to the Napoleonic age with its European wars followed by a restoration and restitution of authoritarian rule that implied anything but freedom for the individual in ordinary circumstances. We remember that Franz Schubert even found himself briefly arrested in 1819 on account of possible association with political progressives- the 19th century was in practice at odds with romantic aspirations. It did not know the ready freedom of association and submitted the written word regularly to censure.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that irony becomes a favoured mode of expression. Wherever the spirit of the people is prevented from expressing itself, it forges its own path through modes of satire and ambiguity. However, the roots of romantic irony are deeper. They are ultimately metaphysical. Man’s experience of the absolute as elusive implies that anything that is said about it is also false. Nietzsche will say: “Whoever thinks deeper, knows that he is always in the wrong”. Irony affords us a way around this dilemma by saying something and withholding another, by aiming at a listener reaction while implying something else, through the surprise of expectations and through the ambiguity of expression. Irony- to return to Novalis- romanticises the world. The romantics Lichtenberg, Schlegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche would become masterful ironists and their thinking would epitomise and elevate irony to a central role. The inability of reaching a final conclusion, of finding fulfilment in our yearning for the absolute would express itself in the “serious” irony of the romantic thinker.

In music too, the rhetorical brings forth irony. We do not need to think of obvious and even vulgar pranks by Mozart (as in the Sextet A musical joke for example). Beethoven discovers that subtleties of musical humour can sustain entire works- he

uses eccentricities and outrageous devices, suggestions followed by denials and is not afraid of surprises and further claims. Extraordinary harmonic progressions surprise, unexpected dynamic developments shock the listener. Beethoven becomes the inventor of romanticisation. Schubert, too, knew the effect of irony and humour-grotesque dynamic contrasts, rhythmic disturbance and exaggerated over- or understated development.¹³

The end of Romanticism

Romanticism is indeed a very particular phenomenon. It is tied to a particular time, to a particular historical constellation and to a particular existential experience with a very distinct metaphysical orientation. Depending on your point of view romanticism finishes with the late 19th century or recedes into the post World-War II era. Some commentators (eg. Safranski) suggest that romantic attitudes pervade such movements as the hippie- and student movement of the late 1960s and 70s and/or the environmentalists of the 80s and 90s. Be that as it may, for our purpose, romanticism as a pervading, all-encompassing attitude, as a Zeitgeist and as a cultural dimension is a phenomenon of the 19th century and finishes with Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner- the last romantics. Why can I say this so decisively? Nietzsche and Wagner – each in their own way- brought to an end the single-minded romantic focus on self-alienation. Nietzsche did so through his concepts of self-overcoming, of the overman and through a recognition that eternity is not something transcendent for which we yearn but something that is here and now in the moment and in our attitude to temporality as eternally recurring. Wagner brought romanticism to an end musically through his dramatic expansion of tonal ambiguity and artistically through the concept of redemption in musical and dramatic dissolution. The individual disappears, sinks into the night, becomes redeemed through love and united with the divine - redeemed through innocence. Tristan and Parsifal do not only transcend musical romanticism by pointing us towards modernity, they also transcend romanticism proper by dissolving and fulfilling two romantic contexts of fundamental importance: night and yearning.

We will close this journey through romanticism with a short reference to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche- a competent pianist, improviser and self-taught composer – was well aware that his composition lacked a “professional” and structured dimension. This notwithstanding, he writes to the conductor Hermann Levi:

“Perhaps there never was a philosopher who was in reality a musician to the degree that I am one. This does not mean that I could naturally be a completely failed musician”.

A failed musician – on what terms? We need to keep in mind that Nietzsche and his own music, which he wrote in his early years, are the creations of a rhapsodic consciousness and of a perception of music as a fundamental spiritual quality, essentially unstructured and amorphous – Dionysian- from which we only derive the definition of poetic content. He quotes Schiller:

¹³ Schubert, Duo A major, Scherzo

“Intuition is for me at first without clear and distinct object. This only forms itself later. A certain musical fundamental mood precedes it, which is then followed by the poetical idea”¹⁴

By affirming a fundamental mood as a basis for the emergence of defined ideas Nietzsche summarizes the fundamental aspect of romanticism: the concealed human consciousness of an ineffable connection with- and openness to an all-embracing, onto-cosmological truth from which all finite being ultimately takes its meaning and existence. Since such a consciousness is never fully disclosed and perhaps cannot be disclosed, romanticism fails and suffers. It is subject to an unfulfillable yearning- it becomes a consciousness haunted by demons.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, Eine Sylvesternacht- Musikalische Dichtung fuer Violine & Klavier.