

Historical Background

Defining the Romantic Period

The Romantic period is defined roughly as 1800-1900; the early Romantic period (which is the focus of the exam question), continued up to around 1850.

Musical eras do not change overnight; instead, there is a gradual evolution of ideas over a number of years, until a point is reached where the current cohort of composers and theorists consider music of an earlier age to be “old-fashioned” for one reason or another, and often wishes to distance itself from it. It is at this point that names of new eras emerge, that is, after they have finished rather than when they begin!

In fact, the term “Romantic” was invented before the term “Classical”. The Romantic era composers used the term “Classical” in a somewhat pejorative sense; for them it meant “dry, conventional and pedantic”.

Classical music (c.1750-1800) had been seen as something of a European *lingua franca*, with a **predictable** set of expectations and conventions regarding style, form, harmonic progressions and chords. Classical music had mostly been commissioned by royalty, aristocracy or the Church, and was therefore written to please whoever was paying for it.

Most composers were employed by wealthy patrons such as Kings, Dukes and Emperors, and were required to provide music on demand for the entertainment at courtly dances or other celebrations, or for religious services.

Romantic music was much more **individualised** and **experimental** because by this time the socio-economic environment in Europe had progressed enough to allow composers to become “self-employed”. Composers were now at liberty to write music to please themselves, although of course to make a decent living they would also need to please the fee-paying audiences!

Public concert halls began to emerge just before the end of the 18th century. In 1800 there were no public concert halls in London, however there were smaller, more intimate “concert rooms” such as those at Hanover Square. By 1875 there were around 375 public concert halls in the Greater London area. In addition, many musical societies sprang up, and informal at-home concerts amongst artistic-minded friends would have been commonplace.

“Romanticism” was a broad artistic movement in the 19th century, not confined to music, but also applicable to art and literature, poetry and ballet. The age was preoccupied with the portrayal of **human emotions**, especially extremes such as grief and passion, and these were often bound together with imagery from the natural, and even supernatural, worlds.

Music and art alike aimed to capture the essence of ideals such as nature’s beauty, or of mystery and magic. By contrast, some other works from this era are very nationalistic: many composers delved into the ancient folk music of their home countries searching for themes, dances or musical ideas which reflected their heritage.

Chromatic Chords

The harmonic vocabulary from the earlier Classical period was still the structural backbone during the Romantic era, but it is at this point in time that composers began to be a little more adventurous, experimenting with previously-untypical chords and progressions.

The chromatic chords most commonly found at this time are listed below. (NB: All of these chords should have been studied at Grade 8 (ABRSM or Trinity). It is worth revising if you are at all rusty!)

- Chords borrowed from the parallel minor key (e.g. minor iv, major \flat VI used in major keys)
- The Neapolitan 6th (\flat II, major)
- The Augmented 6ths (Italian, French and German)
- The diminished 7th (chromatic when used in a major key, but diatonic in a minor key)
- Secondary dominants (e.g. V7 of IV etc.)

C major:

iv \flat VI \flat II (N6) It6 Fr6 Ger6 vii°7 V7/IV

As well as these, literally **any** chromatic chord might be used for added interest, and chromatic chords often feature heavily in this style of music, particularly as decorative passing or auxiliary chords (which therefore do not disrupt the overall “standard” progression).

lb vii°7/IV V IV lb+ IV

passing chord auxiliary chord

The most important point to grasp about chromatics is that the movement from chord-to-chord or note-to-note was virtually always by the **shortest possible route** in terms of voice-leading. Look again at the examples above and notice that:

- notes common to two adjacent chords are kept in the same voice (either held or repeated)
- where pitches change, semitone or tone steps are kept in the same voice
- larger leaps (e.g. 3rds or 4ths) are unlikely to work well.

Burgmüller: Op.100/19 – Score

Andantino ♩ = 100

p religioso

8

p *dim. e rit.*

16 *pp* *p* [a tempo]

21

25 *dim. e poco rit.* *pp*