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THE BIRTH OF ROMANTICISM OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF MUSIC

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Abstract

The German Romantic era (late 18th to mid-19th century) marked a transformative period in intellectual and artistic expression, challenging Enlightenment rationalism with a focus on emotion, individualism, and the sublime. This paper examines how Romantic idealism, shaped by philosophers such as Goethe, Schiller, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, influenced the development of music as both an aesthetic and philosophical pursuit. The Romantic belief in transcendence and the Absolute found an ideal medium in music, which composers like Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Schumann used to explore spiritual longing, nature, personal struggle, and the ineffable. This study highlights how musicology evolved under Romantic thought, positioning music as a conduit for profound emotional and philosophical expression. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that Romantic music was not merely an artistic movement but an intellectual endeavour, deeply intertwined with the era's broader philosophical and cultural transformations.

Keywords: German Romanticism, Romantic Idealism, Philosophy of Music, Transcendence in Music, Beethoven and Romanticism, Hegel and Aesthetics, Musicology and Emotion.

The German Romantic era, from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries, marked a significant shift in intellectual, philosophical, and artistic expression. Romanticism emerged as a response to the Enlightenment, challenging its emphasis on reason and empirical knowledge in favour of emotion, intuition, individualism, and the sublime. Central to German Romanticism was an idealistic philosophy that deeply influenced music, transforming it into a powerful medium for expressing the inner workings of the human soul, spiritual yearning, and the search for transcendence. Composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and

Richard Wagner crafted music that mirrored and embodied these romantic ideals. This paper explores how German Romantic idealism influenced musicology, examining how philosophical movements shaped the development of music, its aesthetic principles, and its role in society.

To grasp how musicology was shaped by Romantic idealism, it is important to first delve into the core philosophical tenets of German Romanticism. The intellectual climate of the period was enriched by figures like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Johann

Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose ideas underscored the autonomy of the individual, the importance of emotion and subjectivity, and the pursuit of the absolute. Romanticism placed great emphasis on the emotional and subjective experience of the individual, in stark contrast to the Enlightenment's reliance on rationality and objectivity. This focus on the inner emotional world found a natural ally in music, a medium capable of transcending verbal language to communicate deep personal expression and feeling. Romantic thinkers and artists were deeply captivated by nature, often viewing it as a reflection of the divine. The concept of the sublime—a profound emotional response to awe-inspiring beauty or terror—was central to romantic aesthetics. Music, in its capacity to stir powerful emotions, was uniquely suited to evoke the sublime and connect the listener to something greater than themselves.

In the works of Schelling and Hegel, German Romanticism proposed the idea of the absolute, a view that reality is not merely a collection of facts but an interconnected, spiritual whole. Music, with its abstract nature, became an ideal medium to express this transcendental idealism. Composers sought to convey unity and the quest for the infinite through sound, exploring the inexpressible through their compositions. Romanticism also turned inward, exploring the irrational and mysterious aspects of the human psyche, such as dreams and the unconscious. Composers harnessed music to express these elusive realms, capturing moods and emotions that words could not fully articulate. Hegel believed that art, including music, was a manifestation of the Absolute Spirit—the ultimate, all-encompassing reality that transcends individual consciousness. For Hegel, the Absolute is not static but is revealed through the unfolding of history and culture. Art, as a form of human expression, is a means through which the Absolute becomes visible and audible to human beings.

In Hegel's system, music occupies a unique position in the hierarchy of the arts. While Hegel argued that all art represents the unfolding of the spirit, he believed that music was particularly expressive of the inner, subjective, and emotional

life of the human spirit. Music, in Hegel's view, embodies the inner soul of human experience in a way that is less mediated by form or external representation than visual arts or literature. In this sense, music is a direct expression of human subjectivity and the feelings and emotions that define the individual's spiritual journey.

Music was especially well-suited to communicating the ideas of German Romanticism because of its abstract and emotional characteristics. Romantic composers explored new emotional and spiritual facets while embracing subjectivity and individual expression, moving beyond the regimented forms of classical music. An important contributor to the development of Romantic music was Ludwig van Beethoven. The intellectual changes of the era are reflected in his transition from classical to romantic forms, especially in his later string quartets and symphonies. A fundamental element of German Romanticism, Beethoven's music glorified the individual's struggle and achievement. His *Eroica* Symphony (Symphony No. 3) represents personal struggle and triumph by depicting the path of a person overcoming adversity. The choral conclusion of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony perfectly embodies the Romantic ideal of transcendent human values and unity. In addition to expressing creative ideas, his works often carried philosophical undertones about spiritual ambition and human potential.

The music of Felix Mendelssohn and Franz Schubert reflects the influence of nature. Many people consider Schubert's Symphony No. 9 in C Major ("The Great") to be a musical representation of nature, with its wide shapes and sweeping melodies that conjure up huge, wild landscapes. Schubert's lieder, particularly those paired with Goethe's poetry, reveal a close relationship between the natural world and human emotions. Inspired by his visit to a Scottish cave, Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture* (Fingal's Cave) encapsulates the overwhelming majesty of nature. Through orchestral textures that allude to both beauty and the unknown, the composition expresses the wonder and mystery of the natural world. Mendelssohn and other Romantic artists saw music

as a reflection of a greater philosophical truth rather than just a means of expressing oneself.

Richard Wagner stands out as the composer most associated with the ideals of German Romanticism, particularly through his concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art). Wagner's operas, such as The Ring Cycle, sought to unify all art forms—music, poetry, drama, and visual spectacle—into a single immersive experience. His music was driven by the Romantic belief in the absolute and the idea that art could reveal profound spiritual truths.

Wagner's operas explore themes of fate, heroism, and redemption, embodying the tension between individual desires and cosmic forces. For Wagner, music was more than just an artistic medium; it was a means to explore the most fundamental aspects of human existence, tapping into the Romantic belief that art could access a transcendent reality. Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk—a "total work of art"—was one of the defining aspects of his Romanticism. Unlike traditional operas of the time, which separated music, drama, and visual elements, Wagner aimed to unify all artistic forms—music, poetry, drama, and visual spectacle—into a cohesive whole. For Wagner, the Gesamtkunstwerk was a means of creating a transcendental experience that could convey deeper spiritual and philosophical truths. His operas, such as The Ring Cycle and Tristan und Isolde, are monumental works in which every element, from orchestration to staging, serves to enhance the emotional and philosophical themes of the piece.

Robert Schumann's music often reflects the Romantic emphasis on individual expression and emotional depth. Works like *Carnaval* and *Kinderszenen* delve into complex emotional landscapes, revealing the inner psychological world of the composer. Schumann's symphonic works, such as *Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major* ("Rhenish"), celebrate personal expression while also engaging with larger themes of nature and the human spirit. His song cycles, such as *Dichterliebe* and *Liederkreis*, demonstrate how German Romantic composers used the voice to explore intricate emotional terrains, ranging from love and despair to spiritual

transcendence. At the heart of Schumann's music is his exploration of individual emotions and psychological depth. Romanticism placed great emphasis on personal feeling, and Schumann's music embodies this through his introspective and often complex emotional landscapes. His compositions are deeply personal, reflecting his own emotional experiences, struggles, and aspirations. His works express a range of moods—from joyful exuberance to profound melancholy—capturing the multifaceted nature of human emotions.

The study of musicology within the context of German Romanticism highlights the close relationship between music and philosophical thought. In the 19th century, music became a subject of intellectual inquiry, with critics and scholars examining its role in articulating emotional and spiritual aspects of the human condition. Romantic idealism provided a framework for interpreting music not only as formal art but also to express deeper existential truths. Philosophical questions surrounding the tension between the individual and the collective, the nature of transcendence, and the role of the artist continue to influence contemporary music and musicology. The Romantic ideal of music as a gateway to the sublime and transcendent remains central to our understanding of its philosophical and emotional dimensions.

German Romantic idealism had a profound impact on the development of music in the 19th century. Composers like Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Schumann used their music to express the Romantic ideals of individualism, emotional depth, spiritual longing, and the search for the absolute. Music, with its unique ability to communicate the ineffable, became a central vehicle for exploring these ideals, deeply entwining it with the cultural and philosophical movements of the time. The study of musicology in this context provides invaluable insights into how music not only reflected but also contributed to the Romantic ideals that continue to shape contemporary music and philosophy.

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