**Chapter 8**

**Program Music**

During the Romantic era composers found that audiences increasingly wanted to hear music that was in some manner, descriptive. The result was a great increase in what we call program music,which sets a mood or scene, depicts an emotion, or tells a story. By the mid-1800s program music was the most popular type of orchestral music and composers began to adjust the form of the symphony, and in some cases abandon it completely, to create this type of music.

Program music is suggestive music. It helps you imagine a scene or a story while it plays. In fact, many composers wrote music based upon a particular story, or provided a story line guide as part of the program so that the listener could follow along with the story as he heard the music. Poetry and literature were very important in the Romantic era and this may be the reason why people wanted their music to also be descriptive in nature. Much program music was written for either full symphony orchestra or solo piano in the Romantic era.

Composers developed four forms of program music in the Romantic era; the symphonic poem, the program symphony, incidental music, and the concert overture. Of these the two most important are the symphonic poem and the program symphony.

The program symphony is similar to the Classical era work in that it has multiple movements—but, usually more than four. And, these movements often relate to a particular part of a story. Often one motif runs throughout the movements helping to bind them together as a unit. One composer of this type of music was Hector Berlioz. Berlioz lived from 1803–1869 and was French. His work *Symphonie Fantastique,* studied in Listening Guide 8-1, is an excellent example of the program symphony. He was one of the great innovators on how to use and combine instruments to create unique timbres. He was very interested in and used in his works most of the experimental and new instruments of his time. Berlioz was a true Romantic spirit; passionate, expressive, filled with inner fire. His music is the same, employing large dynamic ranges, many changes of tempo, long melodies, and rhythmic drive. His use of different instruments filled his works with new timbres. Berlioz was the best-known French composer of his day and wrote a good deal of nationalistic music, much for French ceremonies and often employing huge forces of instrumentalists and vocalists.

The symphonic poem is usually a one-movement, somewhat longish piece for orchestra. It has no standard inner form. The length of the work is broken up by frequent changes in tempo and style, which go along with the sections of the story it depicts. Composers who used this form included the impressionists, studied in Chapter 9. In the late Romantic era Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss were composers who developed this form of program music.

Liszt was, perhaps, the world’s greatest pianist and showman of his day. He lived from 1811 to 1886, in much the style of a modern-day rock star. However, he desired to be known as a composer and accepted a position as court composer in Weimar, Germany where he wrote a good deal of orchestral music, including symphonic poems and program symphonies. The end of his life was spent in Rome after having taken holy orders. Here he focused his compositional talents on oratorios and masses.

Two other composers of the symphonic poem (sometimes called the “tone poem”) important in the late Romantic era were Richard Strauss and Paul Dukas. Strauss was the son of a well-known Viennese horn player and much of his life was spent in Vienna. Strauss lived from 1864 to 1949 and the end of his life was colored by his association with the World War II era Nazi party. Strauss was a master of orchestration, able to create new timbres within his orchestral works.

Paul Dukas was French and lived from 1865 to 1935. While he was a prolific composer he is best-known for his symphonic poem “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” This tone poem was further popularized in the 1940 Disney film *Fantasia.*

Incidental music is music written to accompany a play. For the most part, this music is used prior to beginnings of acts or during scene changes. Because it must match the style of the play itself, it is considered program music. Felix Mendelssohn, who we met in the chapter on the concerto, was a composer of incidental music. His music for Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is an example of incidental music. Beethoven, Georges Bizet, and Edvard Grieg all wrote incidental music that is still performed in the concert hall today. The best of incidental music has been reworked by composers into concert suites and is performed regularly in the concert hall.

A concert overture is a work often written about a play, sometimes even taking its title. The overture is a one-movement, rather brief work for orchestra that sets the mood or depicts the various sections of a literary work. The form grew from the tradition of performing overtures from operas at concerts. It is usually in two parts, often a slow introduction followed by a faster tempo sonata form. One of the most famous of all concert overtures is the *1812 Overture* by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Nationalism in music was important in the Romantic era. Composers wrote music that incorporated folk tunes and other musical devices associated with particular countries. In some countries the music became a political tool. Nationalism in music was heard in symphonic music, ballets, operas, and other forms during the Romantic era.