

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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John Field

Nocturne

Jan Ladislav Dussek

Václav Jan Tomášek

## PRIVATE MUSIC

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

With its belief in the authenticity of the solitary “I,” romanticism fostered a great burst of somewhat paradoxically “private” art. The paradox in the case of music, of course, is implicit in the act of publication or performance—a public display of privacy. But of course making one's private soul known to the world was, like all art, an act of representation, not to be confused (except to the extent that the confusion served art's purposes) with “reality.” The representation of private lives in published biographies, autobiographies, and diaries (genres that boomed during the nineteenth century) was a reflection of—and an example to—the aspirations of middle-class “self-made men” and their families, who were the primary consumers of this new romantic art.

And consumption took place, increasingly, at home. The industrial revolution affected the arts by facilitating their dissemination and domestic use. Cheap editions of books for home reading, addressed to a much enlarged urban (and newly literate) public, and of music for home singing and playing, created new opportunities for authors and composers, and lent new prestige and popularity to the genres that were best suited to private consumption. In literature, this meant a new emphasis on lyric poetry—little poems that vividly expressed or evoked moods and stimulated reverie, encouraging psychological withdrawal from the world and contemplation of one's “inwardness” (from the German, *Innigkeit* or *Innerlichkeit*).

In music, where domestic consumption was further stimulated by the mass-production of pianos and other household instruments, the “inward” spirit found expression in actual settings of lyric poems or “lyrics” in an intimate style that did not require vocal virtuosity, and with manageable piano accompaniments that were often adaptable to guitar, harp, or other parlor instruments. Even more private and *innig* were the instrumental equivalents of lyric poems—short piano pieces, sometimes actually called “Songs Without Words,” that evoked moods and stimulated reverie, according to romantic thinking, with even more unfettered immediacy than words themselves could do, whether read silently or sung aloud.

The closeness of the poetic and musical genres both in content and in effect is evident in their very names: a lyric poem, after all, means a “verbal song”; and as we are about to see, the early pieces for the parlor piano were often given names that evoked poetic genres. The closeness can also be savored by comparing the ways in which poets and musicians were typically described. The critic and essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830) wrote marvelously of his contemporary the poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850), who introduced romantic poetry to England with a volume called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), observing that “it is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe. He lives in the busy solitude of his own heart.”<sup>6</sup> And here is Franz Liszt's somewhat wordier description of another contemporary (and near countryman) of Hazlitt's and Wordsworth's, the Irish pianist-composer John Field (1782–1837):

In writing as in playing, Field was intent only on expressing his inner feelings for his own gratification. It would be impossible to imagine a more unabashed indifference to the public than his. He enchanted his public without knowing it or wishing it. His nearly immobile posture, his expressionless face did not attract notice. His glance did not rove.... It was not hard to see that he was his own chief audience. His calm was all but sleepy, and could be neither disturbed nor affected by the thoughts of the impression his playing made on his hearers.... Art was for him in itself sufficient reward for any sacrifice.... Field sang for himself alone.<sup>7</sup>

Notice that in the case of a performing art, a new level of representation comes into play: the artist's representation of himself to his audience. Field's meticulously crafted public impersonation of solitude (described by Liszt, another great pianist, in collusion) leaves no doubt that a state of "artistic solitude" had come to represent artistic truth. It was the way a public performer in the heyday of romanticism "did sincerity." And not only sincerity: disinterestedness had also to be simulated in the name of art "for art's sake." Also very telling is the name of the pianistic genre in which Field specialized, the genre in which Liszt had caught him, as it were, in the act of performing: it was called the nocturne—a French adaptation of the Italian *notturmo*, "night piece." The word itself was not new to music: Haydn, Mozart, and their contemporaries wrote many *notturmi*. One, by Mozart, is famous as *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, "a little night music," using the German equivalent of the term. But in the eighteenth century the *notturmo*, like the similarly named *serenata* ("evening music"), was a social genre: music for soirées, evening parties. And it was an eminently sociable music: frothy, witty, lighthearted—music to party by.

The word and its attendant music, along with the very idea of the night, had changed enormously in their connotations by the time Field wrote his Nocturnes. In his hands they became the very emblem of solitude and inwardness. To quote Liszt: "from their very first sounds we are immediately transported to those hours when the soul, released from the day's burdens, retreats into itself and soars aloft to secret regions of star and sky." Such a music is not without precedent: C. P. E. Bach (1714–88) had written many Fantasias for the tiny-voiced clavichord, midnight pieces by necessity that shared features with Field's Nocturnes as Liszt described them, especially as concerned the relationship between form and expression. Field's Nocturnes, like Bach's Fantasias, had a similar purpose: "to infuse the keyboard with feelings and dreams," to quote Liszt,

and to free music from the constraints imposed until then by regular and "official" form. Before him they all had of necessity to be cast as sonatas or rondos or some such. Field, contrariwise, introduced a genre that belonged to none of these existing categories, in which feeling and melody reigned supreme, and which moved freely, without the fetters and constraints of any preconceived form.

Again this is not entirely true, historically. Artists have always loved to rewrite history to enhance their self-image. Beethoven himself, the past master of "official" form, wrote intimate pieces for the piano. Significantly, though, he called them *bagatelles*, "trifles," pieces of no account. Now they were important. And Liszt's twin emphasis on simulated spontaneity and meticulously crafted naturalness is another reminder that C. P. E. Bach's fantasy style, known in its day as *Empfindsamkeit* ("hyperexpressivity"), was a harbinger of the later romanticism. In view of their geographical origin (Berlin) and their social (or rather, asocial) use, C. P. E. Bach's fantasias could be called bourgeois romanticism's musical debut.

Next in line after Bach as progenitor of the romantic "piano lyric" (often called *Characterstück* in German or *Pièce caractéristique* in French) were a pair of Bohemians, Jan Ladislav Dussek (or Dusik, 1760–1812) and Václav Jan Tomášek (1774–1850). Dussek, an actual pupil of C. P. E. Bach, was like Field a peripatetic virtuoso, whose career took him from the Netherlands to Germany to Russia to Paris and finally to London, where he became a regular participant in Salomon's concerts, appearing in 1792 alongside Haydn. In addition to his "official" sonatas and rondos and such, Dussek composed many pieces in a "pathetic" (pathos-filled) improvisatory style that particularly thrilled his audiences.

One of them, *The Sufferings of the Queen of France* (1793), dedicated to the memory of the recently beheaded Marie Antoinette (a former patron of Dussek's), was a runaway best-seller, appearing till the end of the decade in many editions. A fairly lengthy composition in ten sections, each with a descriptive heading, it is actually a rather old-fashioned piece in concept. It has forebears going back beyond C. P. E. Bach to his father Johann Sebastian's *Capriccio on the Departure of His Beloved Brother*, and even further back to Johann Kuhnau's so-called Biblical Sonatas (*Musicalische Vorstellung einiger biblischer Historien* or "Musical representations of several stories from the Bible"), which when published in 1700 carried a preface from the author maintaining even then that illustrative music as such was nothing new.

Kuhnau cited one especially relevant forerunner, Johann Jakob Froberger and his famous harpsichord *Tombeau* or "funeral oration" on the death of the lutenist Blancheroche, composed in Paris in 1657. Its concluding page (Ex. 2-1a) contains a graphic illustration of its dedicatee's accidental death by falling down a flight of stairs. Compare Dussek's guillotine (Ex. 2-1b), which intrudes (in C major) upon the Queen's last prayer (in E major). This harmonic relationship—the "flat submediant"—will be this chapter's *idée fixe*.

The only thing that could be called "romantic" here is the extravagance of the effect. Descriptive (or "programmatic") music as such does not necessarily meet romantic criteria of inwardness or subjectivity. Indeed, explicit labeling, as Rousseau had pointed out long before, works against the romantic ideal (or as a romantic might say, against the nature of music) by guiding and

limiting the listener's reaction. Literalism also runs a great risk of bathos: can you suppress a grin at the sight of the performance direction (*devotamente*, “devoutly”) that accompanies the notation of the Queen's prayer? (It is prefigured with even greater unintended comedy when “The Sentence of Death,” marked *allegro con furia*, is followed by “Her Resignation to Her Fate,” marked *adagio innocente*.) The somewhat younger Tomášek, who spent his entire career as a freelance performer and pedagogue in Prague, was unlike Dussek a self-confessed romantic who opposed the music of the fashionable concert stage (including Dussek's), solemnly declaring that “truth is art's only crown.”<sup>8</sup> His character pieces contrast tellingly with Dussek's. Where Dussek's were explicitly illustrative, with titles to explain and justify the sometimes bizarre effects and the “formlessness” of the music, Tomášek used titles derived from classical poetic genres that did not disclose specific content but rather advertised a general “lyric” (and, from a romantic point of view, a more subjective and genuine) expressivity. Dussek represented Marie Antoinette's joys and sufferings, Tomášek his own—and, by implication, ours.



ex. 2-1a Johann Jakob Froberger, end of *Tombeau de M. Blancheroche*

Molto Adagio

*p*

Devotamente

6

*pmo*

*rf*

11

*rf*

3

16

*rf*

3

*pp*

20

The Guillotine drops

*ff*

*pmo*

Slentando

ex. 2-1b Jan Ladislav Dussek, *The Sufferings of the Queen of France*, no. 9

Tomášek's main genre, associated with him as the nocturne is associated with Field, was the *eclogue*—a pastoral poem (literally a dialogue of shepherds) and one of the Roman poet Virgil's favorite forms. In Tomášek's hands it was a gentle lyric, usually cast in a simple scherzo-and-trio form, that occasionally used stylized evocations of rustic music (bagpipe drones, “horn fifths,” and so on) to evoke an air of “naivety,” of emotional innocence. (Despite the claims of the composer's later countrymen, responding to a later political agenda, these folkish effects should not be confused with Czech nationalism.) For more intense and personal expression, Tomášek invoked the ancient genres of rhapsody and dithyramb. The former comes from the Greek *rhapsoidos*, meaning a singer of epic tales, and betokens a dramatic recitation. Dithyramb, originally a song or hymn to the God Dionysus, meant for Tomášek and later composers a particularly impassioned utterance.

The Eclogues were published in seven sets of six between 1807 and 1819. The first set, op. 35, dedicated by Tomášek “à son ami J. Field,” preceded the appearance of Field's first nocturnes by five years. Some of Field's nocturnes were written earlier, however. They circulated before publication, often with titles like Serenade, Romance, or (perhaps significantly) Pastorale. In any case, the dreamy atmosphere associated with Field, and through him with the whole repertory of domestic romanticism, certainly pervades the Eclogues of his Bohemian friend.

In the very first one (op. 35, no. 1; Ex. 2-2), that atmosphere is conjured up by a harmonic wash for which the liberal use of the sustaining pedal, while not explicitly indicated in the notation, is absolutely required. Romantic piano music was preeminently “pedal music.” It is unimaginable without the sonorous “fill” that the pedal was designed to provide, and which inspired composers and performers with many of their most evocatively “pianistic” effects.

The image shows a page of musical notation for the beginning of Václav Jan Tomášek's *Eclogue*, Op. 35, no. 1. The tempo is marked "Allegro ma non troppo" with a quarter note equal to 120. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano introduction. The notation includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *fp*, and *f*. The music is characterized by dense chordal textures and frequent use of the flat submediant harmony.

**ex. 2-2 Václav Jan Tomášek, *Eclogue*, Op. 35, no. 1, beginning**

Equally important to the atmosphere of naive sincerity, inwardness, and “truth” are the frequent dips into “flat submediant” harmonies, like the sudden excursion to  $D \flat$  major in measure 15 (  $\flat VI$  with respect not to the original tonic but to the local one, F). This is the romantic color-chord par excellence. An important precedent for its expressive use was the Cavatina from Beethoven's  $B \flat$ -major Quartet, op. 130, where the flat submediant harmony introduces the unforgettable *beklemmt* (“agonized”) passage for the first violin, in which the imitation of a broken voice is combined with the chromatically darkened harmony to endow the passage with the authenticity (that is, the simulacrum) of direct “heart to heart” communication.

Modulation to the flat submediant became a convention signaling that the music that followed it was just such a communication. It marked a kind of boundary between inner and outer experience and its sounding came to signify the crossing of that edge, endowing the music on the other side with an uncanny aura. The new dimension that these harmonies contributed to romantic

music can best be compared, perhaps, to the goal that the great romantic diarist Henri Amiel (1821–81) set himself in his *Journal intime*: “Instead of living on the surface, one takes possession of one's inwardness.” The sounding of the flat submediant meant taking that plunge beneath the surface.

Tomášek used the flat submediant relation most tellingly in his dithyrambs, the impassioned “Dionysian hymns” in which he gave expression to his most inward moods. In these expansive pieces, the composer no longer sought to project naivety. Their emotional pressure is high, their range of expression more copious and complex. They are stretched, so to speak, on a broad ternary frame, in which a nobly lyrical—indeed operatic—middle section is flanked by turbulence on either side, implying an island of inward repose amid life's turmoil. In two of the three dithyrambs in his op. 65 (1818), Tomášek cast the middle section in the flat submediant key, approached in both instances from the original dominant via a deceptive cadence. Ex. 2-3 shows how C major impinges on E major in no. 2; no. 3 plunges from F into D ♭. (The first dithyramb is in C minor, and its middle section is cast in the customary key of the relative major, also a mediant relationship but an expected one, and therefore not “marked” as “characteristically” expressive.)

## Notes:

(6) William Hazlitt, “Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's poem, “The Excursion,” in *The Round Table*” (1817).

(7) Franz Liszt, “John Field and His Nocturnes”; for the full text (translated from L. Ramann [ed.], *Gesammelte Schriften von Franz Liszt*, Vol. IV [Leipzig, 1882]), see P. Weiss and R. Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Schirmer, 2008), pp. 312–13.

(8) Quoted in Adrienne Simpson, “Tomášek,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. XIX (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 33.



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