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The History of Music

Over the years music in the Western world has been changing constantly, and the music of today is very different from the music people made 300 years ago.

To help you understand how this music has developed, each of the books in this series will describe a different musical period. For each era, we will show you the way the people of the time lived, and the kinds of art and architecture that are typical of the period. We will discuss the important musical characteristics and describe the lives and contributions of the major composers.

The history of Western music is usually divided into six broad time periods:

Middle Ages	Renaissance	Baroque	Classical	Romantic	Contemporary
1450	1600	1750	1825	1900	

This book presents the Romantic period.

The Romantic Period

The end of the Romantic era in music is marked by the beginning of the twentieth century and the arrival of modernism, but its beginning is not nearly as clear. There is a certain amount of overlap between the Classical and Romantic periods. Beethoven is often seen as both the last important Classical composer and the first Romantic, since his career spanned the height of the Classical period and the beginnings of the new movement, and his work moved beyond the Classical tradition. Music historians usually set the beginning of the period more or less in the 1820s.

The term «Romantic» is drawn from literature, where the movement began much earlier, in the eighteenth century. For us the word refers to love, but love was only one of the themes that interested Romantic writers. The Romantics revolted against the standards of the previous period, like symmetry, simplicity, emotional restraint and perfection in form. Instead they sought personal fulfilment, individualism and the freedom to express their emotions at the expense of perfection of form.

Music at home



A typical nineteenth-century evening at home

The increased number of middle class music consumers also meant an increase in music-making at home. Piano factories prospered in Europe and the United States, and new technology made the instrument cheaper and more available. By the end of the nineteenth century, pianos were a standard feature in most middle-class homes. Printed sheet music became readily available, and an evening of amateur music-making in the home was a common occurrence. In fact, the evening

was not complete in many middle-class homes unless family or guests performed a song, gave a piano recital, or played some chamber music together.



A couple playing piano in a typical middle-class home. Note the piles of sheet music on the stand beside the piano.



A young girl playing for her own enjoyment



Marguerite Gachet at the Piano, Vincent van Gogh, 1890