

The orchestra



Berlioz's fascination with large orchestras with huge brass sections is satirized in this drawing. See the audience covering from all the noise.

The orchestra got much bigger during the Romantic period, moving from an average of 30 or 40 players to 70 or more. Some Romantic compositions even call for an orchestra with more than 100 musicians. In addition to the possibility of more variation in tone colour, a bigger orchestra could produce a much larger sound. Also, major technical developments in the nineteenth century meant that the instruments themselves could play louder and carry farther. Where the dynamics in the Classical orchestra varied between soft and loud, the Romantic orchestra became capable of major changes in volume. It could move easily from whispers to roars and produce the dramatic sound quality that Romantic composers wanted to achieve.

Technical advances made instruments more responsive too, so that composers could write music for them that could not have been played in the Classical period. Valves were added to brass instruments, which meant that the trumpet players, for instance, could more easily play quick runs of notes, which allowed them to play a starring role more often, instead of always supporting the other instruments. Trombones and tubas were added so that the brass section could play by itself as an ensemble within the orchestra. New woodwind instruments like the piccolo, the bass clarinet and the English horn added different sound colours to the orchestra and became potential new solo material. New wind instruments were developed, like the tuba and the saxophone.

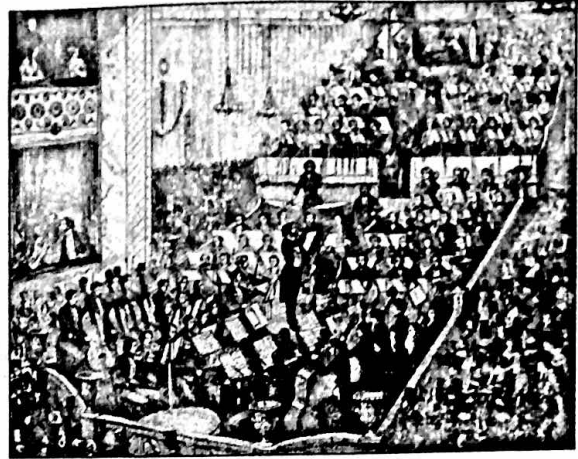


This painting by Degas of a ballet performance shows a slice of the stage from the perspective of the orchestra pit. We can see some of the newly improved woodwind instruments.

The string sections increased in size, and composers began to write differently for them so that they could contribute something during the loud parts. Often they were given fast scales or arpeggios to play while the wind instruments took the lead. The percussion section expanded to include a bass drum, a snare drum, cymbals, and other more exotic percussion instruments like castanets or gongs, to add a particular sound. In Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, small cannon are fired to simulate the sounds of battle.

The orchestra

As the orchestra became more complex, composers began to develop skill in mixing together all the different colours of sound. This blending of different instrumental sounds is called orchestration, and many Romantic composers became superb orchestrators, mixing the tone colours available to them as sensitively as artists mix paint colours, and putting together combinations that would conjure up particular moods or evoke certain emotions.



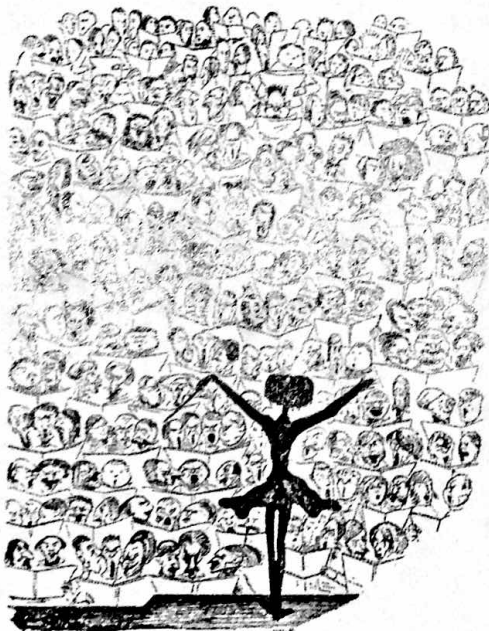
This engraving shows a large orchestra giving a concert at the Covent Garden Theatre in London in 1846

THE TYPICAL ROMANTIC ORCHESTRA

Strings	Woodwinds	Brass	Percussion
first violins (12-16)	2 flutes	4 French horns	3 tympani
second violins (12-16)	1 piccolo	2 trumpets	bass drum
violas (3-12)	2 oboes	3 trombones	snare drum
cellos (8-12)	1 English horn	1 tuba	cymbals
bass viols (6-10)	2 clarinets		triangle
2 harps	1 high clarinet		tubular bells
	1 bass clarinet		piano
	2 bassoons		
	1 contrabassoon		

The conductor

As orchestras and the sounds they made grew more complex, it became necessary to have someone to control them. In previous eras, musicians had generally followed the first violin or the harpsichord player, but now conductors began to emerge. Composers usually conducted their own works, but there were also musicians who conducted other people's music and travelled around Europe and North America on concert tours. One of the first musicians to specialize in conducting was Hans von Bülow of the Munich Opera.



The cartoonist who drew this picture of Berlioz conducting a huge choir did not show very many of the choir members looking pleased with the way things were going!



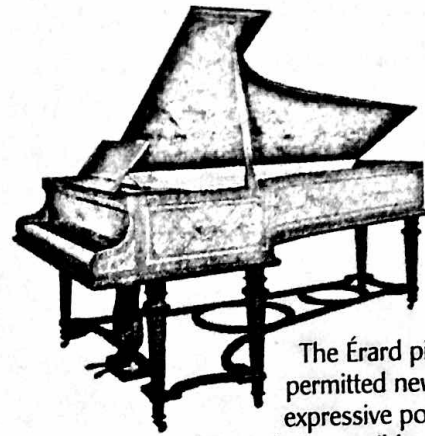
German opera composer Carl Maria von Weber is drawn conducting with a tightly rolled up piece of paper, perhaps a piece of music.

The piano

Towards the end of the Classical period, pianos began to be built with iron bracing, which strengthened the frame tremendously. Heavier strings and more tension as well as heavier hammers could be used, so the sound was louder and more sustained. By 1830, the standard five-octave pianoforte had been expanded to seven octaves. The French piano builder Érard developed the double escapement which allows the hammer to fall back as soon as the string is struck. This enabled performers to play much more rapidly and to repeat notes quickly. Steinway and Sons in New York in 1859 began to build overstrung grand pianos, in which the strings crossed over each other, producing a concert instrument with a big, brilliant sound suitable for the virtuoso pianists that Romantic audiences loved to hear.

Pianos had several roles to play. They were in great demand at home: music was a popular pastime, and a great deal of music was written for the amateur to play. The piano was also the most common accompanying instrument for songs. Piano concertos were very popular, and composers continued to write chamber music for the piano trio, a chamber group made up of piano, violin and cello.

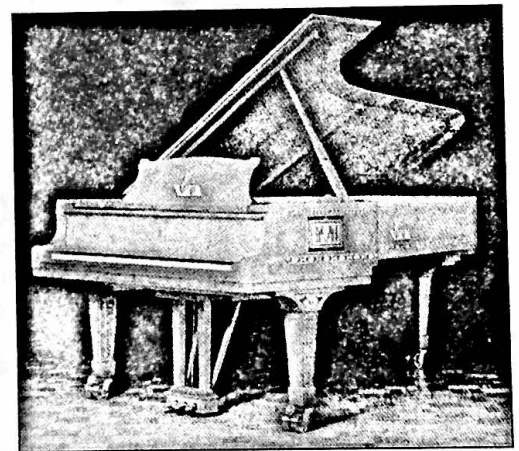
Orchestral and other kinds of music were often transcribed for piano. Usually a symphony transcription would be made for piano duet, two people playing side by side on one piano, making it possible to approach the complexity of a score originally intended for a full orchestra. Miniature compositions for piano were also popular. They were intended to portray a single emotion or convey a mood intensely but briefly. Some were so difficult only a virtuoso could perform them, others were within reach of beginning students. Chopin called many of his miniature works nocturnes or études, while Robert Schumann often gave his fanciful names, like "The Poet Speaks," and "Why?" Mendelssohn wrote six books of short piano pieces that he called *Songs without Words*, and Robert Schumann published a volume of pieces for young people called the *Album für die Jugend*.



The Érard piano permitted new expressive possibilities previously impossible.



Érard built this gorgeous piano around 1840 for the Baroness Kidderminster.



This Steinway is decorated with inlaid woods.