Program Music Essay, Research Paper

New Step in Music-Program Music PUCK Music 120 December 17, 1998 A New Step in Music Since the beginning of organized music in the Middle Ages, like all the other fields of creativity and study, such as art, philosophy, and architecture, music has made leaps and bounds in the flow of progression. The Romantic period was a time when music began to take on a different meaning. The music began to become more subjective as opposed to objective music of the Classical period. The artist or composer became much more important as an individual. An example of one of these progressions occurring mainly during the Romantic period was when composers and audiences alike started turning towards program music. Program music is ?the term for a nonvocal music that is associated with a poem, a story, or some other literary source; the literary text itself is the program. This new style of music created waves of joy and of controversy that still exist today. This form of music was first derived to fulfill a greater need to cease creating and continuing boundaries in the separate fields of art. Before this period music and paintings or in this case music and literature were not meant to be intertwined. The people did not see a need for it since each field was considered a separate entity of itself. Bent 2 During the romantic period, the general feeling began to surface that music could be made even more expressive by channeling it through literature; especially poetry. I believe a lot of this had to do with the new, relaxed frame of thought for the time period, and the genius of William Shakespeare?s writing capabilities. The issue surrounding program music is that critics ridicule the idea that the music can actually illustrate a program. They ask the question that if the audience did not know it was program music, then could they identify it as so, once heard. Some say that it is entirely possible, and even would be hard not to while others claim that there could quite possibly be no clues to the fashion of program music. Another argument made by the critics of program music is music should be able to stand on its own, with meaning, feeling, and a general sense or purpose. With program music, they felt that the music itself could not stand alone. However, the people of the Romantic period did not care. They wanted program music to increase expressive capabilities, and to be entertained in a new fashion. Many of the composers of this time, and since then have flourished through the use

of program music. Perhaps some of the most renowned pieces of music in existence today are forms of program music. Hector Berlioz (1803 – 1869) was a truly gifted composer who was most definitely inspired by literature; mainly Shakespeare. His composition Lelio is a correspondence to the renowned play Hamlet. Probably his best known piece though, Symphonie Fantastique was written about a woman that Berlioz was madly infatuated with. The Irish Shakespearean actress, Harriet Smithson, was the Bent 3 object of his affections, and did actually become his wife for a short time years after this composition. The remarkable part about the symphony is that Berlioz actually had programs made up and distributed to the audience for the performance. ?A young musician of unhealthy sensibility and passionate imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit lovesick despair. Too weak to kill him, the dose of drug plunges him into a heavy sleep attended by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, emotions, and memories are transformed in his diseased mind into musical thoughts and images.? Berlioz?s symphony was received well and he ended up getting his beloved, even though they ended up miserable together. Another famous work in which this new form of music was displayed is Mozart?s Don Giovanni. Mozart used a sort of foreshadowing in his music to help the audience along with the story line. In the second to last scene, Don Giovanni is carried off to Hell. Before the curtain opens, the orchestra begins incorporation a somber tone to signify this occurrence. He felt that this foreshadowing made the mood and the music more interesting. This transition during the Romantic period, beginning to compose program music, created a lot of changes in how composers wrote music, and how the audience received the music. Although there were, and still are some questions and uncertainties in some people?s minds as to the validity of the music, program music was an inspirational change welcomed by most in the Romantic era. Bent 4

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