

I. Preliminaries

I.1 Classicism versus romanticism

It is generally accepted that the terms classical and classicistic denote “stability, repose, clarity, balance, self-reliance, objectiveness, traditionalism,” whereas romanticism expresses the sense of “unrest, exaggeration, experimentation, ostentation, diffusion, subjectivism, etc.”¹ In the brief Danish *Musikalske Begreber*² under the article Romantik (Romanticism) the following words are inspired by the *Harvard Dictionary*:³ “Classicism indicates the will to exercise moderation, balance, clarity and selfcontrol (the artistic creations of the Renaissance are from this point of view the result of such efforts), while romanticism implies unimpeded expression, the subjective and excentric at the expense of formal balance (consequently also much baroque art).” And in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the article ‘Romantic:’⁴ “A term generally used, in music, to designate the apparent domination of feeling over order, whether applied to a single gesture within a Classical or Baroque structure, to an entire work emphasizing these tendencies or to the period of European music between approximately 1790 and 1910 (hence sometimes known as the Age of Romanticism).”

1. Willi Apel: *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (hereafter *Harvard Dictionary*): Article Classicism.

2. Søren Sørensen, John Christiansen, Bo Marschner, Finn Slumstrup: *Musikalske Begreber*.

3. Original Danish text: “klassik betegner viljen til mådehold, til balance, klarhed og selvkontrol (renæssancens kunstneriske frembringelser bliver under denne synsvinkel resultater af en sådan stræben), mens romantik indebærer det uhæmmet udtryksbetonede, det subjektive og excentriske på bekostning af formel balance (således også f.eks. meget af den barokke kunst).” All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

4. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie (hereafter *The New Grove*).

1.2 Implied structure of textbooks on 19th-century music history

Most textbooks on Music History – at least those with which I am acquainted – imply a tripartition of the principal musical currents of the 19th century.

The first is a romantic current representing a natural development and amplification of the means of musical expression of the classical era. The development largely takes place within the framework of established musical genres such as symphony, sonata, concerto and a variety of chamber music genres, among which the string quartet occupies a privileged position.

The foremost representatives of this current – often labelled **classical-romantic** – are Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms and among the composers flourishing towards the end of the century Bruckner is often mentioned.

The second is the so-called **new-German** current, the essence of which may be summarized as attempts to allocate or attribute extra-musical meaning to the musical works, be it of a concrete nature as in programme music proper or more or less vague feelings or moods. With Berlioz as the initiator the leading composers of this current are Wagner and Liszt with Richard Strauss as a latecomer of formidable dimensions.

The third main current is a **national-romantic** current, characterized by its inclusion of elements extracted from local folk-music – instrumental or vocal.

Every corner of Europe, former Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Russia, the Nordic countries, not to forget Great Britain, contribute to this musical current with a number of excellent composers.

This tripartition of the principal musical currents of the 19th century shall be my point of departure.

1.3 The Thesis

My thesis is that the classical-romantic main current in fact represents two sub-currents, the one focusing on the *romantic* aspects, the other focusing on the *classical* aspects of its musical style. For the romantic end of the musical spectrum I shall retain the term classical-romantic, for the classicistic end I shall apply the term retro-classicistic.

I know of no precedent for the application of the term retro-classicistic; but here and there consciousness of the existence of different poles or positions within the classical-romantic style is shown. So even if it is generally agreed to classify Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms as classical-romantic

composers, scholars have for a long time hinted at the question: but what are each of these composers mostly: classicistic or romantic?

“Neither these various influences nor the composer’s own comments about his music permit any definitive classification of Mendelssohn into the mode of thought of any particular period. Least of all is it tenable to call him a Romantic; on the contrary, his affiliations with the 18th century, especially the music of Mozart, make him if anything a neo-classicist.”⁵ “The romantic spirit leads even with him to an accentuation of the feeling of mood (experience of nature colours some of his most important works) but his music never becomes extemporaneous or unimpededly expressive and it retains nightly mystery and demonism, which greatly attracted that age, at a considerable distance.”⁶

In *The New Grove* the following is said about Robert Schumann: “he did not cease to be a Romantic, but his Romantic conception of music first as a medium of self-expression was now modified by the older Classical view of musical composition as a craft to be practised.”⁷ “Schumann’s straining of the romantic was intimately connected with the past, and his style must unite three historical components, which may be characterized as the following types, the character piece, the classical symphony and the baroque fugue.”⁸

And about Brahms: “Concentration on essentials, absence of exuberant gestures and moderation in the choice of his medium define Brahms more as a renovator of tradition than as a reactionary symphonist.”⁹ “That this musical language, which in spite of the multitude of impulses fundamentally adheres to the contemporary stylistic tradition, has often been perceived as retrospec-

5. Article ‘Felix Mendelssohn’ by Karl-Heinz Köhler in *The New Grove*, section 8. The Work: Basic Concepts, Trends and Influences.

6. Article ‘Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’ in *Sohlmans Musiklexikon* (hereafter *Sohlmans Musiklexikon*): Original Swedish text: “Den romantiska tidsandan leder även hos honom till en betoning av stämningsmoment (naturupplevelser färgar några av hans viktigaste komp.), dock blir hans musik aldrig vare sig improvisatorisk eller hämningslös, och den håller sig också fjärran från det nattligt gåtfulla och demoniska, som i så hög grad attraherade hans samtida.”

7. Article ‘Robert Schumann’ by Gerald Abraham in *The New Grove*, section 23. Orchestral and Chamber Music.

8. Article ‘Robert Schumann’ in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (hereafter *MGG*): Original German text: “Schumanns Überdehnung des Romantischen hing auf das Innigste zusammen mit der Vergangenheit, und sein Stil mußte drei historische Komponenten in sich vereinigen, die sich in Typen bezeichnen lassen als das Charakterstück, die klass. Symphonie und die barocke Fuge.”

9. Article ‘Johannes Brahms’ in *The New Grove*, end of section 10. Orchestral Music.

tive (even reactionary) depends not, however, alone on the many-sidedness of connections with older models and stylistic patterns, but to a great extent also on the music's way of expression."¹⁰ "Later – in 1860 – Brahms signed a declaration against Listz and his circle, and after in 1869 he had been violently attacked by Wagner in the article *On Conducting*, both the personal and aesthetic conflict between Brahms and the new-German composers was a reality."¹¹ "Johannes Brahms was the great conservative of the Romantic era. He avoided such pianistic displays as Chopin's elegant ornamentation and Liszt's brilliance and rhetoric; his models, rather, were Beethoven and Schumann. Technically his piano style is characterized by full sonority, broken-chord figuration, frequent doubling of the melodic line in octaves, thirds, or sixths, multiple chord-like appoggiaturas, and considerable use of cross-rhythms."¹²

The European location best suited for studying this issue is France, which several times in the course of music history has been in the forefront of stylistic development.

The article about 19th-century France in the first edition of *MGG* (1949-86) is written by Guy Ferchault¹³ and structured as follows:

- “1. Music during the revolution and the Imperial Empires
2. Influences from abroad
3. The national factors
4. The great currents of the 19th century
 - a. The romantic current
 - b. The new-classical current
 - c. Individualistic tendencies

10. Article 'Johannes Brahms' in *Sohlmans Musiklexikon*: Original Swedish text: "Att detta tonspråk, som trots impulsernas mångfald i sina grunddrag givetvis ansluter sig till samtidens stiltraditioner, så ofta har uppfattats som retrospektivt (eller t o m reaktionärt) beror emellertid inte enbart på denna mångsidiga anknytning till äldre förebilder och stilmönster utan i hög grad även på musikens uttryckskaraktär."

11. Article 'Johannes Brahms' in *Gads Musikleksikon* edited by Finn Gravesen and Martin Knakkegaard (hereafter *Gads Musikleksikon*): Original Danish text: "Senere – i 1860 – var Brahms medunderskriver på en erklæring mod Liszt og hans kreds, og efter at han i 1869 var blevet voldsomt angrebet af Wagner i artiklen *Über das Dirigieren*, var såvel den personlige som den æstetiske modsætning mellem Brahms og nytyskerne en realitet."

12. Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (hereafter *Grout, Palisca*): p. 606.

13. In the new edition of *MGG* the article about France is replaced by a totally different one.

5. Development of musical genres
 - a. The opera
 - b. Symphonic music
 - c. Chamber music
 - d. The *mélodie*
 - e. Church music
6. Music institutions
7. The interpreters
 - a. Singers
 - b. Instrumentalists
8. Dissemination and reception of music
 - a. Music publications
 - b. Musicology and musical aesthetics”¹⁴

It is item 4 that especially calls for our attention. It opens: “Two main currents characterize the development of French music in the 19th century,

14. Article ‘Frankreich, 19. Jahrhundert’ in *MGG*: Original German text:

1. Die Musik zur Zeit der Revolution und des Kaiserreiches
2. Die fremden Einflüsse
3. Die nationalen Faktoren
4. Die großen Strömungen des 19. Jh.
 - a. Die romantische Strömung
 - b. Die neuklass. Strömung
 - c. Die individualistischen Tendenzen
5. Die Entwicklung der Gattungen
 - a. Die Oper
 - b. Die symphonische Musik
 - c. Die Kammermusik
 - d. Die *mélodie*
 - e. Die Kirchenmusik
6. Die Musikinstitutionen
7. Die Interpreten
 - a. Die Sänger
 - b. Die Instrumentalisten
8. Kenntnis und Verbreitung der Musik
 - a. Die Musikpublikationen
 - b. Musikwissenschaft und Musikaesthetik”

romanticism with Berlioz and César Franck as poles, and new-classicism with Saint-Saëns and Gounod as the most prominent composers.”¹⁵

Item 4a first describes Berlioz and his influence on programme music. The section on Berlioz ends with the following sentence: “The spirit of absolute music remained alien to him.”¹⁶ This leads on to César Franck and his symphonies and chamber music. Berlioz and César Franck are seen as poles in French music, both romantic and consequently in opposition to that which the article labels *The new-classical current*.

4b in full¹⁷: “*The new-classical current*. Perhaps as a reaction against the unrestrainedness of romanticism there appeared a tendency, endeavouring to return to the classicistic principles, seeking balance of form and matter and clarity of style, and keeping a certain reservation by way of expression.

15. Article ‘Frankreich, 19. Jahrhundert’ in MGG: Original German text: “Zwei Hauptströmungen charakterisieren die Entwicklung der frz. Musik im 19. Jh., die Romantik deren äußerste Pole Berlioz und César Franck darstellen, und die Neuklassik, deren markanteste Vertreter Saint-Saëns und Gounod sind.”

16. Article ‘Frankreich, 19. Jahrhundert’ in MGG: Original German text: “Der Geist der absoluten Musik blieb ihm unbekannt.”

17. Article ‘Frankreich, 19. Jahrhundert’ in MGG: Original German text: “*Die neuklass. Strömung*. Vielleicht als Reaktion gegen die Hemmungslosigkeit der Romantik zeichnete sich eine Tendenz ab, die sich um Rückkehr zu den klass. Prinzipien bemühte, indem sie Gleichgewicht von Form und Gehalt und Klarheit der Schreibweise suchte und sich eine gewisse Reserve im Ausdruck auferlegte. Gounod und Saint-Saëns sind, von einigen Kleinigkeiten abgesehen, als Vorkämpfer dieser Richtung zu betrachten, durch die sie die frz. Musik neuen Zielen zuführten. – Grandioses, Fantastisches und Spukhaftes sind bei Gounod nicht vorhanden. Aber die Geschmeidigkeit seiner Melodik, die etwas schmachthafte Anmut seiner Arien und der Charme und die Ungezwungenheit, die von ihnen ausgehen, geben seiner Musik einen vertraulichen und innigen Ton und gleichzeitig eine Vornehmheit, für die man schon den Sinn verloren zu haben schien. Sein Schaffen ist nicht frei von Gefallsucht, aber er geht dabei nicht so weit, sich zu erniedrigen. Gounod brachte in das Reich der *mélodie* und des lyrischen Theaters durch seine Art ein neues Element, das der Musik Gewicht und Gehalt gab, worum man sich in diesen Gattungen seit fast einem halben Jh. nicht mehr gekümmert hatte.

– Saint-Saëns war vielleicht weniger inspiriert, bewies aber zweifellos größere theoretische Kenntnis und verfügte über ein bemerkenswertes Können. Er brachte die formalen und technischen Eigenschaften der Musik wieder zu Ehren. Sein Schaffen ist von einer gewissen Strenge, in der sich die Forderungen seines schöpferischen Denkens und der Wille zur Vollkommenheit widerspiegeln, den er an die Kunstübung herantrug. Aber diese Gediegenheit war nach der Erschlaffung der Revolutionsperiode und der romantischen Ära sehr heilsam. Durch seine Strenge trug Saint-Saëns dazu bei, den frz. Musikern Geschmack an vollkommener Form, an schöner Technik und edler Architektonik wiederzugeben.”

Apart from some minor composers Gounod and Saint-Saëns must be considered champions of this current through which they provided French music with new goals.

The grandiose, fantastic and spooky are not present in Gounod's music. But the suppleness of his melodies, the somewhat languishing pleasantness of his arias, and the charm and unaffectedness, which emanate from him, give his music a familiar tone and at the same time an intimate dignity, for which one already seems to have lost understanding. His creations are not devoid of coquettishness, but in this he never goes so far as to abase himself. Gounod gave through his art the realm of *mélodie* and the lyrical theatre a new element that gave weight and substance to music, to which one for almost half a century had paid no attention.

Perhaps Saint-Saëns was less inspired, but undoubtedly he possessed greater theoretical knowledge and was remarkably able. He brought the formal and technical elements of music back to an honourable standing. The creativeness which he brought to Art, is of a certain strictness, in which the demands of his creative thinking and his aim for perfection are reflected. But this purity was very healthy after the slackening of the revolutionary period and the romantic era. Through his strictness Saint-Saëns contributed to restoring to French musicians a taste for perfect form, beautiful technic and noble architecture.”

1.3.1 Comments on Ferchault's article

The word *new-classical* in the heading of section 4b is inconvenient when used in connection with 19th-century music. *New* is translated *verbatim* the same as *neo*. And it is evidently not a musical current identical with the *neo-classicistic* current of the 20th century involving such composers as Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith and the French group *Les Six*. I shall therefore propose that we replace the word *new-classicistic* in Ferchault's article with *classical-romantic*. As we shall see, we are talking about a musical way of expression in line with that of notably Mendelssohn but also other classical-romantic composers.

Also the word 'perhaps' at the beginning of section 4b leaps to the eye, but I think that Ferchault is too timid. Unrestrained (mis)use of musical resources (triple woodwinds, lots of brass, multiple harps, lots of percussion and correspondingly large groups of strings), unrestrained demands on the patience of the audience (works lasting hours), unrestrained musical expression (a harmonic language which not only threatens to, but eventually leads

to the collapse of the harmonic system). This is what Ferchault questions with the word ‘perhaps’.

1.4 Saint-Saëns’ Aesthetical Preferences

Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) has given written utterance to his aesthetical preferences – and one may safely add – in a rather outspoken manner. Below are eight quotations from his *Outspoken Essays on Music*. They call for close reading and discussion; but in the present connection such an endeavour is unnecessary and may be perceived as a stopgap. Here they are:

1) First from the preface: “ ‘Primary’ music, that which appeared simultaneously with the human race itself, consists of two elements: melody and rhythm. It held sway throughout Europe up to the time of the Middle Ages and still reigns throughout both the Near and the Far East. [...]

‘Secondary’ music began its first feeble stammerings in Europe during the Middle Ages. [...]

The early attempts of ‘secondary’.... our own... music to express itself were very strange; there was much searching and groping of the way; the ear was often diverted from the right track to an extent that cannot easily be imagined. It was only by degrees that experience painfully worked out laws which, after being strictly observed for some time, have progressively widened out and extended their scope until the domain of music now covers an immense field of activity. In these modern times of ours, however, this expansion is no longer sufficient; these very laws are being repudiated and looked upon as never having been in force at all, as *non avenues...*”¹⁸

2) “By reason of his talent and erudition, by virtue of his position as the founder of a school, M. Vincent D’Indy has acquired great authority. Everything he writes must of necessity possess considerable influence.

Under the sway of such considerations, it has occurred to me that it might be useful to point out – even though it be to my detriment – certain of his ideas in the ‘Course of Musical Composition’ which do not agree with my own. Not that I claim to be a more or less infallible oracle; it does not fol-

18. Camille Saint-Saëns: *Outspoken Essays on Music*, Authorised Translation by Fred Rothwell (hereafter *Outspoken Essays*): pp. IXff.

low, because M. D'Indy's ideas are not always mine, that they are therefore erroneous [...] I will state my arguments: the reader shall judge for himself."¹⁹

3) "M. D'Indy, like Tolstoi and M. Barrès and many other thinkers, seems to see nothing in art but expression and passion. I cannot share this opinion. To me art is form above all else.

It is perfectly clear that art in general, especially music, lends itself wonderfully well to expression, and that is all the amateur expects. It is quite different with the artist, however. The artist who does not feel thoroughly satisfied with elegant lines, harmonious colours, or a fine series of chords, does not understand art.

When beautiful forms accompany powerful expression, we are filled with admiration, and rightly so. In such a case, what is it that happens? Our cravings after art and emotion are alike satisfied. All the same, we cannot therefore say that we have reached the summit of art, for art is capable of existing apart from the slightest trace of emotion or of passion."²⁰

4) "In the introduction of his book, M. D'Indy says the most excellent things about artistic consciousness, the necessity of acquiring talent as the result of hard work and of not relying solely on one's natural endowments. Horace had said the same thing long ago; still, it cannot be repeated too often at a time like the present, when so many artists reject all rules and restrictions, declare that they mean 'to be laws unto themselves,' and reply to the most justifiable criticisms by the one peremptory argument that they 'will do as they please.' Assuredly, art is the home of freedom, but freedom is not anarchy, and it is anarchy that is now fashionable both in literature and in the arts. Why do poets not see that, in throwing down the barriers, they merely give free access to mediocrities, and that their vaunted progress is but a reversion to primitive barbarism?"²¹

5) "Fétis had foreseen the coming of the 'omnitonic' system. 'Beyond that,' he said, 'I see nothing further.' He could not predict the birth of cacophony, of pure *charivary*.

19. *Outspoken Essays*: p. 1.

20. *Outspoken Essays*: pp. 4f.

21. *Outspoken Essays*: pp. 6f.

Berlioz speaks somewhere of atrocious modulations which introduce a new key in one section of the orchestra while another section is playing in the old one. At the present time as many as three different tonalities can be heard simultaneously.

Everything is relative, we are told. That is true, though only within certain limits which cannot be overstepped. After a severe frost, a temperature of twelve degrees above zero seems stiflingly hot; on returning from the tropics, you shiver with cold at eighteen degrees above zero. There comes a limit, however, beyond which both cold and heat disorganise the tissues and render life impossible.

The dissonance of yesterday, we are also told, will be the consonance of tomorrow; one can grow accustomed to anything. Still, there are such things in life as bad habits, and those who get accustomed to crime, come to an evil end...”²²

6) “The more civilization advances, the more the artistic sense seems to decline: a grave symptom. We have already said that art came into existence on the day when man, instead of being solely preoccupied with the utility of an object, began to concern himself with its form.”²³

7) “What sets me at ease in discussing the ideas of M. D’Indy is the fact that, as he himself confesses, these ideas are very frequently not his own at all, but rather those of Hugo Riemann, a German.”²⁴

8) “*Vocalises* are absent from the works of Richard Wagner, though he did employ the trill, or shake; and while the trills of Brünnhilde are very effective in the ‘Valkyrie,’ those in the duet with Siegfried, on her awakening, seem very strange to any in the audience who have not been sufficiently hypnotised by Wagnerian infatuation.”²⁵

A strong dislike of Wagner, faith in law and order in music, and much concern about the lawlessness implied by the romantic way of musical expression appears immediately from the eight quotations. Thus we may safely remove

22. *Outspoken Essays*: pp. 7f.

23. *Outspoken Essays*: p. 8.

24. *Outspoken Essays*: p. 9.

25. *Outspoken Essays*: p. 22.

the word ‘perhaps’ from the beginning of section 4b of Guy Ferchault’s article and exemplify unrestrainedness, as I have done above.

Exactly what or who Saint-Saëns includes under the heading ‘romanticism’, which he argues against, is not immediately clear. The question is whether or not he includes classical-romantic music. Do Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms belong to the good company or to the lawless romantics? Saint-Saëns’ view of the three great classical-romantic composers may be elucidated by his verbal accounts or through analyses of his musical works, supposing that he himself – at least to a degree – lives up to his own aesthetical preferences.

It is surprisingly little Saint-Saëns writes about Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms. What there is, is found in *Outspoken Essays on Music* and *Musical Memories*.²⁶

“Robert Schumann, whose reason was not very clear – it is well-known that he died insane – took into consideration only his own will when he neglected the requirements of nature; along these lines he committed the greatest of errors.

One of his most characteristic aberrations is in the *Scherzo* of his famous Quintet [...]”²⁷ Here follows a critical analysis of Schumann’s placing of bar-lines in his piano quintet, but nothing that may be taken in support of his general view of the classical-romantic music.

“Both Mendelssohn and Schumann tried the theatre. The failure of Schumann’s ‘Geneviève’ – interesting as it was from a musical point of view, though anything but adapted for the theatre.”²⁸ Not much to go on here either.

Page 116 in *Outspoken Essays*: “It may be divined that I am alluding to those, well known to be a numerous band, who flock to the banner of the mighty Richard, and beneath its shade engage in a fight that has long been inconclusive.

They are not content that their god should triumph; there must even be victims sacrificed on his alters.

Mendelssohn first of all. Certainly there is lack of uniformity in his work. But what of ‘Elijah’, the ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’, the sonatas for the organ, the preludes and fugues for the piano-forte, the Scottish Symphony, the Reformation Symphony?... Try to accomplish a like task!

26. Camille Saint-Saëns: *Musical Memories*, Translated by Edwin Gile Rich.

27. *Outspoken Essays*: pp. 1 of.

28. *Outspoken Essays*: p. 25.

They would have us believe that when he first appeared he was accepted without a struggle, his ‘mediocrity’ having at the outset placed him on a level with the masses.

Do not believe anything of the kind.

I was present at the very first performance of the ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ and of the Symphonies, given before a Parisian public, and I still remember that I broke more than one lance in his defence. At the first performances of the ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ I saw old *habitués* of the Conservatoire holding their heads in their hands as they asked in tones of anguish why the Société des Concerts inflicted such horrors on its subscribers... Only by degrees did this public discover the Berceuse, then the Scherzo, then the Marche, then the Agitato, and finally the Overture. It was a tedious process!

Another victim: Meyerbeer. It was mainly against his ‘Huguenots’ that an outcry was raised, by reason of its popular and long unchallenged success. Robert Schumann lent powerful aid in this direction through an article he wrote which declared that the ‘Huguenots’ was not ‘music.’

Unfortunately, when Schumann applied his marvellous talent to opera, he created ‘Geneviève.’ Now, ‘Geneviève’ is assuredly charming music, though of a kind ill adapted to the theatre. Henceforth, so far as the ‘Huguenots’ is concerned, Schumann’s judgement is lacking in authority. On the other hand, we have the opinion of Berlioz – who is known to be anything but indulgent in criticism – and he in his famous ‘Traité d’Instrumentation’ quotes fragments of the great duo, ‘cette scène immortelle.’ This, in my opinion, is praise of no negligible kind.”²⁹

That Saint-Saëns does not include Mendelssohn among the ‘bad guys’ is clear enough. His opinion of Schumann is more ambiguous. Schumann is criticized on several accounts but nothing which is specifically directed at his general aesthetical preferences.

In *Outspoken Essays* there is not a word about Brahms.

We should now be prepared to start on our work proper, the analyses connected with the tracking down of retro-classicistic passages, movements, works in my endeavours to render plausible the thesis of this book. I shall concentrate on three composers, Charles Gounod (1818-1893), Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) and Danish Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817-1890).