

Unity of the Classical— Romantic Era?

*On the Weaknesses of a Certain
Paradigm in Music History*

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ABSTRACT

One significant proposal in the periodisation of music history was the concept of the unity of the Classical–Romantic era, presented in similar form by Zofia Lissa and Friedrich Blume in the 1960s. Both authors proposed combining musical Classicism and Romanticism—two periods previously treated separately—into one coherent period lasting almost a century and a half (c. 1770–c. 1910).

Although this type of periodisation survived until the end of the twentieth century and was regarded as broadly authoritative, discussion of this approach to music history seems necessary in the twenty-first century. Extensive research into early music has shown that the fundamental traits of the Classical style were formed well before 1770. In turn, recent interpretations of the styles and trends of nineteenth-century music have led researchers to question whether it is appropriate to treat musical Romanticism as a phenomenon extending into the second half of the century. All this necessitates a re-examination of Lissa and Blume's position, which, from a source-historical perspective, appears oversimplified and outdated.

Keywords: Romanticism, Classicism, music history, unity, periodisation, Zofia Lissa, Friedrich Blume

A CERTAIN PARADIGM AND ITS (IMPENDING) DECLINE

One of the significant proposals in the periodisation of music history was the concept of the unity of the Classical–Romantic era, presented in similar form in the 1960s by Zofia Lissa in her paper 'Romanticism in Music',¹ and by Friedrich Blume in his entry 'Romantik' for the prestigious German encyclopaedia *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.² Since both proposals were put forward in the same year, 1963, it is difficult to determine who originated the idea, especially as the two musicologists were in scholarly contact.

The main thesis of this concept in both accounts was the combination of musical Classicism and Romanticism—two periods previously treated separately—into one

coherent period lasting almost a century and a half, from around 1770 to the beginning of the twentieth century.³ The main premise for this approach was the belief that there was no clear demarcation between Classicism and Romanticism, a problem particularly associated in music-historical research with the difficulty of assigning Ludwig van Beethoven's oeuvre clearly to either period.⁴ Blume and Lissa were guided by the dominant features of the musical language and style of the period in question, such as the established major–minor tonal system, the prevalence of sonata forms,⁵ types of instrumentation, and the primary role of instrumental music. Both authors regarded the modifications and changes that occurred during this period merely as evolutionary developments resulting from the particular contributions of individual composers.

Despite this original approach to periodisation, Blume and Lissa did not dispute the fact that the extramusical dimensions and the aesthetic and spiritual concerns of Romantic music differed fundamentally from those of Classicism.⁶ For this reason, while not viewing the Classical–Romantic divide in terms of compositional technique, they acknowledged its significance in the spiritual and ideological spheres of music.⁷

3 According to Lissa ('Romantyzm w muzyce', 31) and Blume ('Romantik', 804), the period ended in 1910 and 1920 respectively. 'Als musikgeschichtliche Epochen bilden Klassik und Romantik eine Einheit. Sie sind zwei Aspekte derselben musikalischen Erscheinung und derselben geschichtlichen Periode [...]. Die Einheit des Klassischen mit dem Romantischen ist so ausgeprägt, daß es im Grunde weder eine rein klassische noch eine rein romantische Richtung oder Periode gibt.' Blume, 'Romantik', 802.

4 Within the model of a unified Classical–Romantic period, the problem ceases to require discussion: 'die oft und mit Leidenschaft diskutierte Frage, ob Beethoven unter die Klassiker oder die Romantiker zu rechnen sei, wird bedeutungslos.' Blume, 'Romantik', 804.

5 'Die grundlegende und allgemein gültige Großform bleibt auch im 19. Jahrhundert die Sonate in ihren vielfältigen Besetzungen [...]'. Blume, 'Romantik', 819.

6 'Bazą romantyzmu muzycznego są zdobycze warsztatowe klasycyzmu, a to, co romantyzm wnosi nowego, to przesunięcie akcentów, uwypuklenie jednych elementów na niekorzyść innych, odmienna postawa wyrazowa, inne treści ideowe.' Lissa, 'Romantyzm w muzyce', 25.

7 This innovative proposal, in Blume's formulation, was rapidly adopted in many general histories, as its discussion in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*

1 This view was first presented by Zofia Lissa in a paper delivered on 28 October 1963 at the scholarly conference *Romantyzm: Studia nad sztuką drugiej połowy wieku XVIII i wieku XIX*. The proceedings appeared only in 1967: Zofia Lissa, 'Romantyzm w muzyce: definicja, kryteria, periodyzacja', in Jan Białostocki, ed., *Romantyzm: Studia nad sztuką drugiej połowy wieku XVIII i wieku XIX* (Warszawa, 1967), 9–33. The text had previously appeared in the collection Zofia Lissa, *Szkice z estetyki muzycznej* (Kraków, 1965), 240–268.

2 Friedrich Blume, 'Romantik', in Friedrich Blume, ed., *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1st edn, vol. 11 (Kassel, 1963), 785–845.

Although this type of periodisation survived until the end of the twentieth century and was regarded as broadly authoritative, in the twenty-first century it seems necessary to revise it and discuss the proposed approach to music history. Extensive research into early music conducted since the mid-twentieth century has shown that the fundamental features of the Classical style were formed well before 1770, in both compositional practice and music theory. In turn, newer interpretations of the styles and trends of nineteenth-century music have led music historians to question whether musical Romanticism should be treated as a phenomenon continuing throughout the second half of the century. From a contemporary perspective, Richard Wagner's innovative conception of music drama and Franz Liszt's symphonic poems have increasingly been viewed as modernist proposals only loosely related to Romanticism but opening the way for original artistic ideas in the first half of the twentieth century.⁸

Given these doubts, and despite the significant role of Lissa and Blume's approach in understanding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music, it is difficult to regard their proposed periodisation as fully justified today. The time seems to have come to reassess this proposal, which, from a source-historical perspective, appears oversimplified and one-dimensional, since it does not take adequate account of the state of music before 1770 or in the second half of the nineteenth century. Expanding the interpretative perspective beyond the dominant body of German instrumental works cited by the authors would also reveal the complexity of music-historical phenomena, including stylistic differences in countries south of the Alps.

THE QUESTIONABLE CLASSICAL– ROMANTIC ERA IN MUSIC

Even the most basic assumptions of Lissa and Blume regarding the stylistic manifestations of the Classical–

Romantic period seem debatable. Both authors considered the major–minor tonal system, which they regarded as universal throughout the period, to be its main musical category.⁹ However, this fundamental determinant of musical style seems to have emerged much earlier: in compositional practice, the dominance of this tonal system was already noticeable at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was reflected, among other things, in the inclusion of a specific key as part of a work's title, as in Arcangelo Corelli's innovative *Concerti grossi*, Op. 6, composed in the 1680s and 1690s but published in 1714. The concertos are written in specific major and minor keys, and the practice of including the key in a title became common from that time as a means of identifying musical works. Theoretical reflection, which generally lags behind compositional practice, also addressed this issue in the first half of the eighteenth century. Jean-Philippe Rameau's important treatise on harmony, *Traité de l'harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels*, which systematised the structural and terminological principles of major–minor tonality, was published as early as 1722.¹⁰

From a contemporary perspective, it is also worth considering the function of major–minor tonality in twentieth- and twenty-first-century music. In view of the works of Richard Strauss and Dmitri Shostakovich, the neo-tonal music of postmodern composers, and the entire sphere of popular and entertainment music, it is clear that this type of tonality was not confined to composers of the Classical–Romantic period. The editors of *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, among others, draw attention to this point in attempting to identify the mainstream of twentieth-century music.¹¹

The same applies to other features of the Classical–Romantic style discussed by Lissa and Blume.

indicates: 'One strength of this chronology, essentially that of Blume, is its implicit recognition that the structural foundations of most Romantic music remain firmly embedded in late 18th-century Classical practice.' Jim Samson, 'Romanticism', in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, eds, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, vol. 21 (London, 2001), 601.

⁸ See Rudolf Stephan, 'Moderne', in Ludwig Finscher, ed., *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd edn, Sachteil, vol. 6 (Kassel, 1997), 392–397: 'die Gründungsurkunden der musikalischen Moderne [...] wären dann Liszts Symphonische Dichtungen und Wagners Musikdramen', 393.

⁹ 'Die Musik des klassisch-romantischen Zeitalters beruht uneingeschränkt auf dem Dur-Moll-System.' Blume, 'Romantik', 809.

¹⁰ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Traité de l'harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (Paris, 1722).

¹¹ Contrary to the widespread belief in the dominance of avant-garde attitudes in twentieth-century music, the editors also suggest that the century may be viewed in terms of the continuation of tonal music: 'It is possible that we would now see the musical mainstream of the first part of the [twentieth – RDG] century as stemming from Pfitzner (or at least Richard Strauss) instead of Schoenberg.' Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, 'Introduction: Trajectories of Twentieth-Century Music', in Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, eds, *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge, 2004), 5.

The fundamental importance of sonata forms for the compositional technique and aesthetics of the period cannot be disputed, but it is also worth noting earlier precedents, predating those of the Viennese Classics. A fully formed conception of the sonata cycle can readily be found in thousands of Neapolitan *sinfonie*, that is, operatic overtures with a three-part structure and sections contrasting in tempo and character, composed in large numbers from around 1720 and inspiring Classical composers to write sonatas or symphonies. The essential principle of sonata form—a construction based on tonal and thematic contrast in the exposition and tonal and expressive resolution in the recapitulation—can be found both in Domenico Scarlatti's instrumental compositions published from the 1730s and in arias from George Frideric Handel's oratorios written in the 1740s and 1750s.¹² In the light of such examples, the beginning of the Classical–Romantic era, which Lissa and Blume place around 1770, should be moved back by several decades. Other stylistic and aesthetic categories mentioned by both authors, such as the orchestral forces established in Classicism, do not belong exclusively to music of the period 1770–1910. Although they appeared in this period, they did not disappear at its end and remain lasting features of musical practice.

The dominance of instrumental music in the Classical–Romantic period, as analysed by both authors, appears one-sided and misleading from a contemporary perspective. In both theory and practice, opera continued to occupy the foremost position, especially in Romance-language countries such as Italy and France. Thus, discourse on music in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italy focused almost exclusively on singing and opera; in writings on musical aesthetics, the word 'music' was commonly equated with 'opera'. A particularly striking example is Giuseppe Mazzini's *Filosofia della musica* (1836), an important and influential treatise on musical aesthetics in which the entire argument is concerned with opera and its sociocultural functions.¹³ Mazzini emphasised opera's ethical and patriotic role, which meant

that works had to abandon morally ambivalent characters and attitudes, since these could not be reconciled with the ideal of the Romantic artist's freedom. However, this highly moralising treatise did not in any way question the primary role of opera in musical aesthetics.

If we consider periodisation in opera, we must also take into account the earlier traditions of Neapolitan opera from the first half of the eighteenth century, which remained vital and served as a point of reference for both composers and audiences in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only in Italy but also in other European musical centres. From this perspective too, the year 1770 is difficult to justify convincingly as the beginning of the Classical–Romantic era. The Italian operas of Niccolò Jommelli, Antonio Salieri, and Domenico Cimarosa, as well as those of Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Gioachino Rossini, share more with the works of Alessandro Scarlatti, Antonio Vivaldi, and Johann Adolf Hasse than they differ from them stylistically and aesthetically.¹⁴

TWO REASONS WHY THE PARADIGM IS NO LONGER RELEVANT

Although Blume and Lissa were distinguished scholars, among the most prominent musicologists and music historians of their time, the paradigm they proposed now seems outdated and less convincing. Changes in the way phenomena are described and scholarly theories constructed are, of course, an inherent feature of knowledge, including research on artistic creativity. It is nevertheless worth considering why this paradigm has lost its former explanatory power and should be replaced by another way of understanding the music of the period in question.

The first reason for the paradigm's obsolescence is the fascination with early music that has developed over the past half-century and was entirely unforeseen when Blume and Lissa were constructing their theories. Musicological research into the repertory predating the Classical–Romantic period has attracted large audiences and many performers. This led

¹² The best-known examples are the arias 'Every Valley' and 'But Who May Abide' from George Frideric Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. They contain tonal duality in the exposition and a return of the opening material in the principal key, the essence of sonata form as described by Charles Rosen in *Sonata Forms* (London, 1988), 1–2.

¹³ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Filosofia della musica* (1833); modern edition: https://www.liberliber.eu/mediateca/libri/m/mazzini/filosofia_della_musica/pdf/mazzini_filosofia_della_musica.pdf (accessed 21 April 2026).

¹⁴ For this reason, terms such as 'Baroque', 'Classicism', and 'Romanticism' are not generally used in Italian music histories; chronological designations such as *Seicento*, *Settecento*, and *Ottocento* are used instead. Compare the earlier volumes in the *Storia della musica* series: Franco Abbiati, *Il Seicento e il Settecento* (Milano, 1967); Franco Abbiati, *L'Ottocento* (Milano, 1967).

to the establishment of historically informed performance (HIP) and to important repertorial discoveries, resulting in a significant expansion of the canon to include numerous earlier compositions.¹⁵ Familiarity with this repertory also opened the way to musicological interpretations showing that some stylistic and generic features identified by Lissa and Blume as products of the Classical–Romantic era actually belonged to works from several decades earlier. In light of these discoveries, it is difficult to maintain the authors' conviction that a clear line divided the Baroque from the Classical–Romantic period. On the contrary, in the light of this repertory and recent research, eighteenth-century music is increasingly treated as a relatively coherent period; the search for breakthroughs around 1770 (or around 1750, as Charles Rosen proposed) therefore seems less justified than previously thought.¹⁶

The second reason for the weakness and obsolescence of Lissa and Blume's model lies in their initial theoretical assumption about the primary role of compositional technique as a criterion for the periodisation of music. The thesis concerning the Classical–Romantic period in European music was formulated on the basis of an analysis of musical style, whereas questions of music's cultural context, meanings, influences, and values were relegated to the background. Such an approach may seem controversial, especially in relation to Romantic musical aesthetics, in which the idea of correspondence among the arts and the strong influence of literature on music were fundamental features of artistic attitudes.

As a result of this assumption, the authors failed to recognise the cultural break that followed the revolutions of 1848 and was associated with the abandonment of Romantic ideology and a shift towards realism. The extension of musical Romanticism into the second half of the nineteenth century did not, of course, originate with Lissa or Blume. It has a relatively long tradition, ranging from Ernst Bücken's views in the *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, published

in the early twentieth century,¹⁷ to *The New Oxford History of Music*,¹⁸ and recent proposals in music history, such as *A Cultural History of Western Music*.¹⁹ However, the resulting separation of music in the second half of the nineteenth century from the other arts may create the surprising and implausible impression that composers alone failed to notice the ideological and intellectual changes and remained faithful to Romantic aesthetics in the age of realism and naturalism.

Such conclusions have already prompted some musicologists to question the validity of treating nineteenth-century music as belonging to a Romantic era, and Carl Dahlhaus expressed this position most fully in his essay 'Neo-Romanticism'.²⁰ Recognising, like Lissa and Blume, similarities in style and musical language throughout the nineteenth century, Dahlhaus emphasised the need to treat the music of the second half differently. He drew attention to a range of ideological and aesthetic changes and described 'the attempt to understand the musical neo-romanticism of the second half of the nineteenth century as romantic art in an unromantic, positivist age'.²¹

The three-volume collective work *Die Geschichte der Musik*, edited by Matthias Brzoska and Michael Heinemann and published at the beginning of the twenty-

17 Bücken uses the terms 'Romantik' and 'Neuromantik' to describe the period from Beethoven to Liszt and Wagner. Ernst Bücken, *Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Moderne* (Potsdam, 1932), 1.

18 The material corresponding to the Classical–Romantic period is discussed in three volumes of this monumental history: Egon Wellesz and Frederick Sternfeld, eds, *The Age of Enlightenment, 1745–1790* (London, 1974); Gerald Abraham, ed., *The Age of Beethoven, 1790–1830* (Oxford, 1988); Gerald Abraham, ed., *Romanticism, 1830–1890* (New York, 1990).

19 Even the editors of this recent volume treat nineteenth-century music under the rubric of Romanticism: 'The stylistic category of Romanticism may be a useful moniker in a historiography founded on the *Zeitgeist*, the unifying spirit of the age that permeates all its artistic expressions across different media.' Alexander Rehding and Naomi Waltham-Smith, eds, *A Cultural History of Western Music*, vol. 5, *In the Industrial Age* (London and New York, 2024), 8.

20 Carl Dahlhaus, 'Neo-Romanticism', in Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 14.

21 Dahlhaus continues: 'The decades between 1850 and 1890 (or 1910) form a coherent epoch, distinct from romanticism on one side and modernism (or the "new music") on the other.' Dahlhaus, 'Neo-Romanticism', 14.

15 The subject has become a major area of research in recent decades. See John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge, 2002); Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, eds, *Performance Practice: Music after 1600* (London, 1990).

16 'It is the lack of any integrated style, equally valid in all fields, between 1755 and 1775 that makes it tempting to call this period "mannerist".' Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York, 1998), 47.

first century,²² develops Dahlhaus's idea. This is particularly evident in the second volume, *Die Musik der Klassik und Romantik*, which covers the history of European music from 1720 to 1850. The connection between Classicism and Romanticism, retained in the volume's title, recasts the unity proposed by Blume and Lissa within a completely different chronological framework. Brzoska and Heinemann's original contribution is also to place the end of musical Romanticism in 1850, corresponding to the end of Romanticism in literature and the fine arts. This entails recognising Liszt's symphonic poems and Wagner's music dramas as manifestations of modernism and the beginning of modern music.²³ This interpretation differs markedly from Lissa's proposal, which viewed Wagner's music drama as the embodiment of Romantic opera.²⁴

A FEW FINAL SUGGESTIONS

In the light of the weaknesses identified above, the concept proposed by Lissa and Blume seems difficult to defend, and their method of periodising music history appears outdated. However, it is difficult to propose an alternative concept free from simplification that would convincingly describe changes in music during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One obvious option would be to stop using terms such as 'Classicism' and 'Romanticism' in relation to music and replace these vague and complex categories with terms referring to the century in question ('eighteenth-century music' and 'nineteenth-century music'). Such proposals have existed for some time in music historiography.²⁵ However, they can also be readily criticised because

the criterion for distinguishing a particular period in music history becomes entirely mechanical: for example, 'nineteenth-century music' covers the years 1800–1900. Adopting such dates distorts meaningful periodisation, since 1800 seems entirely arbitrary in relation to music. A criterion based on centuries may appear more objective, but it introduces a cut-off point where none existed in musical styles and aesthetics.

Carl Dahlhaus, the author of synthetic works published in the series *Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, was well aware of this problem and proposed a periodisation based on significant political and social events in European history. According to him, the history of nineteenth-century music begins in 1814 and ends in 1914, and the internal divisions of this century-long period also correspond to political events.²⁶ Dahlhaus's approach was the opposite of that discussed here: for Blume and Lissa, musical style and genre were the criteria of periodisation, while cultural, social, and political contexts were largely disregarded. For Dahlhaus, politics determines the periodisation of music history, while musical styles form a secondary category. This proposal also seems questionable because of the primacy it accords sociopolitical issues and the secondary status it gives aesthetic ones. If these concepts are to be retained in music history, it seems more appropriate to highlight Classical and Romantic tendencies in the works of individual composers—that is, to understand these categories as features of creative attitude rather than as markers of periodisation.

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23 Brzoska and Heinemann, *Die Geschichte der Musik*, vol. 2, vii–viii.

24 'Romantyczny ideał opery realizuje w pełni dopiero dramat muzyczny'. Lissa, 'Romantyzm w muzyce', 30.

25 One of the earliest works to adopt this approach was Georg Knepler, *Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1961). The concept was later adopted by other scholars; see Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd edn (Laaber, 1989). Jim Samson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge, 2001), is divided into Part One, 1800–1850, and Part Two, 1850–1900 (vii–viii).

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26 For example, 1814 (the end of the Napoleonic Wars)–1830 (the July Revolution) and 1830–1848 (the revolutions of 1848). See Dahlhaus, *Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd edn, iii–iv.

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