

Dr. Caroline Rae discusses the 'War of the Romantics'

The 'War of the Romantics' is the term that's often applied to the aesthetic schism that developed in Germany, with German composers in the second half of the 19th century. One group that was perceived as being the defenders of the classical tradition: the traditionalists, that included Schumann, Mendelssohn and the young Brahms; and then the other group that was perceived as being progressive and forward-looking, and that was Liszt and Wagner.

The main debates that surrounded this War of the Romantics were largely focussed on the following issues: whether you liked writing programme music, something that was descriptive, something that was inspired by extra-musical ideas, it might be literature for example, or whether you were writing 'absolute' music. And Brahms, of course, became the epitome of absolute music. Another debate that became associated with this was their approach to form, whether you were following the classical, traditional forms, sonata forms – like Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms – or whether you were doing something different, like Liszt. One thinks of Liszt's approach in his Piano Sonata, which is a rhapsodic single movement: it has elements of sonata form in it but it's certainly not obeying the rules.

This debate, the 'War of the Romantics' was fuelled by an article that was published in the ***Neue Zeitschrift für Musik***, ironically that was the journal that was founded by Schumann himself. This article founded and coined the expression the 'New German School' to describe Liszt and Wagner and their

progressive ideas. The flip side of that was that it almost marginalised the composers who had been seen as the defenders of Classicism, and had a particularly negative effect on Brahms. He wasn't as well known at this stage as Liszt and Wagner, and of course he had many of his big works still yet to write, but he didn't like it and he came together with his friend Joachim and wrote a Manifesto to present his ideas in objection to the New German school, and to say that that really went against what he considered to be the most fundamental and important aspects of musical expression.