

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **The Romantic Movement in Germany**

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There are good books, very good books, and outstanding books. This latest publication by Letellier is a brilliant and profound introduction to and exploration of the Romantic movement in Germany. He sets out his theme with a nine-page introduction which provides the scaffold for what is to follow. The important differences between English and German Romanticism are clarified, indicating in contrast the former the latter is valued for wit, irony, and beauty. The era considered is from approximately 1797 to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The themes and variations are skillfully developed, interlacing literature, poetry, music, nationalism, and religion. The achievements of familiar and unfamiliar names trace developments from those that are the fons et origo of perhaps the most important cultural genre of Western history.

Letellier introduces us to the Harbingers of Romanticism such as Johann Herder, Fredrick von Humboldt and Goethe, and the philosophers Kant, Fichte, Friedrich von Schelling and Schleiermacher. A key to the success of this book is the many translations of important text, such as all 14 sections of Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1806). In a superb way Letellier brings to us not only names and important biographic details, but the significance of their key positions in the era.

Chapter 4 is given over to Beethoven, chapter 5 to the *Unfolding of German Romantic Literature*. The Sturm and Drang movement, criticised by crusaders of Enlightenment as when "the irrational irrupted into literature", is represented by the lyric poetry of the Göttinger Hain, all 32 verses of *Leonora* by Gottfried Bürger are here to read, an exemplar of the mysterious and terrifying. Christof Wieland's poetic masterpieces including several stanzas of the poem *Oberon*, modelled on Spenser's Fairie Queen, bring us a quest theme in a world of magic enchantment offers with nicely arranged images.

What Letellier refers to as *The Romantic Dawn*, after 1800 brings the major players to central focus. Friedrich Hölderlin, John Paul, Heinrich von Kleist, are treated with the same attention leading up to the wonderful Novalis. His tragic life history, his influence from the philosophy of Johann Fichte and Jakob Boehme, the *Libersreligion* (religion of Love), "magical idealism" and the famous *Six Hymns to the Night* (1807) provide a wonderful insight into his famous Blue Flower, the par excellence of Romantic symbolism. . If you have ever wondered what it was all about, translation of the text and explanations are fully offered. For tears read about his tragic bond with Sophie.

The Jena Romantic literature circle formed at the end of the 1790's included the Schlegel brothers, Clemens Brentano, Achim von Armin and Joseph von Eichendorff, the Berlin circle was Ludwig Tieck, Adalbert von Chamisso, several other substantial authors emerge who add luster to the flourishing creativity of these times. If you want to read sections of Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, or Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihls*, or the mysteries of James MacPherson's *Ossian*, perhaps be touched by the sudden death tragedy in the poem *Margaret's Ghost*, or the epic drama of Nikolaus Lenau's *Faust. Ein Gedicht* we are with Letellier 's unfolding of German Romantic development.

The importance of music for the Romantic era is developed as archetypical in the early 19th century. Letellier takes us through *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1806-08) to survey the text and Mahler's song cycle, Schubert's song cycles as themes with analysis of *Die Schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise* noting a link with Walter Scott and the poems of Heinrich Heine. Soon we enter the wonderful world of *Undine*.

The text of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's fairy tale is shown to be adapted in no less than 7 operas, notably the 1816 version by E.T.A. Hoffman. A whole chapter is given to the latter's astonishing talents and influence

on, for example Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes d' Hoffmann* (1881), Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* (1892), and the ballet *Coppélia* (1870) by Delibes. The perfect way that Letellier annotates in detail the interlacing of the history, the music, the story and providing text from Hoffmann's *Der Sandman* and *Rat Krespel* might astonish even the most Romantic expert.

But our journey is by no means ended.

Letellier's knowledge and delight for fairy tales goes through some of the most important collectors of folklore. This started particularly by Johann Musäus *Deutsche Volkslegenden* 1782-87, and the Grimm brothers. The latter organised scripts transcribed by seeking storytellers particularly but not exclusively from Germanic cultures. Included are some well-known such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, but also are included tales from sources from Giovanni Boccaccio.

The collection increased with modification, some on account of unfavorable reviews due to sexual and violent content, although the compilers contended that they should serve as warnings for children. In the final edition of 1857, there were 211 tales. From the *Gespensterbuch* by Johann Appel and Frederich Laun (1811-15) of ghost stories he highlights the story of *Der Freischütz*. The text is included followed by an analysis of the opera by Carl Maria von Weber (1821) including the libretto, a wonderful treasure-piece for anyone interested in what Letellier considers "the beginning of musical Romanticism".

There is a chapter given over to the Women of German Romanticism: Henrietta Herz and Rahel Levin, Dorothea von Schlegel, Sophie Schubert, Blessed Anna Katharina Emmerich, Bettina von Arnim, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel and Clara Schumann.

The artists who formed the Romantic developments in music, literature and poetry introduced Caspar David Friedrich (given a complete chapter to himself), Philippe Otto Runge, and members of the Nazarener group who wanted to regenerate German art such as Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Peter Cornelius, Frank Pforr, Philipp Veit and Carl Gustav Carus. This genre is followed by a chapter on Architecture and Sculpture highlighting Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

The last two chapters of this engaging and informative book Letellier titled *The Neo-Romantic Afterglow and Sunset*, and *Richard Strauss' Four Last Songs*.

Novalis wrote "Romanticism means imbuing the finite with the infinite."

Strauss:

O wide, still peace!

So deep in sunset glow.

How weary we are in wandering-

Can this be death?

Illustrated with 187 figures and an amazing 29 listed readings, this magnificent book offers more than any other could in bringing the Romantic Movement to the curious, the aspiring, the expert even those who have doubts about the era in question will realize why it remains such a powerful influence in and on our own culture as part of the essence of our humanity.

### **Michael Trimble**

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