

In what ways does Weber's "Der Freischutz" exhibit features typical of early 19th Century Romanticism?

In 1820, Carl Maria von Weber completed work on his first opera, "Der Freischutz". However, it was not written in the style of traditional Classical opera (such as Mozart's - to which Weber's cousin was married - three great masterpieces.). Nevertheless, Beethoven on seeing the score was incredibly encouraging to Weber, and requested further operatic works from the younger composer. It was important to Weber to write the opera in this new style (known as early Romanticism) and some main features included increased melodrama, imaginative instrumentation, recurring motifs, non-Classical harmonic progressions and above all, atmospheric effects.

Each main personality was characterized by a particular type of music. The "good" character's song is written in a highly lyrical fashion, with simple rhythms and a mostly consonant diatonic melody in the major key. Compared with the "evil" characters song, it lacks unusual sonorities, rhythmic disturbance, chromatic dissonance and a minor melody. In this "evil" music, the use of the flute and clarinet in low hollow registers creates an atmosphere of doom. Harmonic changes allow us to quickly differentiate between the two groups of characters. Recurring motifs include syncopation, dark sonorities, tremolandi, absence of melodic motion and the dissonance of diminished 7th chords in the "evil" character's music. In particular, the chord F#-A-C-Eb represents the demon's (Samiel) appearances. C major and D major are used to enhance the plot of human kind and the natural world respectively, whilst C minor is used in more demonic sections.

The bold changes produces as a result of this was highly surprising and melodramatic. There are, however, more subtle musical effects used by Weber regarding melodrama, such as the importance attached to diminished 7th and augmented 6th chords. Weber's instrumentation in "Der Freischutz" is revolutionary. For example, the solo roles given to the four horn players at the opening of the Overture were the first of their kind. He combined muted and open strings, and used a large number of brass instruments and a chorus. Clarinets have an unusually important position in playing the main theme - something which was very rare at the time. The horn sound is repeatedly used to provide tonal colour when the scenes of hunting in the forest are taking place. The instrumental range, from a bold fanfare to the sinister blare in the Wolf's Glen further advocate the horn's new-found presence. Tremolando strings and the low registers, particularly in the woodwind, portray the dark colour of the demonic power. For example, the use of homophonic texture, frequent unison and contrapuntal passages, chromatic auxiliary notes, dotted rhythms and recurring chord progressions help create the atmosphere of the famous scene in the wolf's glen. There is galloping rhythm, low trombone and clarinet tremolos, shrill woodwinds over horns amidst cries of "Uhui" as the bullets are cast. Additionally, the integration of simple and popular folk melodies brings cohesion to the scene, and to the new style of opera which Weber had been so pivotal in creating.