**Chapter 13**

**Solo Keyboard Music**

Keyboard music for the recital hall usually means music for solo piano. But there exists a great deal of wonderful keyboard music for other instruments—some of them no longer used. For example, in the Renaissance and Baroque eras most keyboard music was written for clavichord, harpsichord, or organ. The piano was not invented until the Classical era. Today, it is hard for us to imagine art music without the piano. It is used as a solo instrument, in concerti with full orchestra, to accompany solo song and instrumentalists, and as a partner in chamber music.

In Bach’s time the harpsichord and the organ were the important keyboard instruments and he wrote a great deal of music for them. Bach was a virtuoso keyboard player and part of his job demanded that he be able to play the organ in church services and to improvise music. In the Baroque era, improvisation, or the ability to extemporaneously create music, was an important skill for any keyboard player, and the keyboard music of the time reflects this.

The earliest form of keyboard music that is still important today was the fugue, and Bach was famous for these types of pieces. These works were usually conceived for the organ or harpsichord and are today played on just about any keyboard instrument and have been transcribed for instrumental and vocal ensembles. A fugue is a somewhat brief work in one movement—usually about 4 or 5 minutes long. It is imitative, or in other words the rhythms and melodies are passed around the different parts in a manner that sounds like echoes and imitations of one another. Fugues are polyphonic—they sound like there are two or more melodic lines happening at the same time, and it often sounds like these melodies are competing with one another for prominence. A fugue’s melody is called a subject. A melody that is constructed to go with a subject is called either a countersubject or a counterline. We call the end of the melody’s presentation the cadence. And we call an entire presentation of a melody and its countersubjects an episode.

The organ is called the King of Instruments because of its power and its ability to imitate other wind and string instruments. A true organ is a pipe organ—one that produces its sound by having a column of air pass through a pipe. The length of the pipe determines the pitch—the longer the pipe the lower the pitch.

There have been all sorts and forms of music written for the organ from concerto to fugue to chorale prelude to fantasia to toccata. One important organ form from the Baroque era still heard today is the chorale prelude. In Bach’s time a chorale would have been sung by a congregation in a church service. We call these hymns today. Prior to the congregation singing, the organist would usually play through the chorale first. But, not always in a straightforward manner. Often an organist would improvise upon the chorale creating a new piece of music that we call the chorale prelude. As time passed these improvisations became much more complex and any organist of any merit would have been judged on his improvisation abilities.

Other Baroque era forms for the organ and harpsichord were the fantasia and toccata. Both forms were free forms allowing for improvisation and requiring virtuosity on the part of the organist.

With the invention of the piano in the Classical era, composers shifted their keyboard focus away from the harpsichord. The piano was originally called the pianoforte because it was capable of playing both soft and loud, not easily done on the harpsichord or clavichord. The key action of the piano also lent itself to expressive qualities of Classical and Romantic era music. And by the Romantic era the piano could be mass produced, making it a popular and somewhat affordable instrument for the home.

Many piano concertos were written during the Classical and Romantic eras. but we discussed these in Chapter 6. The piano music discussed in this chapter is solo music, which was originally written for the salon and for amateurs. It is still used that way but today it is also heard very often in the recital hall.

The piano sonata is similar in nature to the concerto. But, there is no orchestral accompaniment and it is usually not as virtuosic as the concerto. The sonata began in the Classical era and Haydn and Mozart wrote many of them, but it reached its height in the Romantic period. It is sometimes a one-movement work, or it can be three movements of contrasting tempi. The sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven are still used today as study and recital pieces.

During the Romantic period composers also created short pieces for piano that were similar in style to the art song. These so-called character pieces were brief and were in one mood. They were written for amateurs to play in the salon, but many are actually very virtuosic pieces. The titles give a clue to the mood. For example, these works often contain works like nocturne, waltz, polka, or polonaise in their titles.

The most important composer of piano character pieces was Frederick Chopin who lived from 1810 to 1849. He was a great pianist himself but was also a recluse. His works are very expressive and allow the pianist to display not only virtuosity, but also passion. These pieces fit wonderfully today in the intimacy of the recital hall. Other great composers of the Romantic era wrote character pieces for piano including Schubert, Schumann, and Liszt.

Keyboard music is very popular today. Many American boys and girls grow up taking piano lessons and playing piano at home and in local recitals. The fugues of Bach, the sonatas of Mozart and Beethoven, and the character pieces of Chopin and Liszt make up a good portion of the repertory for these students while at the same time being performed in recital halls by the world’s best professional keyboardists.