

# six of the best

## Romantics chosen by Kirill Gerstein, pianist



Romanticism, as an artistic and intellectual movement, originated in the 18th century, but we're still living out the consequences of its ideas. So many things that strike us as contemporary — our obsessions with our emotions, with expressing ourselves individually and being true to our subjective experiences — have their roots in a cultural revolution more than 200 years ago.

Take art: it seems natural to suppose that the greatest artists are the ones whose work shows most originality. But this assumption is derived from a central preoccupation of the Romantic age — the violent impulse to discard old classical forms. From the same source comes our belief that we express ourselves most truly when we kick against established rules.

Similarly, where the Romantics took inspiration from the sublimity of untamed nature, seeing it as a

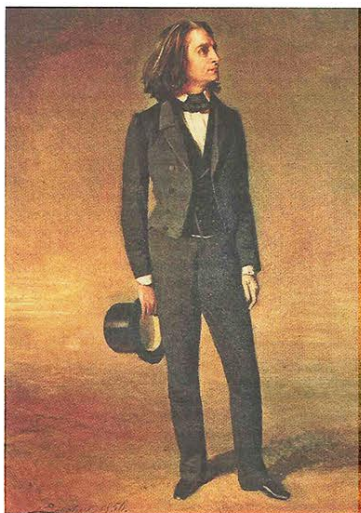
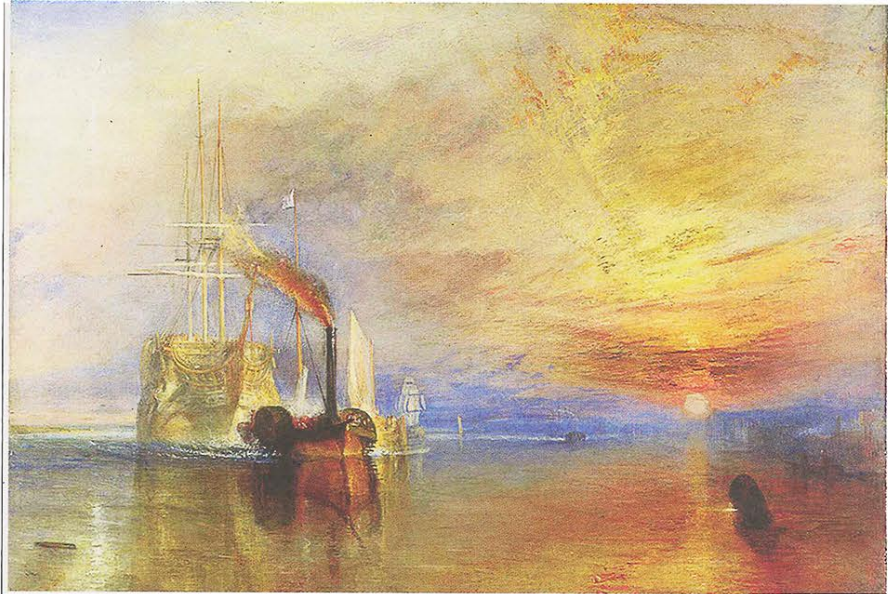
gateway to a higher spiritual realm, we continue to long for wilderness. The balance in our relationship to the environment has shifted, as increasingly we realise nature's fragility.

My "six best" artists created work that is quintessentially romantic, as well as continuously relevant and inspiring.

**Kirill Gerstein's recording of Liszt's *Transcendental Études* is out on Myrios Classics**

► **JMW TURNER (THE FIGHTING TEMERAIRE, 1839)**

The English art critic John Ruskin described Turner as "the artist who could most stirringly and truthfully measure the moods of Nature". His paintings often depict the awe-inspiring beauty and violence of nature untameable by man. Turner's depictions of light are imbued with spiritual symbolism. The phrase "the Sun is God" is attributed to him.



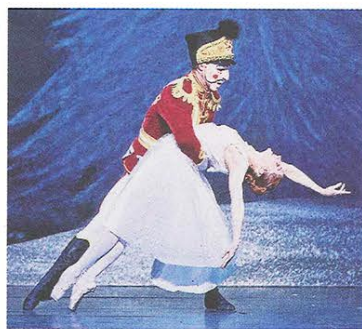
▲ **FRANZ LISZT**

Arguably the greatest piano virtuoso of all. As a composer, he played a pivotal role in music history. Liszt's experiments with harmony and musical structure influenced Wagner, Mahler, Strauss, Schoenberg and Bartók. Proclaiming "Le concert c'est moi", he invented the concept of a solo recital — a lone romantic figure expressing his thoughts and emotions in a soliloquy.



◀ **EMILY DICKINSON**

In her nearly 1,800 poems, Dickinson never rests in her experiment to personalise the English language and make it a surgically precise instrument of individualised expression. Throughout, although her voice remains solitary, her subjects — the human experience, symbolism in nature, fascination with death — are the ones that occupied the more traditional Romantics.

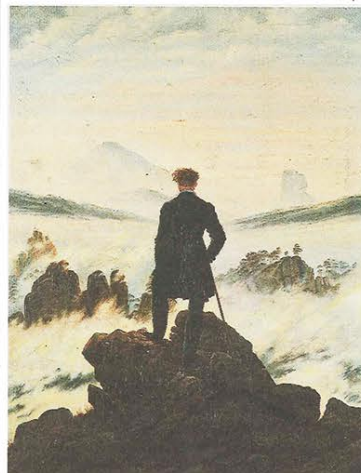


▲ **ETA HOFFMANN (THE NUTCRACKER)**

He was a romantic polymath: author, composer, music critic, jurist and caricaturist. The wildly imaginative world of his stories is filled with supernatural and mysterious characters. The fantastical in Hoffmann's works fired the imagination of many composers — giving us works including Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*, Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and Busoni's *Die Brautwahl*.

► **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

The composer who broke through social and musical boundaries and despite, or possibly with the help of, deafness, soared to stratospheric heights in his late works. His shadow has loomed large over composers since. In Hoffmann's words: "Beethoven's music wields the lever of fear, awe, horror and pain, and it awakens that eternal longing that is the essence of the romantic."



◀ **CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH (WANDERER ABOVE THE SEA OF FOG, 1818)**

"The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees in himself," Friedrich said. He deepened the genre of landscape painting from an act of depiction to one of emotional contemplation. Many of his works feature a so-called Rückenfigur, an observer with his back to us, prompting us to identify with the figure communing with nature.