

SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE, OP. 14

COMPOSED IN 1830

HECTOR BERLIOZ

BORN IN LA CÔTE-ST.-ANDRÉ, ISÈRE, DECEMBER 11, 1803

DIED IN PARIS, MARCH 8, 1869

Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, according to statistics compiled by the American Symphony Orchestra League, emerged in the 1990s as the most frequently performed orchestral work in America. Like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Berlioz's amazing first symphony is a revolutionary composition that eventually triumphed over all objections and became enshrined as a concert favorite, a warhorse. It requires some historical imagination, therefore, to try to recapture the shocking aspects of the work, written by a composer in his mid-20s, and appreciate the ways in which it helped to change the subsequent history of music.

ROMANTIC INNOVATIONS

Not only is the *Symphonie fantastique* ubiquitous in concerts and on recordings, it turns up in nearly every music appreciation textbook as the quintessential example of musical Romanticism. Although premiered in 1830, just three years after Beethoven's death, some of its novel features seem to point far into the future, building on Beethoven's own innovations. (Berlioz briefly alludes to the Ninth Symphony in the *Symphonie*'s third movement, which owes a debt to the "Pastoral" Symphony as well.) Beethoven had found remarkable ways of unifying large, multi-movement works, especially in his Fifth and Ninth symphonies, by recycling motives. Such "cyclicism" had a profound impact on Romantic composers, who took the concept even further: the musical materials were ingeniously transformed. One strategy Berlioz uses to unify the *Symphonie fantastique* is to have a melody, which he calls an *idée fixe*, appear in each of the five movements, sometimes in quite different guises.

This purely musical technique—thematic transformation—supports an extra-musical, programmatic, literary, and ultimately personal goal. Romanticism saw a new relationship to literature. Berlioz adored the works of Shakespeare and Virgil in particular, and this found expression not only in his symphonic works and operas, but also in his delightful memoirs and other writings. In the *Symphonie fantastique*, Berlioz tells a story. He devised a program (excerpted below) that was to be handed out at the performances. Indeed, the flyer states that distribution of the program to the audience is "indispensable for a complete understanding of the dramatic outline of the work." At a time before programs were regularly given out at concerts, such an idea was unusual. (Berlioz also had the story printed in advance in various newspapers.) Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony is often pointed to as an earlier programmatic model. But Beethoven was quite clear about what he was doing—he wrote in sketches for the work: "more an expression of feeling than painting" and "painting carried too far in instrumental music loses its effect." In other words, Beethoven and most previous composers sought to express and convey an atmosphere, not to be realistic. Berlioz wanted it both ways—he wanted to express emotions and feelings but also to tell a story,

much as an opera did. He did not shy away from representing concrete events in his music.

ROMANTIC PASSIONS

Berlioz chose not any old story: it was autobiographical. The subjectivity of the Romantic artist is a commonplace—the urge for self-expression and release. The Symphony is called “Episode in the Life of an Artist,” and that young artist is clearly Berlioz himself. His passion for Shakespeare inspired him in September 1827 to attend performances at the Paris Odéon Theater of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* that featured the young Irish actress Harriet Smithson. He soon fell hopelessly in love, even though he could barely understand a word of the English-language productions. “By the third act, half suffocated by emotion,” he wrote of Smithson’s portrayal of Juliet, “with the grip of an iron hand upon my heart, I cried out to myself, ‘I am lost! I am lost!’”

The initial course of this passion (to cut to the chase: they later married, but eventually divorced) coincided with the genesis of the *Symphonie fantastique* and left its mark on the story. Berlioz heard gossip, for example, that Miss Smithson was having an affair with her manager. This led to real flights of Romantic fancy in the Symphony. Berlioz has his musical “hero” take an overdose of opium (then very much in fashion among artists as evident in De Quincey’s *Confessions of an Opium Eater*), but this induces a “bad trip” in which he murders his former beloved, is sentenced to be executed, and dreams of a wild witches’ Sabbath.

This combination of sex, drugs, and the Gothic was also typically Romantic and Berlioz brings it all off with startling brilliance. From the very first performance, in December 1830, the final two movements—the execution march and witches’ Sabbath—have proved the most popular. Berlioz had, in fact, written the “March to the Scaffold” some years earlier for an unfinished opera and decided to incorporate it in the Symphony by adding a brief coda in which we hear the *idée fixe*, followed by the slice of the guillotine, the head bouncing to the ground, and the cheers of the crowd. It is all very graphic and wonderful.

A NEW WORLD OF SOUND

There is another musical point that helps to define the extraordinary historical importance of this Symphony: the sound world that Berlioz creates. The composer’s own instrument was the guitar and perhaps that skewed his way of thinking of chords and colors. The great 20th-century French composer Olivier Messiaen once gave a summary of some thousand years of musical history in which he remarked that composers “began to be aware of the field of timbre [pure musical sound] with Berlioz, the father of modern orchestration. Berlioz was the first to understand the role of timbre and specific timbre, for previously—I’m thinking of Bach and his contemporaries—timbres were interchangeable. ... [Berlioz’s] music is full of absolutely irreplaceable timbres. I’ll cite you a wonderful example: the tolling of the bell at the end of the *Symphonie fantastique*.”

We tend to think of music primarily in terms of the nature of melody and rhythm, but here Messiaen points to a crucial dimension of music whose importance is sheer sound. Berlioz was a master conductor and author of a famous treatise on orchestration. He often wrote for enormous ensembles—he at one point specified 220 players for the *Symphonie fantastique*—and used individual instruments with extreme precision, both

with respect to the ones he calls for and how he asks them to play. He employs some unusual ones: cornets, English horn, the small E-flat clarinet, ophicleides (which are like tubas), and the church bells Messiaen so admired. Even the more familiar instruments are asked to produce special effects with mutes, slides, and various bow or blowing techniques.

In the visual arts we recognize that certain painters produce much of their power not from the subjects they paint, or even from the formal design, but from color and texture. Just as a black and white photograph of an Impressionist painting tends to lose crucial aspects of its effect, so, too, a piano arrangement of Berlioz's Symphony would inevitably do the work a greater injustice than one of a Beethoven symphony. (That Liszt made just such a keyboard transcription of the *Symphonie fantastique* in 1833, and that Robert Schumann could write a brilliant review of the Symphony based only on this arrangement, speaks to the imaginative powers of all three composers.)

It should be noted that Berlioz revised the Symphony many times before its first publication in 1845 (Liszt's arrangement was the only printed source available for years), and that in the process he significantly changed the orchestration, as well as some of the formal elements of the piece. We are not exactly sure what the music sounded like at the 1830 premiere, and it may not have been quite as bold and imaginative as the piece we now know so well.

A CLOSER LOOK: BERLIOZ'S PROGRAM

Berlioz also wrote many versions of the program for the *Symphonie fantastique*, which differ in minor as well as significant ways. The earliest one appeared in selected newspapers in advance of the work's premiere, but was different from what was actually distributed at the concert, and different still from ones used on later occasions. In 1832 Berlioz wrote a sequel to the Symphony called *Lélio, or the Return to Life*, which was meant to be performed on the same concert after the *Symphonie fantastique*. In this case the entire earlier symphony is cast under the haze of a drug-induced fantasy from which the "hero" emerges at the start of *Lélio*.

Below is a condensed version of the program published in the first printed edition of the full score of the Symphony in 1845.

The composer's intention has been to develop, insofar as they contain musical possibilities, various situations in the life of an artist. The outline of the instrumental drama, which lacks the help of words, needs to be explained in advance. The following program should thus be considered as the spoken text of an opera, serving to introduce the musical movements, whose character and expression it motivates.

First Movement: Daydreams, Passions The composer imagines that a young musician, troubled by that spiritual sickness which a famous writer has called *the emptiness of passions*, sees for the first time a woman who possesses all the charms of the ideal being he has dreamed of, and falls desperately in love with her. ... The beloved vision never appears to the artist's mind except in association with a musical idea, in which he perceives the same character—impassioned, yet refined and diffident—that he attributes to the object of his love. This melodic image and its model pursue him unceasingly like a

double *idée fixe* [fixed idea]. That is why the tune at the beginning of the first **Allegro** constantly recurs in every movement of the Symphony. ...

Second Movement: A Ball The artist is placed in the most varied circumstances: amid *the tumult of a party*; in peaceful contemplation of the beauty of nature—but everywhere, in town, in the meadows, the beloved vision appears before him, bringing trouble to his soul.

Third Movement: In the Meadows One evening in the country, he hears in the distance two shepherds playing *a pastoral song*; this duet, the effect of his surroundings, the slight rustle of the trees gently stirred by the wind ... all combine to bring an unfamiliar peace to his heart, and a more cheerful color to his thoughts. He thinks of his loneliness; he hopes soon to be alone no longer. ... But suppose she deceives him! This mixture of hope and fear, these thoughts of happiness disturbed by a dark foreboding, form the subject of the **Adagio**. At the end, one of the shepherds again takes up the song. The other no longer answers. ... Sounds of distant thunder ... solitude ... silence.

Fourth Movement: March to the Scaffold The artist, now knowing beyond all doubt that his love is not returned, poisons himself with opium. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to take his life, plunges him into a sleep accompanied by the most horrible visions. He dreams that he has killed the woman he loved, and that he is condemned to death, brought to the scaffold, and witnesses *his own execution*. The procession is accompanied by a march that is sometimes fierce and somber, sometimes stately and brilliant. ... At the end of the march, the first four bars of the *idée fixe* recur like a last thought of love.

Fifth Movement: Sabbath Night's Dream He sees himself at the witches' sabbath, in the midst of a ghastly crowd of spirits, sorcerers, and monsters of every kind, assembled for his funeral. Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, far-off shouts to which other shouts seem to reply. The beloved tune appears once more, but it has lost its character of refinement and diffidence; it has become nothing but a common dance tune, trivial and grotesque; it is she who has come to the sabbath. ... A roar of joy greets her arrival. ... She mingles with the devilish orgy. ... Funeral knell, ludicrous parody of the *Dies irae*, *Sabbath round dance*. The sabbath dance and the *Dies irae* in combination.

—Christopher H. Gibbs

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