

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Premiered December 5, 1830, Salle du Conservatoire in Paris, conducted by François-Antoine Habeneck.

Scored for two flutes (second doubling on piccolo), two oboes (second doubling on English horn), two clarinets (first doubling on E-flat clarinet), four bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, two timpanists and four percussionists (bass drum, chimes, pair of cymbals, field drum, suspended cymbal), two harps and strings (approx. 49 minutes).

When Berlioz saw Shakespeare performed in 1827 (see notes on *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, above), he was astounded by more than the English playwright's drama. He also fell passionately in love with the lead actress - Harriet Smithson - as he indicated in his memoirs: "I spent some months in the kind of hopeless stupor of which I have only faintly indicated the nature and the cause, dreaming ceaselessly of Shakespeare and the fair Ophelia (Miss Smithson) of whom all Paris raved." (For her part, Smithson dismissed the letters of her admirer as overly impassioned.)

Berlioz's passion for Smithson found a musical outlet in his *Symphonie fantastique*, which was largely composed in 1830. (It also borrows from earlier works and underwent several revisions before its publication in 1845). Although up to that time they had never met, he re-imagined his experience with Harriet as a series of dream-like episodes in the life of an artist, and wrote five movements to illustrate each. At the premiere, he insisted on distributing pamphlets that described these episodes - much to the befuddlement of the audience.

Berlioz's supreme inspiration for pure instrumental music was Beethoven, who he discovered thanks to concerts organized by the conductor Habeneck at the Paris *Conservatoire*. Conservative French tastes were slow to appreciate this Teutonic composer's long and odd works, but Berlioz became an immediate convert. He used the symphonic models that Beethoven provided as vessels to carry his own dramatic and narrative ideas. Yet for *Fantastique* he stretched and distorted these traditional forms and added vivid orchestral effects drawn from opera. In addition, he devised a single melody, called an *idée fixe*, which appears in one guise or another in each movement. This tune represents the artist's obsession with his beloved, and its transformation over the course of the symphony creates an ongoing narrative.

The first movement, *Rêveries. Passions* (Visions. Passions), depicts an artist who takes opium and falls into a dreamlike state where he thinks of his beloved. It opens with a gentle slow introduction, whose fragmented melodies and frequent harmonic digressions suggest a melancholy fantasy. The following allegro section begins with the *idée fixe*, played by the violins, which represents the artist's obsession with his beloved. Short repeated notes in the accompaniment suggest the artist's passionate excitement. The central development section is less concerned with the expected working out of motives or contrapuntal devices, and more concerned with creating rapid (some might say crazed) shifts in mood.

Movement two, *Un Bal* (A Ball), suggests both the scene of a dance and the artist's confused inner world. It opens with a waltz played by the strings and two harps. The central section shows the composer's ability to use the orchestra to paint a scene. According to the program, "amidst the confusion of a brilliant festival, he finds the loved one again." The beloved is represented by the same *idée fixe*, now transformed into a gentle dance. The accompanying strings occasionally play fragments of the opening melody, as if to suggest the ongoing festivities occurring in the background.

Scène aux champs (In the Countryside) marks the dramatic turning point in the symphony. The artist, having received reasons to hope for a union, begins in a "smiling" mood while walking in the countryside. Suddenly, he sees an image of his beloved and falls prey to dark thoughts: what if she should prove false to him? The movement opens with a melody that alternates between English horn and oboe, two double reed instruments that suggest shepherds playing to their flocks in the hills. The stormier middle section opens with the cellos and basses playing a stern recitative in pointed rhythms, to which the woodwinds reply with a gentle statement of the *idée fixe*. Whether the section represents clouds darkening the landscape or the artist's own disquieted thoughts is left ambiguous. A succession of climactic diminished 7th chords quickly dissipates into a restatement of the pastoral melody, but the mood of the movement has been transformed. It ends with a restatement of the English horn melody, which is answered this time only by the ominous rumblings of the timpani.

Marche au supplice (Procession to the scaffold), draws from a march that the composer wrote in 1826 for *Les francs-juges* (The Free Judges), an aborted opera project. The artist has murdered his beloved in a fit of jealousy. For this crime, a crowd is now leading him to a guillotine to be executed! The gradual build of texture, and the highly distorted ternary form, in which the reprise of the opening quickly breaks into a driving coda, both serve to show the artist's inexorable progression to his grisly fate. The end of the movement contains one of the most graphic instances of tone painting in symphonic literature. A brief fragment of the *idée fixe* in the solo clarinet halts the push toward a climactic conclusion, as if the artist sees one last vision of his beloved. A curt minor chord and two notes plucked by the strings suggest the descent of the guillotine blade and the artist's head rolling into a basket. An extended, triumphant major chord concludes: the crowd's roar of approval.

Berlioz is not content merely to kill his hero; in order to purge himself of his obsession over Harriet he also mocks him at the grave. *Songe d'une nuit du Sabbat* [Dream of a witches' Sabbath], the final movement of the symphony, depicts witches and evil spirits who flock to his lifeless body in order to hold a twisted version of a requiem mass. The extended introduction begins with pure atmosphere: the upper strings are divided into eight different parts to play a ghostly diminished 7th chord. The E-flat clarinet (a higher and shriller version of the standard clarinet), accompanied only by percussion, plays the *idée fixe*, now transformed into a hideous jig. Berlioz's concert pamphlet states that the deceased's beloved herself has arrived to partake in the farce. The following section, which opens with a stark tonic and dominant played by bells, quotes the Latin hymn "Dies Irae" (Day of Wrath). This is a sequence (that is, a composed Gregorian chant melody set to a new text for use in liturgy) that was most likely written in the thirteenth century and is used in Catholic masses for the dead. The coda contains some of the symphony's most bizarre instrumental effects. *Col legno* (in

which string players hit their strings with the wooden part of their bows) combined with trilling winds create a brittle sound that easily lends itself to interpretation as a vivid image (dancing skeletons). Later the “Dies Irae” melody is presented in the low brass and accompanied by rumbling swells played the percussion and strings.

Although now nearly 200 years old, *Symphonie fantastique* remains an audacious and thrilling work, and its effect on the following century was profound. Its exploration of orchestral color and its use of a narrative and dramatic program in orchestral music influenced composers for many years to come. (The piece certainly had a powerful influence on Smithson, who married Berlioz in 1833 despite the fact that she spoke no French and he spoke no English! The virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt was one of the witnesses to the ceremony held at the British Embassy. The couple had one child - Louis Berlioz - but separated in 1840.)

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique* on April 18, 2004 with Itzhak Perlman conducting.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*, Paul Paray conducting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Mercury Living Presence B0005304

Program note by David Heetderks, doctoral student in Music Theory at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance.