

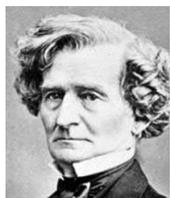
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April 1/2

BEYOND THE SCORE: BERLIOZ'S 'SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE'

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is one of the artistic monuments of the Romantic Age — a virtual treatise of revolutionary orchestral sonorities, one of the first intrusions of psychology and dream states into music, a daring experiment in rhythm, melody and form, a pioneering example of a purely instrumental work structured around a continuous narrative and storytelling. The *Symphonie fantastique* is a remarkable and revelatory achievement for a 27-year-old artist. "I am for the music you call *free*," Berlioz wrote to a friend in 1856. "Yes, free and wild and sovereign; I want it to conquer everything, to assimilate everything to itself."



HECTOR BERLIOZ

**Born December 11, 1803
in Côte-Saint-André,
France; died March 8,
1869 in Paris.**

SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE, OP. 14 (1830)

- First performed on December 5, 1830 at the Paris Conservatoire, conducted by François Habeneck.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 11, 1972 with Nobuo Takahashi conducting. Subsequently performed in 1980, 1988, 1999, and most recently on October 27 & 28, 2012 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 50 minutes)

By 1830, when he turned 27, Hector Berlioz had won the *Prix de Rome* and gained a certain notoriety among the fickle Parisian public for his

perplexingly original compositions. Hector Berlioz was also madly in love. The object of his amorous passion was an English actress of middling ability, one Harriet Smithson, whom the composer first saw when a touring English theatrical company performed Shakespeare in Paris in 1827. During the ensuing three years, this romance was entirely one-sided, since the young composer never met Harriet, but only knew her across the footlights as Juliet and Ophelia. He sent her such frantic love letters that she never responded to any of them, fearful of encouraging a madman. Berlioz, distraught and unable to work or sleep or eat, wandered the countryside around Paris until he dropped from exhaustion and had to be retrieved by friends.

Berlioz was still nursing his unrequited love for Harriet in 1830 when, full-blown Romantic that he was, his emotional state served as the germ for a composition based on a musical "Episode from the Life of an Artist," as he

subtitled the *Symphonie fantastique*. In this work, the artist visualizes his beloved through an opium-induced trance, first in his dreams, then at a ball, in the country, at his execution and, finally, as a participant in a witches' sabbath. She is represented by a musical theme that appears in each of the five movements, an *idée fixe* (a term Berlioz borrowed from the just-emerging field of psychology to denote an unhealthy obsession) that is transformed to suit its imaginary musical surroundings. The *idée fixe* is treated kindly through the first three movements, but after the artist has lost his head for love (literally — the string pizzicati followed by drum rolls and brass fanfares at the very end of the *March to the Scaffold* graphically represent the fall of the guillotine blade and the ceremony of the formal execution), the *idée fixe* is transmogrified into a jeering, strident parody of itself in the finale in music that is still original and disturbing almost two centuries after its creation. The sweet-to-sour changes in the *idée fixe* (heard first in the opening movement on unison violins and flute at the beginning of the fast tempo after a slow introduction) reflect Berlioz's future relationship with his beloved, though, of course, he had no way to know it in 1830. Berlioz did in fact marry his Harriet–Ophelia–Juliet in 1833 (when news of the nuptials drifted back across the channel, one waggish London critic wrote, “We trust this marriage will insure the happiness of an amiable young woman, as well as secure us against her reappearances on the English boards”), but their initial bliss faded quickly, and they were virtually estranged within a decade.

The composer gave the following program as a guide to the *Symphonie fantastique*: “A young musician of morbid sensibility and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit of amorous despair. The narcotic dose, too weak to result in death, plunges him into a heavy sleep

accompanied by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, sentiments and recollections are translated in his sick brain into musical thoughts and images. The beloved woman herself has become for him a melody, like a fixed idea which he finds and hears everywhere.

“PART I: *Reveries and Passions*. He first recalls that uneasiness of soul, that *vague des passions*, those moments of causeless melancholy and joy, which he experienced before seeing her whom he loves; then the volcanic love with which she suddenly inspired him, his moments of delirious anguish, of jealous fury, his returns to loving tenderness, and his religious consolations.

“PART II: *A Ball*. He sees his beloved at a ball, in the midst of the tumult of a brilliant fête.

“PART III: *Scene in the Country*. One summer evening in the country he hears two shepherds playing a *ranz-des-vaches* in alternate dialogue; this pastoral duet, the scene around him, the light rustling of the trees gently swayed by the breeze, some hopes he has recently conceived, all combine to restore an unwonted calm to his heart and impart a more cheerful coloring to his thoughts; but she appears once more, his heart stops beating, he is agitated with painful presentiments; if she were to betray him! ... One of the shepherds resumes his artless melody, the other no longer answers him. The sun sets ... the sound of distant thunder ... solitude ... silence ...

“PART IV: *March to the Scaffold*. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death, and led to execution. The procession advances to the tones of a march which is now somber and wild, now brilliant and solemn, in which the dull sound of the tread of heavy feet follows without transition upon the most resounding outburst. At the end, the *idée fixe* reappears for an instant, like a last

love-thought interrupted by the fatal stroke.

“PART V: *Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath.*

He sees himself at the Witches’ Sabbath, in the midst of a frightful group of ghosts, magicians and monsters of all sorts, who have come together for his obsequies. He hears strange noises, groans, ringing laughter, shrieks to which other shrieks seem to reply. The *beloved melody* again reappears, but it has lost its noble and timid character; it has become an ignoble, trivial and grotesque dance-tune; it is *she* who comes to the Witches’ Sabbath.... Howlings of joy at her arrival ... she takes part in the diabolic orgy ... Funeral knells, burlesque parody on the *Dies Irae* [the ancient ‘*Day of Wrath*’ chant from the

Roman Catholic Requiem Mass for the Dead]. Witches’ Dance. The Witches’ Dance and the *Dies Irae* together.”

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, tenor saxophone, four horns, cornet, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, glockenspiel, xylophone, snare drum, bass drum, church bells, celesta, harp, piano and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.