

## Hector Berlioz

Born December 11, 1803, Côte-Saint-André, France. Died March 8, 1869, Paris, France.

### ***Symphonie fantastique* (Episode in the Life of an Artist), Op. 14**

Although we generally don't think of it that way, this is the most amazing first symphony ever composed. Few of us today, as at the first performance in 1830, notice the word symphony in the title; we are much more taken with the fantastic part—the idea of unbridled passion, a wild opium dream, and the romantic notion of self-expression—or with Berlioz's subtitle, which promises a glimpse into the creative mind.

Berlioz knew audiences well; he provided a title for each of his five movements and distributed a descriptive program note to tell the story behind the music. The question he begged, however, wasn't whether a few words might help someone understand the music, but whether the music made any sense without them. Even Berlioz eventually changed his mind. The issue wasn't new. Beethoven had already famously addressed it by giving descriptive titles to the movements of his *Pastoral* Symphony. (And there are other less well known precedents, some dating from a hundred years earlier.) Beethoven hedged a bit, calling his work “more an expression of feeling than painting”; Berlioz was unequivocal—at first.

On April 16, 1830, he wrote to his friend Humbert Ferrand that he had “just written the last note” of his new symphony. “Here is its subject,” he continued, “which will be published in a program and distributed in the hall on the day of the concert.” Then follows the sketch of a story as famous as any in the history of music: the tale of a man who falls desperately in love with a woman who embodies all he is seeking; is tormented by recurring thoughts of her and, in a fit of despair, poisons himself with opium; and, finally, in a horrible narcotic vision, dreams that he is condemned to death and witnesses his own execution. It must have been shocking in 1830; it's strong stuff even today. For Berlioz it struck very close to home. On September 11, 1827, Berlioz first laid eyes on Harriet Smithson, the young actress playing Ophelia and Juliet with an English Shakespearean troupe then visiting Paris—that moment the *Symphonie fantastique* was launched, and throughout its composition Berlioz was obsessed with Henriette, as he referred to her, even though they wouldn't meet until 1832, two years after the premiere of the work she inspired.

A few days before the premiere, Berlioz's full-scale program was printed in the *Revue musicale*, and, on the evening of the performance, December 5, 1830, two thousand copies of a leaflet containing the same narrative were distributed in the concert hall, according to Felix Mendelssohn, who would remember that night for the rest of his life because he hated the music so much. No one was unmoved. It's hard to know which provoked the greater response—Berlioz's radical music or its bold story. It's possible that people focus on the program because the music is so much harder to explain.

But for Berlioz, who always believed in the bond between music and ideas, the two were inseparable. In an often-quoted footnote to the program as it was published with the score in 1845, he insists that “the distribution of this program to the audience, at concerts where this symphony is to be performed, is indispensable for a complete understanding of the dramatic outline of the work.” But Berlioz changed his mind. Several years later, after he had written *Lélio*, the bizarre sequel to his *Symphonie*

*fantastique*, a new version of the program appeared, allowing that it should be distributed only when both *Lélio* and the *Symphonie fantastique* were “executed dramatically” together, and that, if the symphony alone was played in a concert the program was no longer necessary. “The symphony by itself (the author hopes),” wrote Berlioz, “can afford musical interest independent of any dramatic purpose.” Why did Berlioz change his mind? Possibly in defense of the music, which he thought compelling enough to stand on its own. Probably because his own *Harold in Italy*, a program symphony without a program, had subsequently proved that titles were description enough.

The debate continues. In his landmark 1950 monograph on Berlioz, Jacques Barzun advocates relegating the program “to the role of promotional aid.” But rare is the concertgoer today who comes to this work innocent of the sensational story it has to tell and who is truly able to let the music speak for itself.

Even in 1830, all the fuss over the program couldn't disguise the boldness of the music. Berlioz's new symphony sounded like no other music yet written. Its hallmarks can be quickly listed: five movements, each with its own title (as in Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*), and the use of a signature motive, the *idée fixe* representing Harriet Smithson that recurs in each movement and is transformed dramatically at the end. But what of the staggeringly inventive use of the orchestra, creating entirely new sounds from the same instruments that had been playing together for years; or the daring, unexpected harmonies; or even the melodies that are still, to this day, unlike anyone else's. There's hardly a page of this score that doesn't contain something distinctive and surprising. Some of it can be explained—Berlioz developed his idiosyncratic sense of harmony, for example, not at the piano, since he never learned to play more than a few basic chords, but by improvising on the guitar. But explanation doesn't diminish our astonishment.

None of this was lost on Berlioz's colleagues. According to Barzun, one can date Berlioz's “unremitting influence on nineteenth-century composers” from the date of the first performance of the *Symphonie fantastique*. In a famous essay on Berlioz, Robert Schumann relished the work's novelty; remembering how, as a child, he loved turning music upside down to find strange new patterns before his eyes, Schumann commented that “right side up, this symphony resembled such inverted music.” He was, at first, dumbfounded, but “at last struck with wonderment.” Mendelssohn was confused, and perhaps disappointed: “He is really a cultured, agreeable man and yet he composes so very badly,” he wrote in a letter to his mother. For Liszt, the only admissible question was whether Berlioz was “merely a talented composer or a real genius. For us,” he concluded, “there can be no doubt.” (He voted for genius.) When Wagner called the *Symphonie fantastique* “a work that would have made Beethoven smile,” he was probably right. But he continued: “The first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony would seem an act of pure kindness to me after the *Symphonie fantastique*.”

What Wagner and many later musicians failed to acknowledge was that Beethoven is behind nearly every measure of the *Symphonie fantastique*—it was Berlioz's discovery of Beethoven that prompted him to write symphonies in the first place. (There are two more which followed shortly: *Harold in Italy* in 1834 and *Romeo and Juliet* in 1839.) On the surface, Berlioz seems to forecast Mahler, for whom a symphony meant “the building up of a world, using every available technical means.” Indeed, the *Symphonie fantastique* did shelter a lot of previously composed material under Berlioz's new

literary program, and it did, for its time, stretch the definition of the symphony to the limit. But it didn't shatter the model set by Beethoven. For it was a conscious effort on Berlioz's part to tell his fantastic tale in a way that Beethoven would have understood, and to put even his most outrageous ideas into the enduring framework of the classical symphony.

A parting word about Harriet Smithson, who started it all. She finally met Berlioz on December 10, 1832, the day after the first performance of the complete *Episode in the Life of an Artist*, which contained the *Symphonie fantastique* as its first half and *Lélio* as its second. After a rocky courtship, they married the following October. Within a few years they were miserable; they finally separated in 1844. *Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

### **Composition History**

Berlioz composed this work between January and April 1830. The first performance was given on December 5, 1830, in Paris. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and two cornets, three trombones and two ophicleides (traditionally played by tubas), timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, low-pitched bells, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-nine minutes.

### **Performance History**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 2 and 3, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription performances were given at Orchestra Hall on January 16, 17, and 18, 2003, with Charles Dutoit conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 20, 1943, with Efrem Kurtz conducting, and most recently on July 25, 2003, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

## **Berlioz's Original Program Notes**

For the first performances of the *Symphonie fantastique*, Berlioz provided the following program, indicating that it was indispensable for a complete understanding of the dramatic outline of the work.

### **Part One: Dreams—Passions**

The author imagines that a young musician, afflicted with that moral disease that a well-known writer calls the *vague des passions*, sees for the first time a woman who embodies all the charms of the ideal being he has imagined in his dreams, and he falls desperately in love with her. Through an odd whim, whenever the beloved image appears before the mind's eye of the artist, it is linked with a musical thought whose character, passionate but at the same time noble and shy, he finds similar to the one he attributes to his beloved.

This melodic image and the model it reflects pursue him incessantly like a double *idée fixe*. That is the reason for the constant appearance, in every movement of the symphony, of the melody that begins the first Allegro. The passage from this state of melancholy reverie, interrupted by a few fits of groundless joy, to one of frenzied passion, with its gestures of fury, of jealousy, its return of tenderness, its tears, its religious consolations—this is the subject of the first movement.

### **Part Two: A Ball**

The artist finds himself in the most varied situations—in the midst of *the tumult of a party*, in the peaceful contemplation of the beauties of nature; but everywhere, in town, in the country, the beloved image appears before him and disturbs his peace of mind.

### **Part Three: A Scene in the Country**

Finding himself one evening in the country, he hears in the distance two shepherds piping a *ranz des vaches* in dialogue. This pastoral duet, the scenery, the quiet rustling of the trees gently brushed by the wind, the hopes he has recently found some reason to entertain—all concur in affording his heart an unaccustomed calm, and in giving a more cheerful color to his ideas. He reflects upon his isolation; he hopes that his loneliness will soon be over.—But what if she were deceiving him!—This mingling of hope and fear, these ideas of happiness disturbed by black presentiments, form the subject of the Adagio. At the end, one of the shepherds again takes up the *ranz des vaches*; the other no longer replies.—Distant sound of thunder—loneliness—silence.

### **Part Four: March to the Scaffold**

Convinced that his love is unappreciated, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a sleep accompanied by the most horrible visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned and led to the scaffold, and that he is witnessing *his own execution*. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a march that is now somber and fierce, now brilliant and solemn, in which the muffled noise of heavy steps gives way without transition to the noisiest clamor. At the end of the march the first four measures of the *idée fixe* reappear, like a last thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow.

### **Part Five: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath**

He sees himself at the sabbath, in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, come together for his funeral. Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries which other cries seem to answer. The beloved melody appears again, but it has lost its character of nobility and shyness; it is no more than a dance tune, mean, trivial, and grotesque: it is she, coming to join the sabbath.—A roar of joy at her arrival.—She takes part in the devilish orgy.—Funeral knell, burlesque parody of the *Dies irae* [a hymn sung in the funeral rites of the Catholic Church], *sabbath round-dance*. The sabbath round and the *Dies irae* are combined.