Hector Berlioz

"Symphonie fantastique," Episode from the life of an artist, Opus 14

HECTOR BERLIOZ was born at La Côte-St-André (near Grenoble), Department of Isère, France, on December 11, 1803, and died in Paris on March 8, 1869. He composed his "Symphonie fantastique"—his first major work—in 1830, though a few of the musical ideas derive from some of his earlier compositions (see below). François-Antoine Habeneck led the first performance on Decem?ber 5, 1830, in Paris. Habeneck led the premiere of the revised version on December 9, 1832, also in Paris, on which occasion Berlioz was one of the drummers.

BERLIOZ'S "SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE" IS SCORED for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two cornets, two trumpets, three trombones, two tubas (originally ophicleides), timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, bells, two harps, and strings.

On December 9, 1832, in true storybook fashion—and as vividly recounted in his own *Memoirs*—Hector Berlioz won the heart of his beloved Harriet Smithson, whom he had never met, with a concert including the *Symphonie fantastique*, for which she had unknowingly served as inspiration when the composer fell hopelessly in love with her some years before. The two met the next day and were married on the following October 4. The unfortunate but true conclusion to this seemingly happy tale is that Berlioz and his "Henriette," as he called her, were formally separated in 1844.*

Berlioz saw the Irish actress Harriet Smithson for the first time on September 11, 1827, when she played Ophelia in *Hamlet* with a troupe of English actors visiting Paris. By the time of her departure from Paris in 1829, Berlioz had made himself known to her through letters but they did not meet. By February 6, 1830, he had hoped to begin his "Episode from the life of an artist," a symphony reflecting the ardor of his "infernal passion," but his creative capabilities remained paralyzed until that April, when gossip (later discredited) linking Harriet with her manager provided the impetus for him to conceive a program that ended with the transformation of her previously unsullied image into a participant in the infernal witches' sabbath whose depiction makes up the last movement of the *Symphonie fantastique*. The work had its first performance on December 5, 1830, paired on a concert with Berlioz's Prix de Rome-winning cantata *La Mort de Sardanapale*, which represented his fourth attempt at that prize.

Before Berlioz returned to Paris from Rome (where he was required to live and study while supported by his Prix de Rome stipend) in November 1832, he had subjected the second and third movements of his symphony to considerable revision. At the fateful concert of December 9, 1832, the *Fantastique* was paired with its sequel, the now virtually unknown *Lélio, or The Return to Life*, the "return" representing the artist's awakening to his senses from the opium dream depicted in the *Symphonie fantastique*'s program. Berlioz, overwhelmed by the coincidence of Harriet's being back in Paris at the same time, successfully conspired to provide her with a ticket to the concert; and so it was, when the speaker in *Lélio* declaimed the line "Oh, if only I could find her, the Juliet, the Ophelia, for whom my heart cries out...," that Harriet found herself as taken with Berlioz as he with her.

And what of the music itself? Though he ultimately came to feel that the titles of the individual movements spoke well enough for themselves, the composer originally specified that his own detailed program—a version of which appears on page 58—be distributed to the audience at the first performance. For present purposes, it is worth quoting from that program's opening paragraph, with its reference to the symphony's principal musical theme:

> A young musician of morbidly sensitive temperament and fiery imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit of lovesick despair. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a deep slumber accompanied by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, his emotions, his memories are transformed in his sick mind into musical thoughts and images. The loved one herself has become a melody to him, an *idée fixe* as it were, that he encounters and hears everywhere.

The *idée fixe*, as much a psychological fixation as a musical one, is introduced in the violins and flute at the start of the first movement's Allegro section, the melody in fact having been lifted by the composer from his own 1828 cantata *Herminie*, which took second prize in his second attempt at the Prix de Rome.* In his score, Berlioz calls for a repeat of this section, presumably to ensure that the *idée fixe* be properly implanted in the ear, and mind, of his listeners. Its appearance "everywhere" in the course of the symphony includes a ball in the midst of a brilliant party (for sheer atmosphere, one of the most extraordinarily beautiful movements in Berlioz's orchestral output); during a quiet summer evening in the country (where it appears against a background texture of agitated strings, leading to a

dramatic outburst before the restoration of calm); in the artist's last thoughts before he is executed, in a dream, for the murder of his beloved (at the end of the March to the Scaffold, whose characterization by Berlioz as "now somber and ferocious, now brilliant and solemn" suggests a more generally grim treatment than this music, played to death as an orchestral showpiece, usually receives); and during his posthumous participation in a wild witches' sabbath, following his execution, at which the melody representing his beloved appears, grotesquely transformed, to join a "devilish orgy" whose diabolically frenzied climax combines the *Dies irae* from the Mass for the Dead with the witches' round dance.

Today, nearly 180 years since the premiere, it is easy to forget that when the *Symphonie fantastique* was new, Beethoven's symphonies had just recently reached France, Beethoven himself having died only in 1827, just half a year before the twenty-three-year-old Berlioz first saw Harriet Smithson. And Berlioz's five-movement symphony, with its much more specific programmatic intent, is already a far cry even from Beethoven's own *Pastoral* Symphony of 1808. David Cairns, whose translation of Berlioz's *Memoirs* is the one to read, has written that "Berlioz in the 'Fantastic' symphony was speaking a new language: not only a new language of orchestral sound...but also a new language of feeling,...the outward and visible sign of which was the unheard of fastidiousness with which nuances of expression were marked in the score."

Countless aspects of this score are representative of Berlioz's individual musical style. Among them are his rhythmically flexible, characteristically long-spun melodies, of which the *idée fixe* is a prime example; the quick (and equally characteristic) juxtaposition of contrasting harmonies, as in the rapid-fire chords near the end of the March; his precise concern with dynamic markings (e.g., a clarinet solo in the Scene in the Country begins at a *pppp* dynamic, the sort of marking we normally associate with such much later composers as Tchaikovsky or Mahler); and the telling and often novel use of particular instruments, whether the harps at the Ball, the unaccompanied English horn in dialogue with the offstage oboe at the start of the Scene in the Country, the drums, used to create distant thunder (with four players specified) at the end of that same Scene, and then immediately called upon to chillingly different effect at the start of the March, or the quick tapping of bows on strings to suggest the dancing skeletons of the Witches' Sabbath. And all of this becomes even more striking when one considers that the *Symphonie fantastique* is the composer's earliest big orchestral work, composed when he was not yet thirty, and that the great, mature works—*Roméo et Juliette*, *The Damnation of Faust*, the operas *Les Troyens* and *Béatrice et Bénédict* among them—would follow only years and decades later.

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