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Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

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


On December 9, 1832—two years after its first performance, 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 the two 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 depicted in the last movement of the Symphonie fantastique. Though Berlioz ultimately came to feel that the titles of the five individual movements—I. Reveries, passions; II. A Ball; III. Scene in the Country; IV. March to the Scaffold; V. Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath—spoke well enough for themselves, he originally specified that his own detailed program 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. Its appearance “everywhere” in the course of the symphony includes a ball in the midst of a brilliant party; 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); 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, more than 185 years after its first performance, 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. With its much more specific programmatic intent, Berlioz’s work is already a far cry even from Beethoven’s own Pastoral Symphony of 1808. David Cairns 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.”

Countless aspects of this score are representative of Berlioz’s individual musical style, among them his rhythmically flexible, characteristically long-spun melodies, of which the idée fixe is a prime example; the quick juxtaposition of contrasting harmonies, as in the rapid-fire chords at the end of the March; 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, or the quick tapping of bows on strings to suggest the dancing skeletons of the Witches’ Sabbath; and his precise concern with dynamic markings. 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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