

Symphonie fantastique: Episode de la vie d'un artiste (Fantastic Sym- phony: Episode in the Life of an Artist)

Hector Berlioz

Hector Berlioz's musical inclinations were not particularly encouraged in his youth. He was sent to Paris to attend medical school and, although he hated the experience, he took advantage of being in the big city to enroll himself in private musical studies and the composition curriculum at the Paris Conservatoire (beginning in 1826). The seal of approval for all Conservatoire composition students was the Prix de Rome, and in 1830 (in his fourth consecutive attempt) he was finally honored with that prize.

Earlier that same year Berlioz had already composed the work that would most consistently forge his place in posterity, the *Symphonie fantastique*. This was the first of his four symphonies, all of which leave the abstract realm of Beethoven's symphonic ideal for the programmatic terrain that would find fruition later in the 19th century in the new genre of the symphonic poem.

In Short

Born: December 11, 1803, in La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France

Died: March 8, 1869, in Paris

Work composed: 1830, incorporating material sketched previously, perhaps as early as 1819

World premiere: December 5, 1830, in Paris, by François-Antoine Habeneck conducting members of the orchestras of the Nouveautés, Théâtre-Italien, and Société des Concerts du Conservatoire; the revision unveiled December 9, 1832, again with Habeneck conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 27, 1866, Carl Bergmann, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 31, 2009, Alan Gilbert, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Vail, Colorado

Estimated duration: ca. 52 minutes

The originality of Berlioz's achievement in the *Symphonie fantastique* is simply astonishing. Certainly, programmatic symphonies had been written before — Beethoven's *Pastoral* is a famous example — but in the *Symphonie fantastique* Berlioz depicts images with such vibrant specificity that they are downright cinematic. Furthermore, Berlioz's sense of the programmatic exceeds the “merely” descriptive and enters the realm of the psychological: the image of a state of mind, one that is far from stable and that spills into hallucinations. The *Symphonie fantastique* is an extraordinary example of self-exploration and self-expression, a work of autobiography underscored by the subtitle *Episode in the Life of an Artist*.

The action of this symphony is often accompanied by an *idée fixe*, a musical theme that surfaces throughout the piece in various transformations. It is first played by flute and violins at the beginning of the opening movement's “Passions” section (following the “Reveries” introduction), and pervades the ensuing material, when the artist finds himself in a ballroom, where he waltzes with his beloved, and in the Alpine countryside, where memories of his beloved disturb his peace.

Then, under the influence of opium, he imagines himself being led to the scaffold, where he is executed for murdering his beloved, and, finally, at a Witches' Sabbath convened in honor of his death, at which the *idée fixe* now appears as a grotesque dance, heard along with a parody of the funeral chant, the *Dies Irae*.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one is offstage) and English horn, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and

two cornets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani (two players), bass drum, military drum, cymbals, church bells (offstage), two harps, and strings.

The Work at a Glance

Berlioz provided a detailed description of the “action” of his *Symphonie fantastique*. Following are excerpts, with his own capitalization and punctuation preserved:

Part One: Reveries, Passions – [A] young musician, afflicted with ... “the surge of passions,” sees for the first time a woman ... and he falls hopelessly in love with her. ... [T]he beloved image always appears in the mind’s eye of the artist linked to a musical thought whose character, passionate but also noble and reticent, he finds similar to the one he attributes to his beloved.

The melodic image and its human model pursue him incessantly like a double *idée fixe*. This 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 melancholic reverie, interrupted by a few fits of unmotivated joy, to one of delirious passion, with its movements of fury and jealousy, its return of tenderness, its tears, its religious consolation – all 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 FESTIVITY, in the peaceful contemplation of the beauties of nature; but wherever he is, in the city, in the country, the beloved image appears before him and troubles his soul.

Part Three: Scene in the Fields – Finding himself in the country at evening, he hears in the distance two shepherds piping a *ranz des vaches* in dialogue.... He reflects upon his isolation; he hopes that soon he will no longer be alone.... But what if she were deceiving him! ... This mixture 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.... The distant sound of thunder ... solitude ... silence.

Part Four: March to the Scaffold – Having become certain that his love goes unrecognized, 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 the woman he had loved, that he is condemned, 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 mediation to the most noisy clangor. 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 assembly of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, all come together for his funeral.... The beloved melody appears again, but it has lost its character of nobility and reticence; now it is no more than the tune of an ignoble dance, trivial and grotesque: it is she, come 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*, *SABBATH ROUND-DANCE*. The Sabbath round and the *Dies Irae* combined.



Berlioz in 1832