

Symphonie fantastique:* *Episode de la vie d'un artiste* *(Fantastic Symphony:* *Episode in the Life of* *an Artist), Op. 14

Hector Berlioz

There can be no doubt that Hector Berlioz was a genius, but genius does not always ensure a calm passage through life. His biography makes extraordinary reading, especially accounts lifted from his beautifully written and often hilarious *Mémoires* (which have been vividly captured in English translation by David Cairns). Berlioz's father was a physician in a town not far from Grenoble, within view of the Alps, and since it was assumed that his son would follow in the same profession, the youth's musical inclinations were largely ignored. As a result, he never learned to play more than a few chords on the piano, and his practical abilities as a performer were limited to lessons on flute and guitar — this unorthodox musical background surely contributed to the composer's nonconformist musical language. Berlioz was sent to Paris to attend medical school, hated the experience, and enrolled himself instead in private musical studies; then, beginning in 1826, in composition curriculum at the Paris Conservatoire. The seal of approval for all Conservatoire composition students was the Prix de Rome, and in 1830 (in his fourth

consecutive attempt) Berlioz was finally honored with that prize.

The work that won him this distinction, the cantata *La Mort de Sardanapale*, is long forgotten; in fact, only a fragment of it survives. Ironically, Berlioz had already composed, earlier that same year, the work that would forge his place in posterity: the *Symphonie fantastique*. It would be the first of four Berlioz 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.

The originality of Berlioz's achievement in the *Symphonie fantastique* is simply astonishing; it has been observed that this must be the most remarkable first symphony ever written (not to be rivaled in this regard until the appearance of Mahler's First, six decades later). Certainly programmatic symphonies had been written before — Beethoven's *Pastoral* is a famous example — but in the *Symphonie fantastique* the images are depicted with such vibrant specificity as to become

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: October 9, 2009, Alan Gilbert, conductor, at Suntory Hall, Tokyo

Estimated duration: ca. 53 minutes

downright cinematic. Furthermore, Berlioz's sense of the programmatic goes well beyond the merely descriptive; it enters the realm of the psychological, imaging a state of mind that is far from stable and that spills into hallucination. (It is doubtless no coincidence that the modern Berlioz revival began in the acid-tripping 1960s.) The *Symphonie fantastique* is an extraordinary example of self-exploration and self-expression, a work of autobiography underscored by the subtitle "Episode de la vie d'un artiste" ("Episode in the Life of an Artist").

The episode in question was carefully described in a program note Berlioz prepared (see sidebar, page 29), which was printed,

along with an enthusiastic recommendation, in the newspaper *Le Figaro* prior to the premiere. The action throughout is often accompanied by an *idée fixe*, a musical theme that surfaces in various transformations throughout the piece. It is first played by flute and violins at the beginning of the opening movement's "Passions" section (following the "Rêveries" introduction), and pervades the ensuing material. In succeeding movements 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. Under the influence of a narcotic drug, he imagines

Listen for ... the Bells

Berlioz calls for church bells in his *Symphonie fantastique*. While many orchestras substitute chimes, the Philharmonic uses two of its four real bells — huge bronze instruments, ranging in weight from 341 to 1,408 pounds. Principal Percussionist Christopher S. Lamb explains their history:

The story of the Philharmonic's bells goes back to a performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in Moscow on June 6, 1988, in a joint concert with the State Symphony Orchestra of the Soviet Ministry of Culture in Gorky Park. In that performance we used chimes, which sound an octave higher than the pitch noted in the score. I felt that the Philharmonic should make every effort to be as true to the composer's conception as possible. Carl Schiebler, the Philharmonic's Orchestra Personnel Manager, enthusiastically agreed, adding that we should own our own set of real bells.



Philharmonic Principal Percussionist Christopher S. Lamb in September 1990, with the then newly purchased bells; the two on the right are used in this performance

In the end we commissioned what is called "a spread" of four bells: a low E bell (used in Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*), a G and a C (for the *Symphonie fantastique*), and a D-sharp (used in "The Great Gate of Kiev" of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*). They can be sampled [i.e. recorded and adjusted in pitch] to fill in the rest of an octave, and to use on tour, as the bells themselves cannot easily be transported.

The first time we used these bells for the Berlioz we placed them onstage. As soon as I struck them we all knew it was much too loud. Now they are struck by two players offstage, who wear headphones that let them hear the orchestra.

The Work at a Glance

At the premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique*, members of the audience received a printed copy of the symphony's scenario, as penned by Berlioz:

Part One: Reveries, 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.

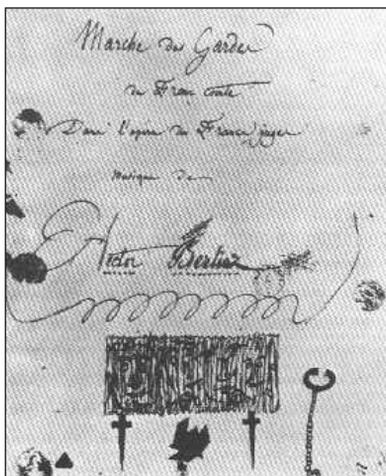
This melodic image and the model it reflects pursue him incessantly, like a double *idée fixe*. That is the reason for the constant appearance, in every movement of the symphony, of the melody that begins the first *Allegro*. The passage from this state of melancholy reverie interrupted by a few fits 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 Fields – 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.



From Berlioz's manuscript, the original title page of the *March to the Scaffold*

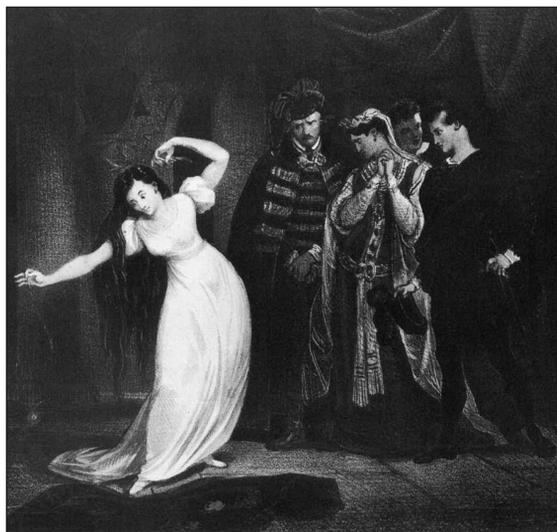
himself being led to the scaffold, where he is executed for murdering his beloved, and finally to a Witches' Sabbath convened in honor of his death, at which the *idée fixe* now appears as a grotesque dance heard along with a parody of the *Dies Irae* funeral chant.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes, English Horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, bass drum, field drum, chimes, two harps, and strings.

Angels and Muses

The Irish actress Harriet Smithson was born in 1800 into a theatrical family. Tall, attractive, and blue-eyed, she nonetheless encountered some impediments. Although her voice was deemed expressive, it was too small to fill large theaters, and English audiences scorned her Irish accent. So Smithson departed to the Continent, where her accent would make no difference. On September 11, 1827, the 27-year-old opened in an English version of *Hamlet* at the Paris Odéon, playing Ophelia to the 52-year-old lead, actor Charles Kemble. Berlioz was present, and he was simultaneously smitten by Shakespeare and Smithson. “My heart and whole being were possessed by a fierce, desperate passion in which love of the artist and of the art were interfused, each intensifying the other,” he wrote.

They did not meet in person until the end of 1832, but that did not prevent Smithson from becoming a vibrant presence in Berlioz’s imagination. The nightmares of the *Symphonie fantastique* seem to have had something to do with his deciding (temporarily) that their love was not to be. In 1831–32, he composed a sequel to the *Symphonie fantastique* – *Lélio, ou Le retour à la vie* (*Lelio, or The Return to Life*) – that he described in his *Memoirs*:



A depiction of Harriet Smithson as Ophelia in an 1827 production of *Hamlet*

The subject of the musical drama, as is known, was none other than my love for Miss Smithson and the anguish and “bad dreams” it had brought me.

Despite the fact that neither spoke much of the other’s language, they entered into an erratic courtship and married in 1833. The *British Court Journal*, reporting on the event, remarked,

We trust this marriage will insure the happiness of an amiable young woman, as well as secure us against her reappearance on the English boards.

Smithson’s stage magic, which had dependably reduced French audiences to tears, seemed to be waning. She and Berlioz would not enjoy a happy marriage, and after they separated in 1844 the actress succumbed to alcoholism, had a series of debilitating strokes, and died in 1854.