

Notes on the Program

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Selections from *Roméo et Juliette*, Dramatic Symphony after Shakespeare's Tragedy, Op. 17

Hector Berlioz

That Hector Berlioz was a genius there can be no doubt, but genius does not always ensure a calm passage through life. His father was a physician in a town not far from Grenoble; and since the father assumed that his son would follow in the same profession, the son's musical inclinations were largely ignored. He was sent to Paris to attend medical school, hated the experience, and took advantage of being in the big city by enrolling himself in private musical studies and, beginning in 1826, the 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. Apart from providing a measure of recognition for his skills and a welcome source of income, the award included a residency in Italy, a nation whose ancient cultural lineage was considered at the time to wield an indispensable influence over formation of the creative intellect.

The 15 months he spent in Italy proved as inspiring to Berlioz as the Prix de Rome foundation could have hoped. Both the remnants of antiquity and the vivacity of modern Italian life left an indelible imprint on his taste. Depictions of Italian history, art, and landscapes would surface often in his music during ensuing decades, as witnessed by such works as the symphony *Harold in Italy*, the "dramatic symphony" *Roméo et Juliette*, and the operas *Benvenuto Cellini* (inspired by the autobiography of the 16th-century Italian sculptor, goldsmith, and musician), *Les Troyens* (1856–58,

after Virgil's *Aeneid*, chronicling events leading to the founding of Rome), and *Béatrice et Bénédicte* (1860–62, after Shakespeare's Italianate *Much Ado About Nothing*).

Berlioz idolized the works of Shakespeare, which the Romantics viewed as reflecting their own aesthetics of highly personalized expression, as opposed to so-called Classical playwrights, such as Racine, whose preference for formulaic structures was deemed emotionally limiting. Berlioz adapted the action of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* considerably when he turned it into a dramatic symphony. To be sure, the *Romeo and Juliet* Berlioz first encountered in the theater was not really Shakespeare's, but rather an 18th-century adaptation by David Garrick. That was in September 1827, at the Paris Odéon,

IN SHORT

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

Died: March 8, 1869, in Paris

Work composed: January 24–September 8, 1839, with revisions following through 1846

World premiere: November 24, 1839, at the Salle du Conservatoire in Paris, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 12, 1878, Theodore Thomas, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 4, 2003, Lorin Maazel, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 14 minutes

and fatefully playing the part of Juliet Capulet was the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, with whom the 23-year-old Berlioz was immediately and irredeemably smitten. Despite the fact that he spoke no English and she no French, they would finally marry in 1833. It would be an unhappy union, and after they separated in the early 1840s Smithson declined into alcoholism. She died in 1854.

Buoyed by generous financial support from the violinist Niccolò Paganini, Berlioz was able to spend most of the year 1839 reinterpreting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a symphony, "something splendid on a grand and original plan, full of passion and imagination" (as he put it). Original it surely was. Berlioz's dramatic symphony incorporated distinct genres that did not normally intermarry any more than Capulets and Montagues did: oratorio, melodrama, operatic movements, song, ballet, and what might be considered "standard" symphonic writing.

This unprecedented project unrolled over seven movements (organized into three parts) that do not so much depict Shakespeare's plot literally as they express the composer's representation of the emotions involved.

This concert presents the opening scene of Part Two, an unbroken, purely instrumental 13-minute expanse. It opens with Romeo musing in his solitude, his yearning phrases surprisingly pointing in the direction of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which lay a quarter of a century in the future. The distant music of the ball interrupts his thoughts, and follows to the celebration at the Capulet home.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, two triangles, two tambourines, two harps, and strings.

Angels and Muses

In his *Nouveaux samedis* (1880), the theater-loving memoirist Armand Ferrard de Pontmartin recalled seeing Berlioz in the auditorium when his future wife, Harriet Smithson, appeared in the role of Juliet:

One would need a quill from the wing of a dove to write of the ideal beauty, the passionate chastity, the virginal — I was about to say seraphic — grace of Miss Smithson. ... My companion nudged me and said in a low voice: "Look!" On our right, in the same row of the pit, I saw a young man whose appearance, once seen for three minutes, was unforgettable. His thick shock



of light auburn hair was tossed back and hung over the collar of his appropriately threadbare coat. His magnificent marmorean, almost luminous, forehead, a nose one might have supposed carved by Phidias' chisel, his fine and slender, curved lips, his slightly, but not too, convex chin, his whole delicacy of mien which seemed to spell the ascetic or the poet, created an ensemble which would have been a sculptor's delight or despair. His was the ideal profile for a medallion or a cameo. But all these details vanished at the sight of those wide eyes, a pale but intense grey, fixed upon Juliet with that expression of ecstasy which the pre-Renaissance painters gave to their saints and angels. Body and soul alike were wholly absorbed in this gaze.

Harriet Smithson, as Juliet, and Charles Kemble, as Romeo, in an 1827 lithograph by Francois-Antoine Conscience