

# ***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. Berlioz's biography makes extraordinary reading, especially when liberally peppered with accounts lifted from his beautifully written and often hilarious *Mémoires* (which have been vividly captured in English translation by David Cairns). His father was a physician in a town not far from Grenoble, within view of the Alps, and since the father assumed that his son would follow in the same profession, the son's musical inclinations were largely ignored. As a result, Berlioz 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, on neither of which he achieved true virtuosity.

His unorthodox musical background surely contributed to his nonconformist musical language. He was sent to Paris to attend medical school, hated the experience, enrolled instead 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) he 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 in the same year the work that would most consistently 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' achievement in the *Symphonie fantastique* is simply astonishing; it has been truly 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 six decades later. Even those rare listeners familiar with the excellent but neglected symphonies of Berlioz's predecessors in Paris, including Étienne-Nicolas Méhul and Luigi Cherubini, will be compelled to acknowledge that those works do little to prepare the ear for Berlioz's accomplishment.

Certainly programmatic symphonies had been written before — Beethoven's *Pastoral* is a famous example — but in the *Symphonie*

---

## **In Short**

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

**Died:** March 8, 1869, in Paris

**Work composed:** 1830, incorporating some material sketched as early as 1819

**World premiere:** December 5, 1830, at the Salle du Conservatoire in Paris, by a large orchestra comprising members of the orchestras of the Nouveautés, Théâtre-Italien, and Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, François-Antoine Habeneck, conductor; Berlioz revised the piece considerably after the premiere, and the new version (which is nearly always heard today) was unveiled on December 9, 1832, again with Habeneck conducting.

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

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 22, 2017, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 52 minutes

## The Work at a Glance

Berlioz penned this scenario for the premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique*:

**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.

**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: 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, 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.

**Part Four: March to the Scaffold** — Convinced that his love is unappreciated, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose, 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.

**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.



The original title page for the March to the Scaffold

*fantastique* the images are depicted with such vibrant specificity as to become downright cinematic. Furthermore, Berlioz's sense of the programmatic goes well beyond the "merely" descriptive to enter the realm of the psychological and the image of a state of mind, one that is far from stable and that spills into hallucinations. (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 "The Work at a Glance"). The action 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 *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 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 funeral chant *Dies Irae*.

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

---

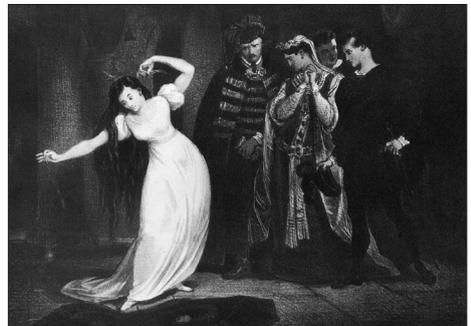
## Angels and Muses

The Irish actress Harriet Smithson was born in 1800 into a theatrical family. On September 11, 1827, the 27-year-old opened in an English version of *Hamlet* at the Paris Odéon, playing Ophelia. 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. 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 *Memoires*:

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. 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.



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