

*SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE, OP. 14* • HECTOR BERLIOZ (1803-1869)

SCORED FOR: 2 FLUTES, 2 OBOES, 2 B-FLAT CLARINETS, E-FLAT CLARINET, 2 BASSOONS, TENOR SAXOPHONE, 4 HORNS, 2 TRUMPETS, 2 CORNETS, 3 TROMBONES, 2 TUBAS, HARP, BASS DRUM, SNARE DRUM, CYMBALS, CHIMES AND STRINGS.

"Generally speaking, my style is very bold . . . . The prevailing characteristics of my music are passionate expression, intense ardor, rhythmical animation and unexpected turns. When I say passionate expression, I mean an expression determined to strengthen or underscore the inner meaning of its subject . . ." Hector Berlioz (*Memoirs*)

The acknowledged "creator of the modern orchestra" Hector Berlioz was intended to pursue a career in medicine. At least that is what his parents intended when they sent him off to Paris. However, shortly after his arrival, Hector Berlioz abandoned all medical studies and enrolled in the Paris Conservatory of Music. His parents were furious and immediately disinherited him. The rigid formality of the classical conservatory soon became far too restrictive for the rebellious youth, whereupon he left the institution and plunged himself fully into the cause of romanticism, associating with the camp of "young France" which included such figures as Victor Hugo and Eugene Delacroix. Essentially self-taught and proficient only on the guitar, the not yet thirty year old Berlioz penned one of the watershed compositions of the romantic period, his programmatic *Symphonie Fantastique*. His pen also served him well as a brilliant musical journalist. Articles he composed appeared in influential journals of the time and helped to arouse interest in new musical ideas. His *Treatise on Orchestration*, essentially a thorough discussion of his own orchestral music, was the first major publication on the subject. It has been translated in to dozens of languages and is still studied by music students today.

Use whatever adjectives you like, but the *Symphonie Fantastique* is one crazy piece of music. The circumstances surrounding its creation; the bizarre life of its creator; the unearthly orchestral effects found within; the debate that still continues today surrounding this most fantastic of compositions. Crazy, crazy, crazy! If you believe what you read, the genesis of the *Symphonie Fantastique* actually begins when Berlioz was twelve years old. At this time he has his first love-at-first-sight experience with a girl (who was six years older than he)—and, as could be expected, it was a completely one sided affair. Berlioz never forgot that feeling of longing, that desire to have the unattainable. After he had settled in Paris he was again struck with another love-at-first-sight episode, this time with a young Shakespearean actress named Harriet Smithson who was visiting Paris with a troupe from England. He saw her playing Ophelia in *Hamlet* and later recalled that "it was long before I recovered. A feeling of intense, overpowering sadness overwhelmed me and I fell into a nervous condition . . . I could not sleep, I could not work, and I spent my

time wandering aimlessly about Paris and its environs." Four days later she was to appear as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Berlioz rushed to get a ticket. "It was too much," Berlioz commented. "By the third Act, hardly able to breathe—as though an iron hand gripped me by the heart—I knew that I was lost."

His anguish served him well to fuel his passions and spur on his artistic activity. Knowing that gaining the attention of an international celebrity was all but impossible, Berlioz decided that he would do something that would get himself noticed. He put on a concert featuring his works exclusively to demonstrate that he also was a dramatic artist. The concert was poorly attended, but did receive quite flattering reviews by the leading Parisian music critics. Harriet was not in attendance, and it is likely that she never even heard of the concert. Again in despair, his desire to gain affection from his unattainable beloved fuels his creative energies. "Imagine," wrote Berlioz, "that an artist gifted with vivid imagination first glimpses a woman who embodies the ideal he has long carried in his heart. He falls desperately in love but by a strange quirk whenever his beloved appears before his mind's eye she is accompanied by a melody which seems to embody his beloved." It was this thought that inspired his *Symphonie Fantastique*. With a white-hot passion he worked on the symphony and managed to have it performed in December of 1830. It later underwent significant revisions before being performed again and ultimately published.

Now a musical celebrity of some reputation, Berlioz commenced a tangible courtship of Harriet Smithson. We have little information regarding her side of the story, but we know for sure that there were serious objections to this courtship and ultimate marriage from both of their families. There were even some violent scenes, during one of which the excitable Berlioz even attempted suicide. Fortunately he recovered, and unfortunately they were married. It was unfortunate because now that the unattainable ideal had become his wife, Berlioz's passion cooled. Their marriage was poor, at best, and though they remained together for ten years and had one child, they ultimately separated. Berlioz went on to search for the ideal elsewhere.

The story told by the *Symphonie Fantastique* is obviously autobiographical; if not based strictly in the reality of events in Berlioz's life, then certainly based on his roller coaster emotional states. The "melody that seems to embody his beloved," as mentioned earlier, becomes the central theme of the entire work. This theme is referred to by the composer as the *Idée fixe* (the fixed idea) and it is developed and transformed in each movement; in some movements playing a significant role in the melodic material while in other movements it is only briefly, but effectively, used to recall the beloved. In order that his audience would understand the complicated nature of the symphony,

Berlioz created a pamphlet that contained the plot of the work that he insisted be given to each audience member to read before hearing the *Symphonie Fantastique*. It is included here below as it appears in the orchestral score.

A young musician of unhealthily sensitive nature and endowed with vivid imagination has poisoned himself with opium in a paroxysm of love-sick despair. [We have no proof that Berlioz was an opium user, but we have no proof to the contrary either. Many jokingly argue that one could not come up with this story and the accompanying orchestral effects unless one was under the influence of some type of drug!] The narcotic dose he had taken was too weak to cause death but it has thrown him into a long sleep accompanied by the most extraordinary visions. In this condition his sensations, his feelings and memories find utterance in this sick brain in the form of musical imagery. Even the beloved one takes the form of melody in his mind, like a fixed idea which is ever returning and which he hears everywhere.

*I. Visions and Passions.* At first he thinks of the uneasy and nervous condition of his mind, of somber longings, of depression and joyous elation without any recognizable cause, which he experienced before the beloved one had appeared to him. [The experiences from before are a reference to the girl whom Berlioz longed for when he was twelve. The beloved one is Harriet Smithson.] Then he remembers the volcanic love with which she suddenly inspired him; his frenzied anguish, his raging jealousy, of his re-awakening love, of his religious consolations.

*II. A Ball.* In a ballroom, amidst the dancing and confusion of a brilliant festival, our protagonist finds once again finds his beloved.

*III. Scene in the Country.* It is a summer evening. He is in the country musing when he hears two shepherd-lads who play the *ranz des vaches* (the tune used by the Swiss to call their flocks together) in alternation. This shepherd-duet, the locality, the soft whisperings of the trees stirred by the Zephyr-wind, some prospects of hope recently made known to him, all these sensations unite to impart a long unknown repose to his heart and to lend a smiling color to his imagination. And then she appears once more. His heart stops beating, painful forebodings fill his soul. "What if she should deceive him?" One of the shepherds resumes the melody, but the other answers him no more . . . sunset . . . distant rolling of thunder . . . loneliness . . . silence."

*IV. The Procession to the Stake.* He dreams that he has murdered his beloved, that he has been condemned to death and is being lead to the stake. A march that is alternately somber and wild, brilliant and solemn, accompanies the procession . . . the tumultuous outbursts are followed without modulation by measured steps. At last the fixed idea returns,

for a moment at least thought of love is revived—which is cut short by the death-blow.

*V. The Witches' Sabbath.* He dreams that he is present at a witches' dance, surrounded by horrible spirits, amidst sorcerers and monsters in many fearful forms, who have come to attend his funeral. Strange sounds, groans, shrill laughter, distant yells, which other cries seem to answer. The beloved melody is heard again but it has lost its noble and shy character; it has become a vulgar, trivial and grotesque kind of dance. It is she, coming to join in the witches' meeting. Friendly howls and shouts greet her arrival. She takes part in the infernal orgy . . . bells toll for the dead . . . a burlesque parody of the *Dies irae* [part of the Catholic Church's ceremony for the dead] . . . the witches round dance . . . the dance and the *Dies irae* are heard at the same time.