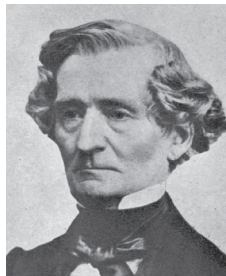

Hector Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*



No composer was more deeply concerned with finding a way forward for the symphony following Beethoven's revolutionary achievements in the form, and in

the *Symphonie Fantastique* Berlioz faces the challenge head-on in five movements (like Beethoven's Sixth) that are monumentally scaled and formally innovative (like the Ninth). But where Beethoven's Ninth embodies these traits in a work devoted to human freedom and brotherhood, Berlioz's *Symphonie* is a fever-dream of love, pursuit, loss and damnation. It is said that the *Symphonie Fantastique* is one of the most graphic representations of drug-induced hallucinations in all of art, a claim that rings true as we listen. This is not a composer's self-indulgence, but a vivid expression of the essence of European Romanticism—its passion, rebelliousness and quest for extreme experience. In the midst of all this wildness, the *Symphonie Fantastique* is meticulously crafted into a gripping musical narrative of romantic obsession.

In the early 19th century (the *Symphonie* dates to 1830), opium was not thought to be dangerously addictive, and dosing one's self was a routine matter; Hector's father, Louis-Joseph Berlioz, was a respected physician and regular user, and scholars believe that Hector took it as well in the preferred form of the era, the alcohol-based solution laudanum, in 1829 and 1830. He wrote frankly about its effects and about his overwhelming infatuation with the Irish actress Harriett Smithson. She is represented by the four-note *idée fixe* that emerges from the tumult in the *Symphonie*, a distillation of the composer's yearning.

It is said that Smithson and Shakespeare were the two great loves of Berlioz's life. Watching his romantic ideal in an 1827 performance of *Hamlet* in Paris was almost more than he could bear, even though he could not understand a word of Smithson's Ophelia. Six years after seeing Smithson on stage he married her, though they still did not share a common language. (Perhaps few

husbands and wives actually do.)

We can listen to the symphony's movements as if they were chapters in an evolving romantic obsession, beginning with the first movement's announcement of Berlioz' yearning, the motif of the *idée fixe*. The second movement, glittering with elegance, is titled simply "Un bal"—a ball. A gorgeously alluring waltz swirls through the movement, but in it the beloved seems tantalizingly out of reach. As the movement progresses, the sensuality of dancing merges with the breathlessness of pursuit. The artist's quickening steps are never quite fast enough.

Berlioz described the third movement as an evening in the countryside during which the artist broods on his loneliness. It is slow and melancholy, with the artist musing on the faithlessness of a beloved who is not even his to begin with. Amid the silence, we hear ominous hints of distant thunder.

In the fourth movement the artist, unable to bear his loneliness, attempts to poison himself with opium. But instead of dying, he is plunged into a fever-dream in which he has killed his beloved and is condemned to death by hanging. With its nightmarish "march to the scaffold," this movement is one of the most famous passages in Berlioz's catalog. And it may well be a case of life imitating art: it was composed during the period when Berlioz himself was taking opium, and he is said to have written it like a man possessed, finishing it in a single night.

In the fifth movement, the artist's downward slide reaches its end—not with his death, but with his funeral: a witches' sabbath evoking demons and monsters of all sorts. The mood is jubilant yet ghoulish, like a diabolical orgy incorporating (shockingly, for observant Catholics of Berlioz's era) parodies of the "Dies irae" as well as the *idée fixe*. The love story is complete.

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Hector Berlioz

Born: 1803. La Côte-Saint-André, France

Died: 1869. Paris, France

Symphonie Fantastique

Composed: 1830

World premiere: Dec. 5, 1830, with François-Antoine Habeneck conducting

Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: Jun. 5, 2016 with Carl St. Clair as conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes including piccolo, 2 oboes including English horn, 2 clarinets including bass clarinet and e-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons; 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas; 4 timpani, percussion; 2 harps; strings

Estimated duration: 49 minutes