

Program Notes by Don Adkins

Symphonie Fantastique (1830)

Hector Berlioz (1803 – 1869)

The first performance of *Symphonie fantastique* was one of those rare musical events that appeared to come out of nowhere and disrupted the course of music history. There were hints from previous composers that this type of piece was possible but it took this remarkable young man and his passion to bring them together in a new way. Berlioz's first symphony, written only three years after the death of Beethoven, was a startling and radical departure from the norm but was almost inevitable if Berlioz's life is examined up to this point. The event that led to the composition of *Symphonie fantastique* was the performance of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Paris in 1827. Berlioz, although he spoke no English, immediately fell in love with the Irish actress playing the role of Ophelia, Harriet Smithson. He saw her again four days later as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. His life was then dedicated to attracting her attention which was difficult as every young bachelor in Paris was in love with her and she, apparently, was having a grand time.

This tendency to almost manic infatuation had first happened to Berlioz when he was twelve. He met Estelle Duboeuf, an eighteen-year-old beauty from the countryside surrounding his village in the Alps. Berlioz remembered that moment years later: "Her tall, elegant figure with large eyes poised for attack, though they were always smiling. And little pink boots! The instant I saw her I felt an electric shock. I loved her." Berlioz called her his "cruel beauty." He later said that he passed nights of sleepless misery and hid during the day like a wounded animal. Everyone knew of his infatuation and he could not avoid her amused disdain at other gatherings. When he moved from the village at age thirteen, he wrote a sad song which begins: "Now I leave forever my dear country, my dear friend [Estelle]. Far from them I'll spend my weary life in sorrow and regret." This melody later became the tune that is played by the violins at the beginning of *Symphonie fantastique*: "It expressed the overwhelming sadness of a young heart first experiencing the torture of unhappy love, and I welcomed it." He was thirty when he saw Estelle again but she was married. He wrote her a passionate letter when he was forty and she was widowed but she did not answer. She finally allowed him to visit when he was over sixty and she nearly seventy. She was kindly but formal and puzzled at the attention of such a famous and elderly man. Berlioz left her an annuity in his will when he died.

At the same time Berlioz was reeling from Smithson's stage charms and Shakespeare, he was also stunned by Ludwig van Beethoven's *Eroica*, fifth and *Pastoral* symphonies, Victor Hugo's poetry, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragic play *Faust*. He also read an 1828 French paraphrase of an English book by Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English*

Opium Eater. After hearing Beethoven's symphonies for the first time, he felt his own work was forever changed. It was impossible to continue on Beethoven's path so he had to go in another direction. One of Victor Hugo's poems from *Odes et Ballades*, *Sabbath Round*, describes the sacrilegious round dance of witches and sorcerers with Satan to a parody of ancient church chant. Berlioz used this vision in the last movement of *Symphonie fantastique*. Goethe's *Faust* and other works by Hugo supplied more diabolical direction to Berlioz's imagination. *Opium Eater* provided one of the crucial elements in the story of the symphony. Before writing the symphony Berlioz presented two concerts of his own music which increased his reputation and visibility. In spite of this effort, he never met Smithson before she left Paris in 1829. Gossip of her sexual misadventures in London with her manager infuriated the love-sick Berlioz who vented his emotions by writing the symphony he had already been planning for a year.

Berlioz was twenty-six and a student at the Paris Conservatory when he wrote *Symphonie fantastique* in just three months. He tried to have it immediately performed but the logistics of the huge orchestra made a disaster of the first rehearsal. Berlioz then backed off and scheduled the premiere for later that year. He sent the program explaining the meaning of the symphony to the press weeks before the performance. He was immediately attacked by several critics and was able to manipulate the publicity to create a premiere that couldn't be missed. Many notables heard the first performance including Franz Liszt but Smithson was not in town. Berlioz originally hoped for an orchestra of 220 players on the stage of the Paris Conservatory but had to settle for 130. Berlioz acknowledged that the project was too big to expect much from two rehearsals but felt that he got his point across to the audience.

Reviews were mixed. Young Liszt, only nineteen at the premiere, was so impressed he later published an arrangement for solo piano in 1836.

Berlioz then moved on from Smithson, won the Prix de Rome composition contest on his fourth try and moved to Rome on a two-year subsidy. His work in Rome included polishing the *Symphonie fantastique*. He returned to Paris and performed a second premiere. To his amazement, Smithson was back in Paris although she was no longer a star performer. Berlioz sent her tickets to the concert which she attended without realizing her role in the creation of the symphony. After the performance she realized her part in the affair and, amazed by Berlioz's apparent love for her, agreed to meet him. They were married in 1833 with Liszt as best man. They were happy for a couple of years until she began to suffer from her public neglect in contrast with her husband's tremendous success in all of his projects. She turned to alcohol, they separated and remained so until her death in 1854.

Two terms always come up in any discussion of the *Symphonie fantastique*: *idée fixe* and *Dies irae*. In the early 1800s the French used the term *idée fixe* in the new discipline of clinical psychology to indicate a fixation of the mind held so firmly as to resist any attempt to modify it. By 1812 the presence of an *idée fixe* was an indicator of monomania, a single pathological

preoccupation in an otherwise sound mind. Berlioz used this term to describe the melody that appears throughout the symphony representing the beloved of the tormented artist. There is no doubt the tormented artist is monomaniacal and, by extension, so is Berlioz. The theme used for the *idée fixe* came from an aria expressing the unhappy love of the heroine in his prize-winning cantata of 1828 *Herminie*. The first movement presents the original version of the *idée fixe* in many different ways. The second movement party scene changes the melody into a waltz tune. The third movement features Alpenhorn-like tunes played by shepherds before the beloved's melody appears and is cut off in a sinister fashion. The fourth movement death march, first written for his unperformed opera *Les Francs-juges*, uses a small portion of the melody just before the artist's head is guillotined. The last movement funeral party transforms the melody into a spiteful, rollicking dance suitable for monsters and a twisted beloved. The *Dies irae* also appears in the last movement to indicate the Witches Sabbath. It is a chant that is used in the Mass for the Dead and would have been immediately recognizable to everyone in the Catholic French audience. Berlioz later combines it with the diabolical witches' dance, leaving no doubt that the artist's last party gives him nothing but torment. Berlioz also uses the witches tune to create a short fugue which, given Berlioz's hatred of the academic styles forced on him at the Conservatory, probably represented the lowest levels of hell.

At first, Berlioz considered the program for *Symphonie fantastique* to be indispensable to understanding the symphony. He thought the audience should consider it as the spoken text of an opera. Berlioz continued to revise the program for 25 years. By this time he considered the program important for the audience but also stated that the symphony could be performed without the program if the titles for the five movements were printed. His original, much more detailed program placed the opium poisoning in the last two movements. The last version of the program, published in 1855, placed the poisoning at the beginning:

"A young musician of morbid sensitivity and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a moment of despair caused by frustrated love. The dose of narcotic, while too weak to cause his death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest of visions, in which his experiences, feelings and memories are translated in his feverish brain into musical thoughts and images. His beloved becomes for him a melody and like an idée fixe which he meets and hears everywhere.

Part one: Daydreams, Passions

"He remembers first the uneasiness of spirit, the indefinable passion, the melancholy, the aimless joys he felt even before seeing his beloved; then the explosive love she suddenly inspired in him, his delirious anguish, his fits of jealous fury, his returns of tenderness, his religious consolations.

Part two: A Ball

"He meets again his beloved in a ball during a glittering fête.

Part three: Scene in the Countryside

"One summer evening in the countryside he hears two shepherds dialoguing with their 'Ranz des vaches'; this pastoral duet, the setting, the gentle rustling of the trees in the light wind, some causes for hope that he has recently conceived, all conspire to restore to his heart an unaccustomed feeling of calm and to give to his thoughts a happier colouring; but she reappears, he feels a pang of anguish, and painful thoughts disturb him: what if she betrayed him... One of the shepherds resumes his simple melody, the other one no longer answers. The sun sets... distant sound of thunder... solitude... silence..."

Part four: March to the scaffold

"He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and led to execution. The procession advances to the sound of a march that is sometimes sombre and wild, and sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which a dull sound of heavy footsteps follows without transition the loudest outbursts. At the end, the idée fixe reappears for a moment like a final thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow."

Part five: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

"He sees himself at a witches' sabbath, in the midst of a hideous gathering of shades, sorcerers and monsters of every kind who have come together for his funeral. Strange sounds, groans, outbursts of laughter; distant shouts which seem to be answered by more shouts. The beloved melody appears once more, but has now lost its noble and shy character; it is now no more than a vulgar dance-tune, trivial and grotesque: it is she who is coming to the sabbath... Roars of delight at her arrival... She joins the diabolical orgy... The funeral knell tolls, burlesque parody of the Dies irae. The dance of the witches. The dance of the witches combined with the Dies irae."