HECTOR BERLIOZ
Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14 ("Fantastic Symphony")

BORN: La Côte-Saint-André, near Grenoble, France, December 11, 1803
DIED: Paris, March 8, 1869
WORK COMPOSED: 1830–32
WORLD PREMIERE: December 5, 1830, at the Paris Conservatoire. François Habeneck conducted an orchestra assembled especially for the occasion.

Symphonie fantastique relates a story of obsessive love, represented by a recurring melody that appears in varied forms throughout the composition. We first encounter this theme in the initial movement, where it is played by violins against a spare accompaniment suggesting the irregular beating of a distressed heart.

In the second movement, the signature theme intrudes upon an intoxicating waltz melody and combines with it in counterpoint.

The third movement begins with a duet between English horn and oboe. Berlioz instructs the latter instrument to play from offstage, so that it sounds as if from a great distance.

The final movement imagines a witches’ sabbath, and the signature melody becomes a grotesque, mocking dance.

Berlioz was more than a composer of colorful music. He was himself one of the most colorful figures of the 19th century. Much of his life reads like a Romantic novel, and its most fascinating chapter concerns the creation of his Symphonie fantastique.

In 1827 Berlioz, then a struggling graduate of the Paris Conservatoire, attended a performance of Hamlet by a troupe of English actors visiting Paris. In the role of Ophelia was a beautiful young actress named Harriet Smithson. As the composer relates in his Memoirs: “The impression made on my heart and mind by her extraordinary talent, nay her dramatic genius, was equaled only by the havoc wrought in me by the poet she so nobly interpreted.”

Berlioz’s infatuation with Harriet Smithson, which he nursed for the next three years, inevitably led to an extravagant expression. In 1830 the composer told a close friend that he was writing a “grand symphony (Episode from an Artist’s Life) in which the development of my infernal passion is to be depicted.” He outlined the program of the work as follows:

I imagine that an artist ... sees for the first time a woman who embodies the ideal of beauty and fascination that his heart has long been seeking; he falls desperately in love with her. As the result of an odd whim, whenever the image of the loved one appears ... it is accompanied by a musical thought ... That is the reason for the appearance, in every movement of the symphony, of the chief melody of the first Allegro (No. 1).

Finding himself one day in the country, he hears in the distance two shepherds piping ... This pastorale immerses him in delightful reverie (No. 2).

He goes to a ball, but ... his idée fixe returns to trouble him, and the beloved melody makes his heart pound during a brilliant waltz (No. 3). [Berlioz later reversed the order of these second and third movements.]
In a fit of despair he poisons himself with opium; but instead of killing him, the narcotic induces a horrible vision in which he believes he has killed his beloved, has been condemned to death, and witnesses his own execution. March to the scaffold ... (No. 4).

He sees himself surrounded by a hideous throng of sorcerers and devils, come together to celebrate the sabbath night ... At last the melody arrives ... The ceremony begins. The bells ring, ... a chorus sings the plainchant sequence of the dead (Dies irae) ... Then finally the sabbath round-dance begins to whirl; in its most violent outburst it mingles with the Dies irae, and the dream is over (No. 5).

A fantastic plot on which to base a fantastic symphony. But the reality of subsequent events proved no less fabulous. After a performance of an early version of his piece, Berlioz departed for Italy for what was to be a three-year sojourn. Eventually the composer felt stifled and restless there and cut short his stay. Upon returning to Paris, his first order of business was a public concert of his music, and Symphonie fantastique was heard on December 5, 1832. In the audience was none other than Harriet Smithson, whom Berlioz had not seen for more than two years.

She had been taken to the concert by friends and had known neither what music was to be performed nor who its composer would be. But she recognized Berlioz at once as he entered the hall, and she suffered an even greater shock of recognition upon learning the “program” of Symphonie fantastique. Berlioz’s memoirs describe her reaction: “‘Am I dreaming? I can no longer doubt. It is of me he speaks. He loves me still.’ From that moment, so she has often told me, she felt the room reel about her ... and at the end returned home like a sleepwalker with no clear notion of what was happening.”

That confrontation between Berlioz and Harriet Smithson through the premiere of Symphonie fantastique proved momentous. They met the following day and within a year were married.

In its narrative structure, intense subjectivity, and themes of obsessive passion, death and the supernatural, Symphonie fantastique is perhaps the quintessential Romantic work of art. But beyond these considerations is the music itself. Berlioz’s score is a dazzling composition of compelling melodies and harmony, brilliant orchestration and vivid musical drama, and it remains one of the most fantastic (in every sense) musical experiences available.

Scorched for 2 flutes (the 2nd flute doubling piccolo); 2 oboes (the 2nd oboe doubling English horn); 2 clarinets (the 1st clarinet doubling E-flat clarinet); 4 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 cornets and 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; 2 tubas; 2 timpani plus percussion; 2 harps; strings.

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