

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
THE YOUNG ROMANTICS
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert
Michael Francis, conductor**

January 18 and 20, 2019

FELIX MENDELSSOHN *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave), Op. 26*

FRANZ LISZT

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major

Allegro maestoso

Quasi adagio – Allegretto vivace

Allegro marziale animato

Rodolfo Leone, piano

INTERMISSION

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

Rêveries; Passions

Un Bal (A Ball)

Scène aux champs (Scene in the Country)

Marche au supplice (March to the Scaffold)

Song d'une nuit du sabbat (Dream of a Witches' Sabbath)

THE YOUNG ROMANTICS

This is not just a program of music by young romantic composers – it is a program of music by *very* young composers: Mendelssohn was 20 when he wrote *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)*, Liszt was 19 when he began his First Piano Concerto, and Berlioz – the old man of this crowd – was 23 when he began the *Symphonie fantastique*. One pleasing thing to know is that these three were (generally) cordial friends. Liszt conducted music by both Mendelssohn and Berlioz, and he invited Berlioz to Weimar, where Berlioz conducted the premiere of Liszt's First Piano Concerto. Berlioz and Mendelssohn met in Rome when they were in their early twenties, and Berlioz reported that Mendelssohn “was responsible for the only tolerable moments which I enjoyed during my stay in Rome.” Mendelssohn invited both Berlioz and Liszt to conduct in Leipzig, and he described Liszt – considered a charlatan by some – as “a good, warm human being and a superb artist.” All three might in private express some reservations about the others' music, but – rather than being jealous of each other – Mendelssohn, Liszt and Berlioz were friends and colleagues who did much to advance the cause of the music of their Romantic era.

***The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)*, Op. 26**

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg

Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig

In 1829, twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn made the first of many visits to England, and after giving a series of concerts in London he set off on a walking tour of Scotland, where he was able to visit the novelist Sir Walter Scott. On August 8, Mendelssohn made a voyage out to the Hebrides Islands to see the island of Staffa, with its famous Fingal's Cave, a name that is said to come from the Gaelic *Fionn na Ghal*, which means “Chief of Valor.” The crossing was extremely difficult. The day was dark and violently stormy, and not until they were almost on top of the island did the famous black basaltic cliffs emerge from the mists as the ocean crashed against the mouth of the dark cave. Legend has it that on the spot the young composer jotted down the opening 21 bars of what would eventually become his *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)*, but in fact Mendelssohn had actually sketched that theme the day before, after a rough crossing to the Island of Mull. Mendelssohn may have been inspired by the rough seas off Scotland, but

he was in no hurry to complete the overture. He did not finish the score until December 11, 1830, while visiting Rome, and he revised it several more times after that.

This music goes under several names – it is sometimes called just *The Hebrides* or just *Fingal's Cave*, and Mendelssohn briefly considered calling it *The Lonely Island*. It is built on two main ideas: the strings' quiet but ominous opening and the cellos' soaring second subject. Mendelssohn supplements these with a wealth of rhythmic secondary figures, and from this material he builds a concert overture in sonata form. Despite its disciplined classical structure, though, this music might best be understood as an evocative mood-piece that paints a picture of the gloomy vistas the young composer encountered on his various voyages to the islands of Scotland. Throughout, one feels the rocking sea, sees swirling mists and hears waves crashing against forbidding cliffs. The music drives to a climax, then vanishes into the mists on fragments of its opening idea.

From the moment of its premiere in London on May 14, 1832, *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)* has been an audience favorite and has been praised by other composers. Wagner, no particular admirer of Mendelssohn or his music, called it “an aquarelle by a great scene painter,” and Brahms is reported to have said that he would give all his works just to be able to say that he had composed *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)*.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major

FRANZ LISZT

Born October 22, 1811, Raiding, Hungary

Died July 11, 1886, Bayreuth

During Liszt's youth, which was spent as a traveling virtuoso, he performed piano concertos by a number of composers, including Bach, Beethoven (his performances of the *Emperor* Concerto were particularly acclaimed), Chopin, Mendelssohn and others. So it is surprising that it took him so long to write one of his own, and in fact it took him a very long time indeed. In 1830, while still a teenager, Liszt made the first sketches for what would eventually become his First Piano Concerto, but he had doubts about his ability with the form (and about his ability to write for orchestra), so he set the sketches aside. He began to rework them nearly 20 years later, in 1849, after he had given up the life of a touring virtuoso and become music director at Weimar. He revised the concerto once again in 1853 and finally had it

ready to perform two years after that. Liszt himself was soloist at the premiere in Weimar on February 17, 1855, twenty-five years after he had had his earliest ideas for the piece. The conductor at the premiere was Hector Berlioz, who was in Weimar for a series of concerts of his own music and who had only a week to learn the concerto from Liszt's manuscript. The premiere was apparently a great success, but Liszt was still not satisfied with the concerto and revised it one final time after the premiere.

The most striking feature of Liszt's First Piano Concerto – which is in the compact span of only 18 minutes – is that its movements are joined and are unified around the same thematic material: themes presented in the opening movements return in quite different forms as the concerto proceeds. The model usually cited for this is Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, a work Liszt loved and performed frequently, though the technique of transforming the same thematic material across a multi-movement work was fundamental to many of Liszt's own works.

Liszt did in fact find writing for orchestra a challenge, and he had substantial help with scoring the First Piano Concerto from the composer Joachim Raff; Liszt himself, however, was responsible for the final version. The orchestration of this concerto is varied and imaginative. There are of course dramatic moments for full orchestra, but more often Liszt creates a leaner sonority, often with just a few instruments playing – there are important solo passages in this concerto for viola, cello, two violins and various woodwinds. And, as we shall see, Liszt used one instrument that got him into a lot of trouble.

The *Allegro maestoso* bursts to life with a fierce gesture for strings, punctuated by responses from the winds. This will become one of the concerto's fundamental theme-shapes, but Liszt departs from tradition by having the soloist immediately launch into a cadenza, and the character of this cadenza is made clear by Liszt's marking for the pianist: *grandioso, marcatissimo, a capriccio, strepitoso* (“noisy”). The opening gesture returns in many forms, but there are also graceful solos from the clarinet and other instruments, and the movement comes to a surprisingly restrained close.

The *Quasi Adagio* opens with another seminal theme, here first presented by cellos and basses. When the piano takes this up, in a passage marked *con espressione*, the spirit of Liszt's friend Chopin seems to hover over the music. Things grow more impassioned, the music proceeds directly into the *Allegretto vivace* (which functions as the concerto's scherzo), and at this point comes a surprise: Liszt creates an important part here for the triangle. Today this

silvery sound seems imaginative, but in his own time Liszt was shredded for it by conservative critics, chief among them Eduard Hanslick of Vienna, who sneered at this music as a “Concerto for Triangle.”

The finale, marked *Allegro marziale animato*, opens with a powerful idea from the winds, and only gradually do we realize that this is a complete transformation of the luminous main theme of the second movement – what had been *espressivo* on its first appearance has magically become *marziale*: “martial.” This final movement reprises a number of ideas heard earlier, including the opening gesture and the part for triangle, before rushing to an exciting close, full of the sound of hammered octaves in the piano. These must have been thrilling when Liszt played them, and they still sound impressive, nearly two centuries after he wrote them.

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Born December 11, 1803, La Côte-St-André

Died March 8, 1869, Paris

It is impossible for modern audiences to understand how revolutionary Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* was when it burst upon surprised listeners in Paris in 1830. The music has become so over-familiar that we forget that it represented not only a brilliant new use of the orchestra but also an entirely new conception of the role of the composer. For Berlioz subtitled this symphony “Episode in the Life of an Artist” and based it on details of his own life. And what made the symphony so sensational was that these autobiographical details were so lurid, private and painful. No longer was music an abstract art, at some distance from the psyche of its maker. When Berlioz created the nightmare journey of the *Symphonie fantastique* out of his own internal fury, the art of music was all at once propelled into a new era.

In 1827 an English acting troupe visited Paris, where their performances of Shakespeare created a sensation. Nowhere did these performances have more impact than on a 23-year-old music student named Hector Berlioz, who was as much smitten with the company’s leading lady, Harriett Smithson, as he was with Shakespeare. Berlioz himself recalled the effect of watching the actress play the part of Juliet: “It was too much. By the third Act, hardly able to breathe – as though an iron hand gripped me by the heart – I knew I was lost.” Berlioz resolved on the spot to marry Harriet Smithson and soon mounted a concert of his own works as a way of attracting her

attention; she never even heard of the concert. Plunged into the despair of his own helpless love, Berlioz came up with the idea that after much revision would become the *Symphonie fantastique*: he would depict in music the nightmare mental adventures of a love-stricken young musician who took opium as a way to escape his pain.

Such an idea carries with it all sorts of dangers for unbridled self-indulgence, but in fact the *Symphonie fantastique* is a tightly-disciplined score. Its unity comes from Berlioz's use of what he called (borrowing the term from the psychology of his day) an *idée fixe*, or "fixed idea"; today we would call it an obsession. In the symphony, this obsession takes the form of a long melody which Berlioz associates with his beloved. This melody appears in each of the symphony's five movements, varied each time to suit the mood of the movement and the mental state of the suffering hero.

Berlioz, an unusually articulate writer, provided program notes of the symphony that are still worth quoting in detail. (Berlioz's notes are in italics in the following paragraphs:)

A young musician of unhealthy sensitive nature and endowed with vivid imagination has poisoned himself with opium in a paroxysm of lovesick despair. 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 his memories find utterance in his sick brain in the form of musical imagery. Even the Beloved One takes the form of a melody in his mind, like a fixed idea which is ever returning and which he hears everywhere. First Movement: Dreams, 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. Then he remembers the ardent love with which she suddenly inspired him; he thinks of his almost insane anxiety of mind, of his raging jealousy, of his reawakening love, of his religious consolation.

The movement's opening, with murmuring woodwinds and muted strings, depicts the artist drifting softly into the drugged dream-state. The animated *idée fixe* theme, the musical backbone of the entire symphony, is soon heard in the first violins and flute. This undergoes a series of dramatic transformations (this opening movement is in a sort of sonata form) before the movement closes on quiet chords marked *Religiosamente*.

Second Movement: A Ball. In a ballroom, amidst the confusion of a brilliant festival, he finds the Beloved One again.

Berlioz here creates a flowing waltz, beautifully introduced by swirling strings and harps. Near the end, the music comes to a sudden stop, and the *idée fixe* melody appears in a graceful transformation for solo clarinet before the waltz resumes.

Third Movement – Scene in the Fields. It is a summer evening. He is in the country, musing, when he hears two shepherd lads who play, in alternation, the ranz des vaches (the tune used by the Swiss shepherds to call their flocks). This pastoral duet, the quiet scene, 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 report 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. “Should she prove false to him!” One of the shepherds resumes the melody, but the other answers him no more ... Sunset ... distant rolling of thunder ... loneliness ... silence ...

The Scene in the Fields is one of Berlioz’s most successful examples of scene-painting, perhaps inspired by Beethoven’s *Pastoral* Symphony, but nothing like it musically. The dialogue of the shepherds’ pipes to the accompaniment of distant thunder is a particularly imaginative touch; the *idée fixe* is heard during the course of the dreamy summer afternoon in the woodwinds.

*Fourth Movement: March to the Scaffold. He dreams that he has murdered his Beloved, that he has been condemned to death, and is being led to execution. 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 *idée fixe* returns, for a moment a last thought of love is revived, which is cut short by the deathblow.*

This is the most famous music in the symphony, with its muffled drums giving way to the brilliant march. At the end, the solo clarinet plays a fragment of the *idée fixe*, then the guillotine blade comes down as a mighty chord from the orchestra. Pizzicato notes mark the severed head’s tumble into the basket.

Fifth Movement: Witches Sabbath. He dreams that he is present at a witches’ revel, surrounded by horrible spirits, amidst sorcerers and monsters in many fearful forms, who have come together for 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 shy and noble character; it has become a vulgar, trivial and grotesque dance tune. She it is who comes to attend the witches’ meeting. Riotous howls and shouts greet her arrival. She joins the infernal orgy. Bells toll for the dead, a burlesque parody of the Dies Irae. The witches’ round dance. The dance and

the Dies Irae are heard together.

Here is a nightmare vision in music: the horrible growls and squeaks of the beginning give way to the grotesque dance for witches and spirits. Berlioz here takes his revenge on the Beloved, who had scorned him: her once-lovely tune is made hideous and repellent. The orchestral writing here is phenomenal: bells toll, clarinets squeal, the strings tap their bowsticks on the strings to imitate the sounds of skeletons dancing.

The first performance of the *Symphonie fantastique* on December 5, 1830 (six days before the composer's 27th birthday) was a mixed success: the work had its ardent defenders as well as its bitter enemies. The storybook climax of this whole tale was that Harriet Smithson finally recognized the composer's great passion for her, and they were married three years later. If this all sounds a little too good to be true, it was – the marriage was unhappy, the couple was divorced, and Harriet died after a long struggle with alcohol.

But this in no way detracts from the musical achievement of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Berlioz looked deep within the nightmare depths of his own agonized soul and found there the material for a revolutionary new conception of music, music that was not an artistic abstraction but spoke directly from his own anguish, and he gave that torment a dazzling pictorial immediacy. Composers as different as Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Richard Strauss were among the many who would be directly influenced by this new conception of what music might be.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Mendelssohn's storm-tossed overture, *The Hebrides*, otherwise referred to as *Fingal's Cave*, was introduced to San Diego Symphony audiences when Nino Marcelli led a performance of it during the 1936 Pan-Pacific Exhibition. That performance was broadcast coast-to-coast, as were many of the Exhibition's concerts. Jahja Ling conducted the most recent (tenth) performance of the overture during the 2008-09 season. San Diego performances of the Liszt First Piano Concerto go back even further, to 1915. Buren Schryock conducted that performance by the original San Diego Symphony Orchestra in the old Savoy Theatre, with a pianist whose last name was Kreuz. In more contemporary times (1941), Nicolai Sokoloff led a performance

with Ramona Gerhard as soloist, and since then the San Diego Symphony has programmed this concerto ten more times, including the current performance. Until this weekend, the most recent hearing had been given during the 2011-12 season when Stephen Hough was the soloist under Jahja Ling's direction.

Berlioz's fabulous *Symphonie fantastique* was first programmed here by Earl Bernard Murray who led the orchestra's initial performance of the piece during the 1959-60 season – and then he repeated it five seasons later. It has remained a very popular audience piece. Yoav Talmi led two performances of it during his tenure in the 1990s and also led a well-received commercial recording of it. Two seasons ago, Josh Weilerstein conducted the piece for its 15th performance by our orchestra.