

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert
Michael Francis, conductor

January 19, 2019

BEYOND THE SCORE®: *SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE*

The epic *Symphonie fantastique* utilizes one of the largest orchestras of its time. The music tells the story of an artist's self-destructive passion for a beautiful woman, describing his obsession and dreams, tantrums, moments of tenderness and visions of suicide, murder, ecstasy and despair. This Beyond the Score® presentation takes an in-depth journey into the heart of Berlioz's life, his struggles and his passions, which set the framework for this remarkable work. Theatrics of narration, singing and dance are paired with refined imagery and illumination, setting the background for this emotional story and events surrounding this revolutionary composition.

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)

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 unhealthily 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

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.