



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

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SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE (1830)



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EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF AN ARTIST; A FANTASTIC

SYMPHONY IN FIVE MOVEMENTS

HECTOR BERLIOZ

“No disrespect to Mahler or Shostakovich , but this is the most remarkable First Symphony ever written.” (Steinberg)

REMINDER ON MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Renaissance & Middle Ages.
- Baroque (1600-1750): Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- Classical (1750-1803): Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
- Romantic (1803-1900): Late Beethoven, Brahms, BERLIOZ, Schumann, Mahler.
- 20th Century: Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.
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FEATURES OF THE ROMANTIC ERA:

- Composer’s need for expression overrides other concerns.
- Unrestrained emotion.
- Compositional liberty with classical era musical forms.
- Nationalism.
- Exoticism.
- Program music.
- Preoccupation with the supernatural.
- Ever enlarging orchestras, ever lengthening works.
- Emergence of the “modern” conductor.

PROGRAM MUSIC: Music that depicts extra-musical material.

- Composers provided a *program*, as in a theater, that explained the music.
- The term was coined by Franz Liszt, but the concept dates much farther back, to the Renaissance and Baroque, e.g. Vivaldi Four Seasons (1720).
- It fell into ill-repute in the Classical Era; rarely composed.
- In the Romantic Era, Beethoven’s 6th Symphony (Pastoral, 1808) and Berlioz Symphonie Fantastique elevated the genre to a new artistic height, ushering a “golden age” of program music in the 1800’s, with followers such as Mendelssohn, Liszt, R. Strauss, Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, and Mahler.
- “*The program is Berlioz’s most seminal homage to Beethoven and arguably his most important legacy to other composers.*” ((Kern)

IDÉE FIXE:

- “A recurring theme, perhaps obsessively, through various movements.” Norton/Grove Encyclopedia of Music
- Invented by Berlioz, the *idée fixe*, signifying the ideal woman, the artist’s beloved, is the singular unifying element of *Symphonie Fantastique*.
- Berlioz borrowed the phrase from a Victor Hugo (1802-1885) documentary short story, *Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné* (1829).
- *Idée Fixe* is a precedent of the Wagnerian *leitmotif*, a musical concept still in use nowadays, e.g. Lara’s Theme in Dr. Zhivago.

HECTOR BERLIOZ BIOGRAPHY (1803-1869):

- 1803: Born near Grenoble; father a physician.
- Expressed interest in music as a child, but discouraged by his father. Mostly self-taught.
- 1815: “First passion for a woman,” at age 12, toward Estelle Fornier.
- 1821: Medical school in Paris at age 18. He detested it.
- 1824: Despite his parents’ objections, abandoned medicine for music.
- 1827: Smitten by Irish actress Harriet Smithson, after seeing her as Ophelia in an English theatre company performance of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, at the Odéon Theatre. His repeated advances rejected by Harriet.
- 1828: Attended Paris premieres of Beethoven’s *Eroica* and *Fifth Symphony*.
- 1830: **Symphonie Fantastique premieres at the Paris conservatoire in December**, with Francois Habeneck conducting and Berlioz himself at kettledrums. Well received.
- 1832: Revised version of *Symphonie Fantastique* performed in Paris. Harriet attends the concert. Berlioz and Harriet meet afterwards.
- 1833: Berlioz and Harriet marry.
- 1834: *Harold en Italie*. Berlioz begins conducting and journalism careers to earn a living.
- 1837: *Requiem*.
- 1839: *Romeo et Juliette*.
- 1842-1863: Mostly touring Europe with performances.
- 1844: Berlioz and Harriet separate.
- 1860 onward: physical decline. Died in Paris in 1869.

BERLIOZ AS A COMPOSER:

- “(Berlioz) makes me sad because he is really a cultured, agreeable man and yet composes so very badly.” (Felix Mendelssohn)
- Berlioz was not formally trained and is considered amateurish by some, especially in Germanic countries. “*The novelty of the Fantastique was offset by a brazen grammar that offended German ears.*” (Kern)

- “It is essential to realize how self-consciously Berlioz has attempted to write his own version of a Beethoven symphony, there being at that time only the sketchiest tradition of symphony writing in France.” (Macdonald)
- “Unfortunately French musical academicism is responsible for almost all that is *saugreau* (weird) in French music.” (Tovey)
- Berlioz’s harmonic weaknesses “coincide suspiciously nearly with the commonest mistakes of a student with a defective ear for counterpoint.” (Tovey)
- Berlioz did not play the piano. “All he could do was pluck a few chords on the guitar or tootle a few notes on the flute or flageolet.” (Schoenberg)
- Berlioz’s strengths lay in orchestration and dramatic self-expression. “The orchestra...was the only instrument he played well.” (Taruskin)

THE FANTASTIQUE ORCHESTRA:

- Scored for 91 instruments, the most of any symphony written until that time.
- Berlioz wanted a 220 member orchestra but settled for 130 for the premiere, the biggest band ever assembled at the time, outside of an opera.
- Calls for a minimum of 60 strings, 2 harps, 5 percussionists.

MOVEMENTS:

- 1) Dreams, Passions: Largo – Allegro agitato e appassionato assai – Religiosamente
- 2) A Ball: Allegro non troppo
- 3) Scene in the Fields: Adagio
- 4) March to the Scaffold: Allegro non troppo
- 5) Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath: Larghetto – Allegro

FIRST MOVEMENT: DREAMS, PASSIONS; QUASI SONATA FORM; C MINOR – C MAJOR

- **Introduction:** The movement begins with a slow introduction, the Largo, with a few preparatory measures in woodwinds, “so unconventionally voiced....that their authorship is unmistakable.” (Steinberg).
- The Largo theme (C minor) follows in muted strings, with unmeasured pauses between its phrases and occasional unconventional accents from string, winds and horns.
- The Largo theme is a plaintive violin melody derived from a song Berlioz wrote for his childhood love Estelle Fournier, entitled *Je vais donc quitter pour jamais* (I will never leave you).
- A brief burst of cheer and energy interrupts the melancholic mood, climaxes but soon dissipates.
- The mournful mood returns. After a brief woodwind chorale the Largo theme is re-stated, louder, with more orchestral texture and no pauses.

- Music dies down and a long, slow, quiet anticipatory interlude follows, climaxing in a brief swell. This is obviously a prelude to something important. “*We pass from the vestibule into the inner room.*” (Schumann)
- **Exposition, idée fixe:** Two loud orchestral chords announce the *idée fixe* on strings (C major).
- This melody is derived from an earlier cantata Berlioz submitted to a Prix de Rome contest in 1828, entitled *Herminia*.
- An aria like melody with an arching profile, the *idée fixe* “(rises) up in quick fitful leaps, then (makes) slow, smooth, syncopated descents that seem to hover out of time.” (Taruskin)
- Its contrast between “*passionate legato and gruff angularity is deliberate.*” (Macdonald)
- “*This is a melody with erectile dysfunction, if there ever was one; it rises and falls, rises and falls, never reaches climax.*” (Greenberg)
- There is no second theme.
- A fast, loud orchestral response, a Closing theme, alternates with fragments of the *idée fixe* and concludes the brief Exposition.
- **Development:** This is also brief and entirely thematic, incorporating fragments of the *idée fixe* and the Closing theme. It climaxes into an open cadence and pause.
- **Recapitulation:** A brief horn call, accented by strings, announces return of the *idée fixe*, in woodwinds, also accented by strings. Closing theme is abbreviated, it climaxes .
- **Codas:** A long series of Codas now ensue; they occupy nearly 1/3 of the movement.
- The first is derived from the Closing theme; next quieter, slower material based on the Largo theme.
- A bassoon passage, also derived from the Largo theme is gradually accompanied by strings, getting louder, rising to a dissonant climax from which the *idée fixe* appears, loud and triumphant in full orchestra loudly climaxing.
- A brief accelerando passage and another loud orchestral climax falls into a quieter re-statement of *idée fixe* fragments in woodwinds. Music feels like it is about to end.
- Instead, another accelerando passage and an even louder statement of the Closing theme, this time in syncopated accents, climaxes and falls.
- Music dies down and fades away, slowing down into an apparent segway.
- Now, in the passage he labeled *Religiosamente*, Berlioz delivers a recollection of the *idée fixe* as a religious hymn. The movement ends in solemn “Amen” cadences.

NOTES OF THE FIRST MOVEMENT:

- The various moods of this movement, from melancholy to exuberance to religious exaltation, depict the artist’s internal state of mind upon encountering and contemplating the beloved.
- For Berlioz, consideration of form is not paramount. The Sonata Form structure is so altered that it is hard to discern, leading different scholars to different interpretations.

- The movement is approximately split into three thirds: the Largo introduction, the Exposition/Development/Recap, and the series of Codas.
- A crucial purpose of this movement is to introduce the *idée fixe*. It is heard three times in full, and many other times in fragments. The *idée fixe* will return sparsely in subsequent movements, yet it will be more dramatic with each appearance.

SECOND MOVEMENT: A BALL; A –B – A – CODA; A MAJOR

- A shimmering introduction in strings ornamented with harp arpeggios introduces a ballroom dance (A major) after a loud, dramatic climax.
- The dance is a gorgeous, “*softly scintillating*,” waltz (Steinberg), in three phrases.
- In the “B” section, the first phrase of the waltz is repeated, but then the mood darkens (F major), the dance is interrupted, and the *idée fixe* appears. After a few bars, the waltz accompanies the *idée fixe*.
- Toward the end, the umpah-pah rhythm disappears, the music becomes hesitant and transitional, as if the artist is trying to recapture his jovial mood.
- He does. In the return of the “A” section, the beautiful dance is re-stated in full.
- A long Coda, in five parts, begins with the first phrase of the waltz, which is then extended toward a fast and loud conclusion.
- Unexpectedly, the *idée fixe* re-appears as a wind chorale with a dissonant accompaniment on horns.
- The music recovers and reaches a loud finale with harp flourishes.

NOTES ABOUT THE SECOND MOVEMENT:

- The harp made its symphonic debut with this movement. In France it had already been popular in soirées, parties and the theater.
- There are different interpretations of the “B” section featuring the *idée fixe*. Some see it as the artist dancing with this idea, others as him spotting the beloved, dancing afar.
- Greenberg interprets the waltz as the artist’s external environment and the *idée fixe*, his internal. When they appear together, Berlioz is presenting both at the same time.

THIRD MOVEMENT: SCENE IN THE FIELDS; INTRO – A – B – A – CODA; F MAJOR

- **Introduction:** A placid, pastoral duet, a *ranz des vaches* (Swiss Alpine horn melody), between solo English horn and off-stage oboe; two shepherds conversing.
- The English horn presents a rising melody, with pauses between the notes. The oboe provides a distant echo. The melody is repeated and extended by the horn, with oboe initially echoing, later in accompaniment.
- The horn states two more phrases, accented by quiet, tremolo strings. Oboe echoes. .
- **Section A:** Strings present a leisurely, rustic melody (F major) with sparse accompaniment, and with pauses accented by pizzicato string beats.

- Melody returns in variation, the pauses filled initially by woodwinds, later with pizzicato strings. It reaches a louder conclusion.
- Another variation, an exchange between winds and strings, reaches a panting climax. This signifies love (same panting can be found in Tchaikovsky's Romeo & Juliet).
- Brief transitional music ushers section "B"
- NOTE: So far the music has been peaceful, pastoral and pleasant for nearly six minutes, setting up the listener for a jolt with what is to come.
- **Section B:** Begins with the pastoral theme (B flat) in cellos – a male voice, that of the artist – with violins providing a counter-melody accompaniment.
- Suddenly the melody is interrupted by a shrill rise that ushers anticipatory music with a panting "lover's rise" in its midst.
- The *idée fixe* appears in woodwinds, each phrase countered by increasingly agitated cellos. The artist is disturbed by his thought of the beloved. "*She loves me* (woodwinds), *she loves me not* (cellos)." (Greenberg)
- The agitated music takes over and climaxes into a series of screams followed by pathetic sobs. The artist realizes she loves him not.
- **Section A:** After pauses and a brief transition, the pastoral music returns, but it is altered by the appearance of the beloved.
- Initially the pastoral melody is quiet in winds with pizzicato string accompaniment. It has lost its earlier exuberance.
- The next variation in strings is louder and faster, but climaxes in dissonance.
- The last variation is quiet, with *idée fixe* fragments in accompaniment. A distant thunder on tympani presages what is to come.
- Codetta derived from the *idée fixe* ends with more panting music.
- **Coda:** Solo English horn returns with the *ranz des vaches*. In dramatic contrast to the introduction, instead of an oboe response, its first three phrases are countered by distant, increasingly loud thunder on tympani.
- In subsequent phrases the thunder recedes. The English horn is all alone and its phrases become softer. Forlorn in solitude, it cuts its last phrase short.
- The movement ends with a soft, solemn codetta from the orchestra.

NOTES ON THE THIRD MOVEMENT:

- In its overall pastoral mood, this movement is inspired by Beethoven's 6th Symphony (Pastoral), also in F major, and a sole precedent in its five movements.
- This movement depicts the artist in melancholy solitude, contemplating in a bucolic setting. It moves the overall narrative of the symphony from anticipation and hope to despair and disaster.
- The transition occurs in the "B" section, essentially the mid-point of the symphony, when the *idée fixe* appears and permanently alters the artist's mood. From here-on anguish and catastrophe will take over.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: MARCH TO THE SCAFFOLD; G MINOR

- **Introduction:** Amid drumrolls the brass quietly announce a motive of what will become the military march to the scaffold. The passage climaxes loudly.
- **March of the condemned:** The artist's theme. The theme (G minor) is a simple chromatic falling scale repeated in five variations. It reflects the condemned man's state of mind as he is being taken to the guillotine.
- The first statement is stark and unaccompanied, in low strings; the next one, louder in higher strings with bassoon in counterpoint.
- The next two variations are more turbulent, both loud and agitated, both with disturbing, dissonant endings. The artist contemplates his upcoming execution with agitation.
- The last variation is the longest; subdued, in pizzicato strings with bassoon in counterpoint. The artist is resigned to his fate.
- **Military march to the scaffold:** Energetic and triumphant, a throwback to the days of the French Revolution and Napoleon, this march, stated twice, represents the environment around the condemned, the military guard and noisy crowd of spectators.
- After each statement a brief *March of the condemned* appears, meek and helpless, pathetic. The last one features a fall, as if the artist fell in his chariot, or disintegrated into sobs.
- NOTE: These statements of the *March of the condemned* feature a novel orchestration, nowadays known as *klangfarbenmelodie*, a term coined by Schoenberg. The musical line of the melody is split between various instruments, creating a dramatic sound effect in live performances.
- **March of the condemned:** Two variations, loud, dissonant, agitated. The artist's apprehension peaks as he nears the guillotine.
- **The execution:** Military march rhythm, fast and steady, devoid of its melody. The guard moving the prisoner to the scaffold. A falling melody represents the condemned keeling down at the guillotine. Hint of a horn fanfare and dissonant fast music with loud accents.
- Unexpectedly the *idée fixe* appears. It is a brief, yet very dramatic statement in clarinet. Then a terrifying, loud orchestral chord! The guillotine just came down. Three falling notes represent the head falling into the basket. The artist's last thought before death is his beloved.
- **Denouement:** After a brief pause, loud drumrolls and celebratory fanfares (G major). The crowd witnessing the execution erupts into hurrahs.

NOTES ON THE FOURTH MOVEMENT:

- This movement mainly presents military band music, a recent French tradition Berlioz knew well.
- Some scholars, e.g. Edward T Cone, attempt to analyze the movement within the context of sonata form. This is not helpful to the listener. The movement tells a straightforward story and should be experienced for its obvious dramatic narrative.

- The *idée fixe*, by now very familiar, makes its briefest, yet most dramatic appearance only once, just before the hero dies.
- This movement is in essence another dance movement, a march being a sort of dance. Thus the slow movement (third) is flanked by two dance movements (second and fourth).
- There is no evidence that Berlioz experimented with hallucinogens. The concept of an opium dream is borrowed from Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

FIFTH MOVEMENT: DREAM OF A WITCHES' SABBATH; C MAJOR – MINOR

- **Introduction:** Eerie, shimmering music, with occasional cackles and footsteps, sets up a devilish atmosphere, evoking a cemetery where witches are gathering. "*Eight part divided strings articulating a dramatic sonority, ...as the curtain rises on an eerie stage.*" (Kern)
- **Idée fixe:** A distant horn-call announces the *idée fixe* (C major), altered into a vulgar dance, played on solo E-flat clarinet, a shrill, squeaky instrument.
- The first statement is interrupted by loud, dissonant music. The artist is horrified at what has become of his beloved. "*The beloved object has come to the Sabbath to take part in her victim's funeral. She is nothing but a courtesan, fit to figure in the orgy.*" (Berlioz)
- This is followed by a full statement of the theme in E flat clarinet, with other winds in accompaniment, still a grotesque dance. Loud agitated music follows in full orchestra. The artist is horrified at what has become of the beloved.
- As this dies down, the motive of the upcoming fugue – the Sabbath round – is foreshadowed, followed by a chromatic descent in bassoons. (Chromatic descents sound funereal.)
- Amid loud church bells the motive of the upcoming fugue is stated again, twice; the bells fade into the distance.
- **Dies Irae:** The grim reaper has arrived, in the form of a parody of the Gregorian plainchant by Thomas of Celano. Presented as theme-and-variations in an A – B – A sequence.
- A: First phrase begins as a stark, scary march in two tubas. Next variation is faster, in horns. Next variation, in woodwinds and strings, is brief and cackling, as if the witches are singing it.
- B: Second phrase in three variations, same successive treatments: low brass with church bells, faster in horns, then cackling.
- A: First phrase returns in variation, but with the same successive treatments: in low brass with off-beat orchestral accents, as if the grim reaper is marching with heavy footsteps; faster in horns; cackling in woodwinds.
- NOTE: Berlioz's score called for ophicleides for the first phrase of each variation, a brass instrument that preceded the tuba, temperamental, difficult to play. The tuba was invented five years after the premiere and took on this task. Nowadays the passages are assigned to two tubas, one insufficient to carry the sound in a large orchestra hall.

- **The Sabbath round, fugue:** This is the witches' Sabbath dance (C major).
- Introduction: The fugue motive is introduced, appearing twice, each with a horn call; a third appearance leads to a loud climax.
- First Episode: The fugue melody, in 6/8 meter, is made of a subject, answer and countersubject; presented four times.
- Second Episode: A passage derived from the countersubject presented four times.
- Third Episode: After an abortive stretto, first episode material repeated twice more.
- End: Horn calls are followed by music that mimic flying spirits, repeated four times. Transitional anticipatory music.
- **Dies Irae returns with fugue subject:** “*At its violent climax (the Sabbath dance) mingles with the Dies Irae, and the vision ends.*” (Berlioz)
- In a quiet passage, a plodding *Dies Irae* in low brass alternates with fugue motives.
- A dramatic crescendo on the fugue motive leads to a massive dissonant climax.
- Fugue re-starts, soon joined by loud *Dies Irae* on brass, with the fugue in stormy accompaniment.
- Skeleton dance, bows hitting strings make a sound that mimics clanking bones; leads to three loud, terrifying, dissonant chords, “Booo,” screams.
- **Coda:** Music rises; after a screech, *Dies Irae* and fugue theme are recalled. Loud concluding chords based on the fugue motive lead to a massive climax in the finale.

NOTES ON THE FIFTH MOVEMENT:

- The supernatural scene of this movement is inspired by Weber's influential opera *Der Freischütz* and its Wolf's Glen scene, as well as Goethe's *Faust* and Victor Hugo's *Ronde du sabbat*.
- Thomas of Celano's plainchant version of the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), from the Latin Requiem Mass, came to signify death or the Grim Reaper in the Romantic Era. It also appears in compositions by Liszt, Saint-Saëns and Rachmaninoff as well as modern soundtracks (Hollywood cartoons, soundtrack of the movie *The Shining*).
- There are parallels between the First and Fifth Movements. Both feature similar key areas but in reverse, and long introductions with a theme – interlude – repeat theme sequence.
- Some scholars interpret a quasi-sonata structure in both. In the Fifth movement exposition begins with the first *Dies Irae* and fugue, and after a brief development, recapitulation occurs with return of the *Dies Irae* and fugue, this time played together.
- The main expressive purpose of the movement, however, remains programmatic, describing an opium induced vision of the artist's own funeral, dreaming of his beloved, grotesquely transformed into a witch, dancing around his coffin with other witches, goblins and the Grim Reaper.

CONCLUDING QUOTES:

“From the vast inner realm of a heroically strong imagination erupts a shower of passions as if from a volcano.” Richard Wagner

“Conventional formal procedures....are swept away ... (by)ideas much more often orchestral than thematic in origin.” Hugh Macdonald

“A brilliant command of the technical resources of the orchestra.” In addition to using novel instruments in a symphonic setting, harps, English horn, bells, *“all previously familiar only in opera, he is requiring them to play in new combinations and in unexplored parts of their range.”* Hugh Macdonald

“(Having gone through Berlioz’s symphony I was) first dumbfounded, then shocked, then at last struck with wonderment.” Robert Schumann

“....what a prodigious flight of inspiration, what intrepid audacity....Beethoven alone had previously given a program to a symphony. But (with Symphony Fantastique) it’s not merely a case of painting a natural landscape with peasants; the composer places himself on stage.” Camille Saint-Saëns

“The first musical expedition into psychedelia....Berlioz tells it like it is. You take a trip, you wind up screaming at your own funeral.” Leonard Bernstein