

Fantastique & Fantasia

Friday, October 4 – 7:30 pm

Jean-Marie Zeitouni, conductor

BERLIOZ

Symphonie fantastique: Épisode de la vie d'un Artiste, Op.14

(51')*

Rêveries, Passions: Largo – Allegro appassionato e assai

Un bal: Allegro non troppo

Scène aux champs: Adagio

Marche au supplice: Allegro non troppo

Songes d'une nuit du Sabbat: Larghetto – Allegro

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

NOTE: There is no intermission in tonight's performance. Please join us in the lobby after the concert.

Symphonie fantastique, Op.14 – Épisode de la vie d'un Artiste

Hector Berlioz

(b. Côte-Saint-André, Isère, 1803 / d. Paris, 1869)

First performed: December 5, 1830 in Paris

Last ESO performance: January 2008

Tied into the creation of the revolutionary *Symphonie fantastique* is both a fanciful and strange story of an imaginary artist and his fervid imagination, and the very personal passions of its creator, Hector Berlioz – and *his* fervid imagination.

Having decided upon a career in music (much to his family's dismay), Hector Berlioz became a determined individualist. Not for him the grand traditions of the past – music was to be his own, intensely personal canvas upon which to expose his artistic soul. Then, in 1827, the Irish actress Harriet Smithson arrived in Paris with a Shakespearean company, and Berlioz was besotted.

He pursued her, sobbed from the balcony at her performances, and made his passion for her quite clear. Understandably, she was frightened to death. But Berlioz' ardour was transformed into something quite remarkable – the *Symphonie fantastique*. While subtitled "Episodes in the Life of an Artist," and with a

strange, fictional story appended to its musical framework, the autobiographical nature of the five-movement work was lost on no one.

But divorced from its program, the work is still a brilliant piece of music, and even those who wish to only appreciate the music cannot fail to recognize the brilliant illustrative nature of much of the material. And for the consciously revolutionary Berlioz, there is a surprisingly logical, even traditional structure to the piece. And the most important musical element in the work is the *idée fixe* (“fixed idea”) – a theme which recurs through the work, a theme moreover which represents an extra-musical element and, upon its every reappearance, marks a return to that important idea.

The “episodes,” as sketched out by the composer, tell the following story:

Movement 1 – “Dreams, Passions” We meet the artist in an extended slow introduction. We sense an aimlessness until, as the *Allegro agitato* begins, the *idée fixe* makes its first appearance: he catches sight of “the beloved,” and he is captivated. Repeats of the theme are set to different accompaniments as his obsession for her grows.

Movement 2 – “A Ball” The artist is at a grand party, though he feels on the outside as he watches the dancing and joy of the revellers. Through the crowd, he catches sight once more of the beloved – the musical detachment of the *idée fixe* theme here from the rest of the music of the movement symbolizes his singular attraction, and her elusiveness.

Movement 3 – “Scene in the Country” This is the symphony’s longest movement, as the artist wanders, as if in a fog, through a pastoral scene in which a shepherd calls out (offstage English horn) to his own love as a storm hovers in the background. Eventually, the shepherd’s call goes unanswered.

Movement 4 – “March to the Scaffold” The artist has taken opium, and hallucinates that he has killed his beloved, and a riotous martial theme escorts him to where he will be hung. Just before the trap drops him from the platform, he catches sight of the beloved – the *idée fixe* here is a squawking parody of itself on solo clarinet.

Movement 5 – “Dream of a Sabbath Night” The executed artist is present at an unholy “witches’ sabbath,” and the macabre scene is set by not only even more extreme versions of the *idée fixe*, but by a set of variations on the “Dies irae” (“Day of Wrath”) music from the plainchant *Mass for the Dead*.

As a footnote, it’s worth pointing out that, despite all seeming logic, Berlioz eventually won the heart of Harriet Smithson. They married, and the marriage proved a disaster, with the unfortunate Harriet ending her days in an institution.

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