

Berlioz

SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE

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San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

Pierre Monteux, conductor



Berlioz SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE (Fantastic Symphony, Op. 14)

A contemporary of Hector Berlioz gave this picture of the master about the time he composed the *Symphonie Fantastique*: "... a young man trembling with passion, and a head of hair—such a head of hair! It looked like an immense umbrella, projecting like a movable awning over the beak of a bird of prey. It was both comical and diabolical at the same time, something like the edge of a cliff..." This was the young Berlioz—wild, romantic, highly sensitive and rebellious, a fiery spirit whose life was one of the tragedies in the history of music.

For Berlioz was a revolutionary—he revolted against the musical forms that hampered his creative instincts; and he revolted against a society that was the antithesis of his liberal nature. Indeed, his life was a constant struggle to make himself understood by a world unsympathetic to and bewildered by his daring innovation. But two of his contributions are recognized today as being of extreme importance in the evolution of music. The first was a new type of expression—the *symphonic poem*—a result of the influence on him by Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony." Here he employed the idea of a central theme, and this was the germ of the leading motive—the *leitmotiv*—later developed by Wagner. In addition to this, he was the first in a long line of great orchestrators—(Liszt, Wagner, Strauss, etc.)—and to this day he remains the most daring and imaginative of them all.

Berlioz' great masterpiece, the *Symphonie Fantastique*, was composed in 1830. It was the result of a most turbulent period in his life—for he was in the throes of an unrequited passion for the young Shakespearian actress who later yielded and became his wife.

The story of the Symphony has been set out by Berlioz himself and forms a preface to the work.

"A young musician of morbid sensibility and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in an excess of amorous despair. The dose of narcotic, not strong enough to kill him, plunges him into a deep sleep, accompanied by strange visions, during which his sensations, sentiments and recollections take the form, in his sick brain, of musical thoughts and images. The beloved woman herself becomes for him a melody and like a fixed idea which he finds and hears everywhere."

FIRST MOVEMENT

Dreams—Passions

"At first he remembers the sickness of soul, the vague despair, the melancholy and the joy for which there was no apparent reason, which he had experienced before he saw his beloved. Then the volcanic passion with which she had suddenly inspired him, his furious jealousy, his return to tenderness, his religious consolation."

The work opens with a long introduction, depicting the troubled state of the artist's soul, and for this Berlioz uses a theme which he took from an earlier work, "Estelle." After some development of this we reach a lively section, an *Allegro*, where the fixed idea, *Idée Fixe* of the Beloved, appears in the flutes and first violins. To this is added the altered theme of

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the *Allegro*. A brilliant development of this matter leads the way to the second subject which is obviously derived from the *Idée Fixe*.

With the statement of this second subject, the exposition ends, and the logical working out of this matter begins—all the time picturing in sound the agonized state of the artist's soul. It is not until the end of the recapitulation that we find in some solemn horn chords "his return to tenderness, his religious consolation."

SECOND MOVEMENT

A Ball

"He finds his Beloved at a Ball in the tumult of a brilliant fête."

This section has, like the first, a fairly long introduction, suggesting the movement of people about the ballroom. Then the delicious tune of the waltz sweeps all before it... Next the theme of the Beloved appears quietly in the oboe and flute. Again the waltz takes possession of the scene, and again the *Idée Fixe* is heard, only to be whirled away in the gaiety of the waltz.

THIRD MOVEMENT

Scenes in the Country

"On a summer evening in the country he listens to two shepherds playing the *Ranz des Vaches* (melody by which the Swiss shepherds summon their flocks). This pastoral duet, the surrounding scene, the gentle rustling of the trees as they are disturbed by the breeze, some prospects of hope which he has recently come to entertain, all combine to produce in his heart an unaccustomed calm, to give his thoughts a bitter tinge. But she returns again—his heart throbs—he is disturbed with sad forebodings that she might deceive him... one of the shepherds resumes his naïve melody... the other no longer replies... the sun sets... thunder rumbles in the distance... solitude... silence..."

This is a wonderful piece of tone painting. The dialogue of the two shepherds is given out in the English horns and an-

swered by the oboes as if from afar. No further analysis is necessary than the bare mention of the principal theme of the movement and a plaintive version of the *Idée Fixe*.

FOURTH MOVEMENT

March to the Scaffold

"He dreams that he has killed his beloved—that he is condemned to death, that he is being led to the scaffold. The procession advances to the sound of a march now sombre, now wild, now brilliant, now solemn; and in which the loud outbursts are followed without pause by the heavy sounds of marching feet. At last the *Idée Fixe* appears for a moment—like a last thought of love cut short by the fatal blow of the axe."

This movement was written within three years of the death of Beethoven. It has a stark realism, a brilliant pictorialism that has never since been surpassed. Not until the battle section of Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* was there anything in music to compare with it.

Between reiterated tattoos in the drums, the horns play a series of strange, sinister chords. Then as the crowd, lusting for blood, approaches the place of execution, the 'cellos and basses play. Horror is piled upon horror. The upper strings take up this theme, suggesting the swelling crowd making its way to the guillotine. Suddenly the theme of the march itself bursts out in the brass and woodwind, jostling its way along with sickening gusto. It seems as if the culmination of horror has been reached, but just at the end of the movement the *Idée Fixe* is heard in the clarinet, and cutting brutally across it with a hideous clatter is a chord—the axe—without a shadow of a doubt, and the three pizzicato notes which follow can be nothing but the falling of the head, at which the crowd breaks out with a wild cry of joy—its blood-thirst slacked.

FIFTH MOVEMENT

Dream of the Witches' Sabbath

"He finds himself at a witches' revel, in the midst of a horrible group of spectres, sorcerers and monsters of every kind who have come to attend his funeral. Strange noises are heard—groans and bursts of laughter, distant shrieks to which other shrieks seem to reply. The Beloved melody appears once more, but it has lost its character of nobility and gentleness. It is now nothing more than a common, grotesque dance tune. It is she who comes to the witches' revel... howls of joy at her arrival. She has thrown herself into the diabolical orgy... funeral bells... burlesque parody on the Dies Irae. The witches dance... the witches' dance and the Dies Irae together."

The opening of the *Larghetto* tells clearly enough of the wailing of the spectres and the strange noises of the monsters who have gathered to attend the Sabbath. Here is the *Idée Fixe* in its vulgarized form—and here the theme of the witches' dance—which, during the course of the movement, is used as the basis of a double fugue. From this material and the Dies Irae, Berlioz has built an amazing tone picture.