

VICS-1031 STEREO

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BERLIOZ
SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE
MONTEUX / VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA





Berlioz—SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE
Pierre Monteux • Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Mono VIC-1031
Stereo VICS-1031

“...weird narcotic
visions transformed
into music...”

The *Symphonie Fantastique*, except for its short fourth movement, is constructed like any nineteenth-century symphony. It is all held together by a recurrent melody, the *idée fixe*, in much the same manner as the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven. In other words, the *Fantastique* is a symphony and not a formless musico-literary rhapsody.

The “program” is very vague at the beginning but becomes more specifically descriptive as we reach the third movement, *Scene in the Country*; most of this scene, however, is still “pure” music. But the *March to the Scaffold* and the *Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath* really are descriptive pieces, corresponding to their literary “programs” in great detail. In the *Witches’ Sabbath* scene, the ancient melody of the *Dies Irae* is subjected to syncopation to suggest the blasphemous ceremony.

Finally, the symphony is full of those orchestral innovations for which Berlioz is famous. The two harps of the ball scene, the English horn and oboe duet of the shepherds, the use of kettledrums in chords for the distant thunder, the employment of the shrill E-flat clarinet and the wood of the bows of the violins in the grotesque finale are outstanding among these innovations, but what counts most is the composer’s uniquely colorful handling of the orchestra as a whole.

The “program” opens with a general “argument”: A young musician of abnormal sensitivity and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a paroxysm of amorous despair. The narcotic dose, too feeble to cause death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the weirdest visions. His sensations, emotions and memories . . . are transformed into musical images and ideas. The beloved

one herself becomes to him a melody, an *idée fixe*, which haunts him everywhere.

Berlioz then provides separate notes on each movement:

1. *Reveries; Passions*. First he recalls that weariness of the soul, those indefinable passions, the objectless joys which he experienced before meeting his beloved—then the volcanic love with which she at once inspired him. . . .

2. *A Ball*. He discovers his beloved in the midst of the tumult of a brilliant festival.

3. *Scene in the Country*. One summer evening in the country he hears two herdsmen who call to one another with their shepherd’s melodies. The pastoral duet in such surroundings, the gentle rustle of the trees softly swayed by the wind, some reasons for hope he has lately harbored—all conspire to fill his heart with unwonted tranquillity. . . . But *she* appears, and a spasm contracts his heart. Black presentiments assail him . . . should she prove false. . . . One of the herdsmen resumes his rustic tune, but the other answers not. The sun sets . . . distant thunder . . . solitude . . . silence.

4. *March to the Scaffold*. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and led to execution. The procession advances to the sound of a march. . . . At the end, the *idée fixe*, like a last thought of love, appears for a moment, to be broken by the fatal ax.

5. *Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath*. He sees himself at a witches’ sabbath, in the midst of a crowd of ghouls, sorcerers and monsters of every description,

united for his burial. . . . The melody of his beloved is heard, but it has lost its character of nobleness and timidity; it is no more than an ignoble dance tune, trivial and grotesque. It is *she* who comes to the sabbath! . . . She mingles with the diabolical orgy. The funeral knell . . . the *Dies Irae*. Dance of the witches. The dance and *Dies Irae* combined.

Notes by ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN
Music and Art Editor of the San Francisco Chronicle

PIERRE MONTEUX Born, raised and trained in Paris, Monteux won his reputation introducing several now-famous scores by Stravinsky, Debussy and Ravel in the heady days, just before the outbreak of World War I, when Paris was the musical capital of the world. Since that time, it has also become apparent that he is one of the world’s foremost interpreters of the French classics and romantics. His advocacy of the great French composers has been both staunch and authoritative; he has in fact been one of the leading figures in the Berlioz revival which has been so signal a feature of the world’s musical life in recent decades.

One of the most famous and beloved figures in the entire musical world, Monteux has led virtually every great orchestra here and abroad. He was the first French conductor to win a following in the German-speaking countries after World War II, and in recording the *Fantastique* with the Vienna Philharmonic he follows a trail blazed by Berlioz himself, for Berlioz repeatedly visited Vienna, Berlin and the other German-speaking music capitals as interpreter of his own works.

Today, at 88, Monteux is conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

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