Hector Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*
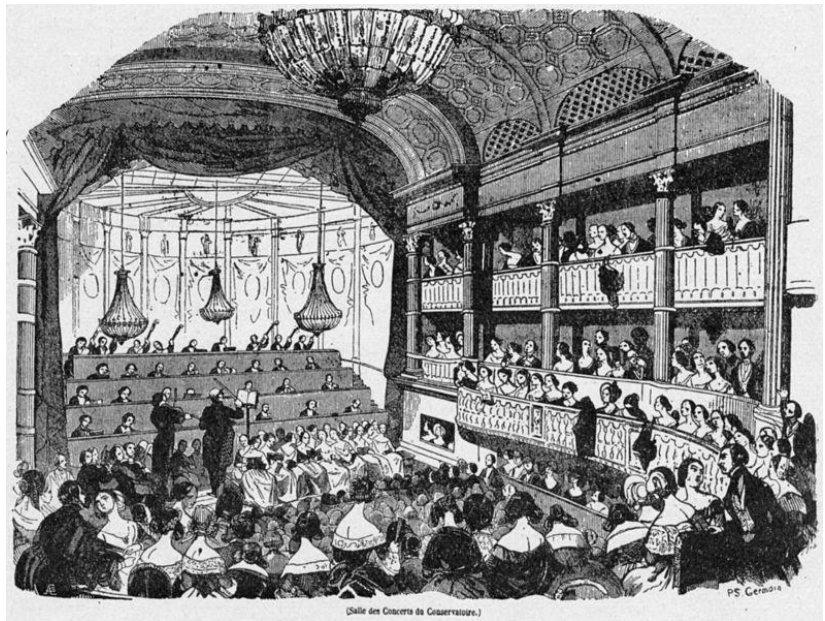# *Romanticism and Programmatic Music*

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Historical Context

- Composed between late 1829 and April 1830 in Paris.
- Berlioz's first major orchestral work and his first of four symphonies (*Harold en Italie*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*).
- French audiences at the time favoured operatic music from the Italian school so Berlioz's composition of a symphony was somewhat unusual (French composers had averaged less than one symphony a year since 1800).
- Berlioz's decision to compose a symphony was probably inspired by his encounter with the instrumental music of Beethoven which was being performed in Paris under the baton of conductor François Habaneck in 1828.
- The symphony is commonly believed to be about Berlioz's attachment to the Irish actress Harriet Smithson whom he had seen playing various Shakespearean roles (such as Ophelia and Juliet) and would later marry, and with whom he would conceive a son, Louis Berlioz.

Key Ideas

- Much discussion of the work centres around its lengthy programme note which explains the events of the symphony and which proved controversial at a time in which the romantic movement was extolling the virtues of wordless instrumental music.
- The symphony contains five movements (rather than the more usual four) each of which depicts a scene or 'episode' in an artist's life.
- In each movement, the symphony's artist-protagonist is plagued by thoughts and visions of his beloved who is represented by a theme (Berlioz called it an *idée fixe*) which recurs transformed in each movement.

Paris Consevetoire concert hall, where Symphonie Fantastique was first performed.

- Each movement can also be related to those of a traditional symphony: a sonata-allegro followed by a dance movement (a ball), a slow movement (pastoral), a march, and a finale.
- The work is widely regarded as a culmination of the composer's work up to that point and it borrows much of its material, often reworked, from earlier or discarded works (such as an early song he wrote about his first love, a cantata, *Herminie*, his *Messe Solennelle*, and an abandoned opera, *Les Francs-Juges*).

- In addition to its autobiographical allusions, scholars have noted references to a wide range of literary works by Hoffmann, Chateaubriand, Goethe, and Hugo.
- The symphony has also been linked (by Francesca Brittan and Stephen Rodgers) to a psychological illness called monomania which was a prominent feature of medical discussion at the time and concerned a person's obsession with a thing or person.
- With its clear autobiographical references, the symphony is a great example of the romantic view of art as a form of self-expression.

Things to Listen For

- The symphony and its composer are famed for their orchestral effects. In order to breathe life into his narrative, Berlioz brought instruments traditionally reserved for the opera house or military bands into his symphony: cor anglais, Eb clarinet, cornets, trumpets, harps, bells, bass drums and timpani (to be played with a variety of sticks).
- No less interesting is the use to which he puts his orchestral instruments: strings divided into eight parts at opening of the finale, and later playing *col legno* to imitate the rattling of bones; an offstage oboe in the pastoral third movement; and four timpani drums imitating thunder at that movement's close.
- Listen out also for the recurring theme which is transfigured in each movement in such a way as to fit into its new context whether a ball, a pastoral, a march, or a witches' Sabbath. This last occurrence is particularly grotesque, its effect enhanced by the shrill sound of the higher-pitched Eb clarinet.

Symphonie Fantastique's Idée fixe.

- The uncommon repetitiveness of the first movement's 'sonata form', the two themes of which share strong similarities, has been linked by Rodgers to the monomania malady mentioned above. The movement reverses the order of the themes in the symphony's recapitulation giving the impression of a symmetrical form.
- After a slow introduction, in which we hear a further recurrence of the *idée fixe*, the exciting finale quotes the *Dies Irae* tune after which begins a witches' dance cast as a furious fugue. Later, Berlioz masterfully overlays the two themes (recalling techniques from French opera but also the finale from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony).

Dies Irae melody.

Legacy and Reception

- Influential Belgian critic Joseph Fétis derided the work and its composer in a review in 1835, for lack of melodic taste, a feeble notion of rhythm, and monstrous harmonic combinations, but he noted Berlioz's talent for orchestration.
- Others were much more favourable, the symphony was transcribed for piano by composer-virtuoso Franz Liszt, who would later become one of Berlioz's greatest champions (he would later write an extended essay on *Harold en Italie*).
- Robert Schumann also wrote a famous rebuttal of Fétis's critique praising Berlioz for his originality and his courage for writing a symphony in the wake of Beethoven's death. He also provides an insightful extended analysis of the work's form and structure.
- Berlioz came to be known for his talent for orchestration and it is here that his influence on subsequent composers is perhaps most easily discernible.
- The work's use of a programme also had a profound influence on later composers such as Liszt, Mahler and Strauss, all of whom wrote programmatic orchestral music and explored literary subjects in their work.
- The use of thematic transformation was taken up by Liszt in his *Faust Symphony* and perhaps inspired Wagner's leitmotif technique.

Other Resources

- Fantastique! For Schools: *Fantastique! for Schools*
- The Hector Berlioz Website: http://www.hberlioz.com

Further Listening

- Hector Berlioz, *Harold en Italie* – this work also uses an *idée fixe* but puts it to different use. Whereas in *Symphonie Fantastique*, the theme goes through various transformations, in *Harold en Italie*, it remains unchanged throughout in a way which reflects the alienation of its title character.
- Hector Berlioz, *Roméo et Juliette* – this is a sort of hybrid of symphony and opera though Berlioz called it a symphony. Its central instrumental movements are framed by vocal numbers including a full-blown operatic finale. Thematic cross-references can be heard here, too.
- Franz Liszt, *Eine Faust-Symphonie* – Liszt dedicated this symphony to Berlioz who had introduced him to the subject of Goethe's *Faust*. Its final movement, a character portrait of Mephistopheles, begins with what sounds like a quotation of the opening of *Symphonie Fantastique's* finale.
- Paul Dukas, *L'Apprenti Sorcier* – another very famous programmatic work in the French tradition based on a literary work by Goethe and containing a distinctive theme which recurs throughout.
- Modest Mussorgsky, *Night on a Bald Mountain*, a spooky programmatic work recalling some of the more spooky elements of Berlioz's symphony.

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