

Symphonie Fantastique (1830)
Hector Louis Berlioz (1803 – 1869)

With this extraordinary work, Berlioz created a whole new world of orchestral sounds and colors that profoundly influenced music for the next 100 years. Even today its power and drama are impressive and its orchestral innovations are startling. Berlioz, a brilliant but highly emotional composer, wrote the work when he was desperately in love with Harriet Smithson; the recurring motif, the *idée fixe* of the work, is his image of her expressed musically. The *idée fixe* recurs throughout the entire work in various forms and moods. Berlioz himself described the work as a series of visions experienced by a morbid, sensitive young musician who is heavily drugged with a near-fatal dose of opium.

In the first movement the artist recalls moments of sorrow and joy before seeing his beloved, the tempestuous love she inspires in him, and his moods of anguish, jealous fury, and tenderness. The main theme of the introductory *largo* is a long, passionate violin melody. A horn solo, with violin obbligato, begins the *Allegro* section. After some sharp chords, flute and violins present the *idée fixe*, which recurs repeatedly during the movement – now dramatically in flute and clarinet with singing violins, now passionately in the lower strings, now sweetly in the woodwind. A simple, almost religious version of it in the violins ends the movement.

In the second movement, the artist sees a vision of his beloved at a ball. After a tremolo in the strings, the complete waltz melody is heard, and the *idée fixe* then appears in flute and oboe. The movement ends with a recall of the waltz by the full orchestra.

The third movement describes a summer evening in the countryside. Two shepherds play a simple tune alternately. In a calm and tranquil scene, with the leaves gently rustling in the breeze, the artist is just beginning to feel more cheerful when **she** reappears and throws his emotions into turmoil again; what if she were to betray him? One shepherd resumes his playing, but the other no longer responds. The sun sets, and the silence is broken only by a distant rumble of thunder. The music is pastoral in mood. The duet for English horn and clarinet is followed by the main subject in the violins, a theme reminiscent of the *idée fixe*. After a climax the woodwinds present a new theme. The first subject returns in violas, cellos, and bassoons while the violins decorate it elaborately. A third subject is heard in cellos, basses, and bassoons, and woodwinds recall the *idée fixe*. After a vigorous climax a solo clarinet, set

against plucked strings present a new theme, which is taken up by the woodwinds. The *idée fixe* is heard again in the woodwinds, and the movement ends with the tranquil, opening subject in English horn with soft timpani accompaniment.

In the fourth movement the artist dreams that he has murdered his beloved, is condemned to death, and must march to the scaffold to be executed. The movement begins with a fantastic march in full orchestra, and two further themes are then presented – one in woodwinds and brass together, the other alternately in brass and woodwinds. The three subjects are developed to an impressive climax. A solo clarinet's recall of the *idée fixe* is followed by a shattering chord. The percussion hammers out a vital rhythm, and the movement ends with broken chords of the march.

In the Finale the artist sees himself at a witches' Sabbath with ghosts, magicians, and monsters who growl, groan, howl, and shriek. The *idée fixe* reappears, now transformed into a hideous, grotesque dance tune; **she** takes part in a diabolical orgy, and a parody of the old plainchant *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) is heard, followed by the witches' dance and the *Dies irae* together. Tremolo chords in divided strings establish an eerie mood. Clarinets give out a grotesque version of the *idée fixe*. Bells chime and the *Dies irae* theme is heard in tubas and bassoons, followed by a frenetic dance in the form of a fugue. After a tremendous climax the *Dies irae* is heard in violins, and then majestically in the brass and woodwinds, and the movement ends with an explosion of demoniac energy.

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