

Symphonie Fantastique and the Music of Hector Berlioz



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Introduction

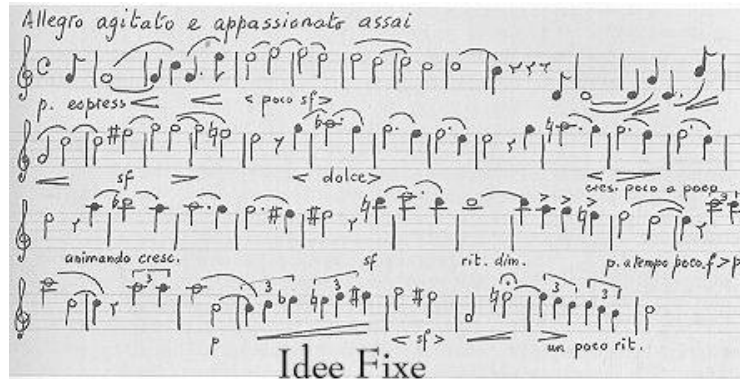
The *Symphonie Fantastique*, also titled '*An Episode in the Life of an Artist*' is undoubtedly a defining moment in romanticism. Hector Berlioz wrote this masterpiece in 1830 at the height of the romantic period. It is programmatic in nature, meaning that it is accompanied by a bit of prose that tells the story that the author wishes the music to be describing. Berlioz in this case was describing his passion for one Henrietta Smithson, an actor of Shakespearian theatre of some fame at the time, who he later married. The passion of Berlioz in this case is a kind of hallucinatory journey that takes the unfortunate man to his eventual death and burial. The Romantic Movement finds particular expression in the work of Berlioz and in the *Symphonie Fantastique*, individualism, passion, nature and emotion all take expression. We will look at the elements of the Berlioz style and then take a longer look at the piece before summing up our experience with Berlioz through this piece.

The Elements of Berlioz Style

A book by Brian Primmer called '*The Berlioz Style*' takes an in depth look at the elements of Berlioz throughout his career. He breaks Berlioz style into the following elements: adherence to the French musical tradition, and the elements of melody, tonality, and harmony.

Berlioz was a Frenchman and in his works and in his critical writings this fact represents itself. His love of Virgil and other ancient Greek and Roman writers is typical of this. Mr. Primmer lists the typical French artistic ideals as: clarity, economy, delicacy, wit, exuberance, elegance, refinement, and deep feeling. At first a presentation of these elements side by side could seem rather to be at odds with each other but, when these elements are viewed through the rather excessive lens of the romantic movement it is easy to see a refinement to his passion, an elegance to the emotion that is displayed, and a clarity even to the lines presented especially when compared to some the works of his contemporaries, Wagner for instance, and especially in comparison to 20th Century composers. (Primmer p.1-14)

Berlioz also use the rather French technique of achieving “*effets . . . by fresh combinaisons . . . by a considered and sensitively refined use of contrastes et oppositions.*”(Primmer p.5) This means that seemingly opposing material is presented side by side to make a new texture. A good example of this can be found in the final movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique* in which the author presents an ancient Gregorian chant alongside the newly composed witches dance. The combination is a fresh take on a melody which all would be familiar which is innovative and as we can now see also very French in nature. One of the primary elements of the *Symphonie Fantastique* was the *idée fixe*, which means that a single melody forms the primary theme of the entire symphony and appears in different contexts throughout the piece. Of course we can see that this stems from this very same idea.



It is also said that Berlioz can be traced to the style of Gluck and Rameau by his use of rhythm to express his ideas. The French had used rhythms as a defining part of their style since in reaction to the Italian comic opera French musicians had imposed a rhythmic formula on words in the French language to somehow imitate the rhythmic nature of the Italian language. Since then that tradition had been passed down to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the form of double dotting. Berlioz makes use of odd rhythmic changes and contours throughout the symphony to express changes of mood, the beating of his heart and myriad other effects. (Primmer p.11)

Melody is an area in which Berlioz typifies himself, that is to say that the most recognizable element of Berlioz music is his use of long expressive melodies as an essential part of his style. The *idée fixe* is a prime example, a melody that can be identified in three measures and yet in its full form occupies 72 bars in its first full exposition. A good bit of the tonal difficulties that are found in Berlioz music stem from this important element. Berlioz melodies are often long and descriptive in a way that many historians and critics have remarked of its reminiscence to the works of Shakespeare. Shakespeare, which was appearing in French editions during Berlioz formative years had a profound effect on him. Berlioz even wrote an opera and a

dramatic choral work based on his writings. (*Beatrice et Benedict* and *Romeo et Juliette*) There are nine references to Shakespeare in his memoirs . . . of course there are forty two mentions of his wife Harriett Smithson and nineteen mentions of his mistress, Maria Recio . . . (Berlioz)

Berlioz use of tonality is typically varied and at the beck and call of his melodies. Berlioz definitely gave due mention to the traditional forms as he moved from primary theme to secondary theme as is common in the standard forms of the time, such as the sonata allegro form. In the *Symphonie Fantastique* he obeyed this formality by having the C major key be punctuated by the Dominant G in the Secondary theme, but as we'll see this is only a formal obedience in an otherwise unruly harmonic texture. The harmonic scheme explored as coloration by Beethoven in which the flat VI and the flat III can be used as closely related keys are in Berlioz work taken to new heights, or lengths really. Berlioz lingers on these tonal areas in a way that Beethoven did not. This causes difficulties because of the fact that this undermines the tonal fabric in many ways, so indeed the key is obscured and therefore makes the returning to dominant or tonic for that matter just a mere formality. Berlioz employs any and all of the keys within the major or minor scales of the key he's working in, so rather than a focused description of the key were in, we are more concerned in Berlioz work with the expression of ideas and emotions. (Primmer p.44-145) This concern is typical of a romantic composer.

In the harmonic elements of Berlioz' style we find the place where he is most often criticized. His sometimes-clumsy harmonization of melodies often causes the more traditional critic to express a certain type of distaste; however, Mr. Primmer presents this element from a more tolerant point of view. This view is that Berlioz in an attempt to free

the melodic element of music from the harmonic element, and thus further express the romantic concern with passion without abandoning the tonal universe that music was so reliant on at the time, treated each note in his melodies as a single note. He did this more so than other composers in his time divorcing himself from the accepted and codified methods of bass harmonization of melodies. This was a throwback to the medieval era when melody reigned supreme over harmony, but with the new expressive uses of harmony coupled with this melodic freedom this allowed him to open the door to a new world of creativity without, hopefully, ignoring the harmonic rules that had been established. This was done with both success and failure.

Berlioz also had a habit of reharmonizing melodies, harmonically developing his melodies if you will. This means that a melody that is seen again gets a fresh coat of paint at virtually every appearance, and with a melody like the *idée fixe* in the *Symphonie Fantastique*, this can and does pose problems. Luckily Berlioz was also gifted in his ability to come up with different options.

Symphonie Fantastique Program Summary

The story begins with vague contemplations of the author preceding his meeting the lover in the first section of the first movement called '*Reveries*'. This is the first time we are introduced to a major returning melodic idea in this piece known as the *idée fixe*. It is known as such because it is a returning theme and because the melody represents the author's obsession with the woman Harriett Smithson the literal translation from the French *fixed idea* is understood. This melody is briefly explored in an incomplete form

before the main sonata allegro section called '*passions*' takes over and a full statement of the *idée fixe* is exposed in its full 72 bar form complete with throbbing heartbeat accompaniment. From that time on the author is consumed by passion for the girl and is driven mad with a need for her.

This part starts off at a similar pace and style as the scene in the meadow in the pastoral symphony. The music of the devolvement is sectioned, as if the individual effects he produces have autonomy, while the traditional figures serve more as dialogue between scenes or as transitional matter. These autonomous scenes contain for the most part items that have been given programmatic meanings. This also suggests the Shakespearian influence on his work.

In the next movement called '*Un Bal*' the author in an attempt to shake off the memory of the girl goes out to a ball to rid himself of her memory; however, as we expect she is at the ball and again the author is thrown into passionate turmoil at the sight of her. As the scene begins we can hear the author walking up a stairway until the doors of the ballroom are thrown open and the ballroom setting is revealed to us.

The primary theme here is actually somewhat polite until the second half of it takes over and the introspective Berlioz is let to wind off into the distance. Of course the return of the *idée fixe* has a heartbeat accompaniment; but, it is in a different rhythm this time. As far as I can see the lady seems to be forgotten as the dance resumes its former character, but at the end her melody is briefly revisited in an extremely spare texture. Then we are treated to an extremely unaccounted for coda, I suppose by listening to the end that the author meant that he rode off in triumph, which we know is not true for the author was supposed to have gone off in despair.

Next in '*Scene aux champs*' the author takes off for the countryside to get back to nature and think of something different for a while. In this rather lengthy movement the author hears the piping of two shepherds in the distance. He is finally at peace, the countryside is filled with a sublime quiet, though you can hear the restlessness of the peace in the author's heart as well as reminiscences of the *idée fixe* in the pipers tune. There is an attempt by the author to free himself from this torment as things gradually get more and more conjunct. This does not last; however because the girl returns and he once again loses his rationality.

Here again the trouble is that the return of the primary theme tends to wash out whatever action he had going with the *idée fixe* melody and the torment from her presence. I mean, there are buildups of volume after that point but nothing to prepare you for the brutal facts as they appear in the program. Apparently in a fit of rage the author kills the young girl and this is described by the return of the piper theme with one of the pipers replaced by rolling chords in the tympani. I personally feel that he should have put the murder and the *idée fixe* in the coda so he could really give a brutal rundown of the throttling of the girl and so on.

The '*March au Supplice*' describes the author's march to the scaffold to pay for his crimes. The crowd is a roar of brass and tympani. The *idée fixe* is only heard seconds before the guillotine severs his head from his body and goes bouncing into the basket. This followed by the roar of the crowd and then the author goes to hell. What can you say about this movement, it's a crowd pleaser, pure bombast. Like most of the *Symphonie Fantastique* it can win you over if you let it.

The final movement is the author in hell, the '*Songe d'une Nuit de Sabbat*' presents the author surrounded by witches and warlocks that have come to torment him for eternity. Of course, what hell would be complete without the ghostly appearance of the beloved in to form of a witch? So now the authors really not feeling well and we are treated to the sound of church bells in the distance. The '*Deis irae*' an old Gregorian chant melody associated with funeral services is played along with the witches dance witch is a striking passage regardless of its programmatic intent. Soon the orgy takes on a frenzied air as the residents of hell riot at the sound of the funeral mass above.



“This powerful symphony is of considerable historical importance; not by reason of its form or even of its original invention, mingled as they are with banalities and platitudes, but by reason of its psychological content.” (Vallas)

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