

## **Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique* – Listening guide**

### **Sam Burstin:**

In 1827, the 23-year-old Hector Berlioz fell in love with the Irish actress Harriet Smithson. Berlioz was completely obsessed with this woman – After seeing Smithson's Juliet in the arms of Romeo, Berlioz is said to have rushed from the theatre screaming. But Berlioz' advances were not welcome – Harriet is quoted as saying, "*do not leave me alone with that man should he come back.*"

Despite the fact Berlioz was completely infatuated they took 5 years to actually meet, eventually courting, and marrying in October 1833, almost three years after the piece was premiered. *Symphonie Fantastique* is the product of this infatuation and desire; and although Berlioz doesn't explicitly make the piece autobiographical his programme notes don't do little to persuade us otherwise...

*'A young musician of extraordinary sensitivity and abundant imagination, in the depths of despair over a hopeless love, poisons himself with opium. The drug, too feeble to kill him, plunges him into a heavy sleep, accompanied by weird visions, during which his sensations, emotions and memories are transformed in his affected mind into musical images and ideas. The woman he loves becomes for him a melody, like an idée fixe which he finds and hears everywhere.'*

The first three movements of the piece show the early stages of the infatuation, together with the musicians' jealous rages, melancholy and delirious sufferings. The piece opens with *'that weariness of spirits, that surge of emotion, those fits of melancholy, those objectless joys Berlioz experienced before meeting the one he loves.'*

The music fails to settle and we are introduced to fragments of achingly beautiful melodies. Only after five minutes of music are we introduced to the idée fixe, this is a single melody representing his beloved, which reappears in different guises throughout the piece. We first hear it played over a pulsing bass accompaniment by the flute and violins.

In the second movement we hear it as a waltz as Berlioz finds his beloved again at a ball in the midst of a noisy and brilliant gathering.

The third movement begins one summer evening in the country as we hear two herdsmen call to one another across the fields. Towards the end of the movement one herdsmen takes up his simple tune again, the other no longer answers. As the sun sets the only reply is the distant rumble of thunder...

By the fourth movement paranoia has taken a hold and the 'musician' dreams that he has killed his beloved, *'He is condemned to death and led to the scaffold. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a March that is sometimes sombre and wild, sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which the dull thud of heavy steps follow the noisiest of outbursts. At the end the idée fixe reappears for a moment like a last thought of love cut off by the fatal blow.'*

By the time we reach the final movement Berlioz takes the audience to a world of pure romanticism, a million miles from that of Beethoven, who died only three years before this piece was premiered.

*'He sees himself at a witches' Sabbath, in the midst of a ghastly crowd of shadowy figures, sorcerers and monsters of every kind, gathered together for his funeral. Unearthly noises, groans, shrieks of laughter, distant cries which other cries seem to answer. The beloved-melody appears again; but it has lost its character of nobility and timidity; it is nothing more than a dance-tune, ignoble, trivial and grotesque; it is she who comes to the Sabbath ... Shouts of joy at her arrival ... She joins the diabolical orgy ... The funeral knell, a burlesque parody of the Dies Irae. Dance of the witches. Dance of the witches and Dies Irae combined.'*

*Symphonie Fantastique* is a snapshot of one period of the life of Hector Berlioz, one period that was to affect everything. The dizzying and all-consuming infatuation that took hold of the composer drove him to create his masterpiece. This masterpiece though dark, mysterious and bleak is a joy to perform the music much like the

infatuation is all consuming. Berlioz's infatuation becomes ours and the spirit of the obsession lives on.