



Hector Berlioz

(1809-1847)

## Hector Berlioz

- ▶ Hector Berlioz was an early Romantic composer whose programmatic symphonic works were enormously influenced by literary culture
- ▶ Berlioz's music is uniquely unconventional, with striking orchestral effects, irregularly phrased melodies, and unusual treatment of harmony and dissonance
- ▶ Berlioz was a master of orchestration, writing the first significant (and still widely used) book on the topic
- ▶ He was also a virtuoso conductor and a brilliant music critic and writer

## *Symphonie Fantastique*

- ▶ Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) tells the story of a lovesick young musician whose drug-induced slumber yields strange visions in a series of musical landscapes
- ▶ His inspiration for the work was his own infatuation with an Irish actress named Harriet Smithson
- ▶ In the symphony, the artist's beloved is represented by an *idée fixe* that recurs in every movement, each time being *transformed* by its new settings (at a party, in the country, at an execution, and in a diabolic orgy)
- ▶ Berlioz wrote a program which concert-goers could follow along with as they listened to the music

## Program for *Symphonie Fantastique*

### Part One: Reveries—Passions

The author imagines that a young musician, afflicted with that moral disease that a well-known writer calls the "vague des passions," sees for the first time a woman who embodies all the charms of the ideal being he has imagined in his dreams, and he falls desperately in love with her. Through an odd whim, whenever the beloved image appears before the mind's eye of the artist it is linked with a musical thought whose character, passionate but at the same time noble and shy, he finds similar to the one he attributes to his beloved. This melodic image and the model it reflects pursue him incessantly like a double "*idée fixe*." That is the reason for the constant appearance, in every moment of the symphony, of the melody that begins the first Allegro. The passage from this state of *melancholy reverie*, with its movements of fury, of *jealousy*, its *return of tenderness*, its tears, its religious consolations—this is the subject of the first movement

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### Part Two: A Ball

The artist finds himself in the most varied situations—in the midst of "the tumult of a party," in the peaceful contemplation of the beauties of nature; but everywhere, in town, in the country, *the beloved image appears* before him and disturbs his peace of mind.

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### Part Three: Scene in the Country

Finding himself one evening in the country, he hears in the distance *two shepherds piping* a "ranz des vaches" in dialogue. This pastoral duet, the scenery, the quiet rustling of the trees gently brushed by the wind, the hopes he has recently found some reason to entertain—all concur in affording his heart an unaccustomed calm, and in giving a more cheerful color to his ideas. He reflects upon his isolation; he hopes that his loneliness will soon be over.—But what if *she* were deceiving him!—This mingling of hope and fear, these ideas of happiness disturbed by black presentiments, form the subject of the Adagio. At the end one of the shepherds again takes up the "ranz des vaches"; the other one no longer replies.—Distant sound of thunder—loneliness—silence.

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### Part Four: March to the Scaffold

Convinced that his love is unappreciated, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a sleep accompanied by the most horrible visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned and led to the scaffold, and that he is witnessing his own execution. The procession moves forward to [the sounds of a march](#) that is now somber and fierce, now brilliant and solemn, in which the muffled noise of heavy steps gives way without transition to the noisiest clamor. At the end of the march the first four measures of the *idée fixe* reappear, like a last thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow.

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### Part Five: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

He sees himself at the sabbath, in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, coming together for his funeral. [Strange noises](#), groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries which other cries seem to answer. The [beloved melody appears again](#), but it has lost its character of nobility and shyness; it is no more than a dance tune, mean, trivial, and grotesque: it is she, coming to join the sabbath.—A roar of joy at her arrival.—She takes part in the devilish orgy.—Funeral knell, burlesque parody of the *Dies Irae*, sabbath round-dance. The sabbath round and the *Dies Irae* combined.

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