

BERLIOZ - SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE

Perusal script

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Cast

One male actor, playing the rôle of Hector Berlioz

One female actor/mime/dancer, who never speaks but represents the object of the composer's love

One male singer

Movement 1 Rêveries – Passions (Daydreams – Passions)

VO 1 Actor

[with a boyish innocence]

When I was a child... my mother, my sisters and I
would spend three weeks almost every summer
in a beautiful village in the mountains...

On the hillside up above, there was... and still is... a small white house
half-hidden in the gardens and the vineyards...
with a magnificent view over the wide valley below...

Behind... a few craggy hillocks, an old tower in ruins, a wood...

and the great rock-bastion of Saint-Eynard:

a spot marked out for the scene of some romantic drama!

In this little house lived Madame Gautier... and her two nieces,
the younger of whom was called... Estelle!

Tall, elegant, eighteen years old...
with large smiling eyes, primed for the attack...
and on her feet... little pink dancing shoes.

You may laugh; but though I've forgotten the color of her hair,
I still cannot think of her without seeing those little pink shoes!

[with rising excitement]

From the moment I first saw Estelle, I loved her!
Her very name aroused my passion...

Why?

Because it was already familiar from a book...

[he takes a small and old-looking book]

Estelle et Némorin...

a 'pastoral romance'...

which I discovered in my father's library
and read and re-read at least a hundred times...
especially its many little poems,
whose watery charms I then found sweet,
and perfect for inspiring music:

[he reads, with an appropriate sense of drama]

"Now I must leave forever

My gentle homeland... and my friend.

Far from them must I drag out my weary life

In tears... and in regrets!"ⁱ

When I was eighteen, my father sent me to Paris...

to become a doctor...

[in outrage]

A doctor? Study anatomy? Dissect?

Take part in horrifying operations...

Instead of giving myself body and soul to music?^{iv}

My parents must have been out of their minds!^v

I was attending the opera almost every night

and I even neglected my course in experimental electricity!

A musical ecstasy possessed me!^{vi}

And soon I presented myself to a composition teacher...^{vii}

and then enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire...^{viii}

where the Director...

was the cadaverous and basilisk-eyed Luigi Cherubini!^{ix}

At my first examination, he declared my work 'unplayable'...

and disqualified me!^x

The next year, the committee of judges came within two votes

of awarding me first prize...^{xi}

One of them even praised my 'very ingenious orchestration'!

Cherubini became so angry that for a moment he could not speak!^{xii}

[mimicking Cherubini's Italian accent, his lisp and his rage]

"No, no, it's quite untrue.

This alleged triumph of orchestration doesn't exist.

It's just a stupid muddle, it's nonsense!

If it were played by a symphony orchestra, it would sound...

abominable!"^{xiii}

ME 4 **Cantata 'Herminie', 2 pages**

0'18"

VO 5 **Actor**

[acknowledging the orchestra, and relishing the irony]

"If it were played by a symphony orchestra"...

[outraged]

But Cherubini... and the other judges...

only ever heard it played... appallingly badly... on a miserable piano!^{xiv}

How can anyone judge an orchestral score, emasculated in such a fashion?^{xv}

[with the utmost scorn]

For a true composer, a piano is a guillotine!^{xvi}

And so that music was forgotten... and put away...

[with mounting excitement]

until, once again, I remembered it... when I began my...

[as though proudly announcing the piece, in a lecturing style]

"Fantastic Symphony..."^{xvii}

'Episode from an Artist's Life!'

An instrumental drama without words...

[explaining himself]

and because of that,

I consider that some advance explanation is necessary...

like the programme at the opera...

[He reads from his own program note]

Movement One!

[The next 2 words are the title of the first movement]

'Daydreams! Passions!'

The composer imagines a young musician who sees for the first time

...a woman!

...the ideal being he has dreamed of for so long!

But by some trick of fancy, she never appears before his mind

except in association with a musical idea... a melody...

[with the grand manner of one inventing a concept]

which I call... the *idée fixe*...^{xviii}

ME 5 Pickup to bar 72 to downbeat of bar 111 0'47"

VO 6 Actor

[exploring the idea, in response to the music]

My young musician... the hero of my symphony...

is troubled by a sickness of the spirit...

that disease of our time...^{xix}

which our most famous writer, Chateaubriand, has called...

Le vague des passions...

[struggling to translate the idiom]

'The uncertainty of the passions'...^{xx}

[reading from the book, but with mounting energy]

"Let me now speak of a condition of the soul...

which, it seems to me, has not yet been well described...

I speak of that state when our minds are still young, active, unsullied,
but locked up within themselves...

and there seems no object to our lives, no end...

[Build the melodramatic tension to lead into the music]

And the more that civilisation advances all around us,

the more this uncertainty of the passions grows...

and we arrive at a situation of the utmost sadness...

We have so much before us...

so many books that give us knowledge of man and of his feelings...

but no experience...

We feel deceived without ever having known a single joy...

We have desires but we have no illusions...

[with huge energy]

Our imaginations are rich, abundant, marvellous...

But our lives are poor, dry and disenchanting...

[taking the level down towards the music]

We live in a world of emptiness.....

and yet our hearts are filled to overflowing...^{"xxi}

ME 6 **Bar 198 to bar 228**

0'31"

VO 7 **Actor**

[with huge drama, following the music]

Now... let me come to the supreme drama of my life.

I shall not tell you of all the sad vicissitudes... only this:

One day there arrived in Paris, a company of English actors...
to present... Shakespeare... at the Odéon Theater,
with a repertory of plays then quite unknown in France...
On the 18th of September 1827... along with many of my friends...
I attended the first night...

[utter wonder]

of *Hamlet*...

a play that none of us had ever seen before...

There... in the role of Ophelia...

I saw for the first time the actress Harriet Smithson...

[a muttered aside, suggesting great difficulty]

(who five long years later would eventually become my wife...)

[leaping back to his story with enthusiasm]

The impression made on my heart and mind by her extraordinary talent...

Nay... her dramatic genius!...

was equalled only by the havoc wrought within me

by the poet she so nobly interpreted...^{xxii}

Shakespeare, coming upon me unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt...

opening before me at a single stroke the whole sublime heaven of art...

illuminating it to its remotest depths...

In Shakespeare, I recognised

the meaning of dramatic grandeur... beauty... truth...^{xxiii}

ME 7 Bar 410 to end of bar 450

0'35"

VO 8 Actor

I should add that at that time I spoke not a word of English...

[wait for any laughter to end, then try and win them over]

It was the power of her acting which so moved me,

the play of her expressions and every detail of her voice and gesture..^{xxiv}

ME 8a **Bar 503 to bar 510**

0'20"

VO 8a Actor

And now I understood the pitiful narrowness

of the worn-out, academic, cloistered traditions of my country...

[with a religious hush - the final words come from the Bible]

And I saw... I understood... I felt...

that I was alive... and that I must arise and walk..^{xxv}

ME 8b **Bar 511 to bar 522**

0'30"

Movement 2 **Un bal (A ball)**

VO 9 Actor

The following day... playbills in the streets of Paris

announced the next performance... *Romeo and Juliet*...

I had my free pass, but to make doubly sure,

I rushed to the box office the moment I saw the posters

and I bought myself a ticket!

My fate was sealed!

[he relives the experience]

After the cruel melancholy of *Hamlet*...

the agonizing sorrows, bitter ironies...

Denmark's sombre clouds and icy winds...

to be exposed to the fiery sun and balmy nights of Italy...

to witness the drama of that passion swift as thought...

burning as lava, radiant, pure as an angel's glance...

[suddenly hushed, to prepare for the quietness of the music]

I knew that I was lost...^{xxvi}

ME 9 From opening to downbeat of bar 36 0'36"

VO 10 Actor

[Proudly reading the stage directions, and gesturing to the hall]

The house of Capulet!

[gesturing to the orchestra]

Musicians waiting with their instruments!

[becoming the character]

Capulet himself...

[Capulet's speech]

"Gentlemen, welcome! Ladies! Ah ha, my mistresses!

Which of you will now deny to dance?

You're welcome, gentlemen! Come, musicians, play!"^{xxvii}

ME 10 Bar 36 to end of bar 53 0'20"

VO 11 Actor

[thrilled by his own discovery]

And in this movement... for the first time in a modern symphony... two harps!

Not one, but two! The more the better!

Notes, chords, arpeggios, thrown across the orchestra...

a sound of utter splendour!^{xxviii}

ME 11 **Bar 54 to downbeat of bar 66** **0'12"**

VO 12 **Actor**

Recently I read... for the first time in my life...

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater...

Listen!

[with a slight accent, to suggest Thomas De Quincey]

"One cold, damp winter, on the streets of London...

I met a young army officer, a friend.

'To dissipate your gloomy day-dreaming', said he,

'this evening I will take you to a ball'.

'A ball?', I shook my head, 'I might as well go to a funeral.'

'A funeral? It's not a concert...!', he retorted!

'It's a dance... in the french style... and with the prettiest girls!'

We entered, and I saw a brilliant gathering.

In my gloomy mood, dressed all in black, my arms folded,

I leaned a while against a pillar at the far end of the room.

I thought: 'Had I only taken opium tonight,

I would be enjoying myself far more by now...'

But at that moment a new crowd of guests arrived.

I heard the footman shouting out their names

and some of their faces were quite beautiful, so I looked up.

A Marquis entered, with a woman on his arm,

and surrounded by a jostling crowd of younger people.

I was seized by a sudden curiosity. But when I stood

because of the coiffures and the feathers in my way,

I felt a sharp pain in the heart and a tremor from head to foot.

And I fell back into my chair... "xxix

ME 12 **Bar 117 to downbeat of bar 135** **0'20"**

VO 13 **Actor**

"It is her, I said to myself! Once more have I seen her!

What exactly I had seen, I could not say.

All I could find within my memory

was a dress of satin, an ivory complexion, hair as black as ebony,

tresses plaited and lifted fashionably behind the head.

I forced myself to stand again,

but this time I searched vainly for her in the swirling crowd.

Strange vision! Was I mistaken?

Had anyone told me I would find you here, I would have called him mad!

My very soul had passed before my eyes...

but in this moment she was nowhere to be seen,
lost amid the circling throngs of dancers...

And all the while the orchestra grew louder... louder...
and faster and faster!"^{xxx}

ME 13 **Bar 256 to end of 307** **0'50"**

Movement 3 **Scène aux champs (Scene in the Country)**

VO 14 **Actor**

[He returns to the programme of his symphony, thoughtfully]

'Everywhere the artist goes...
the beloved vision appears before him...
bringing trouble to his soul...'^{xxxi}

[he breaks off]

And that is how it was with me,
as no doubt you have already recognised all too easily...^{xxxii}

At first I was in shock...^{xxxiii}

but now, for three whole months,^{xxxiv}

a feeling of intense and overwhelming sadness struck me down...
a nervous illness...^{xxxv}

And I fell prey to a sorrow from which nothing could distract me...^{xxxvi}

I lost my ability to sleep and all my former animation,
all taste for favourite studies, all ability to work.

[he begins to move out of the playing area and walk around]

Instead I wandered aimlessly through the streets of Paris
and even the neighbouring countryside...

Truly, on very few occasions did I sleep at all,
and then it was a deep and death-like slumber
brought on by utter physical exhaustion...

One night on some sheaves of corn among the stubble...
once during daytime in an open field...
on another occasion in the snow on the banks of a frozen river...^{xxxvii}

[he goes back to his programme note]

Movement three...

"Scene in the fields"

One evening in the countryside, the artist hears... in the distance...
two shepherds playing a *ranz des vaches*...^{xxxviii}

[he picks up the dictionary and consults it]

'Ranz des Vaches'^{xxxix}

A celebrated air among the Swiss,
and which their young herdsman [*sic*] play on the bag-pipe,
while they keep their herds on the mountains.^{xl}

ME 14 ***Rousseau - Ranz des vaches, offstage oboe 1'00"***

VO 15 **Actor**

I knew these ancient melodies from my childhood reading...
of all the books in my father's library!

[he explains]

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his Dictionary of Music...

[and then quotes]

'The above celebrated Air... was so generally beloved among the Swiss,
that it was forbidden to be play'd in their troops under pain of death,
because it made them burst into tears, desert or die, whoever heard it...^{xli}

But where Rousseau had one bagpipe player...

I have two... 'a pastoral dialogue'...

[pointing to the two instruments, one onstage, one off]

the voice of a young adolescent... responding to a girl...^{xlii}

ME 15 **Opening to end of bar 4** **0'30"**

VO 16 **Actor**

Offstage... the oboe... that supremely melodic instrument^{xliii}...

successful equally with accents of joy,

and phrases of sadness and of desolation...^{xliiv}

Onstage, the English horn... a different timbre...

less piercing and more veiled... more serious...

melancholy and dreamy...^{xlv}

ME 16 **Bar 5 to end of bar 9** **0'30"**

VO 17 **Actor**

The effect of pastoral surroundings...

the duet of the shepherds...

the slight rustling of trees stirred gently by the wind...
and certain feelings of hope which sprang up recently within his heart...
all combine to bring to my young artist an unfamiliar peace of mind...^{xlvi}

ME 17 **Var 20 to bar 27**

0'44"

VO 17a **Actor**

[showing us that he knows what the countryside is all about]

I was born in the countryside...
in the remote provinces of south-east France...
in a very small town on the side of a hill
overlooking a wide, rich plain... green and golden...
and in its stillness filled with a sense of dreamlike grandeur...
enhanced by chains of mountains... beyond which, gleaming and far off...
rise the glaciers and towering peaks of the Alps...

Needless to say, I was raised as a child
in the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Rome...
This charming religion (so attractive since it gave up burning people)
was for seven years the whole joy of my life...

Religion and I have long since parted company,
but I retain the most tender memories...

[organ music begins under his speech]

especially of my first communion, when... as I blushing took the sacrament...
a chorus of virginal voices broke into a eucharistic hymn...^{xlvii}

ME 17a **Pre recorded 4 bars of *Gratias* from Messe solennelle**

VO 18 **Actor**

[in ecstasies]

This was my first musical experience!

And as I listened I thought that I saw heaven open,

a heaven of love and chaste delight!

Such is the magical power of true expression,

the incomparable beauty of melody that comes straight from the heart...^{xlviii}

A long time afterwards...

(I was now in my second year in Paris as a student...)

a church organist in the city suggested that I write a solemn Mass...

to be performed on the feast day of the children of his choir...

I enthusiastically agreed...

[with great excitement, imagining it]

I would have an orchestra of one hundred picked musicians...^{xlix}

[in disappointment]

But when... after a long struggle... I actually heard what I had written...

I could not help seeing how little it was worth...

[hinting at the next music example]

And so I burned the score...

keeping only a few fragments... to be used again...!

ME 18 **Bar 33 to 4th quarter of bar 36**

0'23"

VO 19 **Actor**

By now... I was thoroughly disheartened...

I was seriously in debt...

and my parents were bombarding me with letters...

threatening to withdraw the modest allowance which was all I had to live on...^{li}

To make economies, I rented a tiny attic room...

and for my meals established an austere regime...

of bread and a few dried prunes or dates...^{lii}

And all the while... ceaseless dreams of Shakespeare...

and of that actress of pure genius, the 'fair Ophelia',

who had now become the rage of Paris...

And I could not help contrasting her dazzling reputation

with my own miserable obscurity...

At last I roused myself...

and resolved that though my name was utterly unknown to her

I would by a supreme effort make it shine

so that even she should catch a glimpse of it.

I would dare to do what no composer in France had ever before attempted...

I would give a concert exclusively of my own works... at the Conservatoire...

Yes, I thought... I will show her: 'I too am a painter'!^{liii}

ME 19 **Bar 87 to end of bar 99**

0'55"

VO 20 **Actor**

The concert was successful...
and the papers spoke enthusiastically...

[remembering the notices]

"Berlioz has natural talent, his style is virile and energetic,
and his ideas are sometimes quite felicitous..."

[picking up energy]

But were such repercussions enough to reach Miss Smithson
or make her pause for an instant in her whirl of triumphs?

Alas, as it turned out, engrossed in her own glittering career,
of me and my music, my struggles and my successes,
she heard not a single word...^{liv}

It is difficult to describe what now I suffered...
the longing tearing my heart out by the very roots,
my dreadful loneliness in an empty universe...
the agonies thrilling through me
as though my blood were running ice-cold in my veins...

Shakespeare himself never told of such a torture...
but, in *Hamlet*, he counts it among the most terrible
of all the evils of existence:

An utter disgust with living but the impossibility of dying...^{lv}