

Program Symphony: Hector [Berlioz](#) (1803-1869)

Berlioz (bear-lee-ohz) was a French composer whose father was a doctor; to please his father, he went to medical school, but he spent more time going to concerts and to the theatre than studying medicine. Berlioz played flute and guitar, but is best known as a composer and orchestrator. As a student at the Paris Conservatory, he tried several times to earn the prestigious Prix de Rome, finally winning in 1830.

During his medical school days, Berlioz attended performances of an English theatrical troupe. *Hamlet* was part of their repertory, and Hector became infatuated with the actress who played Ophelia. This was really a fixation on the character as played by Harriet Smithson, since Hector had not yet met the actress. (Imagine your own fantasies about your favorite actor!) Despite this infatuation, Berlioz became engaged to another woman before he went off to Rome to work (the other woman, Marie, married someone else while he was gone). Berlioz wrote several works during his sojourn in Rome, but the one that won him the most recognition was a program symphony, *Symphonie fantastique*.

Berlioz used this symphony to express his feelings about Harriet Smithson. The symphony tells the story of a young poet who has taken an overdose of drugs and has a series of dreams about his beloved. The beloved is represented by a recurrent theme known as the *idée fixe* (French for "fixed idea"); this theme appears in several different permutations depending on how he feels about the woman at the time. The five movements are as follows, with Berlioz's descriptions:

1. Reveries, Passions. "He remembers the weariness of soul, the indefinable yearning he knew before meeting his beloved. Then, the volcanic love with which she at once inspired him, his delirious suffering, his religious consolation."
2. A Ball. "Amid the tumult and excitement of a brilliant ball he glimpses the loved one again."
3. Scene in the Fields. "On a summer evening in the country he hears two shepherds piping. The pastoral duet, the quiet surroundings...all unite to fill his heart with a long absent calm. But she appears again. His heart contracts. Painful forebodings fill his soul."
4. March to the Scaffold. "He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he has been condemned to die and is being led to the scaffold. At the very end the fixed idea reappears for an instant, like a last thought of love interrupted by the fall of the axe."

5. Dream of a Witches' Sabbath. "He sees himself at a witches' sabbath surrounded by a host of fearsome spirits who have gathered for his funeral. Unearthly sounds, groans, shrieks of laughter. The melody of his beloved is heard, but it has lost its noble and reserved character. It has become a vulgar tune, trivial and grotesque. It is she who comes to the infernal orgy. A howl of joy greets her arrival. She joins the diabolical dance. Bells toll for the dead. A burlesque of the *Dies irae* [chant from the Requiem Mass]. Dance of the witches. The dance and the *Dies irae* combined."

Listen now to the fourth movement, "March to the Scaffold" (CD 3, Tracks 9-14). As you listen, think about whether the music seems to depict the events described in the synopsis above. **Writing Assignment #9** is to write about your impression of the music's connection to the program. Does it sound like the story to you? Be specific about things that happen in the music and their relationship to the events of the story. Keep in mind that you are only focusing on the events of the March to the Scaffold (movement #4), not of any other movement. That is, you shouldn't expect to hear the dream, the ball, the fields, or the witches.

By the way, Berlioz did finally meet and marry Miss Smithson in 1833. Some of his best work was written during their marriage, which produced his only child. One of the symphonies he wrote during this time, *Harold en Italie*, caused virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini to fall at Berlioz's feet and declare him Beethoven's successor—and Paganini gave him 20,000 francs to boot! The *Romeo and Juliet* choral symphony that Berlioz subsequently wrote was dedicated to Paganini, whose gift allowed Berlioz to give up his "day job" in journalism.

Berlioz and Smithson later separated, and he married that first fiancée when Harriet died.

Berlioz's great contribution to composition was his attention to the orchestra. He was a noted conductor who believed in teaching orchestra members to play the new music correctly. He also wrote an important book on **orchestration** that is still used today. Orchestration refers to the art of writing for instruments. Obviously, composers had been doing that for hundreds of years, but Berlioz was the one who focused on the specific capabilities of each instrument, the use of tone colors in various combinations, and on making the absolute best use of the instruments available.

