

Symphonie Fantastique opus 14 - Hector Berlioz

Programme note by the composer

"At concerts at which this symphony is played, the distribution of this Programme to the audience is indispensable to a full understanding of the dramatic plan of the work.

The composer's intention has been to treat various states in the life of an artist in the form of musical images. Since this instrumental drama lacks the assistance of words, an advance explanation of its plan is necessary. The following programme, therefore, should be thought of as though it were the spoken text of an opera, serving to introduce the musical movements and explain their character and expression."

First movement – Daydreams and Passions

The composer imagines that a young musician, troubled by an extreme sensitivity of mind, sees for the first time a woman who seems to embody the ideal for which he has always longed, and he falls desperately in love with her. Every time he thinks of her, a single musical idea comes to mind – a melodic idea impassioned, but refined - qualities he also attributes to the object of his love.

This melody and its associations, heard at the beginning of the 'allegro' section of the first movement, pursue him relentlessly, like an *idée fixe*. This tune recurs in every movement of the symphony, although in many different forms.

The first movement starts in an extended state of dreamy melancholy; but it then transforms into a succession of wildly-varying moods, from aimless joy, to delirious passion, mixed with rage, jealousy, tenderness, tears, and, finally, religious solace.

Second movement – A Ball

The young musician is at a festival, contemplating the joys of the occasion; but, amidst the swirling dancers at a ball, a vision of his beloved appears before him, again bringing trouble to his soul.

Third movement – Scene in the Countryside

It is a summer evening. He is peacefully musing when he hears in the distance two shepherds playing a *ranz de vaches* – a tune used to call flocks of sheep together. The duet, his peaceful surroundings, the rustle of the trees in the breeze, all combine to bring peace to his heart. He considers his loneliness, and his hopes to be alone no longer. Then her image appears to him again. What if she deceives him! Dark forebodings fill his soul.

Then one of the shepherds starts the *ranz de vaches* again – but the only answer is the roll of distant thunder in the mountains...solitude...silence.

Fourth movement – March to the Scaffold

The young musician, now realising his love is unrequited, poisons himself with opium. The dose is not strong enough to be fatal, but it plunges him into a deep sleep, wracked by the most ghastly visions. He dreams he has killed the woman he loves, that he is condemned to die, is brought to the scaffold, and *witnesses his own execution*. The procession of the tumbril is a march, sometimes fierce and sombre, sometimes stately. We hear the jeering of the crowd and the relentless thud of heavy footsteps. At the end of the march, he thinks he sees the object of his obsessive love watching from the crowd, before the vision is interrupted by the fatal stroke.

Fifth movement – Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

He sees himself at a Witches' Sabbath, in the midst of a ghastly crowd of spirits, sorcerers, and monsters of every kind, assembled for his funeral. There are strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, and far-off shouts which are replied to with other shouts. The *idée fixe* returns once more, but in coarse and ugly form – a common dance tune, trivial and grotesque. It is the object of his love who has come to the sabbath ... A roar of joy greets her arrival ... She mingles with the devilish orgy ... A funeral knell sounds, and a ludicrous parody of the *Dies irae* follows. The *Dies irae* and the round-dance eventually combine in a final frenzied outburst.

Dies irae, or Day of wrath – a hymn about the Last Judgement chanted during the Funeral Rite of the Catholic Church.

Hector Berlioz