Close Analysis
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I. Rêveries--Passions. (C minor--C major; quadruple meter)

We might take Berlioz's own double title literally, as a sign of his musical form. "Rêveries" figures as a kind of introduction, beginning in C minor (pp. 3-9). You will learn (in lecture) that this gentle, opening melody has a sentimental history associated with Berlioz's first love. "Passions," in C major, forms the main body of the movement, set in motion by the vision of the (new) beloved. The passage on the bottom half of p. 9, with its sudden agitation (Allegro agitato) and passion (e appassionato assai) would seem to mark the moment when the hero, jolted out of his vague dreams, first catches sight of her. Are you surprised by the constant fluctuations of tempo? Think back to the program and what Berlioz was trying to convey. The idée fixe, the first important event in "Passions," appears for the first time on the next page (p. 10). As you listen to the remainder of the movement, consider how the changes Berlioz operates on the idée fixe correspond to shifts in emotional significance. Attend to differences in orchestration, dynamics, tempo, and figuration.

The chief recurrences of the idée fixe are illustrated with music in the Playthrough section.

("Passions" is sometimes considered a sonata form, but the markers of that form are by no means obvious, e.g. determining the point of recapitulation raises significant questions.)

II. Un bal. (A major; triple meter)

This movement begins with a special effect. Gradually, out of a kind of symphonic mist, a waltz comes into being; we seem to descend on the scene just as one falls into a dream. Perhaps this effect, in less cinematic terms, might be compared to the nebulous start of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Consider, too, how Berlioz gives his introduction visceral excitement by means of both dynamics (a gradual crescendo) and pitch (a rising sequence by semitones). This sequence is simply a rising musical figure repeated at successively higher levels. Because the successive semitones are equidistant, they foster a sense of instability: we don't know where the ascent will end (in the event, we end on E, the dominant degree in the key of this movement). The rustling effect in the strings is called tremolo and is created by bowing or fingering rapidly. The overall form of this piece is ternary, with an introduction and a coda. Thus:

INTRO. | A₀ | B | A¹ | CODA

This form corresponds to that of an ordinary scherzo, or any number of dance-like movements found in nineteenth-century symphonic works.

The idée fixe, like a vision amid the tumult of the dance, appears, transformed into triple meter, in the middle of the movement (p. 40), then vanishes. Berlioz later whips the waltz into a frenzy, and just when we think we have reached the end, a solo clarinet unexpectedly offers us another glimpse of the beloved (at fig. 35, p. 54). (How does Berlioz treat the orchestral texture here?) But the dance, indifferent to this dreamy parenthesis, races off to a flourish whose uninhibited verve seems to merge the whirling dancers with the radiance of the chandeliers. How does Berlioz achieve this final burst of orchestral light?

III. Scène aux champs. (F major; compound duple meter)

The meter (6/8), the key of F major, and the prominent use of woodwind instruments all contribute to the pastoral atmosphere of this movement. Berlioz pairs an English horn with an off-stage oboe for a duet between two shepherds ( ). Note that the first call and echo are in major mode, the second in minor. Also note that this call reappears at the end of the movement, but there is the first shepherd's call is answered only--ominously--by distant thunder. Inside this frame, Berlioz fashions a set of variations on another idea.
Theme ( ). It first appears in the flute and violins at fig. 37 of your score (p. 61). The character of this melody is at first aloof but then expands into the high register with more longing.

Var. I. ( ) Four measures before the end of p. 61. . . . This is followed by a kind of development or extension, which modulates to the dominant (C major).

Var. II. ( ) Introducibly a new figure in the violin, the theme now appears in the bass (bottom system, p. 64). . . . Modulation to B-flat (subdominant); in the midst of growing inner turmoil and doubt, the idée fixe appears in the flute and oboe (p. 66). Listen to the counter melody that immediately precedes the idée fixe in the bassoons and low strings; not unlike a recitative at first, the counter melody soon takes on a life of its own, and the idée fixe is ploughed under. Loud climax (p. 68), then a fall back to the tonic key (F). Near silence. A short transition, led by flutes and oboes, to . . .

Var. III. ( ) The theme traced in filigree pizzicati (plucked notes) in the violins and violas and picked up in the clarinet’s counterpoint (p. 69, at fig. 43).

Var. IV. C major. ( ) Theme in the second violins against very lively background figuration (p. 70, at fig. 44). . . . In the second bar on p. 72, we reach a point of transition which takes us back to the home key.

[Var. V.] ( ) At fig. 47 (p. 72) the winds pass a fragment of the idée fixe back and forth while the strings present another variation of the main theme. After a few bars, Berlioz abandons the main theme, and the idée fixe prevails. Listen for the first few notes of the idée fixe again in the violins, echoed by the horns.

The music seems to fade away. We reach the shepherd's call again. How does Berlioz "orchestrate" the sound of thunder coming across a valley? Do you think he succeeded in the paradoxical project of representing a sense of loneliness and silence through sound? In what sense is the movement open-ended and in what sense is it rounded off?

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IV. Marche du supplice. (G minor; duple meter)

This procession to the scaffold exemplifies Berlioz's orchestration at its most strident. Whether he created a rustle or an explosion, however, Berlioz cared about every detail. Note his explicit instructions, here (p. 75) as in the previous movement (p. 73), about the way the timpani players are to handle their sticks. Listen also to the outrageously low, rasping sound of the pedal tones (B-flat and A) on the third trombone once the march gets underway (p. 81ff) ( ).

These notes are impossible to play quietly and are very rarely called for. This is probably their first use in the history of symphonic music.

The idée fixe, a gentle clarinet solo, does not appear until just before fall of the blade of the guillotine (pp. 95-96). This is the last time we will hear the idée fixe in its original guise (though here obviously abbreviated). Berlioz offers us a macabre example of musical mimicry: the thud of the protagonist's head falling into the executioner's basket. The succeeding fanfare of brass and drums evokes a military band in the public square.

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V. Songe d'une nuit de sabbat. (E-flat major, C minor, C major; quadruple meter and triple meter)

Berlioz strives to evoke the "strange noises, cackling, [and] distant cries" that set the scene for the witches’ sabbath. The opening is extremely unstable, and the key is unclear. When the idée fixe appears (foreshadowed in C major on p. 102, definitively in E-flat major on p. 104), it is utterly transformed. Assigned to an Eb clarinet, couched in a dance-like meter, and accompanied tartly by other woodwinds, the idée fixe has lost all its "shyness" and "nobility" to become a wanton parody of itself. The protagonist, in effect, avenges his own failure to win his ideal woman by transforming her into an idolatress in the Black Mass.

This act of imagination, combined with a scene described as the protagonist's own funeral, explains the subsequent appearance of the "Dies Irae" (p. 109) (glossary entry on Dies irae and webpage on Dies irae). This chant ("Day of wrath"), which Berlioz quotes from the ancient

http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~lab51/fantastique/close_analysis.html
repertory of Christian plainsong, is here wordless but normally carries the gravest of the texts associated with the mass for the dead; it solemnly reminds all believers of the definitive Judgement that awaits them at the end of the world. The chimes ( ) represent a funeral knell. The disruptive burst of energy ( ) from the woodwinds and high strings presents the "burlesque parody" of the chant which Berlioz indicates in his program.

Now we come to the "Witches' Round-Dance" (p. 118), which Berlioz had already foreshadowed in some interruptions earlier on (pp. 108-9, 116-17). The round-dance is set up as a short fugal exposition. (Technical detail: because the tune, the fugal subject, is immediately set against invertible counterpoint, Schumann called this passage a double fugue). Here, the outstanding textural process to observe is the transfer of the dance-tune from instrument to instrument until the whole orchestra, like the gathering circle of witches, seems to be infected with its frenzy. After a lull, a sinister, chromatic version ( ) of the round-dance emerges in the bass (p. 131) and is treated in imitative polyphony (p. 132). Then comes one of the most characteristic moments in the score: two things that should never go together are forced into synchrony. Berlioz combines the "Dies iræ" and the round-dance in (non-imitative) polyphony. Notice that the round-dance is soon dissolved in a wash of sixteenth notes. Berlioz referred to his technique of heterogeneous polyphony as "la réunion des thèmes" ( ); he used the device in many other works. The effect is above all dramatic and climactic. Can you remember a moment in the finale of the Ninth Symphony where Beethoven employs a similar technique?

Berlioz saves a final grotesquerie for p. 142 (fig. 83), where the violins and violas are instructed to play col legno ( ) -- with the back of the bow (with the wood rather than the hair). This is yet another example of "turning things upside-down" in a movement evoking diabolical rites. Under this eerie, brittle sound, a fantastical trilled version of the round dance appears in the woodwinds and ccellos.
Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is a remarkable representation of musical Romanticism for many reasons. First, it is profoundly influenced by literature. The story of the symphony is inspired from multiple literary sources, including Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and Goethe's *Faust*. In contrast to earlier symphonies, it follows an extramusical narrative devised by the composer, thus making it an early example of program symphony - an orchestral work in the form of a symphony and bearing a descriptive title or program. The program of the *Symphonie fantastique* concerns the Artist (understood to be Berlioz himself who was at the time deeply in love with a Shakespearean actress named Harriet Smithson), who, unhappy in love, swallows an overdose of opium. He survives the powerful drug but in his hallucination experiences wild, impassioned dreams of his unfaithful Beloved. Berlioz provides descriptive titles for its five movements. In addition, he offered a lengthy literary text that he insisted should be distributed to audiences whenever the symphony was played.

As the author of the pioneering work *Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration* (1844), Berlioz had a unique understanding of the capabilities of various instruments. His romantic preference for harmony and color led him to expand the size of the orchestra, achieving a wider range of volume and colorful sonorities. The *Symphonie fantastique* is scored for piccolo, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling *cor anglais*), English horn, two clarinets (one doubling Eb clarinet), four bassoons, four horns, two cornets,
two trumpets, three trombones, two tubas (or ophicleides), four timpani, a variety of percussion (e.g. cymbals, suspended cymbal, tenor drum, bass drum), bells (sounding C and G), two harps, and strings. Each of the five movements has a different orchestral requirement. Berlioz wanted an orchestra of 220 performers, but only had 130 at the premiere.

Like most romantic composers who were interested more in expression than in form, Berlioz freely adapted classical formal designs to suit his romantic needs, allowing the sequence of the program to govern the structure of his work. The symphony's movements are unified dramatically by the recurrence in each movement of a theme called the *idée fixe* (fixed idea), a melodic reference to the Beloved (Harriet), which changes shape (rhythm, harmony, tempo, meter, and instrumentation) altering its character for programmatic reasons. Thematic transformation of the *idée fixe* throughout the symphony dramatically reflects changes in the Beloved's personality and in the Artist's concept of her:

**First movement: Largo - Molto allegro**

*"Reveries, passions"*

In the first movement, the *idée fixe* is presented by the violins and flute, accompanied by a minimal string accompaniment. The theme is deliberately imbalanced; its phrases are of unequal length, marking an immediate departure from the preferred order and balance of the Classical period. Berlioz goes for intensity in every phrase, with much chromaticism and very detailed expression marks:

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Allegro agitato e appassionato assai (d=132)

Vn. I, Fl.
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![Musical notation for the first movement](image)
Second Movement: Waltz - Allegro non troppo

“A ball”

The second movement begins with a lilting waltz, but it is interrupted by the unexpected appearance of the *idée fixe*, its rhythm changed to accommodate the triple meter of the waltz:

![Flute and Clarinet Sheet Music](image)

Third Movement: Adagio

“Scene in the countryside”

The third movement begins with two shepherds answering one another with their pipes - the *cor anglais* calls plaintively and the oboe answers from off stage. The *idée fixe* is presented first by flute, then answered by the clarinet and later the oboe:

![Flute, Oboe Sheet Music](image)

Fourth Movement: Allegretto non troppo

“March to the scaffold”

In the fourth movement, the artist dreams that he has murdered his beloved, and has been condemned to death and is being led to the scaffold. At the end of the march a solo clarinet begins to play the *idée fixe* but is savagely interrupted by a very loud chord representing the fall of the guillotine's blade:
Fifth Movement: Larghetto - Allegro - Dies Irae - Sabbath Round

Dream of a Sabbath Night

The final movement, Berlioz musically depicted the descent of the executed Artist into hell, where his murdered Beloved and a host of witches greet him. Rhythmic distortion of the *idée fixe* indicates the transformation of the Beloved. As the composer himself points out, the "noble and timid" *idée fixe* theme loses its character and sounds vulgar and raucous when played by the squeaky high Eb clarinet, and when parodied to a fast jig rhythm, with trills and grace notes adding to its "triviality":

Throughout the five movements, the presence of an *idée fixe* creates a motivic connection among all the movements resulting in what is called the cyclic form. Although there are some relationships to conventional musical forms in its first four movements (e.g. the sonata form), Berlioz relied more on the programmatic content of his music, and the resulting forms were loose, but logical. And in the fifth movement the composer even abandoned traditional forms and relied on his program to organize the music.

Berlioz was the first to exploit fully the recent improvements in instruments, such as the fully
chromatic valved horns and cornets. Colorful new ways of writing for instruments, both alone and in combinations, abound in his scores. For example, in the second movement, Berlioz adds two harps to better project the spirit of the Waltz and to brighten up his orchestral palette. Berlioz scores the third movement for woodwinds, horns, strings, and four timpani. An imitative passage between the oboe and English horn opens the third movement, where the oboe was placed offstage in order to achieve an echo effect. Precise use of dynamic markings is shown by the clarinet solo at $pppp$. At the end of the third movement, the English horn returns to the accompaniment of distant thunder sounds produced by the four timpanists, played with sponged-tipped sticks on four differently tuned timpani. It is not until the fourth movement that all the brass and percussion instruments enter the action. Berlioz creates a menacing atmosphere with the opening orchestral sound, a unique combination of muted French horns, timpani tuned third apart, and basses playing *pizzicato* chords. The finale requires special effects such as off-stage bells and wind *portamenti*, wind trills, muted strings and bass *pizzicati*. The violins and violas are required to produce a clattering sound by playing with their bow-sticks bouncing on strings (*col legno*), creating an eerie effect suggesting skeletons dancing. The movement ends with the grand bass drum rolls played by two players. *Symphonie fantastique* holds a unique position in the history of music as one of the few surviving program symphonies. It well documents Berlioz's position as one of the orchestral pioneers of the early nineteenth century.
Bibliography


