Hector Berlioz – Symphonie Fantastique
The Idee Fixe

Berlioz was the quintessential Romantic artist. For him, the artist was the hero of the work of art. He originally subtitled his work "Episode in the Life of an Artist." In fact, many parallels exist between the actual events of Berlioz's life and the fictional "events" of the symphony.

After abandoning his medical studies against his father's wishes, Berlioz pursued musical studies at the Conservatory in Paris. He immersed himself in the music of Beethoven and the works of Shakespeare. In 1828, he attended a production of *Hamlet* in Paris by a traveling English Shakespeare Company. The role of Ophelia was played by an Irish actress named Harriet Smithson. In Berlioz's words: "her extraordinary talent, nay her dramatic genius, was equalled only by the havoc wrought in me by the poet." Berlioz was love-struck and returned several nights later to see *Romeo and Juliet.*

Berlioz's attempts to meet Smithson were shy and in fruitless—they did not meet. He began to conceive of a grand symphony about an artist's unrequited passion for a woman. Later, Berlioz learned (incorrectly) that Smithson was involved romantically with the company's manager. His disillusionment had a decisive effect on the program of the symphony. In the symphony, the scorned artist murders his beloved, is executed and meets her spirit at a witches' Sabbath!

The real life events were less gruesome but hardly less dramatic. After completing the symphony (and a companion work entitled *Lelio: The Return to Life*), Berlioz arranged for a performance of the two works. Smithson (who had no idea of her connection to the music) was invited to the performance. Upon reading the program and hearing these words (spoken by the narrator in *Lelio*): "When will my Ophelia, my Juliet, return to me," she realized the true circumstances of the creation of the music.

At this point, two years after her first tour of Paris, Smithson had returned to Paris on a failed tour and her career was in shambles. One can only imagine the effect that this performance must have had on her, seated in a crowded theatre only to discover that the composer was deeply in love with her. A meeting was arranged between the two shortly after the concert. They were married on October 3, 1833. Unfortunately, the true life story lacks a happy ending. Within a few short years they were miserable. Berlioz took a lover named Marie Recio. Hector and Harriet were separated in 1844, and Harriet died in 1854.

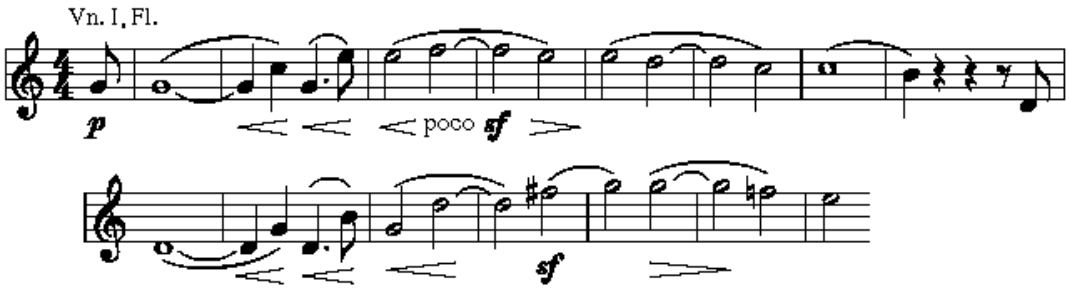
Berlioz wrote a "program" to describe the action of the symphony which was distributed at the performance. It is paraphrased below.

Program of the Symphony

A young musician of morbidly sensitive temperament poisons himself with opium in lovesick despair. The dose is too weak to kill him, but plunges him into deep slumber and strange visions. The beloved appears to him everywhere in a melody (*idée fixe*) which haunts him. (The first appearance of the *idée fixe* is scored for violins and flute).

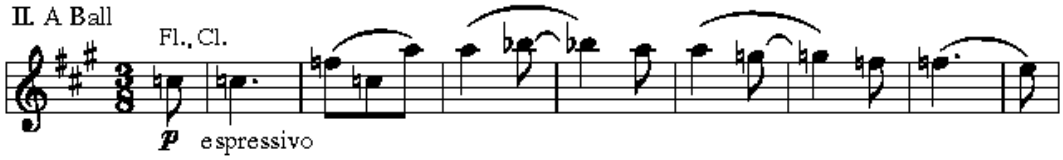
I: Reveries, Passions

- the lover dreams about his beloved
- slow introduction, then allegro
- idée fixe presented in pure form (violins & flutes)



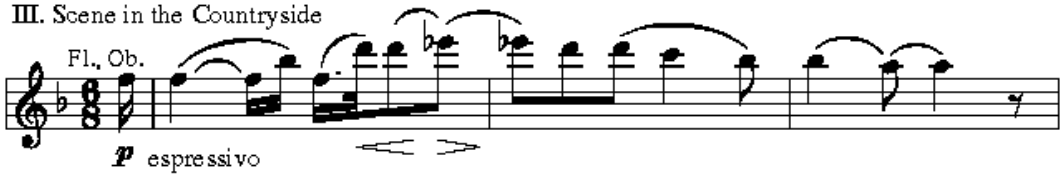
II: A Ball

- the lover finds his beloved at a ball
- waltz
- idée fixe transformed into a waltz tune



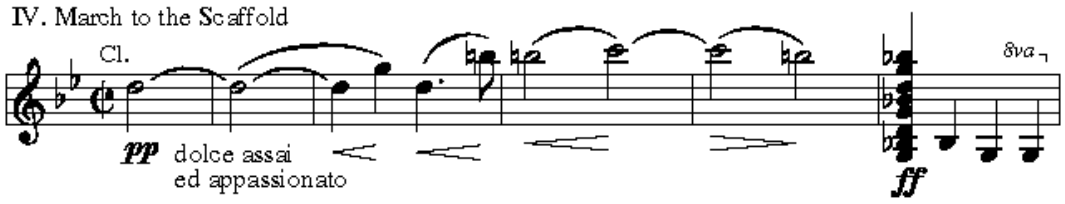
III: Scene in the Country

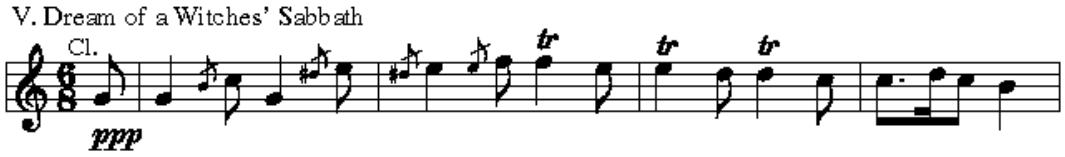
- the lover finds his beloved in the country during a summer evening
- English horn solo opens movement; represents loneliness, solitude
- timpani represent rumble of distant thunder
- the artist hears two shepherds piping in dialogue
- the pastoral scene, the duet and the quiet rustling of wind in the trees raise his hopes
- her image appears again (*idée fixe*)
- what if she were deceiving him? Fear tightens his heart. Distant thunder is heard. One shepherd plays alone. Emptiness -- silence -- sadness.



IV: March to the Scaffold

- the lover dreams that he has murdered his beloved, has been condemned to death, and is being led to execution
- opening orchestral sound is unconventional: muted French horns, timpani, basses (pizzicato chords)
- syncopated march tune: brasses and woodwinds
- idée fixe in solo clarinet toward end, as her image appears before him for a moment
- his final thoughts are interrupted by the fatal blow of the axe - loud chord = guillotine blade falling, soft pizzicato chords = head rolling



V: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

- the beloved has become a witch, and dances with other witches and monsters at his funeral
- idée fixe transformed into a grotesque dance tune
- Dies irae: medieval chant from requiem (mass for the dead); represents eternal damnation
- witches' dance and Dies irae combine