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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\text{Allegro agitato e appassionato assai (}\dot{q}=132)\\
\text{Vn. I, Fl.}
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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:

II. A Ball

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:

III. Scene in the Countryside

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 \textit{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 \textit{pizzicato} chords. The finale requires special effects such as off-stage bells and wind \textit{portamenti}, wind trills, muted strings and bass \textit{pizzicati}. The violins and violas are required to produce a clattering sound by playing with their bow-sticks bouncing on strings (\textit{col legno}), creating an eerie effect suggesting skeletons dancing. The movement ends with the grand bass drum rolls played by two players. \textit{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


