

Symphonie Fantastique

Described as “the first psychedelic musical trip”, Hector Berlioz’s passionate *Symphonie Fantastique* was the catalyst for an equally passionate ballet. By Valerie Lawson.

In Paris, Hector Berlioz fell in love with the idea of love. His infatuation led to the creation of a revolutionary symphony that ushered in the Romantic age of the nineteenth century. The symphony was an artistic triumph, both in the concert hall and much later, at The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden where it came to life visually in a ballet choreographed by Léonide Massine. But for Berlioz, one moment of infatuation led to eventual tragedy both for himself and the woman with whom he was obsessed.

Had he been born a hundred years later, the young French composer might have heard the lighthearted but deeply felt lyrics of Lorenz Hart, who warned: “Falling in love with love is falling for make-believe, falling in love with love is playing the fool”. Berlioz was smitten at the Théâtre de l’Odéon, where in 1827 he saw the actress Harriet Smithson playing Ophelia in *Hamlet*. The pretty Irishwoman spoke in a melodious voice. Her long dark hair fell from her heart-shaped face over her voluptuous shoulders, and down to her tiny waist. Berlioz told a friend he was stricken like a thunderbolt with a “delirium which takes possession of all one’s faculties, which renders one capable of anything”. He went on to stage concerts in Smithson’s honour but she failed to attend them. When her visiting Shakespearean troupe returned from France to Britain, Berlioz poured all his heartache into *Symphonie Fantastique*. Subtitled *Episodes in the Life of an Artist*, it was the story of his obsession.

Described by Leonard Bernstein as “the first psychedelic musical trip”, the symphony in five movements tells of a lonely musician who sees his beloved in a series of visions, first in a daydream in which the music reflects his various moods, from happiness to melancholy, then at a ball, and then in the countryside. In the final two movements, the musician tries to end his life with an overdose of opium but rather than killing him, the drug makes him hallucinate. He dreams of

his beloved’s death, then is swept up in an orgy with a coven of witches and evil spirits.

The symphony predicted the bleak end of Berlioz’s eventual life with Smithson. They married in 1833 but the couple broke up eight years later. A document in the Clare County Library in Ireland explains how the marriage between Harriet and her husband became strained, largely due to Harriet’s failure as an actress, her mounting debts and her jealousy of her husband’s success and his popularity with other women he met in the course of his work: “They separated, and Harriet began to suffer from a paralysis which left her unable to talk or move”. She died in 1854. Berlioz, who later married his mistress Marie Recio, went on to compose his masterpiece, the opera *Les Troyens*.

The overwrought narrative of *Symphonie Fantastique* encapsulated the concepts and themes of the Romantic age, many of which found expression in the works of Chopin and Liszt and the artist Delacroix. The symphony was completed in 1830. Had it been simpler in form and story, it might have found its way to the ballet stage of the time. After all, it shared the same supernatural creatures and the concept of an unattainable woman a number of Romantic ballets, such as *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*.

With *Giselle*, it also shared a musical device. As Peter Guttmann writes in his website Classical Notes, Berlioz used “a recurrent and strikingly complex theme” to symbolise the Beloved or the composer’s *idée fixe*. “Long, jagged and deeply chromatic, it keeps yearning upward only to fall back in despair ... Berlioz’s innovation of using the same theme throughout paved the way for Wagner’s leitmotifs that would soon transform opera”. In *Giselle*, the leading characters each have their own musical theme, as did the ballets of Tchaikovsky later in the nineteenth century and Prokofiev in the twentieth.

The balletic adaptation of *Symphonie Fantastique* had to wait for more than a century, when Massine was experimenting with the then-controversial idea of using symphonic music for ballet. That year, for Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes, he choreographed *Les Présages* to Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 5* and *Choreartium* to Brahms’s *Symphony No. 4*. When *Les Présages* was presented in Paris critics, musicians and balletomanes angrily debated the merits of using such music for ballet, arguing that a symphonic work was complete in itself, and was corrupted by its use for dance. *Les Présages* was not well received in New York and three years passed before Massine was ready to premiere his third symphonic ballet, *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Unlike *Les Présages* and *Choreartium*, which were abstract representations of the music, *Symphonie Fantastique* closely followed Berlioz’s scenario. At the premiere in 1936, Massine himself played the role of the Young Musician while the beautiful Tamara Toumanova danced the role of the Beloved. The writer Cyril Beaumont has described the opening moments: “The curtain rises to reveal a bare room in which a young musician, whose dress belongs to the Romantic period, is seated at a table, wrestling with his thoughts”. Massine was so engrossed in the role that, according to the former Ballets Russes dancer Tamara Tchinarova Finch, “he seemed to live the part to such an extent that he became withdrawn, brooding and morbid”. The reaction to the ballet was mixed with one dance writer, AV Coton calling it “a grave disaster” while another, Arnold Haskell, found it “fully successful”.

De Basil’s company, the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, presented the work in Australia in 1938. At the premiere in Melbourne, Yurek Shabelevsky appeared as the Young Musician and Irina Baronova as the Beloved while Anton Dolin danced the role on subsequent dates on the tour.

Madeleine Eastoe, Robert Curran and Remi Wörtmeyer in *Symphonie Fantastique* Photography—Jim McFarlane

Kirsty Martin and Robert Curran in *Symphonie Fantastique* Photography—Justin Smith



Both critics and audiences loved the production which was chosen by public ballot to be part of the programme for the company’s last performance on that tour. *Symphonie Fantastique* returned to Australia during the Original Ballet Russe tour, with the leading roles danced in 1940 by Paul Petrov and Tamara Toumanova.

In the mid-1950s, the work was restaged in Australia by the Borovansky Ballet. But many years followed before its reincarnation when The Australian Ballet’s Artistic Director, David McAllister, asked Polish choreographer Krzysztof Pastor to create a new *Symphonie Fantastique* as part of the company’s four-year celebration of the Ballets Russes tours to Australia. Pastor, the resident choreographer of the Dutch National Ballet, was given the brief in 2005, and the ballet opened in Melbourne on August 30 last year, with Robert Curran as the Artist, (the Musician in Massine’s ballet), Kirsty Martin as the *Idée Fixe* (or Beloved), and set and costume design by Amsterdam-based Tatyana van Walsum, who has collaborated often with Pastor. The images she has created – among them vibrant red poppies, swollen raindrops and the menacing visage of the *Idée Fixe* – are a window into the Artist’s tortured mind.

Interviewed before the Australian premiere, Pastor told me, “I was scared to do *Symphonie Fantastique*. It’s an inspiring work, a musical obsession. The music is very big, very complex. For me, the music became obsessive. I’ve been listening to it since David commissioned me, one and a half years ago”.

There was no chance of Pastor following in Massine’s literal footsteps. “It would look ridiculous now”, Pastor said. “The audience would laugh. I paid no attention to the Massine version. I tried to do it a different way, and tried to follow the spirit of the music”.

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