Hector Berlioz’s pathological psycho-drama, *Symphonie fantastique*, has long been an orchestral landmark and audience favorite. The orchestration was so original that conductor Felix Weingartner called Berlioz “the creator of the modern orchestra.” Hugo Leichtentritt assessed the work to be the product of “an inventive genius of the first order. (His) art of orchestral coloring is an achievement comparable to Chopin’s chromatic harmony, a fundamental achievement on which the art of Wagner, Liszt, Richard Strauss and Debussy is based.” Audiences in 1830 were aghast and tantalized by the subject matter and the new idea of a program symphony. The graphic working-out of Berlioz’s obsession for the Shakespearean Irish actress Harriet Smithson was shocking and thrilling.

Although he spoke no English, Berlioz was a Shakespeare fan. On February 6, 1830, Berlioz wrote a feverish response to Harriet after her performances of Ophelia and Juliette. Today we would say a “hysterical stalker,” and it must have been terrifying for her. “I am now plunged into the anguish of an interminable inextinguishable passion … each muscle of my body shudders in pain. … I am on the point of beginning my great symphony and I have it in my head. I shall marry that woman and on that drama, I will write my greatest symphony.” The first prophecy came true, and in the opinion of many, the second did as well. He was possessed with Harriet, the symphony and the emotions therein.

The symphonic result was spellbinding. Berlioz wrote quickly, fired by neurotic intensive and romantic fervor. His orchestral score called for 220 members, employing four types of clarinets, large bells and four bassoons. Eventually, the largest orchestra Berlioz could muster was 130 players. By December 5, 1830, the symphony was ready and presented to a stunned audience that included Liszt, Meyerbeer and Spontini … but not Harriet, whom he had desperately hoped to attract. They did meet two days later and were married within two months into a horrible union. After 10 years, they separated. In 1854, Harriet died, and Berlioz consoled himself by marrying his mistress. At age 65, the composer died, outliving both wives, his only son, all his siblings and most of his friends.

Because *Symphonie fantastique* is programmatic, Berlioz thought that the first audience should receive a *précis* of the plot. “There is absolutely no question of the program reproducing what the composer is trying to communicate through the orchestra. He knows perfectly well that music cannot substitute for either words or pictures. The symphony can (the composer hopes) offer musical interest independent of any dramatic purpose.” Indeed, it did.

For the opening movement, Berlioz prepared his audience, saying, “A young musician (artist) of morbid sensibility and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit of amorous despair. The narcotic dose, too weak to result in death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, sentiments and recollections are translated in his sick brain into musical thoughts and images. The ‘beloved woman’ herself has become for him like a melody, like a fixed idea, which he finds and hears everywhere.” Harriet’s tune appears everywhere within the work, transforming itself according to the situation. She permeates the score as she permeated his mind.
The first movement, *Reveries and Passions*, evokes the artist’s initial enchantment and desire for the girl. “He recalls first the soul-sickness, those imitations of passion, those seemingly groundless depressions and elations, that he experienced before he first saw the woman he loves; then the volcanic love that she suddenly inspired in him.”

*The Ball* finds the lover at a beautiful party and features a glorious waltz, which is constantly interrupted by Harriet’s theme. Berlioz continues his description: “He meets his beloved again during the tumult of a brilliant fete.”

*In the Country* moves the listener to a pastoral setting. Now the lover is alone and deeply reflective. Berlioz continues his tale: “On a summer evening in the country, he hears two shepherds piping back and forth to each other a ranz des vaches (a traditional tune played by Swiss herdsmen to call their herds). Harriet’s theme interrupts the serenity and the lover questions, “What if she were to deceive him?” Eventually, one of the shepherds reiterates the ranz des vaches, but the other no longer answers (the feared anticipated abandonment). Berlioz concludes with “the sunset, distant roll of thunder, solitude and silence.” An English horn and off-stage oboe provide a calming dialogue before the terrorizing opium dream begins.

The *March to the Scaffold* (using a march from Berlioz’s unperformed opera, *Les Francs-juges*) depicts the artist’s accidental poisoning, his belief that he has killed his beloved, and his anticipated death by hanging. “The procession moves forward to the sounds of a march that is now somber and wild, now brilliant and solemn, in which the muffled sound of heavy steps gives way without transition to the noisiest clamor. At the end, the *idée fixe* (fixed idea) returns for a moment, like one last thought of love interrupted by the death blow.”

The *Dream of the Witches’ Sabbath* places the artist in a hideous nightmare, surrounded by monsters, with Harriet’s theme shrieking in delight at his torture. “He sees himself at the Sabbath, in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, coming together for his funeral. “Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries that other cries seem to answer. The ‘beloved melody’ appears again, but has lost nobility and shyness. It is now more of a dance tune, base, trivial and grotesque. It is SHE (Harriet) coming to join the Sabbath. A roar of joy at her arrival. She takes part in the devilish orgy. Funeral knell, burlesque parody of Dies Irae.” The music is crammed with strange harmonies and melodic twists, clearly evoking a fearsome, ugly scene. His use of a tritone (an augmented fourth interval that has an unsettling sound for most Western ears; sometimes even called the devil’s interval) is heavily employed. Tubas and bassoons proclaim an enormous statement of the Dies Irae theme before the witches perform their frenetic dance within a seething fugal texture. The frenzy climaxes in an overwhelming re-iteration of the Dies Irae before Berlioz ignites his consuming, fiery coda.