

Opening Weekend: Denk plays “Emperor”

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Beethoven: Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*. Beethoven’s only ballet score, *The Creatures of Prometheus*, yielded some of his most memorable music. Its sparkling overture is a romp with joyous rhythms and an upbeat mood.

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5, “Emperor.” Majesty and confidence exude from this concerto. Listen for a commanding solo entrance—like a cadenza—at the beginning. Ethereal beauty shimmers through the slow movement, while the finale merges dignity, grace and the spirit of dance.

Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*. Berlioz was thrilled by Beethoven’s expansion of the symphonic concept and set his unorthodox ambitions on carrying on the Beethovenian spirit. Obsessive love underlies his *Symphonie fantastique*. Its principal theme, symbolizing the beloved, recurs in each movement. Opium hallucinations distort the tune in the thrilling “March to the Scaffold” and “Witches’ Sabbath.”

BEETHOVEN: Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*, Op. 43

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1800–01

World Premiere: March 28, 1801, at the Vienna Burgtheater.

NJSO Premiere: 1967–68 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 5 minutes

In 1800, the Italian dancer and choreographer Salvatore Viganò was the most influential ballet-master active at the Viennese imperial court. When Viganò approached Beethoven about collaborating on a ballet, Beethoven accepted the assignment with alacrity, correctly guessing that the project would do much to further his reputation. The resulting work, *The Creatures of Prometheus*, was his only ballet score.

In Viganò's scenario, the Greek demi-god Prometheus brings two clay statues to life, using fire from the heavens. Upon discovering that they lack emotions, he leads them to Parnassus. There, the Muses, Apollo and Bacchus educate them in the arts so that they may experience the passion of human life through the power of harmony.

The Creatures of Prometheus became quite popular, enjoying nearly 30 performances in its first two years. Today, it is known primarily for its overture and finale. The overture is the earliest of Beethoven's concert overtures to remain in the repertoire. It is a symphonic sonata-form movement (a movement in three sections, with an introduction, development and recapitulation of two main themes), drawing heavily on the models of both Haydn and Mozart.

The slow introduction calls to mind Beethoven's First Symphony (also in C major), but the Allegro molto con brio is more self-assured and aggressive than the symphony's. The music relies primarily on

its principal theme for both development and coda, and it boasts some imaginative orchestration.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.

BEETHOVEN: Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 73 ("Emperor")

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Composed: 1809

World Premiere: November 28, 1811, in Leipzig. Friedrich Schneider was the soloist; Johann-Philipp Christian Schulz led the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1927–28 season. Harold Bauer was the soloist; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 38 minutes

Take a look at the sleek, 9-foot ebony instrument at center stage.

By 1809, what we call the piano had expanded beyond Mozart's five-octave fortepiano. However, more than another half-century would elapse before that development culminated in an instrument the size and scope we hear this weekend. Beethoven was prescient in his ambition for the piano, writing music so far ahead of its time that the instrument has continued to grow into the music. Surely he would have been delighted with the modern concert grand, and nowhere more so than in the "Emperor" Concerto.

Beethoven tested both structural boundaries and elasticity of form in this last concerto. One revolutionary move was placing the solo cadenza at the beginning of the first movement, rather than its traditional placement near the end. Full orchestra intones a resonant, *fortissimo* E-flat major chord. Solo piano replies with a series of arpeggios that cede to a trill, then figuration, passage work and a melodic lead-in to a second chord from the orchestra, this time in A-flat. Once again unaccompanied piano responds, this time with more elaborate figuration for both hands. The piano ushers in the third,

preparatory orchestral chord—no one in the orchestra has yet played more than a single pitch—and answers it with a more melodic, but still virtuosic, passage to the main theme.

After the piano's bold entrance, nearly 100 measures of music unfold before we hear the piano again. Clearly, Beethoven was in no hurry. His opening *Allegro* is spacious and relaxed; in fact, it is the longest movement Beethoven ever composed. The soloist re-enters with another grand flourish: this time an ascending chromatic scale and a clarion trill, before a simple, elegant statement of the imperial theme. The piano weaves around the principal melodic ideas, etching elaborate figures without obscuring the noble design of each theme. There is no solo cadenza *per se* at the end of the *Allegro*, though the extended coda that serves the approximate function does begin on the familiar chord that usually heralds a cadenza. The structure is broad and symphonic, the music commanding and, yes, majestic.

Employment offer from a foreign monarch

Beethoven composed the E-flat concerto during a period when Vienna was braced for the second onslaught from Napoleon's army. Ironically, the French Emperor's brother Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, had recently invited Beethoven to move to Cassel, Germany, to become Kapellmeister. Beethoven was tempted. Then, three of his wealthy Viennese patrons pooled resources to provide him with an annuity, thereby persuading him to decline the offer.

Vienna had been home to him for so long that he was unlikely to leave at that point. In light of his strong ties to and reputation in the Austrian capital, it is ironic that the 1810 premiere of the "Emperor" did not take place in Vienna, but rather in Leipzig. Beethoven's pupil Karl Czerny played the first Viennese performance the following year.

Berlioz on Beethoven's slow movement: "The very image of grace"

The middle movement is comparatively brief, perhaps because its rich tonality of B major is so potent. Beethoven's *Adagio un poco mosso* emphasizes dialogue between soloist and orchestra. He develops his material almost like variations, with an improvisatory character. Hector Berlioz was a great admirer of this movement, calling it "the very image of grace" and singling out Beethoven's ethereal

orchestration.

Perhaps the most inspired moment occurs at the very end, with the bridge to the glorious finale. The horns hold a single pitch for what seems like an eternity, suspended in midair; then, seemingly out of nowhere, the soloist diffidently introduces the triumphant chords of the closing Rondo, initially posing them as a question.

A magical modulation leads without pause to the exultant finale. This irrepressible joy ride is one of the most delightful and positive conclusions in all of Beethoven's music. As in the first movement, the piano choreographs dazzling figures around the principal themes, without obscuring their contour. Our perception of royal splendor remains unimpaired. The "Emperor" ends with every ounce of the magnificent style with which it opened: virile, spacious and ever confident.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani, solo piano and strings.

BERLIOZ: *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Born: December 11, 1803, in La-Côte-Saint-André, France

Died: March 8, 1869, in Paris, France

Composed: 1830; early sketches date back as far as 1819.

World Premiere: December 5, 1830, in Paris; François-Antoine Habeneck conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1933–34 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 49 minutes

A marvelous extravagance underlies the *Symphonie fantastique* of Hector Berlioz. He was a master of orchestral effects, and the sonic kaleidoscope of this spellbinding, quintessentially romantic score has made it a popular favorite. More than 190 years after its first performance, this splendid symphony still sounds fresh, even slightly dangerous. And so it is, for Berlioz's subject was the obsessive love of a

young artist driven to opium by his passion for a woman. To be sure, the symphonic and programmatic aspects of this five-movement work are more important than its dance elements. All the same, the second movement waltz is one of the great ballroom scenes in the symphonic literature.

Paradoxically, there is a non-French connection to this unique French work: Berlioz's love interest, the Irish-born actress Harriet Smithson. In 1827, Berlioz attended performances of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* in English at Paris' Théâtre de l'Odéon. He fell instantly in love with Smithson, who played both Juliet and Ophelia. Although he spoke virtually no English, Berlioz pursued the comely actress and eventually married her in 1833. The union was not a success—they separated in 1844—but Berlioz's turbulent courtship was a major stimulus in the composition of his symphony and its sequel, *Lélio*.

Frankly autobiographical, the symphony bears the subtitle "Episode in the Life of an Artist." The basic premise is that a sensitive young artist, rejected by the woman he loves, has taken a potentially fatal dose of opium in a suicide attempt. Rather than dispatching him to his destiny, the opium catalyzes a series of hallucinatory dreams reflecting the artist's unstable state. These visions culminate in the nightmare-induced belief that he has murdered his beloved and is being led to the scaffold for execution.

One of Berlioz's innovations in the *Symphonie fantastique* is the use of an *idée fixe*, or "fixed idea," a musical theme representing the beloved that occurs in all five movements. In the first movement, he encounters his ideal woman and capitulates to her charms. In the second movement, we accompany our hero to a gala ball, where he glimpses the beloved through the crowd of dancing couples. In the third movement, "Scene in the Country," two shepherds engage in a mournful duet, while thunder in the distance hints at impending doom.

The concluding two movements depict the drugged dreamer marching to his own execution, condemned for murder. In the diabolical finale, witches and other ghoulish specters assemble for a death orgy. Berlioz transforms the *idée fixe* in the course of the music, distorting it to a macabre,

spectral scherzo idea as the opium induces the hero to further hallucinations.

Berlioz famously used the medieval chant *Dies irae* in his finale. Liszt, Rachmaninoff and other composers would follow his example, using the same chant in works for solo piano and orchestra. But the spine-tingling sound of Berlioz's expanded brass section in the "March to the Scaffold" and "Witches' Sabbath" movements leaves an unforgettable impression.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (first doubling E-flat clarinet), four bassoons, four horns, two cornets, two trumpets, three trombones, two ophicleides (generally played by tuba in modern performances), two timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, bells, two harps and strings.

BEETHOVEN AND BERLIOZ

For Berlioz, Beethoven epitomized the power and expressive potential of the symphony. He was thrilled by Beethoven's expansion of the symphonic concept in the "Pastoral" and "Choral" symphonies. In France, a country where symphonic music took a subservient role to the all-important operatic stage, Berlioz set his unorthodox ambitions on carrying on the Beethovenian spirit. Berlioz's passion for the literary works of Goethe and Shakespeare was to find lifelong expression in his symphonic music. The *Symphonie fantastique*, while not directly based on either Shakespeare or Goethe, has become irrevocably associated with a Shakespearean actress on tour in Berlioz's France.

In Irish femme fatale

Harriet Smithson made her Parisian debut in 1827. She created a sensation, and Berlioz, like all of Paris, flocked to the theater to see her perform. Though he did not understand English well, Berlioz was sufficiently familiar with Shakespeare to project his literary ardor onto the female protagonists of the plays he attended. He fell headlong in love. Starting in 1828, he wrote to Smithson for almost two years, but she did not respond, even to the letters he had taken the trouble to frame in English.

The young composer's romantic passion was undimmed. By February 1830, Berlioz was in such a keyed-up emotional state that he "could scarcely endure—or distinguish between—moral and physical pain," as he wrote to his father. In this agitated, precarious frame of mind, Berlioz began composing the *Symphonie fantastique*. Two months later it was finished, the creative efflorescence of his unrequited love.

Berlioz the iconoclast: breaking with tradition

Musically, this adventurous work required considerable adjustments to the traditional four movement symphonic form. To begin with, Berlioz expanded his symphony to five movements. A precedent had been set with the Beethoven Sixth ("Pastoral") symphony; Berlioz adopted that idea to allow for greater exploration of the hero's different emotional states. Next, anticipating Wagner and to some extent Liszt, he assigned a musical theme to the beloved, calling it an *idée fixe*; the term is borrowed from psychology. This theme, introduced in the first movement and varied or transformed in each of the subsequent movements, becomes an integrating component that serves both structural and narrative purposes. As a recurrent melodic idea, it makes the symphony a cyclic composition. As an auditory reminder of the program, the *idée fixe* turns the *Symphonie fantastique* into a dramatic work, even though it has no singers, actors or staging. With this, his first unquestioned masterpiece, Berlioz turned a sharp corner with the romantic symphony and never looked back.

Five movements: a tour through Berlioz's symphony

Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* often uses both C major and C minor, using that tonal ambiguity to heighten the sense of psychological imbalance. In the first movement, our hero first encounters his ideal woman, the beloved, and capitulates to her charms. He starts out in a state of sadness, somewhat meditative, but his newfound obsessive passion wreaks great changes on him—and in the music.

In the next vision (the second movement), we are with our hero at a gala ball, where he glimpses the beloved through the crowd of dancing couples. The key changes to F major for the appearance of the beloved; her impact on the artist is clear.

Berlioz was proud of the effect that the Adagio (“Scene in the Country”) always had on the public and himself. Two shepherds (English horn and offstage oboe) discuss life in a mournful duet; thunder on the horizon disturbs the meditative atmosphere in an eloquent portent of impending doom.

The concluding two movements of the symphony are among the best known excerpts in the entire symphonic literature. We see the dreamer marching to his own execution, having been condemned to death for the murder of his beloved. In the diabolical finale, witches and other ghoulish specters assemble for a death orgy. Berlioz twists the *idée fixe*, distorting it to a macabre, spectral scherzo idea. Is this his revenge for unrequited love?

The last movement is famous for its incorporation of the medieval *Dies Irae* chant, with ophicleides brought in to reinforce the brass section. Berlioz quite rightly thought them ugly; his vulgarization of the chant melody was intentional. It is but one example of innovative orchestration in this remarkable orchestral showcase. The *Symphonie fantastique* was also the first major orchestral work in which harp, English horn and bells were used.

P.S.

The postscript to the Harriet Smithson story is that Berlioz did marry her in 1833, when her career was in decline. The marriage failed. Berlioz scholar Hugh MacDonald has raised the tantalizing possibility that another woman, Camille Moke, may have also figured in the tempestuous events that resulted in the *Symphonie fantastique*. She and Berlioz were involved in a liaison in the early months of 1830 and were briefly engaged. She later married Ignaz Pleyel, heir to the piano manufacturing firm. The possibility of an addition in the cast of characters sends us to the concert hall with an entirely fresh perspective on Berlioz’s youthful masterpiece.