Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14
Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)
Written: 1830
Movements: Five
Style: Romantic
Duration: 49 minutes

When the twenty-one-year-old Hector Berlioz arrived in Paris from the provincial town of La Côte, he was as starry-eyed as any young man newly arrived in the big city. He was grudgingly following in his father’s footsteps to become a doctor—until he went to his first opera. “The pomp and brilliance of the spectacle, the sheer weight and richness of sound produced by the combined chorus and orchestra . . . excited and disturbed me to an extent which I will not attempt to describe,” he wrote in his Memoirs. “I hardly slept that night, and the anatomy lesson next morning suffered accordingly.”

Then Berlioz discovered that the music library of the Conservatory was open to the public. “It was the death-blow to my medical career. The dissecting-room was abandoned for good.” There were other important influences during those early years in Paris. He saw a production of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in English. He probably didn’t understand a word of it, but “Shakespeare, coming upon me unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt. The lightning flash of that discovery revealed to me at a stroke the whole heaven of art, illuminating it to its remotest corners. I recognized the meaning of grandeur, beauty, dramatic truth.” Most importantly, he saw the English actress Harriet Smithson play the role of Ophelia. He was so smitten that he became what we would call a stalker. Berlioz did everything in his power to meet Miss Smithson and played the role of the lovesick artist.

A direct result of that ill-fated relationship was his Symphonie fantastique. Partly autobiographical, the rest stands as a hallmark of musical romanticism. It is a symphony with five movements, not the standard four. Each is tied together with a single melodic idea—what Berlioz called an idée fixe—which represents the heroine of the story. Berlioz included the following description in the program (which is why we call it a “program symphony”). He insisted that it was essential to the understanding of the work:

A Young musician of unhealthily sensitive nature and endowed with vivid imagination has poisoned himself with opium in a paroxysm of lovesick despair. The narcotic dose he had taken was too weak to cause death, but it has thrown him into a long sleep accompanied by the most extraordinary visions. . .

First Movement: At first he thinks of the uneasy and nervous condition of his mind, of somber longings, of depression and joyous elation without any recognizable cause . . . he remembers the ardent love with which the Beloved One suddenly inspired him . . .

Second Movement: In a ballroom, amidst the confusion of a brilliant festival, he finds the Beloved One again.

Third Movement: It is a summer evening. He is in the country when he hears two shepherd lads who play a pastoral duet. And then She appears once more . . .

Fourth Movement: He dreams that he murdered his Beloved, that he has been condemned to death and is being led to execution. . . . For a moment a last thought of love is revived—which is cut short by the deathblow.
Fifth Movement: He dreams that he is present at a witches’ revel, surrounded by horrible spirits, amidst sorcerers and monsters in many fearful forms, who have come together for his funeral. The Beloved melody is heard again, but it has lost its shy and noble character; it has become a vulgar, trivial, grotesque dance tune.

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Prélude à “L'après-midi d'un faune” (Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun”)
Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Written: 1892–94
Movements: One
Style: Impressionistic
Duration: 10 minutes

“Was it a dream I loved?” asks the mythological faun in the opening lines of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem The Afternoon of a Faun. Were those sensuous nymphs he carried off real or just imagined? When the young composer Claude Debussy met Mallarmé, and heard The Afternoon of a Faun, he was intrigued by the idea of turning the poem into a ballet. Debussy worked for the better part of two years on the brief opening scene and soon realized that the symbolism of Mallarme’s poem was not easily suited to the theater. He contented himself by reworking the opening section as an orchestral concert piece and called it a “prelude.” “The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem,” he wrote. “By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather, there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon.”

By the time Debussy wrote the Prélude to “The Afternoon of a Faun,” he was already known as someone who was willing to break the established rules of composition. “Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity,” he said. Debussy intentionally left dissonances unresolved, using them solely for their colorful effect. Debussy used scales other than the traditional major and minor ones. He also handled rhythm differently. Instead of having a clearly defined beat grouped into distinct measures, Debussy purposely confused the rhythm in his music. Others considered Debussy’s music dangerous. “Better not listen to it,” Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov once facetiously said. “You risk getting used to it, and then end up by liking it.”

The flute, representing the faun’s panpipe, begins the Prélude, but its theme seems to lack any definable key and sputters out, giving way to the horns. The flute begins again and gives way to the oboe. For the third time the flute starts, and this time extends the theme into a full-blown melody. The clarinet introduces a new theme that grows in intensity and passion as the whole orchestra joins in. Suddenly, the oboe and English horn play a tune that mimics a dream dissipating and the flute returns with the opening theme. Just like the beginning, it fades away, leaving us to ask, “Was it a dream?”

After hearing Debussy’s Prélude to his L’après-midi d’un faune, ” Mallarmé wrote a little poem on a copy of the music: “Sylvan creature of the first breath/if your flute has succeeded/hearken to all light/which Debussy will breathe into it.”

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Even though Sergei Rachmaninoff was considered the rising star (both as pianist and composer) in Russia, that didn’t spare him from disaster at the premiere of his first symphony. The critic Ceasar Cui called it "a program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt" with the potential of giving "acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell." (It wasn't necessarily the symphony itself; it was the performance. The conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was drunk!) Rachmaninoff went into a severe depression, unable to compose. Among the various suggested cures was a visit to Leo Tolstoy for inspiration. Tolstoy’s remarks didn’t help: "You must work. Do you think that I am pleased with myself? Work. I work every day." And when he heard Rachmaninoff play his own music, the great man replied, "Tell me, do you really think anybody needs such music? I must tell you how much I dislike it."

Finally, Rachmaninoff sought help from the hypnotist Dr. Nikolay Dahl. Rachmaninoff would lie half-asleep in the doctor's study while Dahl would repeat "You will begin to write your concerto . . . You will work with great facility . . . The concerto will be of excellent quality . . ." It worked. "Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me," Rachmaninoff wrote. Soon he had more than enough material for a concerto. He wrote the second and third movements first and performed them at a benefit concert. It was an instant success. Cured of his depression, he completed the first movement and premiered the entire work in 1901. Since then, it has become one of the most-loved piano concertos.

If there is a single characteristic of this concerto, it is its long unfolding melodies. It is also distinctive by how often the orchestra gets the melody and the piano only the accompaniment. In each of the movements, the orchestra gets the first utterance of the tune. And in the last movement, the orchestra gets the last grand statement of the melody—later exploited by Frank Sinatra as “Full Moon and Empty Arms.” The first and second movements have faster middle sections that serve to expand on the content of the main melodies. The third movement begins quickly but has slower inner sections to accommodate the expansive melodies.

Igor Stravinsky said that Rachmaninoff was the only pianist he had ever seen who did not grimace. Hearing Rachmaninoff’s melodies in this concerto, you can understand why.

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