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About the Cover

by

Phillip Huscher



To subscribe to *Harmony* or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: information@soi.org

www.soi.org

About the Cover



Few pages convey revolution in music as well as does the one on the cover of this issue. If Berlioz, along with Liszt and Wagner, truly created “the music of the future,” this *Symphonie fantastique* certainly provided the cornerstone. The makeup of Berlioz’s orchestra suggests how far the symphony has come in the three years since Beethoven’s death—Berlioz asks for four types of clarinets, an english horn, four (rather than two) bassoons, cornets as well as trumpets, two ophicleides (replaced today by tubas), and two harps. But it is not just a matter of personnel. Any member of the audience at the premiere, on December 5, 1830, would have realized that this

symphony *sounded* like no music written before—that Berlioz was using the orchestra in a radical way, as if it were one large virtuoso instrument, capable of unforeseen effects.

This was a time of great political and social unrest—Paris was torn apart by revolution as Berlioz worked on his symphony—and the winds of change blow through every page of this forward-looking score. Inevitably Berlioz met with resistance. Mendelssohn was outraged that this “cultured, agreeable man,” would resort to “every possible exaggerated orchestral means.” The eminent critic and composer François-Joseph Fétis, who attended the premiere, delighted in reporting that “the audience thought it was having a nightmare.”

At first the *Symphonie fantastique* attracted controversy because of its programmatic subtext and its pictorial touches—the heartbeats and shepherds’ pipes, the thunder and fatal guillotine slash. But Robert Schumann, the most perceptive critic of the day, recognized that the most original aspect of the score was its orchestration, and he rightly hailed Berlioz as an “orchestral virtuoso”—the counterpart of Paganini with his violin, or Chopin at the piano. Indeed Berlioz uses his large orchestra with unprecedented imagination and daring, writing near-impossible glissandi in the woodwinds and horns, chords for four timpani, hand-stopped horn sounds, a raucous solo for E-flat clarinet, and four-part

pizzicato bass chords. And just when the work is very nearly over, Berlioz asks the violins to strike the strings with the wood of their bows—one of the earliest known uses of *col legno*.

Although Berlioz did not play an orchestral instrument himself, his ear for color was unmatched, and his appetite for new sounds inexhaustible. He made “specialty” instruments, such as the harp and english horn, part of the standard orchestra, and he was one of the first composers to write for the bass clarinet and the newly invented saxophone. In the *Symphonie fantastique* Berlioz regularly stretches his players’ abilities (“the following eleven measures are extremely difficult,” he writes in the score at one point, reminding the conductor to rehearse the passage several times), but he can also be a model of good common sense (“if bells cannot be found that are deep enough, . . . it is better to use pianos”). The *Symphonie fantastique* changed music forever, but it also gave the composer new freedom in dictating how his or her works should be played. Berlioz boldly opened a new chapter in the history of orchestral music, and it should come as no surprise that, 10 years later, he literally wrote the book on instrumentation.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.