

Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique is one of the first orchestral pieces that I was lucky enough to play early on in my high school studies. The sheer excitement of this piece contributed to my pursuit of a music career!

JONATHAN RANDAZZO, NCS ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL TROMBONE

Chasing Light

RENE ORTH

BORN 1985, in Dallas, Texas

PREMIERE Composed 2015; first performance 2015, in Philadelphia, by the Curtis Symphony Orchestra

OVERVIEW

Originally from Dallas, Texas, composer Rene Orth is a graduate of the University of Louisville and Curtis Institute of Music (CIM), and is currently Composer-in-Residence of Opera Philadelphia. She has composed music for string quartet, dance, and voice; her chamber opera, *Empty the House*, was produced at CIM this year. She has just finished a new work, *10 Days in a Madhouse*, inspired by a film about reporter Nellie Bly—in 1887, Bly committed herself to an asylum for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and her exposé led to major reforms in mental health institutions. Orth was a recipient of an American Composers Forum Subito Grant and the Kentucky Foundation for Women Artist Enrichment Grant.

Orth composed *Chasing Light* in 2015 for the Curtis Symphony Orchestra for her graduation from CIM. She describes it as racing to the light at the end of the tunnel.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Chasing Light is something like a relay race through the orchestra, with instruments and sections taking up the “baton” in turn. At times, various combinations of instruments

team up as if to surround and capture their quarry. The “light” itself, however, remains elusive, both to the pursuers and to the listener. *Chasing Light* brings to mind the game cat-owners play with laser lights, to the delight and frustration of their pets. The abruptly quiet conclusion suggests either success or exhaustion.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

BORN April 1, 1873, near Novgorod, Russia; died March 28, 1943, in Los Angeles

PREMIERE Composed 1900-01; first performance November 9, 1901, Moscow

Philharmonic Society, Alexander Siloti conducting, with the composer as soloist

OVERVIEW

Sergei Rachmaninoff grew up in a middle-class musical family, but under strained economic conditions. His father, a gambler and an alcoholic, squandered the family's fortune to the point that eventually his mother and father separated, and she had to sell what remained of the family's assets and move into a small apartment in St. Petersburg. Young Sergei—whose care in better times would have been entrusted to a nanny—consequently grew up with little supervision.

His schooling suffered as a result. Although he showed early promise as a pianist and obtained a scholarship to study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the administration threatened to expel him for failing to attend classes. He subsequently transferred to the Moscow Conservatory where his mentor, Nikolay Zverev, discouraged his initial attempts at composing. Nevertheless, Rachmaninoff continued to march to

the beat of his own drummer, defying his teacher and transferring to classes in counterpoint and composition.

Clearly, his sense of his own worth was more accurate than that of his professors. While still a student, he produced a string of successful works, including the tone poem *Prince Rostislav*, his first piano trio, and a flood of songs and piano pieces. For his graduation in 1892 he composed the opera *Aleko*, which won him the highest distinction, the Great Gold Medal. The same year he also composed the Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, a work whose inordinate fame haunted him all his life because audiences always expected—and demanded—it as an encore at his performances as one of history's greatest pianists.

By 1895, Rachmaninoff felt confident enough to compose a symphony. The premiere took place in St. Petersburg in 1897, but was a dismal failure, in large part because of shoddy conducting by Alexander Glazunov who was “under the influence.” While earlier setbacks had produced in the young composer creative defiance, this disappointment brought on a severe depression. For three years he was unable to do any significant composing. After consulting numerous physicians and advisors—even asking old Leo Tolstoy for help—he finally went for therapy in 1900 to Dr. Nikolay Dahl, an internist who had studied hypnosis and rudimentary psychiatry in Paris. The result was one of the first well-known successes of modern psychotherapy. Although the composer was able to return to creative work, relapses into depression dogged him for the rest of his life. Significantly, all his large instrumental compositions are in minor keys, and one of the melodic themes recurring in many of his compositions is the *Dies irae* from the Catholic mass for the dead, reminding mourners of the terrors of the Day of Judgment.

Rachmaninoff expressed his gratitude to Dr. Dahl by dedicating the Second Piano Concerto to him. The first performance of the complete work, in November 1901, was an instant success. It is Rachmaninoff’s most frequently performed and recorded

orchestral work. It even found its way into Hollywood as background music to the World War II movie *Brief Encounter*.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with dark, plodding, unaccompanied chords on the piano that increase in intensity and volume, gradually joined by the orchestra and leading to the first theme. The effect is like the tolling of the giant low-pitched bells common in Russian churches. The second broadly romantic theme is a Rachmaninoff signature. The lyrical mood is sustained throughout until the coda with its sudden conclusion in a dramatic burst of energy.

In the *Adagio sostenuto*, muted strings, followed by the piano left hand, hesitantly accompany the high woodwinds. The right hand then joins the woodwinds in dreamy interplay. After a brief energetic cadenza, the atmosphere of the beginning returns.

The beginning of the third movement in the lower range of the orchestra is deceptively gentle, enhancing the surprise of the sudden sparkling piano cadenza. The main theme, introduced by the violas and oboes, is intensely passionate—in the same vein as the second theme of the opening movement. After a surprisingly calm episode, the tempo increases to presto; and after another short cadenza the highest instruments in the orchestra take up the theme, culminating in a glittering climax.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

HECTOR BERLIOZ

BORN December 11, 1803, in La Côte-Saint-André, France; died March 8, 1869, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1830; first performance December 1830, in Paris, Société des concerts du Conservatoire, François Antoine Habeneck conducting

OVERVIEW

Being a rebel without independent means makes life difficult for an artist. Hector Berlioz, the son of a physician, was sent by his family to Paris to study medicine, but at 21 gave it up to become a musician. To make ends meet as a composer, he became a prolific writer on music, musicians, conducting, and orchestration, as well as a sharp-tongued music critic for Paris newspapers.

Berlioz was a master of orchestration. He freed the brass, making it the equal of the other orchestral sections. He experimented with new instruments, including the bass clarinet and valve trumpet, and pioneered the use of the English horn as one of the orchestra's most expressive solo instruments. He paid only lip service to conventional musical form and was the foremost advocate of program music. Most of his compositions are narrative, related in some way to a story or literary text. This approach to art was the natural outcome of his belief in the inseparability of music and ideas. For Berlioz, music and literature were inextricably connected as the quintessential expression of human imagination and emotion.

As if Romantic literature didn't present enough *Sturm und Drang*, Berlioz's personal life added a subsequent entanglement. Around 1827, he attended productions in Paris of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, performed by the great British actor, David Garrick, and the apparently somewhat less talented actress, Harriet Smithson. Despite the fact that the young composer didn't know English, he fell madly in love with Smithson, developed an obsessive fixation on her that inspired the *Symphonie fantastique*, and married her six years later, ultimately making both of them miserable.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The *Symphonie fantastique* is the first example of a narrative symphony. Berlioz composed it in 1830 as a musical testament to his infatuation. The symphony is united by what the composer himself termed an “*idée fixe*,” a theme introduced in the first movement symbolizing the obsession with the beloved. The movement describes a young musician encountering his ideal woman for the first time. His fervor is so great that by the end of the movement the theme turns religious.

In the second movement, a lilting waltz, the artist attends a ball where among the dancing couples, he becomes conscious of his beloved’s presence, with the sudden reappearance of the *idée fixe*.

In the third movement, the artist goes for an outing in the pastoral countryside, in the midst of which he suddenly remembers his beloved. The movement opens with a haunting echo duet for English horn and oboe. There follows a violent storm, in which the thunder symbolizes and foreshadows the disastrous denouement of the affair.

By the fourth movement, the artist’s desperation grows, as does his irrationality. In an opium-induced fantasy, he murders his beloved and is condemned to the guillotine. Before the blade falls, the *idée fixe* is imprinted on his memory.

The finale describes an after-death experience, the Witches’ Sabbath. The *idée fixe* now reappears in a grotesquely screeching clarinet solo, the ideal beloved now the object of ridicule. At this point Berlioz quotes the *Dies irae*. He contrapuntally combines the witches’ dance with the plainchant melody in one of his signature musical devices, which he called “the reunion of two themes.” The two melodies are presented separately, then combined—as musically incompatible as they are—to create a kind of musical irony, and the work ends in a wild orchestral climax.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, percussion, two harps, strings

©2018 Joseph and Elizabeth Kahn