

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”

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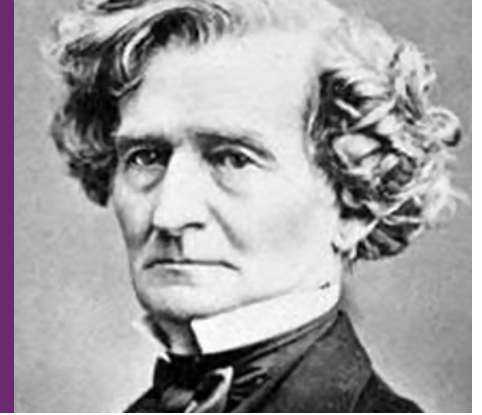
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October 2017

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Masterworks #2: Mozart & La Mer | November 10-12, 2017

Which composer on our program contrived to murder his unfaithful fiancée, her lover and her parents, and then commit suicide?



Many artists are known for their “mercurial” temperaments, but Berlioz occupies a class by himself.

His music – and his love life – was filled with intense passions and drama worthy of tabloid headlines.

Born in 1803, the son of a respected physician, Louis Hector was expected to follow his father’s career path. Hector’s fascination with music was evident; as a child he learned to play the flute and guitar, and became a self-taught composer.¹ But the elder Berlioz’s disapproval of his son’s interest in music was absolute; he even refused to allow his son to have a piano. As a result, Hector was one of the few composers who never mastered the instrument.² At the age of 18, obliged to follow his father’s wishes, Berlioz went to Paris to study medicine.³ Much of his time in Paris, however, was spent at the Paris Opera, and he secretly contrived to be accepted as a composition student at the Paris Conservatoire.⁴ His parents, fearing Hector would be lost in a ‘crowd of commonplace artists’, cut off all financial support for their son.⁵

In 1826, now 23, Berlioz was finally given his father’s permission to pursue music, and he enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire, determined to win the coveted Prix de Rome to vindicate his career choice.⁶ Within one year, young Hector fell madly in love with Harriet Smithson – an Irish actress portraying Ophelia in a touring production of *Hamlet*.⁷ It was love at first sight: they had never even met, but Berlioz’s infatuation was overwhelming. He contrived to meet Smithson, showing up repeatedly at the stage door, and hand

delivered notes to the theater manager.⁸ Nothing worked. Obsessed with Smithson, and crushed she had not noticed his multiple overtures, he composed his glorious *Symphony Fantastique*, convinced that when she heard the music, his love would be reciprocated.⁹ The outcome was predictable: Smithson, knowing nothing of Berlioz’s obsession or composition, did not attend the 1830 premiere.¹⁰



Hector Berlioz

Berlioz, distraught, sought comfort in the arms of another woman, a pianist named Marie-Félicité-Denise Moke, commonly known as Camille. Within a short time he proposed, but Camille’s parents had serious doubts about an unemployed composer as a suitable husband for their daughter.¹¹

Berlioz, still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, was determined to win the Prix de Rome, the school’s highest honor, proving his worth not only to his parents but to Camille’s. Amazingly, in 1830 he DID win – not with *Symphonie Fantastique*, but with a cantata, *Sardanapole*.¹² Winning the prize required Berlioz to spend three years studying abroad, including two years in Italy. Berlioz departed, leaving behind a somewhat flirtatious fiancée.¹³

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Six weeks later, he received a letter from Camille's mother, informing him that her daughter would instead be marrying a wealthy piano-maker, Camille Pleyel.¹⁴ Berlioz was enraged and, to put it lightly, he lost it. Convinced that his only recourse was to murder Pleyel, his fiancée and her mother, Berlioz devised an elaborate plan to disguise himself as a ladies' maid so he could enter the Moke household undetected, murder the family and then commit suicide.¹⁵ Armed with two stolen pistols and elaborate costume (he purchased a dress, wig and hat), Berlioz also carried vials of strychnine and laudanum to end his own life.

The long journey north from Italy helped abate Berlioz's rage, and when he reached Nice and realized that his elaborate costume had been left in a carriage, he came to his senses. In Nice, Hector consoled himself by writing an orchestral overture – and engaging the services of a local prostitute.¹⁷

Berlioz adored the music of Beethoven, and it was reported that someone seated next to a young Berlioz at a performance of Beethoven's music was touched to see him sobbing uncontrollably. "You seem to be affected, monsieur," said the stranger kindly. "Had you better retire for awhile?" Berlioz replied: "Are you under the impression that I am here to enjoy myself?"

[Story source: *The Secret Lives of Composers*, by Elizabeth Lunday]

As required by the terms of the prize, Berlioz returned to the Villa Medici in Rome. Though he continued to compose, Berlioz was bored. He longed for the music of Beethoven and Gluck, who, like him, believed that music must be dramatically expressive.¹⁸ Impatient, he returned to France after only 18 months and forfeited part of his prize.¹⁹

Back in Paris in 1832, when Berlioz learned he was renting the very apartment Smithson had once occupied, his obsession for Smithson was revived.²⁰ He arranged for a second performance of *Symphonie Fantastique* and by some miracle, Smithson was in attendance. Flattered by the romantic gesture of a symphony composed in her honor, she accepted Berlioz's instant proposal of marriage.²¹ By the time

their son was born in 1843, the marriage, as could have been predicted, was faltering; reality could not possibly live up to Berlioz's imagined fantasies and idealized romanticism.²² Between Harriet's alcohol-fueled tirades and Berlioz's infidelities, the marriage didn't have a chance, but the two remained married until Smithson's death in 1854.²³



Harriet Smithson

For the rest of his career, Berlioz struggled for recognition and income. He became a music critic and deputy librarian at the Paris Conservatoire to make ends meet.²⁴ Despite praise and a substantial gift from Nicolai Paganini, Berlioz still struggled to achieve the fame he believed was his right.²⁵ Embittered and resentful, in 1854, Berlioz composed *L'enfance Du Christ* but claimed it was the work of a fictitious 17th century composer named Pierre Ducre, insisting he had unearthed the manuscript in the wall of a restored church.²⁶ To his cynical delight, "expert" members of the audience were totally deceived by his scam. The fantastic hoax would have remained a secret had Berlioz not needed a short work for his next program. He told his choir and orchestra that the new piece was written by the imaginary Ducre.²⁷ At the well-received performance, when Berlioz was again praised for dragging Ducre out of obscurity, he finally confessed his subterfuge. When the piece, *L'adieu des bergers* was published, Berlioz wrote below his name: "Attributed to Pierre Ducre, imaginary maître de chapelle."²⁸

The Hartford Symphony Orchestra welcomes you to **Mozart and La Mer, November 10 - 12, 2017**, featuring music of Mozart, Debussy, and *Le corsaire* by Berlioz, the music Berlioz composed while on holiday in 1844 in Nice, the very place his plot to commit murder and take his own life had been thankfully abandoned.

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Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!



To watch Anne Sophie-Mutter perform and conduct Mozart's Violin Concerto in A Major:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETXPKHPPov8>

Watch the Detroit Symphony perform Debussy's *La Mer*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-kZN97ir_4

A moving performance of Berlioz's *Le corsaire*, performed by the Orchestre de Paris:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7kez0FoUJ4>

We hope you will be intrigued by the story to hear more of Berlioz's works:

Symphonie Fantastique, inspired by the composer's love of Harriet Smithson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCuKg6Dgc6I>

And his most exciting *Roman Carnival Overture*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYqItMmwwKE>

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The return of Casey's Classics

Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program?

Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Berlioz's *Le corsaire Overture* receives a mercurial performance from the leading interpreter of Berlioz, Colin Davis, conducting the Dresden State Orchestra (RCA).

Mozart's beautiful and profound Violin Concerto No. 5 is touchingly interpreted by Wolfgang Schneiderhan with Eugen Jochum conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (DG), happily coupled with Beethoven's Violin Concerto, two performances that have stood at the top of lists of recommended recording since they were set down in the early 1960s.

Herbert von Karajan's profoundly beautiful yet rigorous traversal of Debussy's *La Mer* is still the greatest recording of this revolutionary masterpiece fifty years after it was laid down with his own Berlin Philharmonic (DG).

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7 Ibid
8 <http://www.classical-music.com/article/love-story-behind-berliozs-symphonie-fantastique>
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