Sunday, July 25, 2010
Orchestra

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, op. 15 (1854–59) Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
  Maestoso
  Adagio
  Rondo: Allegro non troppo

Symphonie fantastique (1830) Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)
  Reveries—Passions
  A Ball
  Scene in the Country
  March to the Scaffold
  Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)—*Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor*, op. 15 (1854–59)

Robert Schumann may have been insane by the end of his life, but he certainly recognized exceptional talent when it showed up on his doorstep—as it did in 1853, when a twenty-year-old Brahms came to visit the Schumanns. Schumann (who published an influential musical journal) wrote an excited article about this "young eagle," and singled out Brahms's piano sonatas for special praise. Schumann felt that, in Brahms's hands, the piano was "an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices," and his sonatas were "veiled symphonies." Nevertheless, Brahms was hesitant to compose large-scale works, fearing he would never measure up to Beethoven. Then, in 1854, came shocking news: Schumann, age 43, had thrown himself into the icy Rhine river; he was rescued, but was institutionalized. Brahms rushed to Düsseldorf to support Clara Schumann (who was left to raise eight children). Not long after Brahms's arrival, he began work on a sonata for two pianos. But, as Brahms told a friend, "two pianos are really not enough for me," so he began transcribing his sonata sketches into a symphony. However, in February 1855, he hit upon a new idea: he would rework the budding symphony as a piano concerto.

It took Brahms almost a year and a half to finish the powerful first movement, but the rondo finale came along much more quickly. Although Brahms's instrumental works usually do not depict extra-musical stories, he informed Clara, "I am painting a lovely portrait of you. It is to be the Adagio." Moreover, a friend told Brahms's biographer that the stormy first movement was Brahms's reaction to Robert's suicide attempt. Whether or not this is true, the "Maestoso" was a mighty partnership between orchestra and piano—a far more symphonic approach than was the norm for concertos. After the gentle Clara-inspired "Adagio," the finale is an energetic and muscular workout for all the players. The audience at the concerto's 1859 Leipzig premiere didn't know what to make of such a robust powerhouse of a concerto; Brahms told Clara that hissing drowned out the sparse applause. This negative reception was a harsh setback to the sensitive composer, who did not attempt a second concerto for another twenty years. Today, of course, such disapproval is hard to fathom—what *were* those Leipzigers thinking??—and certainly the concerto is a testament to the fact that Brahms needn't have feared Beethoven after all.

Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)—*Symphonie fantastique* (1830)

"Hey, baby—what's your sign?" was a notorious pick-up line of the 1980s. In the 1830s, however, couples were expected to be formally introduced, and that wasn't always easy to manage. When a young Berlioz was infatuated by the Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson, he was desperate for a way to get her attention—and his *Symphonie fantastique* was the result. The symphony was novel in many ways, such as its huge battery of percussion (at various points, two players are needed on bass drum, and four on timpani). More importantly, however, was its use of a program—a storyline—that guides the imaginations of its listeners.

Berlioz's program is—as hippies of the 1960s would have said—a "bad trip." The story's premise is that an artist takes opium and imagines that he starts to see his Beloved everywhere he turns. The Beloved (read: Harriet Smithson) is represented musically by a recurring melody, which Berlioz designated as the *idée fixe* (fixed idea)—a nomenclature later borrowed by psychiatry as an alternative term for an "overvalued idea," or obsession. The *idée fixe* is first introduced in "Reveries—Passions" as an expansive, broadly sweeping theme; she then waltzes in triple meter during "A Ball." The artist tries to get away from it all during "Scene in the Country," which opens with two pipers mimicking a traditional "ranz des vaches" (a melody played by Swiss cowherds), but the *idée fixe* is heard even in this remote location. At the end of the movement, one of the pipers resumes the ranz des vaches—but there is no response, and, ominously, thunder rumbles in the distance (thanks to the four timpanists).

The situation grows much worse, for the artist now dreams he has killed his Beloved and is being marched to the guillotine. The march begins solemnly but builds to a raucous peak. In the climactic moments, the *idée fixe* appears briefly—are his last thoughts of her? Or—worse—is she among the watching crowd? It is possible that her ghostly presence *is* there, for the finale is the most supernatural movement of them all. The artist now envisions himself at a witches' Sabbath, hearing his Beloved in the shrill E-flat clarinet, cavorting with the other witches to the dire tune of the ancient funeral chant *Dies irae*.

Did the symphony "work"? Smithson did marry Berlioz after this bizarre courtship—but they drifted apart scarcely six years later.

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