Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

**Musical Style**
- one of the most idiosyncratic of the 19th century
- he was subject to inspiration in truly Romantic fashion
- but this created the extraordinary belief that he had no technique and composed in a kind of blind fury.
- His music would be worthless with neither inspiration nor technique and that its mastery is due to an abundant provision of both

**Melody**
- Few of his melodies fall into regular phrase lengths
- found the regular balance of four- and eight-bar phrases uncongenial and spoke naturally in a kind of flexible musical prose
- The idée fixe of the *Symphonie fantastique* is well known for its expansive length
- melodic strength is built on small chromatic inflections

**Harmony**
- the actual vocabulary of his harmony is restrained (compared to Chopin or Liszt)
- He was content with the harmonic vocabulary of Gluck and Beethoven
- saw harmony as an expressive rather than functional element
- The element of surprise is intrinsic
- The suggestion that his harmonic thinking was derived from his study of the guitar has too weak a technical basis to be convincing

**Part writing**
- A characteristic sonority is the grouping of upper parts as high as possible with the bass line isolated at a distance from them
- strong melodic role of the bass line
- preferred a smooth, often stepwise, movement to the striding pattern of a functional bass
- bass line is in free counterpoint with the upper line, with harmonic filling.

**Counterpoint**
- free contrapuntal relationship of parts, especially the upper and lower parts of a texture, is an essential element of Berlioz’s style
- mature style exhibits plainly his distaste for ‘tune with accompaniment’, a mannerism associated by him with Italian opera and only used for special purposes (‘Un bal’ in the *Symphonie fantastique*)
- Contrapuntal textures are often an extension of orchestral textures

**Fugato**
- occurs repeatedly, generally to fine expressive and formal effect
- the turbulent effect of the ‘Ronde du sabbat’ in the *Symphonie fantastique*

**‘Réunion de deux thèmes’**
- where two separate themes are heard first separately and then in combination
- the finale of the *Symphonie fantastique*, where the ‘Ronde du sabbat’ is combined with the *Dies irae*
Rhythm
• The vitality of Berlioz’s music owes much to the clarity and boldness of his rhythmic articulation.
• exploited experimental rhythms, not just unusual time signatures but also superimpositions of different rhythms.
• fondness for 3/4 for music of tenderness or longing
• As a conductor, too, he was noted for his rhythmic precision.

Orchestration
• His reputation has long rested on his supreme skill as an orchestrator
• Instrumental colour is a fundamental element of his music
• he played no orchestral instrument either (having abandoned the flute) and had to learn this art by studying textbooks, tutors, the instruments themselves, the scores of other composers, and by be-friending players

Treatise on Orchestration…
• published in 1844 with a second edition in 1855
• Did not want to neglect the possibilities of orchestral instruments or to use them in unsuitable combinations
• He was particularly anxious to use new instruments and took a close interest in Adolphe Sax’s work

Unusual instruments
• Instruments that had previously been used for special purposes he introduced into his normal requirements
• Harp
• English Horn
• First to write for bass clarinet, valve trumpet, and saxhorn
• Instrumental colors
• one instrument is used for a solo of striking fitness (the viola or the English horn)
• combining and contrasting instruments
• woodwinds in layers more often than in solos, and he liked the sound of wind chattering on repeated notes.
• ‘Marche au supplice’ in the Symphonie fantastique is a defiantly modern use of brass.

Dynamics & Balance
• delicacy of his use of pianissimo
• force of his immense sounds
• there are occasions when the correct balance is extremely difficult to achieve, or when acoustics hinder the proper realization of a novel idea (the timpani chords in the Symphonie fantastique)

Influence
• directly influenced Liszt, Wagner, the Russians, Strauss and Mahler
• his emancipation of the procedure of orchestration—intrinsic to composition, not something applied to finished music.
• timbre became something that could be used in free combinations as an artist might use his palette, without bowing to the demands of line
• this leads to the rich orchestral resource of Debussy and Ravel.
Symphonie Fantastique (1830)

Note
The following programme should be distributed to the audience every time the Symphonie fantastique is performed dramatically and thus followed by the monodrame of Lélio which concludes and completes the episode in the life of an artist. In this case the invisible orchestra is placed on the stage of a theatre behind the lowered curtain. If the symphony is performed on its own as a concert piece this arrangement is no longer necessary: one may even dispense with distributing the programme and keep only the title of the five movements. The author hopes that the symphony provides on its own sufficient musical interest independently of any dramatic intention.

Programme of the symphony
A young musician of morbid sensitivity and ardent imagination poisons himself with opium in a moment of despair caused by frustrated love. The dose of narcotic, while too weak to cause his death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest of visions, in which his experiences, feelings and memories are translated in his feverish brain into musical thoughts and images. His beloved becomes for him a melody and like an idée fixe which he meets and hears everywhere.

Part one: Daydreams, passions
He remembers first the uneasiness of spirit, the indefinable passion, the melancholy, the aimless joys he felt even before seeing his beloved; then the explosive love she suddenly inspired in him, his delirious anguish, his fits of jealous fury, his returns of tenderness, his religious consolations.

Part two: A ball
He meets again his beloved in a ball during a glittering fête. The artist finds himself in the most diverse situations in life, in the tumult of a festive party, in the peaceful contemplation of the beautiful sights of nature, yet everywhere, whether in town or in the countryside, the beloved image keeps haunting him and throws his spirit into confusion.

Part three: Scene in the countryside
One evening in the countryside he hears two shepherds in the distance dialoguing with their ‘ranz des vaches’; this pastoral duet, the setting, the gentle rustling of the trees in the wind, some causes for hope that he has recently conceived, all conspire to restore to his heart an unaccustomed feeling of calm and to give to his thoughts a happier colouring. He broods on his loneliness, and hopes that soon he will no longer be on his own… But what if she betrayed him!… This mingled hope and fear, these ideas of happiness, disturbed by dark premonitions, form the subject of the adagio. At the end one of the shepherds resumes his ‘ranz des vaches’; the other one no longer answers. Distant sound of thunder… solitude… silence…

Part four: March to the scaffold
Convinced that his love is spurned, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of narcotic, while too weak to cause his death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest of visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned, led to the scaffold and is witnessing his own execution. The procession advances to the sound of a march that is sometimes sombre and wild, and sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which a dull sound of heavy footsteps follows without transition the loudest outbursts. At the end of the march, the first four bars of the idée fixe reappear like a final thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow.

Part five: Dream of a witches’ sabbath
He sees himself at a witches’ sabbath, in the midst of a hideous gathering of shades, sorcerers and monsters of every kind who have come together for his funeral. Strange sounds, groans, outbursts of laughter; distant shouts which seem to be answered by more shouts. The beloved melody appears once more, but has now lost its noble and shy character; it is now no more than a vulgar dance tune, trivial and grotesque: it is she who is coming to the sabbath… Roar of delight at her arrival… She joins the diabolical orgy… The funeral knell tolls, burlesque parody of the Dies irae, the dance of the witches. The dance of the witches combined with the Dies irae.