Music 320

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Biography

- Born in Lyon, son of wealthy doctor who didn’t want Hector to be musician. Hector studied medicine in public, music in secret; eventually overcame parental opposition.

- Attended Paris Conservatoire, entered Prix de Rome (composition competition that still exists today; eventually won on 4th try; studied in Rome and then Germany.
- Berlioz had many non-compositional accomplishments, esp. literary and conducting efforts.
  - Treatise on Instrumentation (1843) explained concepts of orchestration and was definitive source for teaching orch. through 19th century; still used today
  - Many other literary works including Evenings with the Orchestra.
- Three important events in 1827-28 changed his life (he was 24-25 yrs old)
  - heard Beethoven’s 3rd and 5th symphonies for first time
  - read French translation of Goethe’s Faust
  - saw his first production of Shakespeare, Hamlet (Charles Kemble played Hamlet, young actress named Harriet Smithson as Ophelia

- Summation of Berlioz: he was the "leading musician of his age in a country, France, whose principal artistic endeavor was then literary, in an art, music, whose principal pioneers were then German."

Composition Periods

- Works which were composed for Prix de Rome attempts are from his earliest comp. period; later he borrowed ideas and themes from these works
- Second Comp Period 1830 (Symphonie Fantastique) to 1846 (Damnation of Faust)
  - expanded musical resources;
  - wrote for larger orch, more different wind instruments;
  - exploited some of the new improvements to instruments, such as woodwind fingering systems and brass valves.
- Final period is called "neo-classic" in that it is philosophically retrospective especially Humanism

Works
Symphonie Fantastique, "an episode in an artist’s life" has 5 movements that tell a story (but entirely instrumental)
  o Berlioz issued a pamphlet containing program; program went through several versions
  o Central organizing idea is a melody or idee fixe:
    ▪ appears in each movement
    ▪ represents the woman who is the object of adoration of the central character

"Second Symphony" or Harold in Italy: a dramatic orchestral work, also has a solo instrument (viola), makes concerto part of hybrid mix
  o story was well known: based on popular poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage by Lord Byron. Harold and his naivte are symbolized by an idee fixe played by viola
  o Written at request of Paganini

Other hybrid pieces:
  o Lelio (sequel to Sym Fant): uses symphony plus chorus and narrator (NOT Programmatic)
  o Romeo & Juliet has several movements: inner ones are strictly symphonic, but lots of chorus in outer movements; Berlioz called it a "dramatic symphony"
  o Damnation of Faust has aspects of symphony, oratorio, opera, cantata.... Can’t be clearly placed in any one category

Some true Operas, including Les Troyens: they have very demanding parts for singers, esp. range

Composition Traits

  • Melody
    o He liked long, asymmetrical melodies
    o has lowered 6th scale degree
  • Form:
    o Berlioz was as likely to use rhythm, tempo, dynamics, etc. to define sections of his pieces as using tonal contrast or themes.
    o Also used very distant key relationships