

Chapter 18: Music and Literature: Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Schumann, 1830–50

I. Introduction

- A. Literacy increased during the nineteenth century, as did music literacy.
 - 1. Composers wrote themselves, as music critics.
 - 2. Important figures are Hector Berlioz (1803–69), Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47), and Robert Schumann (1810–56).
- B. “Program music” is music having extramusical inspirations. “Absolute music” is music without external references. A debate on the merits of these two types of music emerged in this time.
- C. Social conventions prevented women composers such as Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–47) and Clara Wieck Schumann (1819–96) from reaching their full potential.
- D. Educational opportunities rose, and a growing urban middle class read widely. More people could read musical notation, and published music and musical instruments were mass produced.

II. Hector Berlioz

- A. Only three years after the death of Beethoven (two after that of Schubert), Berlioz composed the *Symphonie fantastique*, one of the most startling and unique pieces in the symphonic literature.
 - 1. Its program is expertly revealed in masterful orchestration.
 - 2. The program itself drew the proverbial line in the sand between absolute and program music.
 - 3. The association with extramusical content was of paramount importance.
 - 4. Berlioz remarks in his memoirs that reading spurred his interest in the arts.
- B. Berlioz’s fantastic First Symphony
 - 1. The *Symphonie fantastique* aligns with many aspects of Romanticism, particularly the grotesque and supernatural.
 - 2. The “hero” of the five- (not four-) movement symphony is a musician (“un artiste”), who is in love with a woman. She is represented by the *idée fixe*.
 - 3. The artist encounters her theme in different ways throughout each movement.
 - 4. The text lays out the program for the symphony.
 - 5. The *Symphonie fantastique* is considered autobiographical, but the extent of its relevance is unknown.
 - 6. The most reliable representation of Berlioz’s life is the relationship with Harriet Smithson, for whom Berlioz had fallen in 1827.
 - 7. The program to *Symphonie fantastique* circulated prior to the premiere. This was unusual because most performances did not even have anything like a program or notes distributed at the concert itself.
- C. The orchestration of the *Fantastique*
 - 1. The five-movement work harkens back to Beethoven’s Sixth.
 - a) The orchestra required was larger than any that had been needed outside of an opera house.

- b) Woodwinds are particularly prominent, notably the four bassoons and new types of clarinets.
 - c) Four harps are required in the score.
 - d) Berlioz wanted an orchestra of 220 performers, but only had 130 at the premiere.
- 2. The manner in which the instruments play was also novel.
 - 3. Berlioz published a manual on orchestration in 1843.
- D. Tracing the *idée fixe* through the *Fantastique*
- 1. Berlioz's use of a motive to cause the listener to remember a particular character derives from opera.
 - 2. Here, it is a physiological reaction.
 - 3. The appearance of the *idée fixe* at various times functions as a juxtaposition of "real time" and "aria time" and draws the listener's attention to a specific "moment out of time" that was characteristic in opera of the period, but not instrumental music.
 - 4. The fourth movement, "March to the Scaffold," began life in a different piece, altered in the *Symphonie fantastique* to include the *idée fixe* in a spectacular musical representation of the guillotine blade chopping off the artist's head.
 - 5. The fifth movement is grotesque in several ways: harmony, instrumentation (including execution), dynamics, and transformation of the *idée fixe*. It includes the *Dies irae* to represent the sacred, including an academia represented by counterpoint.
- E. The initial reception of the *Symphonie fantastique*
- 1. Schumann's longest critique was devoted to the *Symphonie fantastique*.
 - 2. Berlioz did not write another detailed program for instrumental pieces after this one.
 - 3. He came to be associated with the "Music of the Future," with Wagner and Liszt.

III. The prodigious Mendelssohn

- A. One of Mendelssohn's early works, the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also depicts fantasy in a brilliant demonstration of orchestration.
- 1. Composed when he was twenty-seven, it premiered only a few years before the *Symphonie fantastique*.
 - 2. Goethe met Mendelssohn when the composer was twelve.
 - 3. Mendelssohn knew the music of Bach and Handel well, conducting the revival of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829, at age twenty.
- B. The concert overture
- 1. He excelled at the concert overture, expanding the conception into freestanding, poetically titled orchestra pieces.
 - 2. In 1828, still in his teens, Mendelssohn composed *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, a musical seascape inspired by two short Goethe poems.
 - 3. His *Hebrides* was stimulated by his experiences traveling in Scotland. Two of his symphonies incorporate travel experiences.
- C. Mendelssohn's *Paulus* and civic nationalism

1. Mendelssohn's Handelian oratorio, *Paulus*, demonstrates various facets of the man: composer, conductor, advocate, civic musician, and religious composer.
2. While the composer had conducted and studied the works of Bach, his oratorio is more along the lines of Handel, with a measure of Bach added to it.
3. *Paulus* reveals aspects of the relationship between religious and national.
4. The chorales in *Paulus* also point to ideas about the German nation.

D. Nationalist takes a racial turn

1. The critics in Leipzig overwhelmingly approved of Mendelssohn.
2. Only three years after his death, however, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* published an inflammatory article entitled "Judaism in Music," claiming that Jews were biologically distinct from gentile Christians and served therefore to dilute Christian musical traditions. The article argued that:
 - a) Jews could never be true Christians, nor true Germans.
 - b) Race, unlike religion, could not be changed.

IV. Schumann and literature

A. Schumann was a contemporary of Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Liszt.

1. He began his adult life pursuing law, but turned to music, rather late for a composer.
2. He tried to make a career as a concert pianist, studying with Friedrich Wieck, father of the professional pianist Clara Wieck (a child prodigy herself). Schumann and Clara married, against her father's wishes, in 1840.

B. The influence of literature on Schumann's music

1. Schumann championed the music of Schubert, Beethoven, and even Bach (and later Brahms). He associated with literary music.
2. He chose as a model the literature of Jean Paul, a Romantic author. He remarked that he felt like the music of Schubert represented the literature of Paul.
3. He frequently wrote literary music without words, and he included narrative comments in his compositions.
4. He signed some of his pieces with the names of his literary characters.
5. Schumann often used literary devices (letters, names) as the basis for compositions.
6. Schumann thought that literary devices in his music should be considered part of the works, not "extramusical" additions or inspirations.

C. Schumann's "year of song"

1. Schumann was occupied with piano composition until 1840, the year he married Clara.
2. He wrote predominantly (almost entirely) songs in 1840. He called this the "year of song."
3. The year 1841 was devoted to symphonies, 1842 to chamber music, 1843 to oratorio, and 1848 to dramatic music.

4. Song obviously provide the opportunity to work with literature.
5. He drew from Heine for the *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48.
 - a) This is a song cycle of sixteen pieces that addresses the pain of unrequited love.
 - b) *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* represents the musical embodiment of the longing Schumann felt for Clara and was composed in May.

D. Schumann's last years

1. In his mid-thirties, Schumann devoted his time to large-scale compositions.
2. As he became more famous, his works tended to become more predictable and to behave as the public expected them to behave.
3. He did, indeed, go mad, spending his last two years in an asylum.

V. Genius restrained: Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Wieck Schumann

- A. Fanny Mendelssohn was also a child prodigy, studying piano and composition.
 1. She was the first to use the title "Songs without Words" and composed over five hundred works.
- B. In contrast to Fanny, Clara Wieck Schumann lived her life as a public figure, performing frequently.
 1. Many of her compositions were for her own performances.