

Charles Munch Born: September 26, 1891 – Strasbourg, Alsace, France

Died: November 6, 1968 – Richmond, Virginia, USA

The eminent Alsatian-born French conductor, Charles Munch (originally, Münch), was the son of the Alsatian organist and choral conductor Ernst Münch (1859–1928). His elder brother was the choir-master and professor of music, Fritz Münch. Charles studied violin at the Strasbourg Conservatory and with Lucien Capet in Paris. At the outbreak of World War I (1914), he enlisted in the German army; made a sergeant of artillery, he was gassed at Peronne and wounded at Verdun; after the end of the war (1918) and his return to Alsace-Lorraine (1919), he became a naturalised French citizen.

Having received further violin training from Flesch in Berlin, Charles Munch pursued a career as a soloist; was also professor of violin at the Leipzig Conservatory and concert-master of the Gewandhaus Orchestra there. In November 1932, he made his professional conducting debut in Paris with the Straram Orchestra. He studied conducting with Szendrei in Paris from 1933 to 1940. He quickly rose to prominence; was conductor of Paris's Orchestra de la Société Philharmonique from 1935 to 1938, and in 1936 became a professor at the École Normale de Musique. In 1938 he became music director of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris, remaining in that post during the years of the German occupation during World War II; refusing to collaborate with the Nazis, he gave his support to the Resistance, being awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1945.

Charles Munch made his USA debut as a guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in December 1946; a trans-continental tour of the USA with the French National Radio Orchestra followed in 1948. In 1949 he was appointed music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he and Monteux took on its first European tour in 1952; they took it again to Europe in 1956, also touring in the Soviet Union, making it the first USA orchestra to do so. After retiring from his Boston post in 1962, he made appearances as a guest conductor; also helped to launch the Orchestre de Paris in 1967.

Charles Munch acquired an outstanding reputation as an interpreter of the French repertoire, his performances being marked by spontaneity, colour, and elegance. French music of the 20th century also occupied a prominent place on his programs; he brought out new works by Roussel, Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and others. He wrote *Je suis chef d'orchestre* (1954).



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BERLIOZ

SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE

CHARLES MUNCH • BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



Berlioz was the pioneer of tonal phantasmagoria, and the *Symphonie Fantastique* was his first and most prodigious onslaught upon classical formality. It is presumably autobiographical. "A young musician of morbid sensibility and ardent imagination," wrote Berlioz, "takes opium in a fit of despair over his love, and dreams of his beloved who has become for him a melody, like a fixed idea, which he finds and hears everywhere." The theme is transformed into a waltz in the second movement, as he "sees her at a ball"; it appears seductively in the pastoral scene. "He dreams he has killed his beloved, is condemned to death and led to execution." Finally he imagines her as a "courtesan," mocked and derided by witches and demons.

In spite of all this, which is admittedly hard to take, Berlioz, musically speaking, was a practical man. Realizing that this story would be more likely to distract the listener from his music or, worse still, raise a smile, he dropped the "program," offering the music as "independent of all dramatic attention."

Indeed, there is no other sane or helpful approach. The story can make some sense only if it is taken as a nightmare (in which realm logic is not required) or for what it more surely is, a post facto attempt to find verba justification in a musical work which has true logic as music, true form, progress, sequence, and dramatic point as music. What else matters? The five moments of the *Symphonie Fantastique* are simply the musical adventures of a theme, the *idée fixe*. (It is first intimated in the impassioned introduction and is then set forth at length by the violins and flutes in unison.) In the first movement it is developed in the flame of ardor, in the second it is transformed into the triple beat of a waltz, in the third introduced in glowing retrospect, in the fourth brought in as a momentary reminiscence before the terrifying close, in the final "witches'

sabbath" newly developed in sharp and "obscene" grotesquerie. Beyond this, we need only note the main features which made this one of the most remarkable milestones in all music: the free style of the first movement; the novelty of waltz-scherzo, composed at a time when such sinuous and swaying measures were yet unknown (Johann Strauss, Jr., was then five years old); the breathless hush of the scene *aux champs* as it opens with the near and distant piping of two shepherds (English horn and oboe) and closes with the soft rumble of dying thunder; the canny build-up of the march to its enormous climax; the weird coloring, then absolutely unprecedented, in the finale, which must have been more than startling in the correct and musty concert world of its day.

Was Berlioz publicly parading his feelings for Henrietta Smithson, the Irish actress whom he was later to marry but had not yet met, or was he deliberately attempting to shock his world into sudden awareness of himself – that world in which the latest thing in descriptive music was the "Pastoral" Symphony by one Beethoven, then three years dead? There is probably an element of truth in both charges. But let us not belittle Berlioz or call him a "poser" unless we know exactly what we mean by the word in his case. Who can claim to have fathomed this extraordinary man – or his motives so alien to our own? It is enough to marvel that this music (which paved the way for the "program music" of Liszt, Wagner, Strauss and many more) sounds undulled, unantiquated by the passage of a century-and-a-quarter in its intoxication of fantasy, its thrilling impulse, its freshness and newness of color.

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- 1 I Reveries; Passions 13:23
- 2 II A Ball 6:12
- 3 III Scene In The Country 13:56
- 4 IV March To The Scaffold 4:30
- 5 V Dream Of The Witches' Sabbath 8:39
- Total Time: 46:42

Recorded by RCA records 1954
Engineer - John Crawford / Producer - John Pfeiffer



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