

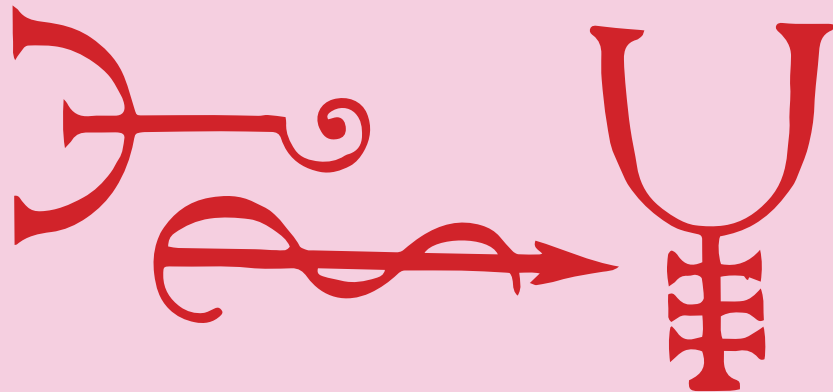
Conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos stood apart from the European traditions that dominated first-rank American orchestras for much of the twentieth century. After attending the Athens Conservatory, where he studied piano and composition, his opera *Béatrice* was presented there. The French composer Saint-Saëns was in the audience, and was so impressed that he arranged a scholarship that enabled the 24-year-old to study composition with the Belgian composer Paul Gilson and piano with Busoni in Berlin. Busoni persuaded him to abandon composition and concentrate on becoming a conductor.

From 1921 to 1925, Mitropoulos assisted Erich Kleiber at the Berlin State Opera and on Kleiber's recommendation, was appointed conductor of the Hellenic Conservatory Symphony Orchestra in Athens. In 1927, he became conductor of the Greek State Symphony Orchestra and in 1930 was engaged to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, where he instituted the practice of conducting from the piano.

In 1937 Mitropoulos succeeded Eugene Ormandy as musical director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1937. He became a U.S. citizen in 1946, and remained in America until 1959. After 12 years in Minneapolis, he was invited to share the conductorship of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra with Stokowski, becoming its conductor when Stokowski resigned in 1950. Mitropoulos resigned the post after sharing the podium with Leonard Bernstein, his co-principal conductor, in the Orchestra's 1958 tour of Latin America. From 1954, he was a dynamic force as Bruno Walter's successor at New York's Metropolitan Opera, where he introduced many new operas, including ones by Richard Strauss and Samuel Barber.

Mitropoulos never conducted his own works, but considered his best composition to be a *Concerto Grosso* written in 1929. He lived simply and took little part in social activities. His conducting style was passionate, highly-charged and demonstrative; he had a phenomenal memory and rarely used a baton. The American composer and music critic Virgil Thomson once described him as "oversensitive, overweening, over brutal, over intelligent, underconfident and wholly without ease....His personal excitement borders on hysteria and he distorted music with nervous passion." Whether or not this judgement was true, or fair, he programmed much modern music and particularly admired Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, such as Webern and Berg, as well as twentieth century American and British composers. His recording of Mahler's *First Symphony* made with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1941 was the first ever made in the U.S. of that work, and Mitropoulos was awarded the American Mahler Medal of Honor in 1950 for his work in promoting the composer's music. He died while rehearsing Mahler's *Third Symphony* with Toscanini's famous La Scala Orchestra.

## BERLIOZ *Symphonie Fantastique*, op 14



**DIMITRI MITROPOULOS - THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**

Symphonie fantastique: Épisode de la vie d'un artiste ... en cinq parties  
(Fantastical Symphony: Episode in the Life of an Artist ... in Five Sections)

Op. 14, is a program symphony written by the French composer Hector Berlioz in 1830. It is an important piece of the early Romantic period. The first performance was at the Paris Conservatoire on 5 December 1830. Franz Liszt made a piano transcription of the symphony in 1833 (S. 470).

Leonard Bernstein described the symphony as the first musical expedition into psychedelia because of its hallucinatory and dream-like nature, and because history suggests Berlioz composed at least a portion of it under the influence of opium. According to Bernstein, "Berlioz tells it like it is. You take a trip, you wind up screaming at your own funeral."

In 1831, Berlioz wrote a lesser-known sequel to the work, *Lélio*, for actor, soloists, chorus, piano and orchestra.

*Symphonie fantastique* is a piece of program music that tells the story of an artist gifted with a lively imagination who has poisoned himself with opium in the depths of despair because of hopeless, unrequited love. Berlioz provided his own preface and program notes for each movement of the work. They exist in two principal versions – one from 1845 in the first score of the work and the second from 1855. From the revised preface and notes, it can be seen how Berlioz, later in his life, downplayed the programmatic aspect of the work.

In the first score from 1845, he writes:

The composer's intention has been to develop various episodes in the life of an artist, in so far as they lend themselves to musical treatment. As the work cannot rely on the assistance of speech, the plan of the instrumental drama

needs to be set out in advance. The following programme must therefore be considered as the spoken text of an opera, which serves to introduce musical movements and to motivate their character and expression.

George Clint's portrait of actress Harriett Smithson, the inspiration for the symphony

In the 1855 preface, a different outlook towards the work's programmatic undertones is established by Berlioz:

The following programme should be distributed to the audience every time the *Symphonie fantastique* is performed dramatically and thus followed by the monodrama 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.

After attending a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on 11 September 1827, Berlioz fell in love with the Irish actress Harriet Smithson who had played the role of Ophelia. He sent her numerous love letters, all of which went unanswered. When she left Paris, they had still not met. Berlioz then wrote *Symphonie fantastique* as a way to express his unrequited love. Harriet did not attend the premiere in 1830, but she heard the work in 1832 and realized Berlioz's genius. The two finally met and were married on 3 October 1833. However, their marriage became increasingly bitter, and they eventually separated after several years of unhappiness.

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- 1 Reveries; Passions 13:38**
- 2 Un Bal 6:25**
- 3 Scène Aux Champs 14:47**
- 4 Marche Au Supplice 5:07**
- 5 Songe D'Une Nuit Du Sabbat 10:19**

Recorded February 1957 by Columbia



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