

## Program Notes (by Terry Robbins)

### *Harold in Italy, Symphony with Viola obbligato, Op.16*

**Hector Berlioz (1803-69)**

Hector Berlioz was the quintessential 19th-century Romantic, as intense, eccentric, turbulent, passionate and excessively emotional in his personal life as he was in his music. After all, it takes a certain type of young boy to read harmony and counterpoint textbooks in bed late into the night or to burst into tears while reading Virgil.

Berlioz always wanted to be a musician, but his father, a physician in the small French town of La Côte-Saint-André, was intent on having his son follow the same career path and sent him to Paris in 1821 to study. Despite his discomfort with many aspects of the field, Berlioz managed to graduate with a bachelor of science degree in 1824 but abandoned the medical world the same year to concentrate on music.

Towards the end of 1827, Berlioz saw the English Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson playing Ophelia in *Hamlet* at the Odéon in Paris and was immediately smitten. It was the start of a famous and tempestuous infatuation — and eventual affair — that led to the composition of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, a programmatic work born of his unrequited love. Despite his having become engaged to Camille Moke in the meantime, Berlioz arranged the work's December 1830 premiere specifically to impress Harriet, who was again visiting Paris but, unaware of his efforts, didn't attend.

Shortly thereafter, Berlioz left for three years of compulsory study at the French Academy in the Villa Medici in Rome, having finally won the coveted Prix de Rome with his cantata *Sardanapale*. He didn't enjoy his time there; he hated the food and was extremely critical of the musical activities. He did, however, love wandering through the Italian countryside, in particular the Abruzzi mountains north of Rome.

Back in Paris in 1832, Berlioz discovered that Harriet Smithson was once again visiting the city and he arranged another performance of the now considerably revised *Symphonie Fantastique* on December 9; this time, Harriet was there with her sister. Her waning star power and deteriorating financial situation may well have made her more open to Berlioz's advances and, after a fairly brief courtship, the two were married in October 1833.

It was that same performance of the symphony that led to the creation of *Harold in Italy*. The legendary violinist Nicoló Paganini was also in the audience that evening and approached Berlioz afterwards with a request for a new work for the fine Stradivari viola he had just acquired. What Berlioz produced was not the expected virtuoso showpiece concerto, however, but essentially a symphony with a deeply poetic viola solo part inspired by Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Paganini was disappointed with the initial sketches and consequently had nothing to do with the premiere in Paris on November 23, 1834. When he did finally hear a performance four years later, he was extremely impressed, sending Berlioz 20,000 francs along with the famous message "Beethoven is dead, and Berlioz alone can revive him."

The four-movement work is a series of orchestral scenes in which the solo viola is involved, in the composer's own words, as "a more or less active participant while retaining its own character" — a

melancholy dreamer in the style of Byron's Childe-Harold. "*In the style of*" must be emphasized here, as there is no explicit programmatic depiction of any scenes or images from the poem. Instead, the central character travels in the memories of Berlioz's own wanderings in the Abruzzi a few years earlier, leading the American music critic Olin Downes to remark that the work should really have been called "Berlioz in Italy."

Berlioz borrowed the solo viola theme that represents the character Harold from the *cor anglais* part in his *Rob Roy* overture, a work composed in 1831 but discarded and left unpublished.

*Harold in Italy* was completed on June 22, 1834, and dedicated by Berlioz to his close friend Humbert Ferrand, who had written the libretto for his opera *Les Franc-Juges* some six years earlier. It was first performed by Chrétien Urhan with the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire on November 23 of that year, with Narcisse Girard conducting. The latter's performance did not please Berlioz; the fourth movement almost fell apart due to Girard's poor conducting, and the incident was a contributing factor in Berlioz's deciding to conduct his own works in the future.

And the fine Stradivari viola that had prompted Paganini to ask Berlioz to write a new work for him in the first place? Paganini never performed the work on it, but the viola itself is now in the Corcoran Gallery of Art collection in Washington, D.C., and on each occasion that the National Symphony Orchestra performed *Harold in Italy* from 1948 to 1993, it was loaned to it for the soloist to use.

Sometimes in life, perfect endings take a little while.

## **Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op.21**

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Given how crucial the contribution of Beethoven's nine symphonies is to our modern comprehension of the word "symphony" and its connotations, it seems entirely appropriate that his first essay in the genre should have been written at the very turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Beethoven lived in, and contributed greatly to, a period of enormous change in music. The end of the 18th century had seen a social revolution that had signalled the end of the classical world, and the early years of the 19th century were paving the way for the Romantic movement. Beethoven's significance in the development of music at this time is immense, standing as he did at the close of one era and on the threshold of another.

For Beethoven, music was a means not of expressing his own sufferings in life but of projecting his ideas concerning humanity and the ideals against which he set his own struggles. This affirmation of the supremacy of idea over form resulted not only in Beethoven's profoundly modifying the expressive content of the symphony but also in his changing the rules enough to allow the traditional forms to be rejected, thus opening the door to Romanticism.

Beethoven started working on his first symphony in 1799 and completed it in early 1800. His original intention had been to dedicate the work to Maximilian Franz, the Elector of Bonn — Beethoven's birthplace, and at the time an independent Electorate. Maximilian was a former employer of the composer, Beethoven having been appointed assistant to the Bonn court organist, Christian Gottlob Neefe, when he was still only 13 years old. He was also a former patron, having recognized the young man's talent and having provided the funds for Beethoven to visit Vienna in 1787.

However, Maximilian died in July 1801, five months before the publication of the orchestral parts, and Beethoven instead dedicated the symphony to Baron Gottfried van Swieten, who had been Court Librarian at the Imperial Palace since 1777. It was a fitting move. The elderly Swieten had worked closely with Haydn, and had not only been a great help when the young Beethoven arrived in Vienna for good in November 1792 but had also introduced him to the music of Bach and Handel, having explored the same composers with Mozart some ten years earlier.

In developing the classical style, both Mozart and Haydn were greatly influenced by their Baroque predecessors, and Beethoven in turn owed much to the symphonies of Mozart and Haydn.

Each of the Beethoven symphonies has a distinct character of its own, with classical and Romantic elements present in all of them, but the first two in particular are clearly straddling the dividing line between the two eras. With their clearly defined form and simple but refined melodies, they look back to the classical period, but there are obvious points of departure as well.

Beethoven certainly wasted no time in that respect; the premiere of the First Symphony at the Hofburgtheater in Vienna on April 2, 1800, despite its historical significance, was not an auspicious occasion to start with — the music was felt to be too difficult and the orchestra played carelessly — but the audience was astonished to hear the work to apparently start not in the tonic key of C major but in the sub-dominant key of F major. Such unheard-of crassness!

One can only wonder what they would have thought had they known that it was just the start of an unparalleled symphonic journey that would span 23 years and end in the rarified heights of the monumental Ninth Symphony.