I

INTRODUCTION, PROGRAMME, OUTLINE

The full title of Berlioz's first symphony is *Épisode de la vie d'un artiste. Symphonie fantastique en cinq parties* (Episode in an artist's life: Fantastic Symphony in five movements). It was completed in April 1830 and its programme was published in *Le Figaro* on 21 May. However, the rehearsal on 16 May went so badly that the intended premiere was cancelled; the first performance eventually took place on 5 December, shortly before the composer's twenty-seventh birthday. Although the symphony soon became, and remains, one of Berlioz's best-known works, its second performance was not until two years later, almost to the day.

As the symphony was nearing completion in February 1830, Berlioz described his emotional state in a letter to his father, who was a doctor; one can read into it an understanding of his own creative fever and the need to suppress it in order carry on working. His account of a severe toothache modulates into a frank comment on self-absorption, mingling present events with past memories:

> I have adopted the habit of observing myself all the time, so no sensation escapes me, and reflection doubles it; I see myself as if in a mirror. I experience extraordinary feelings of which I can hardly give an idea, seemingly caused by nervous exaltation, which resembles intoxication with opium. What surprises me is that I well remember feeling just the same way at the age of twelve[.][1]

Letters of this period to his close friends the poet Humbert Ferrand and the pianist and composer Ferdinand Hiller are more open about the anguish he suffered from unrequited love and unfounded rumours about the behaviour of the object of his passion, the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, whom he had not even met. These feelings are implicit in the programme of the symphony, which, in turn, may have had a therapeutic effect; its completion should

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have served to restore his self-confidence. He managed to turn the rehearsal debacle in May to advantage by making revisions; and between May and December 1830, his life changed fundamentally. On the rebound from Harriet Smithson's refusal to meet him, he became engaged to be married to the pianist Camille Moke; and at the fifth attempt, he won the prestigious Prix de Rome (Rome Prize) awarded to artists and musicians by the Académie des Beaux-Arts.[2]

The Prix de Rome

During the hottest days of July 1830, Berlioz was immured in the Institut de France, one of six aspiring composers all setting the same text, a dramatic cantata, *La Mort de Sardanapale*. At the same time the 'July Revolution' broke out and overthrew the last Bourbon king, Charles X, an event which has been seen as a political parallel to the cultural stirrings that led in due course to romanticism's becoming established as a leading artistic tendency, displacing the stuffy neoclassicism associated with the *ancien régime*: 'By 1850 . . . the superiority of inspiration, emotion, and subjective judgment over tradition, rules, and skill was now official.'[3] This comment refers to sculpture, where, as with music, skills cannot be dispensed with, for they are as essential in preparing works of romantic inspiration and subjectivity as they are for works that maintain tradition and adhere to the rules, or are purely decorative. It is the rules that mostly explain Berlioz's four earlier failures in the Prix de Rome, for he often broke them; his rivals behaved better, but none established a reputation comparable to his, and all are now practically unknown.

From early 1831, Berlioz was based at the French Academy in Rome (the Villa Medici). While there he made further revisions to *Symphonie fantastique* and assembled its sequel ('complément') in the form of a monodrama ('mélologue'), mixing music and speech. The programme includes the imaginary death of the protagonist, so the sequel was poignantly entitled *Le Retour à la vie* (The Return to Life); it is usually known by its later title, *Lélio*, *ou le Retour à la vie*, or simply *Lélio* (see Chapter 9).

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Berlioz did not want to leave Paris, and by 1830 he had a considerable if disputed reputation on which to build. But he competed for the prize not only for the income it provided but from a need to mollify his father, who disapproved of his musical ambitions and periodically withdrew financial support. In 1826 he failed the preliminary test in fugue. He then enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire class of Antoine Reicha, and in each of the four following years he passed the preliminary test and entered the Institut to compose a cantata. In 1827 his *La Mort d'Orphée* was declared 'unplayable' at the trial performance because the rehearsal pianist was unable to play it; that it was written for orchestra was not considered relevant. In 1828 *Herminie* was awarded second prize. In the previous three years the 'Deuxième Grand Prix' had been awarded first prize the following year, as if by right, and this encouraged Berlioz to take risks in 1829 with his *La Mort de Cléopâtre*. In the interests of expressive realism he violated not only rules but the judges' perception of good taste; some of them found his music unpardonable. No first prize was awarded that year. In 1830 Berlioz took care to write down to the level of his judges. Nevertheless, he conducted a performance of *La Mort de Sardanapale* after returning from Rome, before abandoning this cantata, of which only a fragment survives.

Berlioz habitually recycled good ideas from abandoned works, as did many composers, including his first musical hero, Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–87). Berlioz was self-critical, and destroyed much of his early music once he had exhausted its usefulness. Autographs of the 1828 and 1829 cantatas were preserved in the Institut archives, and when *Herminie* was unearthed it was found to contain the principal theme of *Symphonie fantastique*, identified in the programme as the *idée fixe* (see Chapter 4).[4] It does not necessarily follow that the melody was inspired by the emotions of the cantata's protagonist; he could have thought of it earlier and carried it in his head in case it proved useful when composing under prison-like conditions.

Out of sympathy with Italian musical culture, Berlioz found it hard to work in Rome, but before returning to Paris he wrote the words of *Lélio* and assembled its music from existing works. These include his Shakespearean fantasy, *La Tempête*, composed

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after *Symphonie fantastique* but performed first (7 November 1830). In 1831, temporarily away from Rome, he composed two overtures inspired by literature: *Le Roi Lear* after Shakespeare and *Rob-Roy* after Walter Scott. Required to send sacred music to Paris as a condition of the Rome Prize and as evidence of diligence and progress, he cheekily sent a copy of the 'Resurrexit' from his *Messe solennelle* of 1824, although it had been performed in Paris five times (most recently in 1829). It was not recognized, and the Academy's report praised Berlioz for restraining his over-active imagination, a barb perhaps aimed at the 1829 cantata *Cléopâtre* but certainly at *Symphonie fantastique*.[5]

'Stella montis'

The opening melody of *Symphonie fantastique* originated much earlier, during Berlioz's semi-rural youth in La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, in south-eastern France. Hector was the eldest of six children, all of whom predeceased him; only two sisters had survived into adulthood.[6] He was expected to inherit his father's respectable position in the local community, and was sent to Paris shortly before his eighteenth birthday to study medicine. Hearing music professionally performed for the first time, including operas, hardened his resolution to defy his parents and become a musician.

The symphony's opening Largo harks back to an early love. Berlioz said his youthful songs were melancholy and in minor keys, but all that survive, including his earliest published works composed as a teenager, are in major keys. Just one, that was not published and is lost, is known to have been in a minor key. It set a poem from *Estelle et Némorin*, the novel by Jean-Pierre-Claris de Florian (1755–94) which Berlioz read and reread as a boy. The tune 'presented itself humbly to my mind when I began to write my Fantastic Symphony in 1829. It seemed to me suited to express the overpowering sadness of a young heart first tortured by a hopeless love, and I welcomed it'.[7]

Florian's heroine shared the forename of a real person who lived near Berlioz's grandfather, whom he often visited in Meylan, near Grenoble.[8] Aged twelve, he fell head over heels in love with Estelle Dubœuf, then eighteen. Their age difference made even

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friendship impossible, but she became his ideal, his ‘Stella montis’ (mountain star) and he was unkindly mocked for his passion, even by his mother. In the 1860s he reintroduced himself to her (she was now Madame Fornier, and a widow); their brief friendship led him, when rewriting his will in 1867 after the death of his son Louis, to offer her an annuity: ‘I beg her to accept this modest sum as a memento of the sentiments that I have harboured for her *throughout my lifetime*’ (she accepted).

The song was probably composed not long before the seventeen-year-old Berlioz left for Paris. The first lines suggest what he may have been feeling:

> Je vais donc quitter pour jamais
> Mon doux pays, ma douce amie,
> Loin d’eux je vais traîner ma vie
> Dans les pleurs et dans les regrets!

‘I must leave my dear homeland forever, and my sweet love; far away, I shall drag out my life in tears and regrets!’ Florian’s poem can be fitted to the tune up to a point. It was probably not in the same key as the symphony, and the original accompaniment – perhaps for guitar, which Berlioz played well – must have been entirely different.[9] In Berlioz’s most ambitious early song, *Le Montagnard exilé* (published by early 1823), the mountaineer sings of his sorrow, exiled from the ‘paternal roof’ and its associations; the poem by Berlioz’s friend Albert du Boys mentions the Isère, the river that gives its name to their home region. Berlioz’s adolescent turmoil contributed to a sensation reflected in the symphony’s programme, an extreme reaction to loneliness (‘isolement’):

> From the age of sixteen, he suffered from what he called *mal de l’isolement*, a problem at once mental, nervous, and imaginary whose symptoms included intense longing, ‘a feeling of loneliness and absence’, and a sense of terrible constriction.[10]

He described the condition in connection with his Italian exile: ‘A vacuum forms round my panting chest, and it is as if my heart, subject to an irresistible force of suction, were evaporating and about to dissolve. The skin smarts and burns.’[11] He called the

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condition 'spleen', distinguishing active and passive forms; active spleen embraces life and happiness, but passive spleen is world-weary: life seems to have no meaning. From an artistic viewpoint, what matters is the force of these sensations, and their coexistence within him; their musical analogue is found in much of his work, including the third movement of *Symphonie fantastique*.

Berlioz's earliest *mal de l'isolement* derived from family conflicts, when even his sisters refused to take seriously his dreams of music and love for 'Stella montis'. He had later loves, notably Harriet Smithson and his second wife, Marie Recio, as well as women friends and confidantes, but 'Stella' lies behind elements in *Symphonie fantastique* that suggest nostalgia – which, if truly a 'Swiss disease', originated not far from Estelle's home in Meylan; from there, the Alps are visible in the east.

The Programme of *Symphonie fantastique*

On 16 April 1830, Berlioz confided to Humbert Ferrand (also his literary collaborator in the 1820s) that he was completing a 'grande symphonie fantastique', adding a preliminary version of its programme, not much different from what would be offered to audiences in December. He sets out the ideas behind its five movements:

Part I: double, made up of a short adagio, followed at once by an extended allegro (flux of passions; pointless reveries; delirious passion with every element of tenderness, jealousy, rage, fears, etc. etc.)
Part II: Scene in the country (adagio, thoughts of love and hope troubled by dark foreboding).
Part III: A ball (brilliant and intoxicating music).
Part IV: March to Execution (ferocious, pompous music).
Part V: Dream of a Sabbath night.

In the letter he expanded this in detail, with an introductory paragraph almost identical to what was printed for the first performance.[12]

The main difference between this outline and the final version is the order of the second and third movements. Berlioz soon decided that the foreboding that disrupts the country scene should lead to a crisis of despair, when the protagonist tries to poison himself; the

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last two movements are a nightmare induced by the poison. Berlioz reconsidered the programme when the symphony and *Lélio* were performed together in Weimar in 1855. He now decided that the whole symphony should be considered a series of increasingly terrifying dreams. My translation follows, based on the text in the published full score (1845); the many variants, all small other than those mentioned, are detailed in the New Berlioz Edition (NBE).[13]

Box 1.1: Programme

The composer aims to develop, as far as is musically possible, some aspects of an artist's life. The plan of this instrumental drama, unaided by words, requires prior explanation. This programme should be considered equivalent to spoken dialogue in opera, introducing and motivating the character and expression of each musical movement.*

* Making the programme available to audiences at concerts including this symphony is indispensable to full understanding of the work [Berlioz's note].

Part One: Rêveries, Passions (Day-Dreams, Suffering)

I suggest that a young musician, affected by the mental complaint a celebrated author [Chateaubriand] has termed *flux of passions* [*vague des passions*], sees for the first time a woman with the perfect charm conjured in his dreams, and falls hopelessly in love. By a freakish accident, her image only comes to mind combined with a musical idea, which seems to have the character – passionate, but also noble and reticent – he attributes to his beloved.

This imagined image and its musical parallel haunt him unceasingly like a double *idée fixe*. This explains the return in each of the symphony's movements of the melody that begins the first Allegro. Hence the first movement passes from a state of melancholy reverie, interrupted by bursts of unfounded happiness and stirrings of anger and jealousy, returning to tenderness, tears, and religious consolation.

Part Two: Un Bal (A Dance)

The artist finds himself in diverse situations; in the middle of the *tumult of a ball*, in peaceful contemplation of the beauties of nature. But wherever he goes, in the town or the countryside, the beloved image comes to him and troubles his soul.

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Box 1.1: (*cont.*)

Part Three: Scène aux champs (Country Scene)
Finding himself one evening in the fields, he hears in the distance two peasants exchanging cow-calls [*ranz des vaches*]; their pastoral dialogue, the rural scene, the leaves gently whispering in the breeze, all contribute to a new hopefulness, encouraging a strange calm and lending his thoughts a brighter colour. He contemplates his loneliness; he hopes it will soon be over . . . But if she were to deceive him! . . . This blend of hope and fear, possible happiness disturbed by dark foreboding, forms the topic of the Adagio. Finally, one peasant resumes the *ranz des vaches*; there is no reply . . . Distant rumbling of thunder . . . solitude . . . silence . . .

Part IV 'Marche au supplice' (March to Execution)
Now sure he loves in vain, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of the drug, too weak to kill him, induces deep sleep accompanied by nightmares. He dreams he has murdered his beloved; condemned to death, he witnesses *his own execution*. He is led in a procession to sounds of a march, now dark and fierce, now brilliant and grand; the dull funereal tramping leads without transition to the most explosive outbursts. Finally, the first bars of the *idée fixe* are heard, like a last thought of the beloved before the fatal fall of the guillotine.

Part V 'Songe d'une nuit de Sabbat' (Dream of a Witches' Sabbath)
He sees himself at the Sabbath among a dreadful band of ghosts, sorcerers, and all kinds of monsters assembled for his funeral. Weird sounds, groans, shrieks of laughter, are heard in the distance and seemingly answered. The beloved melody reappears, but it has lost its noble and reticent character; it has become a vulgar dance, trivial and grotesque; *she* has come to the Sabbath . . . Shouts of delight at her arrival . . . She joins the devilish revelry . . . Funeral bells, burlesque parody of the *Dies irae*.* *Sabbath round dance* [*Ronde du sabbat*]. The round dance and *Dies irae* combined.

* Hymn sung at Catholic funeral ceremonies [Berlioz's note].

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The programme offers a way of understanding Berlioz's expressive intentions, but its relationship to the music is not over-literal. He refers to it as equivalent to the spoken dialogue in an *opéra comique*, which motivates, rather than being part of, the music of that genre. In a preview of the performance, François-Joseph Fétis

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referred to the symphony with programme as a sort of novel ('roman'). This analogy had occurred to Berlioz himself, as he wrote to Ferrand: 'this is how I've woven my novel, or better my story, in which you'll have no difficulty in recognizing the hero'.[14]

'Reveries and passions' run throughout, with the former predominant in the first and third movements. The role of the *idée fixe*, principal theme of the first movement, is explained by the programme for the March and finale, but not for the second and third movements. The 1830 programme shown here says almost nothing about the second movement, but the revised version prepared a quarter-century later reads: 'He meets the beloved at a dance in the midst of the glittering tumult of a party', a meeting that gives rise to hope that his passion might be returned and so induces the initial calm of the third movement. The finale's programme does not suggest that over half its bars come after the burlesque parody. The last words are intended to draw attention to a purely musical feature, a climactic combination of themes such as Berlioz often used in later works.

Peter Bloom found a possible source for the original title and the *idée fixe*:

> a certain 'Épisode de la vie d'un voyageur', in which a young man wanders round Paris for a month trying to find the beautiful young woman he has seen but once – a woman whose image appears before his mind's eye, like an *idée fixe*, whenever he sees a rose. The woman meets a tragic fate. Did Berlioz – who tells us of the extraordinary images he saw in his *own* mind's eye – read this book?[15]

The combination of 'Épisode de la vie . . .' and *idée fixe* is certainly striking, although the fate of the woman imagined by Berlioz's programme is undetermined. This book was published in March 1830, so Berlioz could have seen it before he outlined the programme to Ferrand. But it could be a coincidence; Berlioz had decided to write a symphony some months earlier, and by March 1830 it was nearing completion. And there is another possible source for the term *idée fixe*: Francesca Brittan notes its definition in 'French psychiatric ideas of monomania (an unhealthy fixation on a single person, object, or idea), with which Berlioz was clearly familiar'.[16] Literature certainly played its part in the symphony's conception (see Chapter 3). If Berlioz adapted his title from literature, he was not the only composer to do so. Liszt's 'Vallée

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d'Obermann' (*Années de Pèlerinage* I, 'Suisse') alludes to a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel where the title character is the author's alter ego; Swiss adventures led 'Obermann' to discourse on the *ranz des vaches*. (Did Berlioz read *this* book?)[17]

An Outline of *Symphonie fantastique*

Most earlier symphonies have three or four movements, but an obvious precedent for five is Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral*), with its crisis (thunderstorm) similarly placed as the fourth movement.

One of the most original aspects of *Symphonie fantastique* is its use of melodies previously set to words. The opening is the Florian romance; the *idée fixe* is sung in *Herminie*; the main theme of the third movement comes from the *Messe solennelle*, and the *Dies irae* chant from the Requiem Mass. Countering that vocal tendency are clearly instrumental ideas: secondary material in the first movement, the waltz theme, the *ranz des vaches*, the March, the fugue in the finale.

Chapters 4–8 include 'maps' of each movement, outlining their forms musically; the bar numbers follow those of the New Berlioz Edition (NBE).[18] When a theme begins on an upbeat, the number is the bar of the following first beat. Where keys are indicated, a capital letter means a major key unless qualified as minor. Here is the overall sequence of keys, which is only a little unusual from the point of view of 'classical' precedents:

Movements I–II: C minor (Largo), C major (Allegro). The quiet ending leads easily to the quiet A-minor harmony that opens movement II; A major is then established as the tonic.

Movements II–III: II is in A with an episode in F; F is also the key of III. The note A is common to both tonic chords, but other elements at the junction of movements (texture, dynamics) are dissimilar, marking the change of atmosphere between ballroom and countryside.

Movements III–IV: F and the March key, G minor, are not directly related, but similar dynamic levels and the use of horn and timpani at the junction of movements form an audible connection.

Movements IV–V: IV ends loudly in G major; V begins quietly on a diminished seventh with the same top note (g'''), a tenuous connection. The tonic of V (C) is only established much later.

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In one of the most thorough analyses of the work, Edward T. Cone refers to the succession (C–A–F–G minor–C) as 'a clear pattern', but 'exceptional'. In a work in C, one might expect A to be minor and G to be major. Cone notes a symmetry: II starts and IV ends in the opposite mode to what might be expected; A minor (starting II) follows its relative C major (I), and G major (ending IV) is the dominant of C (V).[19] This is well enough if one overlooks applause between movements, quite normal circa 1830 and after, and (which could also happen) the chance that the audience might demand an encore of a movement before going on to the next.

Berlioz probably did not think of these matters when changing the movement order: 'Un Bal' after 'Scène aux champs' would be unexceptional as to key (F to A minor), but A major to the G minor of the March would have been rather abrupt. The change is likely to have had a programmatic motivation. With the final order, the marked discontinuity between II and III (keys A–F; *fortissimo* to unaccompanied cor anglais) makes an effective contrast: a scene in the city, then a pastoral scene. Either ordering makes a contrast between movements III and IV to fit the change, in the 1830 version of the programme, from a waking to a dreaming protagonist. Yet there is little audible link between the two parts of the opium dream (IV–V); a brazen *tutti* is followed by mysterious, indeterminate rhythm and harmony. The order of movements was not affected when Berlioz revised the programme to represent the whole symphony as a dream from which the sequel *Lélio* is a rude awakening.

After the symphony's second performance (9 December 1832), also the premiere of *Lélio*, Berlioz finally met Harriet Smithson, with whom he had fallen in love five years earlier. After a turbulent courtship, they were married the following October.

Notes

1. Letter to Dr Louis Berlioz, 19 February 1830. *Correspondance Générale* (hereafter *CG*), Vol. I, 309–13; cited 310. 'En outre, l'habitude que j'ai prise de m'observer continuellement fait qu'aucune sensation ne m'échappe et la réflexion la rend double, je me vois dans un miroir. J'éprouve souvent des impressions extraordinaires dont rien ne peut donner une idée, vraisemblablement l'exaltation nerveuse en est la cause, cela tient de l'ivresse de l'opium.

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Mais ce qui me surprend c'est que je me rappelle fort bien avoir éprouvé exactement la même chose dès l'âge de 12 ans'.

2. On the Prix de Rome, see Julia Lu and Alexandre Dratwicki (eds.), *Le Concours du prix de Rome de musique (1803–1968)* (Lyons: Symétrie: Centre de musique romantique française, 2011).
3. Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 10.
4. On 'self-borrowing' see *The Cambridge Berlioz Encyclopedia* (*CBE*), 43–5; Hugh Macdonald, 'Berlioz's Self-Borrowings', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 92 (1965–6): 27–44.
5. Berlioz, *Mémoires*, chap. 39. The Academy's report is quoted in *Mémoires d'Hector Berlioz de 1803 à 1869*, ed. Peter Bloom (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 365.
6. See David Cairns, 'The Berlioz Family', *CBE*, 31–3, and 'Two Sisters' in Cairns, *Discovering Berlioz* (London: Toccata Press, 2019), 91–104.
7. *Memoirs*, chap. 4. David Cairns (trans.), *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Knopf, 2002), 16; *Mémoires* (ed. Bloom), 146.
8. *Memoirs*, chap. 3. Pascal Beyls, *Estelle Fornier, premier et dernier amour de Berlioz* (Grenoble: Pascal Beyls, 2003).
9. See Julian Rushton, *The Music of Berlioz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168; Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1972), New Berlioz Edition (NBE), Vol. 16, 194.
10. Francesca Brittan, 'Health', *CBE*, 158–9. See also Susan Ironfield, 'Creative Developments of the "Mal de l'Isolement" in Berlioz', *Music & Letters*, 59 (1978): 33–48.
11. 'Le vide se fait autour de ma poitrine palpitante, et il semble alors que mon cœur, sous l'aspiration d'une force irrésistible, s'évapore et tend à se dissoudre par expansion. Puis, la peau de tout mon corps devient douloureuse et brûlante'. *The Memoirs* (trans. Cairns), 175–6; *Mémoires* (ed. Bloom), 372.
12. *CG* Vol. I, 319–20; most of the letter is translated in David Cairns, *Berlioz,* Vol. I, *The Making of an Artist* (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press), 1999), 359–60.
13. NBE 16, 167–9; the revised programme, 170.
14. '... une sorte de roman'. François-Joseph Fétis, 'Nouvelles de Paris', *La Revue musicale* X (December 1830), 89–90. Berlioz's letter of 16 April 1830: 'voici comment j'ai tissé mon roman, ou plutôt mon histoire, dont il ne vous est pas difficile de reconnaître le héros'. *CG* Vol. I, 319.

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15. Peter Bloom, 'Berlioz in the Year of the *Symphonie fantastique*', in *Berlioz in Time: From Early Recognition to Lasting Renown*, Eastman Studies in Music (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2022), 1–25; cited, 2. Marquis Louis-Rainier Lanfranchi (pseudonym of Étienne-Léon de Lamothe-Langon), *Voyage à Paris ou Esquisses des hommes et des choses de cette capitale* (Paris: Le Petit, 1830), 207–24. My thanks to Peter Bloom for clarifying the month of publication (personal communication).
16. Francesca Brittan, 'Health', *CBE*, 158.
17. Étienne-Jean-Baptise-Pierre-Ignace Pivert de Senancour, *Obermann* (1804) (*Oberman* in some editions).
18. NBE 16 is available as a miniature score (Schott: Edition Eulenburg 422).
19. Edward T. Cone, 'Schumann Amplified', in Cone, *Berlioz: Fantastic Symphony*, Norton Critical Scores (London: Chappell, 1971), 249–77; cited 249–50.

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