

Romeo and Juliet

Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)

Written: 1839–1847

Style: Romantic

Duration: 96 minutes

Like many nineteenth-century composers, Hector Berlioz had a life-long fascination with Shakespeare. His began in 1827 when he was a student in Paris. He went to see an English company's production of *Hamlet*. In the *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz* he wrote:

Shakespeare, coming upon unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt. The lightning flash of that discovery revealed to me at a stroke the whole heaven of art, illuminating it to its remotest corners. I recognized the meaning of grandeur, beauty, dramatic truth. . . . I saw, I understood, I felt. . . . As I came out of *Hamlet*, shaken to the depths by experience, I vowed not to expose myself a second time to the flame of Shakespeare's genius.

However, he couldn't stay away. When the playbills announced *Romeo and Juliet*, I rushed round to the box office the moment I saw the posters and bought a stall. My fate was doubly sealed. . . . By the third act, hardly able to breathe—as though an iron hand gripped me by the heart—I knew that I was lost. I may add that at that time I did not know a word of English.

Then there was Beethoven. After his first encounter with his music, Berlioz felt “the shock was almost as great as that of Shakespeare had been. Beethoven opened before me a new world of music, as Shakespeare had revealed a new universe of poetry.” Beethoven's symphonies demonstrated to Berlioz the dramatic potential of music. The great violinist Nicolò Paganini felt the same way. After attending a concert of Berlioz's music that included his *Symphonie fantastique* and *Harold in Italy*, he sent him a letter:

Beethoven being dead, only Berlioz can make him live again; and I who have heard your divine compositions, so worthy of genius you are, humbly beg you to accept, as a token of my homage, twenty thousand francs . . .

Stunned, Berlioz resolved to write “a really important work, something splendid on a grand and original plan, full of passion and imagination.” He settled on the idea of a “symphony with chorus, soloists, and choral recitative on the sublime and perennial theme of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Berlioz worked on the symphony for nine months in 1839—and continually revised it up until its publication in 1847. The result is one of the longest—and these days the least performed—symphonies written by a “standard” composer. Like almost all of his works, *Romeo and Juliet* is an unorthodox work. It has seven parts, but hidden amongst them are the typical four movements of a symphony (*Andante malinconico -Allegro, Adagio, Scherzo prestissimo and Allegro agitato*). There are scenes adapted from a stage play by David Garrick that Shakespeare never wrote (*The tomb scene, funeral march, and double chorus oath of reconciliation*). And, Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* notwithstanding, the inclusion of soloists and chorus in a symphony was still highly unusual in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* was one of Berlioz’s greatest successes. There were, of course, critics. One announced that Berlioz “failed to understand Shakespeare.” Berlioz’s response? “Toad, swollen with wind and crapulous stupidity! Let him prove it!”

© 2016 John P. Varineau