

## Night on Bald Mountain by Modest Mussorgsky

The inspiration for this orchestral work was the European legend of St. John's Eve, commemorating the birth of John the Baptist and the June solstice. According to this legend, witches, sorcerers, and demons are given special powers on St. John's Eve, and they gather on an isolated mountain (in the Russian version, Mt. Triglav, near Kiev) for a night of debauchery.

Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* was originally subtitled St. John's Night on the Bare Mountain. His notes for this work are as follows: "Subterranean din of supernatural voices. Appearance of Spirits of Darkness, followed by that of the god Tchernobog. Glorification of The Black God, The Black Mass. Witches' Sabbath, interrupted at its height by the sounds of the far-off bell of the little church in a village. It disperses the Spirits of Darkness. Daybreak."

Mussorgsky was familiar with Liszt's *Totentanz* (also on today's program), and there are many similarities between the two works. Both are variations on the *Dies irae* (Day of wrath) plainsong, and both are in the key of D minor. Fittingly, Mussorgsky completed the first version of *Night on Bald Mountain* on St. John's Eve (June 23), 1867. He revised the score in 1872 for the cooperative opera-ballet *Mlada*, adding a chorus, and then again in 1880 when he incorporated the work into his opera titled *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*.

Mussorgsky never heard a performance of *Night on Bald Mountain*. After his death in 1881, his colleague Rimsky-Korsakov made additional revisions, which included cutting approximately two minutes' worth of music, reworking some of the orchestration, and writing a new ending. This version was published in 1886, and has become the standard version in the orchestral repertoire; it is this version that we will be hearing in today's concert.

## Totentanz by Franz Liszt

Sometimes referred to as Liszt's "third piano concerto", the inspiration for *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) was a fourteenth century Italian fresco seen by Liszt during a trip to Pisa in 1838. Created by the Florentine artist Andrea Orcagna, the fresco is titled *The Triumph of Death*. In this ghoulish scene, the female figure of Death carries a scythe as she swoops toward her victims. Some souls are seen ascending to heaven, while others are being dragged down to hell. A pile of corpses and open graves with decomposed bodies add to the ghastly atmosphere.

Liszt did not begin work on *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) until 1849, eleven years after he saw Orcagna's painting, and ten years after he composed his two piano concertos. He revised *Totentanz* in 1853 and 1859, and the premiere took place at The Hague in 1865. The pianist was Hans von Bülow, Liszt's son-in-law; *Totentanz* is also dedicated to him.

Liszt uses the plainsong chant *Dies irae* (Day of wrath) as the theme in this composition, which is a set of variations. He had arranged Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (also on today's program) for solo piano several years before, which also incorporates the *Dies irae* melody; it

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is likely that Liszt was inspired by Berlioz to use this melody as well. As described by Oliver Hilmes in his biography of Liszt, “Death stalks the score in the form of strident trills and brutal chords. The percussive use of the piano, the bold harmonies and the work’s implacable momentum make the *Totentanz* an extraordinarily modern piece, the piano writing confronting the soloist with uniquely challenging difficulties.” The composer Béla Bartók said of *Totentanz*, “. . .the work has such a phantasmagoric, dream-like quality that one feels one is in a world in which the strangest things could happen, and no juxtaposition is too bizarre.”

The premiere of *Totentanz* took place at The Hague in 1865, with Liszt’s son-in-law, Hans von Bülow, at the keyboard. The piece is also dedicated to von Bülow. *Totentanz* is Liszt’s final work for piano and orchestra. A few days after the premiere, he received tonsure, the first step toward joining a clerical order. Although he never completed the final steps of this process, he was known as Abbé Liszt for the remainder of his life.

### **Symphonie Fantastique by Hector Berlioz**

“No disrespect to Mahler or Shostakovich, but this is the most remarkable First Symphony ever written. . . .Berlioz strove to write ‘new music’. He succeeded. The Fantastic Symphony sounds and behaves like nothing ever heard before.” So wrote Michael Steinberg (1928-2009), renowned music critic and author. Composed in 1830 with a revised version completed two years later, the *Symphonie Fantastique* was inspired by Berlioz’s obsession with Harriet Smithson, an Irish actress whom he saw in a London theatre company’s performance of Hamlet in Paris on September 11, 1827. He immediately began to write her passionate letters, which she ignored. “I am again plunged in the anguish of an interminable and inextinguishable passion, without motive, without cause. She is always in London, and yet I think I feel her near me; all my remembrances awake and unite to wound me; I hear my heart beating, and its pulsations shake me as the piston strokes of a steam engine.” When Berlioz wrote these words, he and Harriet Smithson had never met. On the day after the premiere of the revised version of the symphony in 1832 (during which Berlioz played in the percussion section), the fateful meeting finally occurred. Berlioz and Smithson were married in 1833; their son was born a year later. Unfortunately, they soon discovered that it was an ill-suited match and separated in 1844, although Berlioz continued to provide for her until her death in 1854.

In this groundbreaking work, Berlioz ingeniously utilizes unconventional and vivid orchestration, unexpected pauses, abrupt dynamic changes, an expanded five-movement structure, and a grotesque story line to create what is widely hailed as the first great romantic symphony. In the last movement, we hear once again the *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) plainsong, quoted and varied in a variety of ways. A recurring motive, known as the *idée fixe*, appears in each of the five movements. It represents Harriet Smithson and Berlioz’s feelings toward her.

The publication of *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1845 included a detailed explanation of the program by the composer, which appears here on the next page:

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“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. This programme should be distributed to the audience at concerts where this symphony is included, as it is indispensable for a complete understanding of the dramatic plan of the work. [HB]

## **Part One- Daydreams, Passions**

The author imagines that a young musician, afflicted by the sickness of spirit which a famous writer has called the vagueness of passions (*le vague des passions*), sees for the first time a woman who unites all the charms of the ideal person his imagination was dreaming of, and falls desperately in love with her. By a strange anomaly, the beloved image never presents itself to the artist’s mind without being associated with a musical idea, in which he recognises a certain quality of passion, but endowed with the nobility and shyness which he credits to the object of his love. This melodic image and its model keep haunting him ceaselessly like a double *idée fixe*. This explains the constant recurrence in all the movements of the symphony of the melody which launches the first *allegro*. The transitions from this state of dreamy melancholy, interrupted by occasional upsurges of aimless joy, to delirious passion, with its outbursts of fury and jealousy, its returns of tenderness, its tears, its religious consolations – all this forms the subject of the first movement.

## **Part two- a Ball**

The artist finds himself in the most diverse situations in life, in the tumult of a festive party, in the peaceful contemplation of the beautiful sights of nature, yet everywhere, whether in town or in the countryside, the beloved image keeps haunting him and throws his spirit into confusion.

## **Part three- Scene in the Countryside**

One evening in the countryside he hears two shepherds in the distance dialoguing with their ‘*ranz des vaches*’; this pastoral duet, the setting, the gentle rustling of the trees in the wind, some causes for hope that he has recently conceived, all conspire to restore to his heart an unaccustomed feeling of calm and to give to his thoughts a happier colouring. He broods on his loneliness, and hopes that soon he will no longer be on his own... But what if she betrayed him!... This mingled hope and fear, these ideas of happiness, disturbed by dark premonitions, form the subject of the *adagio*. At the end one of the shepherds resumes his ‘*ranz des vaches*’; the other one no longer answers. Distant sound of thunder... solitude... silence...

## **Part four- March to the Scaffold**

Convinced that his love is spurned, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of narcotic, while too weak to cause his death, plunges him into a heavy sleep accompanied by the strangest of visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned, led to the scaffold and is witnessing his own execution. The procession advances to the sound of a march that is sometimes sombre and wild, and sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which a dull sound of heavy footsteps follows without transition the loudest outbursts. At the end of the march, the first four bars of the *idée fixe* reappear like a final thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow.

## **Part five- Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath**

He sees himself at a witches’ sabbath, in the midst of a hideous gathering of shades, sorcerers and monsters of every kind who have come together for his funeral. Strange sounds, groans, outbursts of laughter; distant shouts which seem to be answered by more shouts. The beloved melody appears once more, but has now lost its noble and shy character; it is now no more than a vulgar dance tune, trivial and grotesque: it is she who is coming to the sabbath... Roar of delight at her arrival... She joins the diabolical orgy... The funeral knell tolls, burlesque parody of the *Dies irae*, the dance of the witches. The dance of the witches combined with the *Dies irae*.”