

PROGRAM NOTES
QUINCY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
April 29, 2017
Dr. Paul Borg

Our season theme, *Passions & Reveries*, comes from the title of the first movement of our season's final composition, Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*. And a better representative of those concepts has never been composed. "Passions" also characterizes the other compositions on the program.

Ignite

Stephanie Berg

We begin with the world premiere of *Ignite*, commissioned by the QSO and composed by Stephanie Berg, a Missouri native and clarinetist, who creates engaging, new instrumental works. In Berg's words:

Ignite! is an exciting orchestral overture that features a fiery, Celtic-influenced theme that harkens back to my old love of Irish folk music. The piece features contrasting sections that pit small, soloistic passages against the fearsome power of the entire orchestra. Every section of the ensemble is highlighted, with intricate rhythmic passages in the percussion, thunderous storm fronts in the brass, and high-energy, quick-paced passagework in the woodwinds and strings. The piece opens with a solo for piccolo, accompanied by a light and agile percussion motif, and is interspersed with a contrasting theme of large, blocky parallel fifths that is first presented by the low woodwinds. These motives are repeated, increasing in complexity and instrumentation with each repetition, frequently appearing as a modified round, or transformed to become a shimmering texture. The middle section features fanfares from the brass interspersed with sparkling flourishes from the woodwinds and presentations of the opening theme by the strings. A chromatic section featuring the bass instruments propels the piece to the return of opening material, now presented in its most powerful form until the grandiose conclusion.

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 10

Sergei Prokofiev
(1891-1953)

On July 25, 1912, Prokofiev performed the premiere of his first piano concerto in Moscow; he was only 21 years old. During his childhood his parents, fairly well-to-do for Russians at the end of the 19th century, encouraged his interest and talent for music. Early on, he composed pieces for piano while he himself was becoming an accomplished pianist. So, the concert's critical success confirmed the abilities of the young composer whose subsequent career was influenced by the political changes of Russia during the first half of the 20th century. Though he became an internationally successful composer, his own death, March 5, 1953 went unnoticed because Josef Stalin died on the same day.

His first piano concerto consists of a single movement, articulated into three distinct sections: Allegro brioso—Andante assai—Allegro scherzando. The technical demands on the soloist are immense, a challenge for any pianist. Yet, the light-hearted moods that an audience experiences belie those difficulties. Engagement, rather, is the mood that Prokofiev evokes with all the delightful pianistic acrobatics. The more somber middle section hints at Prokofiev's ability to create haunting melodic lines that contrast with the exuberance of the faster sections. Prokofiev identified five characteristics of his music: 1) a Classical element, 2) a search for innovation, 3) a motor element (toccata-like), 4) a lyrical element, and 5) the grotesque. In this first piano concerto we hear all, except perhaps the grotesque.

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

Hector Berlioz
(1803-1869)

Hector Berlioz was an aspiring young composer during the 1820s. He studied at the Conservatoire in Paris, and earned a trip to Italy by winning the Priz de Rome in 1830. At that time Italian opera was perhaps the most influential musical genre in Europe. Yet, Beethoven's symphonies were also championed in Paris by the conductor Habeneck beginning in 1824. Being challenged like any young, little-known composer, Berlioz created a hybrid composition in 1830. It contains a "kind of" story (opera-like) incorporated into a "symphony" for which he wrote dramatic "descriptions" as explanations for each of the movements. Although precedence for

a descriptive symphony existed (Beethoven's 'Pastorale' Symphony No. 6, the most famous of them), Berlioz set a new standard for romantic evocations in symphonic music.

Since Berlioz was not musically trained at a keyboard, as was usual, his musical choices seem freed from the limitations that two hands imposed on other composers. In the *Symphonie fantastique* this is shown by the extended range of pitches, the rapid contrasts in tempo and dynamics, and the imaginative instrumentation. The use of harps, English horn, E-flat clarinet, ophicleides (tuba), and large church bells was rare in symphonic music of the time. Especially notable is his evocation of thunder (2 sets of timpani) at the end of the third movement; the severed head bouncing down the scaffold steps (plucked strings) at the end of the fourth movement; or the macabre dance combining the *idée fixe* with the *Dies irae* from the Requiem Mass.

At the same time Berlioz was establishing his musical credentials, he was fascinated by the theatre. He became enamored with an English actress, Harriet Smithson whose interpretations of Shakespeare inspired Berlioz to a love for serious drama as well as to develop an infatuation with the actress. She became the tacit inspiration for the story of the symphony. Berlioz revised his description of the actions in the symphony several times. The 1858 version follows:

A young musician of morbidly sensitive temperament and fiery imagination poisons himself with opium in a fit of lovesick despair. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a deep slumber accompanied by the strangest visions, during which his sensations, his emotions, his memories are transformed in his sick mind into musical thoughts and images. The loved one herself has become a melody to him, an *idée fixe* as it were, that he encounters and hears everywhere.

Part I: Reveries, Passions

He recalls first that soul-sickness, that *vague de passions*, those depressions, those groundless joys, that he experienced before he first saw his loved one; then the volcanic love that she suddenly inspired in him, his frenzied suffering, his jealous rages, his returns to tenderness, his religious consolations.

Part II: A Ball

He encounters the loved one at a dance in the midst of the tumult of a brilliant party.

Part III: Scene in the Country

One summer evening in the country, he hears two shepherds piping a *ranz des naches* in dialogue; this pastoral duet, the scenery, the quiet rustling of the tress gently brushed by the wind, the hopes he has recently found some reason to entertain—all concur in affording his heart an unaccustomed calm, and in giving a more cheerful color to his ideas. But she appears again, he feels a tightening in his heart, painful presentiments disturb him—what if she were deceiving him?—One of the shepherds takes up his simple tune again, the other no longer answers, The sun sets—distant sound of thunder—loneliness—silence.

Part IV: March to the Scaffold

He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and led to the scaffold. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a march that is now somber and fierce, now brilliant and solemn, in which the muffled sound of heavy steps gives way without transition to the noisiest clamor. At the end, the *idée fixe* returns for a moment, like a last thought of love interrupted by the final blow.

Part V: Dream of a Witches' Sabbath

He sees himself at the sabbath, in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, come together for his funeral. Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries which other cries seems to answer. The beloved melody appears again, but it has lost its character of nobility and shyness; it is no more than a dance tune, mean, trivial, and grotesque: is it she, coming to join the sabbath.—A roar of joy at her arrival.—She takes part in the devilish orgy.—Funeral knell, burlesque parody of the *Dies irae*, *sabbath round-dance*. The sabbath round and the *Dies irae* combined.