

HECTOR BERLIOZ

(1803 - 1869)

Roman Carnival Overture

Hector Berlioz, the passionate, ardent, irrepresible genius of French Romanticism, left a rich and original oeuvre which exerted a profound influence on nineteenth century music. His father, a physician, assumed that his son would follow in the same profession. Therefore, his son's musical inclination was largely ignored. As a result, the younger Berlioz never learned to play more than a few chords on the piano, and his practical abilities on flute and guitar were far short of virtuosic. At age 17, he was sent to Paris to study medicine, but was so enchanted by the operas of Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck that he decided then and there to become a composer. With his father's reluctant consent, Berlioz entered the Paris Conservatoire (1826) and won the Prix de Rome in 1830. He settled into a career pattern which he maintained for more than a decade - writing reviews, organizing concerts, and composing a series of visionary masterpieces. A difficult time followed, however, as his marriage failed to bring him the happiness he desired. Concert tours to Belgium, German, Austria, and England occupied him through most of the 1840s. He was elected to the Institut de France in 1855, the stipend from which provided him with a modicum of financial security. Though frail and ailing, Berlioz continued to travel and conduct his works as late as the winter of 1868. Returning to Paris in March of 1868, he was a walking shadow of his former self and paralysis slowly overcame him prior to his death.

The concert overture "Roman Carnival" (subtitled "a characteristic overture for large orchestra") was completed in January of 1844 and premiered on February 3, 1844 with the composer conducting. It was such a success at the premiere that it had to be encores and has become one of his most popular works. In his memoirs, Berlioz wrote of the premiere: "Not a single mistake occurred. I started the allegro at the right tempo, the whirlwind tempo of the Roman dancers. The audience encored it; we played it again; it went even better the second time."

The overture is fashioned out of music from his opera "Benvenuto Cellini", his first, and it later served as a prelude to the second act for productions of that work. The concert showpiece with a brief outburst of the main saltarello theme at a devil-may-care speed, followed by an exquisite and utterly characteristic slow, lyrical melody in the English horn (drawn from the duet between Cellini and Teresa in the opera's first act). Once into the subsequent Allegro, the material comes almost verbatim from the Act II finale. The brief fugato that comprises the development keeps the galloping saltarello rhythm constantly present just prior to the climactic conclusion of the work which combines all of the previously introduced musical elements. These intricately combined elements create a wonderfully invigorating close that leaves the listener - not to mention the performers - breathless with its non-stop, headlong rush to the final cadence. The "Roman Carnival Overture" quickly became one of Berlioz's most-played works.

OF NOTE:

Early listeners were baffled by its idiosyncratic language. Not atypical is an account from an unidentified San Francisco newspaper, reporting on a performance on January 10, 1882: "He exorts [sic] from his players frenzies, grotesque and uncouth humors, of whose expression they would have believed no human being capable; and the Roman Carnival is a mad conglomeration of all these things. One could only be surprised at the success attained by the orchestra in this first rendition of so motley a festival sound."