



Program Notes
October 30, 2009
By Chris Morrison

As the lights dim for this season-opening concert, hold your loved ones close and prepare for a “Fright Fantastique!” It starts with a visit from Frankenstein, joined in HK Gruber’s phantasmagoria by a cast of characters including Dracula, Superman, and John Wayne! Then come the drug-fueled visions of Hector Berlioz – he’s in love, and enjoys a party and a walk in the countryside. But his love affair is an unhappy one, and he suffers from nightmares that include a beheading and a visit to a gathering of witches, ghosts, and other monsters!

HK Gruber (1943-)
Frankenstein!!

HK (originally Heinz Karl) Gruber is a composer, bass player, singer (or “chansonnier,” as he prefers to be called), and conductor. Supposedly a distant relative of Franz Gruber, composer of the famous carol “Silent Night,” HK Gruber sang in the Vienna Boys Choir as a youth. After studies at the Vienna Hochschule für Musik, in 1961 Gruber joined the ensemble Die Reihe as a double bassist, later becoming its Artistic Director. From 1969 to 1998 he also played bass in the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 1966 Gruber made his first appearance as an actor and singer, a vocation which became increasingly important to him. His large catalog of compositions reflects a unique combination of influences, stretching from Kurt Weill (in whose works Gruber specializes) to Alban Berg to Igor Stravinsky as well as pop and cabaret music, along with a liberal dose of Gruber’s own unique sense of humor.

Far and away the best-known of Gruber’s works is the “pan-demonium” *Frankenstein!!* An audacious, darkly comical setting for chansonnier and orchestra of children’s verses by the Viennese poet H.C. Artmann, the work originated in a *Frankenstein-Suite* (1971). In 1976-77 he rewrote the suite as a continuous cycle; this version was first performed on November 25, 1978 by Gruber and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic conducted by Simon Rattle. Since then *Frankenstein!!* has been performed hundreds of times all over the world, in both staged and concert versions as well as in productions for film and television.

Gruber writes, “The title of the volume from which I took the poems of *Frankenstein!!* – *Allerleirausch, neue schöne kinderreime* (Noises, noises, all around – lovely new children’s rhymes) – promises something innocuous; but Artmann himself has described the poems as being, among other things, ‘covert political statements.’ Typically he refused to explain what he meant. But his reticence is eloquent: the monsters of political life have always tried to hide their true faces, and all too often succeed in doing so.”

The verses are mock nursery rhymes that make reference to a remarkable host of characters from literature and pop culture – Dracula, Superman, James Bond and Goldfinger, and John Wayne. There are others, too, like “the unfortunate scientist who makes so surprising an entry at mid-point” – with a tango! And let’s not forget the central figure of the piece: “Frankenstein – or whoever we choose to identify with that name – is not the protagonist, but the figure behind the scenes whom we forget at our peril. Hence the exclamation marks.”

The recitation itself is a *tour de force*, often performed by Gruber himself. As he describes it: “The utmost flexibility is called for. The soloist must be capable of effecting sudden and complete changes: for instance, from shrieking to falsetto, from whispering to exaggerated operatic singing, from normal Lieder singing to domestic singing (as in the bath).” He also has directions for the orchestra: “Keep pokerfaced! No laughing, no grinning!”

They have reason to grin, for along with the standard orchestral instruments, Gruber’s score calls for them to play all sorts of other things, like whirling plastic hosepipes, kazoos, motor horns, a toy trumpet, and whistles (heard to great effect in the central “Rat Song and Crusoe Song”). Gruber explains: “Artmann’s demystification of heroic villains or villainous heroes finds a musical parallel in, for instance, the persistent alienation of conventional orchestral sound by resorting to a cupboard-full of toy instruments. However picturesque or amusing the visual effect of the toys, their primary role is musical rather than playful – even howling plastic horses have their motivic/harmonic function.”

Gruber once summed up his one-of-a-kind *Frankenstein!!* – “a piece made by a 33-year-old naughty youngster with musical ability.”

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) ***Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14**

He became France’s best-known musician, the composer of mammoth works such as the four hour epic opera *Les Troyens* (1856-58) and the *Grande Messe des morts*, or *Requiem* (1837) with its choirs, brass bands, and ten timpani players. But in 1827, Hector Berlioz was a twenty-three year old student at the Paris Conservatoire with more ambitions than accomplishments.

Filled with enthusiasm for the works of Shakespeare, one evening Berlioz attended a performance of *Hamlet* presented by an English company visiting Paris. Along with greats like Edmund Kean, this company featured a young Irish actress named Harriet Smithson. Berlioz was smitten with this fiery performer, and four days later he returned to the theater to see her as Juliet. “It was too much,” he wrote. “By the third Act, hardly able to breathe – as though an iron hand gripped me by the heart – I knew that I was lost.” Attempts to win her attention – including love letters and the staging of a concert of his music – went unnoticed, and she and the company returned to England. Then Berlioz started to conceive of a new symphony in which “the development of my infernal passion will be portrayed.”

In April 1830 he completed the *Symphonie fantastique*, or *Fantastic Symphony*. By then Harriet had fallen upon hard times and was back in Paris, performing small roles at the Opéra-Comique.

She never heard, though, of the premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique* on December 5, 1830. Berlioz wrote that the concert was received with enthusiastic “screaming and stomping,” even though many critics were put off by the detailed description of the music that Berlioz had published in local newspapers before the performance.

After two years in Italy, Berlioz returned to Paris and arranged for a performance of the *Symphonie* and its newly composed (and now largely forgotten) sequel *Lélio, or The Return to Life*. This time he made sure Harriet, who was still in Paris, was invited to the performance. Traveling to the concert hall, she read all about the *Symphonie*, but had no idea that she was its inspiration. As she entered the hall she attracted stares from the many audience members who were in on the secret. But in the middle of the concert she realized the truth. Berlioz was playing timpani in that performance, and he said that each time her eyes met his, he played with increased fury. The day after the concert Berlioz had his first face-to-face meeting with his beloved, and within a few months they were married. While they were happy for a time, the relationship gradually deteriorated and they divorced after ten years.

But the *Symphonie fantastique* is still regarded as one of the greatest, and most innovative, works of its day. The colors he drew from the orchestra – using four bassoons, several kinds of clarinets, bells, and more – were like nothing anyone had heard before. Likewise, his use of the *idée fixe*, a melody representing Harriet that is heard in each of the symphony’s five movements, anticipates Richard Wagner’s use of the *leitmotif* many years later.

The detailed program Berlioz invented for the symphony has received criticism – Jacques Barzun felt it was a “promotional aid” for less engaged listeners, and Edward Downes called it “an autobiographical masterpiece of exhibitionism and self-pity.” But Berlioz felt it essential for an understanding of his music: an “outline of the instrumental drama,” as he put it, to be “considered as the spoken text of an opera, serving to introduce the musical movements, whose character and expression it motivates.” In the following description of the *Symphonie*, the words of Berlioz are in quotes.

“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.”

I. *Reveries, Passions*. “He recalls first that soul-sickness, those *intimations of passion*, those seemingly groundless depressions and elations that he experienced before he first saw the woman he loves; then the volcanic love that she suddenly inspired in him, his frenzied anguish, his jealous furies, his returns to tenderness, his religious consolations.” After a slow introduction, we hear the first statement of Harriet’s melody, the *idée fixe*, which Berlioz had originally written for his 1828 cantata *Herminie*: “It seemed to me just right to express the overwhelming sadness of a young heart first experiencing the torture of unhappy love.” Robert Schumann remarked on the unusual, chromatic nature of the melodic development in this movement, “so intense in every note, as to defy normal harmonization.”

II. *A Ball*. “He meets his beloved again during the tumult of a brilliant party.” The mysterious introduction creates an air of expectation. Then we hear the main theme of the movement, a variant of the *idée fixe* now transformed into a graceful waltz, transparently orchestrated and colored by delicate harps (their only appearance in the *Symphonie*).

III. *Scene in the Country*. “On a summer evening in the country, he hears two shepherds piping back and forth to each other a *ranz des vaches*; this pastoral duet; the scenery, the quiet rustling of the trees gently stirred by the wind, some prospects of hope he has recently found – all combine to sooth his heart with unaccustomed calm, and lend a more smiling color to his thoughts. But *she* appears again, he feels a tightening in his heart, painful presentiments disturb him – what if she were to deceive him? – One of the shepherds takes up his simple tune again; the other no longer answers. The sun sets – distant roll of thunder – solitude – silence.” The *ranz des vaches* is a traditional tune that Swiss shepherds use to call their flocks, played here by oboe and English horn. In between we hear what is essentially a set of variations on another theme, heard first in the violins and solo flute. The *idée fixe* appears briefly, just as distant thunder – quiet chords from four timpani – erupts and the flocks are led home.

IV. *March to the Scaffold*. “He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and is being led to execution. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a march that is now somber and wild, 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 one last thought of love interrupted by the death blow.” This brilliant movement, which Berlioz apparently completed in a single evening, is propelled by scurrying strings and blazing brass. The march builds to a climax, then we suddenly hear the clarinet recalling the *idée fixe* one last time before the fall of the blade – followed by pizzicato strings representing the bounce of the severed head into the basket! – and the crowd’s cheers.

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 seem 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, base, trivial, and grotesque: it is 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.” After an eerie introduction, this movement develops in four parts. We hear first a vulgarized version of the *idée fixe*. Then distant bells sound, followed by the famous *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) theme from Gregorian Chant played by bassoons and tuba. Part three is the dance of the witches, with its strange orchestral colors, which merges with the *Dies irae* in the symphony’s exciting conclusion.