




Romeo & Juliet

Saturday 18 February, 7pm
Royal Festival Hall



e Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

Due to a production error the main programme notes for Berlioz's *Romeo & Juliet* have been omitted from the printed programme. They are reproduced below together with choir and orchestra lists for this evening's performance. Apologies for any inconvenience.

Programme Notes

Berlioz's *Symphonie Dramatique*

Roméo et Juliette

When Berlioz was in London in 1848, conducting opera at Drury Lane, a newspaper article recounted a story of him as a young man, coming out of the Odéon Theatre in Paris after the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by the English company led by Charles Kemble and Harriet Smithson, and exclaiming: 'I shall marry that woman and write my grandest symphony on the play'.

Berlioz's response, in his *Memoirs*, was that, though he 'did both those things', he 'never said anything of the sort'. So far as the writing of a *Romeo and Juliet* symphony is concerned, that is absolutely correct. At that stage of his career the 23-year-old student simply couldn't have thought in those terms. His musical education, since coming to Paris, had been largely devoted to the operas and sacred music of the French classical school (French composers or foreigners assimilated into the French tradition): Gluck, Cherubini, Le Sueur, Sacchini, Méhul, Spontini. The crucial discovery of Beethoven, and of the symphony as a major art-form, lay several months in the future.

Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet* comes out of Beethoven almost as much as out of Shakespeare – out of the revelation of the Beethovenian symphony at the Conservatoire Concerts in 1828: the symphony as a dramatic medium every bit as vivid and lofty as opera, and the symphony orchestra as a vehicle of unimagined expressive power and subtlety. From that time on, Berlioz's aspirations turn in a new direction, towards the dramatic concert work: first the *Symphonie Fantastique*, then *Harold en Italie*, and finally, in 1839, twelve years after the epiphany at the Odéon, *Roméo et Juliette*.

One of the vital lessons Berlioz learnt from both Beethoven and Shakespeare concerned form. The young French Romantics, who had fretted under the stifling constraints and prohibitions of the then dominant academic art, found in Shakespeare's infinite variety and freedom of form the answer to their deepest instincts and desires. It was not that art had no need of rules, but that rules could not be preordained and fixed, as the academicians insisted, but must on the contrary be created afresh every time. For

Berlioz, listening to the symphonies and studying the scores in the Conservatoire Library – above all the Ninth, the Choral Symphony – the sheer variety of Beethoven's compositional procedures and the clearly distinct character of each work reinforced the lessons of Shakespeare: continual reinvention of form in response to the needs of the material. The poetic world of each new creation demanded its own appropriate colour and shape.

Thus, we see Berlioz's three post-Beethoven symphonies each cast in a different form, and adopting each time a different solution to the problem of communicating dramatic content. In the *Fantastique* it is the written programme, in *Harold* just movement titles (as in Beethoven's Pastoral), and in *Roméo* choral recitative, setting out – as Shakespeare does in his spoken prologue, 'Two houses, both alike in dignity...' – the action that will be distilled in the movements that follow.

The project occupied Berlioz a long time. In Italy in 1831-2 we see him discussing with Mendelssohn a possible orchestral scherzo on





Queen Mab, and – under the negative impact of Bellini's *Montecchi e Capuleti* – imagining an ideal scenario for a dramatic work: 'To begin with, the dazzling ball at the Capulets, where amid a whirling cloud of beauties young Montague first sets eyes on "sweet Juliet" whose constant love will cost her her life; then the furious battles in the streets of Verona, the "fiery Tybalt" presiding like the very spirit of rage and revenge; the indescribable night scene on Juliet's balcony, the lovers' voices "like softest music to attending ears", uttering a love as pure and radiant as the smiling moon that shines its benediction upon them; the dazzling Mercutio and his sharp-tongued, fantastical humour; the naïve old cackling nurse; the stately hermit, striving in vain to calm the storm of love and hate whose tumult has carried even to his lowly cell; and then the catastrophe, extremes of ecstasy and despair contending for mastery, passion's sighs turned to choking death; and, at the last, the solemn oath sworn by the warring houses, too late, on the bodies of their star-crossed children, to abjure the hatred through which so much blood, so many tears were shed'.

Much of this will feature in Berlioz's symphony. The scheme was based on Garrick's version of the play as given by the English company, in which Juliet wakes while the dying Romeo is still alive, a scene that inspired Berlioz to the most avant-garde music he ever wrote: 'Romeo at the Capulets' tomb – invocation – awakening of Juliet – frantic joy, despair, last agony and death of the two lovers'.

Years later he could still remember vividly the intense effect Kemble and Harriet Smithson had had on him in that scene. 'At the name of Romeo, breathed out faintly from the lips of the reviving Juliet, the young Montague stands motionless, riveted. As the voice calls a second time, more tenderly,

he turns towards the tomb. He gazes at her: there is movement. He can no longer doubt it – she is living. He flings himself on the funeral couch, snatches up the beloved body, tearing away veils and shrouds, carries it to the front of the stage and holds it upright in his arms. Juliet looks dully out from her sleep-drugged eyes. Romeo calls her name, he clasps her in a desperate embrace, parts the hair hiding her pale forehead, covers her face with kisses, laughing convulsively. In his heart-rending delight he has forgotten that he is dying. [...] But a stab of agony recalls him: the poison is devouring his vitals'.

The work finally performed in the Conservatoire Hall in November 1839 was the result of long and careful consideration of means and ends. 'Romeo and Juliet, Dramatic Symphony, with chorus, vocal solos, and prologue in chanted recitative, after Shakespeare's tragedy' is the title. The preface written later by Berlioz has an ironic edge: 'There will doubtless be no mistake as to the genre of this work'. In fact there has been a great deal. Yet (as the preface continues), 'Although voices are frequently employed, it is neither a concert opera nor a cantata but a choral symphony'.

Nowadays Mahler's multi-movement vocal-orchestral constructions are accepted as symphonies, though they were long disputed. Their whole conception has been described, by the composer Hugh Wood, as "profoundly Berliozian". In Berlioz's symphony the balance between the narrative and the symphonic is precisely calculated. At the heart of the work, structurally and emotionally, is the wordless love scene, conceived for orchestra alone. But voices are never forgotten, and voices and narrative are brought increasingly to the fore, in preparation for the large-scale choral finale, where the drama comes finally into the open and the

hatreds depicted orchestrally at the outset of the work are resolved.

The work's outward form is richly filled with music that is motivically close-knit. At the same time no Berlioz score is more abundant in lyric poetry, in a sense of the magic and brevity of love, in 'sounds and sweet airs' of so many kinds: the flickering, fleet-footed scherzo, which stands not only for Mercutio's Queen Mab speech but for the whole nimble-witted, comic-fantastical, fatally irrational element in the play, and in which strings and wind seem caught up in some gleeful but menacing game; the noble swell of the great extended melody which grows out of the questioning phrases of 'Roméo seul'; the awesome unison of cor anglais, horn and four bassoons in Romeo's invocation in the Capulets' tomb; the haunting beauty of Juliet's funeral procession (another Garrick addition); the adagio's deep-toned harmonies and spellbound melodic arcs, conjuring the moonlit night and the wonder and intensity of the passion that flowers beneath it.

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Orchestra list

The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment would like to thank the following Benefactors for their support without which this concert would not have been possible:

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 David Brown
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 Jörg Ederle
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 Bill Richards
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Basses

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 Laurence Beard
 Roger Carter
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