When the twenty-one-year-old Hector Berlioz arrived in Paris from the provincial town of La Côte, he was as starry-eyed as any young man newly arrived in the big city. Grudgingly following in his father’s footsteps to become a doctor, Berlioz persisted in his medical studies until he went to his first opera. “It was the death-blow to my medical career,” he wrote. “The dissecting-room was abandoned for good.” There was another important influence during those early years in Paris. He saw the English actress Harriet Smithson play the role of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Berlioz became what we would call a stalker. He did everything in his power to meet Miss Smithson, always to no avail. Berlioz played the role of the lovesick artist and conjured up his *Symphonie fantastique*.

This symphony tells a partly autobiographical story. A single melodic idea that represents his “Beloved One” ties each of the five movements together. Berlioz insisted that knowing the story was essential to understanding the work. Here is a brief synopsis:

A young musician of unhealthily sensitive nature and endowed with vivid imagination has poisoned himself with opium in a paroxysm of lovesick despair. The narcotic dose he had taken was too weak to cause death, but it has thrown him into a long sleep accompanied by the most extraordinary visions. . .

*First Movement:* At first, he thinks of the uneasy and nervous condition of his mind, of somber longings, of depression and joyous elation without any recognizable cause. Then he remembers the ardent love with which she suddenly inspired him. . .

*Second Movement:* In a ballroom, amidst the confusion of a brilliant festival, he finds the Beloved One again.

*Third Movement:* It is a summer evening. He is in the country when he hears two shepherd lads who play a pastoral duet. Then She appears once more. . .
Fourth Movement: He dreams that he murdered his Beloved. He has been condemned to death and is being led to execution. For a moment a last thought of love is revived, but is cut short by the deathblow.

Fifth Movement: He dreams that he is present at a witches’ revel, surrounded by horrible spirits, amidst sorcerers and monsters in many fearful forms, who have come together for his funeral. The Beloved melody is heard again, but it has lost its shy and noble character; it has become a vulgar, trivial, grotesque dance tune.

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