

# PASSION, DREAMS AND OBSESSION – BERLIOZ' FANTASTICAL SYMPHONY

2019-20 HAL & JEANETTE SEGERSTROM FAMILY FOUNDATION CLASSICAL SERIES

Carl St. Clair, conductor  
Alain Lefèvre, piano

Thursday, February 6, 2020 @ 8 p.m.  
Friday, February 7, 2020 @ 8 p.m.  
Saturday, February 8, 2020 @ 8 p.m.  
Segerstrom Center for the Arts  
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall

Ravel	<b>LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN</b> <i>Prélude</i> <i>Forlane</i> <i>Menuet</i> <i>Rigaudon</i>
Ravel	<b>PIANO CONCERTO IN G MAJOR</b> <i>Allegramente</i> <i>Adagio assai</i> <i>Presto</i> Alain Lefèvre
Intermission	
Berlioz	<b>SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE</b> <i>Daydreams, Passions</i> <i>A Ball</i> <i>Scene in the Meadows</i> <i>March to the Scaffold</i> <i>Dream of a Witches' Sabbath</i>

The Piano Soloists for the 2019-20 Season are  
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# PROGRAM NOTES

Maurice Ravel:

## *Le Tombeau de Couperin*



Brightly burnished and deeply appealing—we can hear the great affection in it—Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is actually an elegiac work that wears

its remembrances lightly. Ravel worked on this suite of six movements between 1914 and 1917, during the depths of World War I. Based in form on a traditional Baroque suite, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is not only a wistful backward glance that suggests bygone beauty and elegance, but also a memorial to lost loved ones: each movement is dedicated to a friend who had died in the War.

Ravel spoke little about his war experiences, but we know they devastated him. He made many attempts to enlist, first with the French Air Force and later with the French Army, finally joining the 13th Artillery Regiment as a truck driver in 1915 at the age of 40. Transporting munitions by night under German bombardment, Ravel suffered the risks and stress of combat without actually fighting. He developed frostbite and dysentery when, as Stravinsky noted, “at his age and with his name he could have had an easier place, or done nothing.” His agonies were compounded by the death of his mother, who died in January 1917 after their forced separation. He finalized composition of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* only after her death, by which time the pace of his work, always deliberate, became slower.

Stylistic echoes of Scarlatti as well as Couperin echo in the suite. As for the work’s lack of morbidity—it seems occasionally to verge on lightheartedness—Ravel was well aware that some listeners found it surprising. But as he remarked in a score notation, “The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence.”

Maurice Ravel:

## *Piano Concerto in G Major*

Ravel’s admirers had long been waiting for him to compose a piano concerto. When he finally took up the form he was in his mid-50s (the year was 1929), and he worked on two at once: the G Major, and one in D Major for the left hand alone, composed for his friend Paul Wittgenstein, a pianist who had lost his right arm in battle during World War I. Though he began the G Major first, it took longer to complete; as things turned out, these concertos were among the last compositions he ever completed.

The G Major concerto sparkles with joyous energy and a sense of spontaneity, but it is far from casual in its sourcing and craftsmanship. Ravel scholars hear an olio of dazzling diversity in it: Basque and Spanish melodies, jazz riffs, the influences of Mozart and Saint-Saëns and even his childhood fascination with mechanical toys. Ravel himself claimed that a major inspiration for the work came to him aboard English trains as he traveled to Oxford University in 1928 to receive an honorary doctorate. Is that the rhythmic impetus we hear in the final movement, with its *moto perpetuo* pushing forward like a locomotive? Here is what he told a reporter for the *London Daily Telegraph* after both piano concertos were completed:

It was an interesting experience to conceive and realize the two concertos at the same time. The [G Major]... is a concerto in the strict sense, written in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. I believe that a concerto can be both gay and brilliant without necessarily being profound or aiming at dramatic effects. It has been said that the concertos of some great classical composers, far from being written *for* the piano, have been written *against* it. And I think this criticism is quite justified.

At the beginning, I meant to call [the G Major] a “divertissement,” but afterwards I considered that this was unnecessary, as the name concerto adequately describes the kind of music it contains. In some ways my concerto is not unlike my Violin Sonata; it uses certain effects borrowed from jazz, but only in moderation.

While the charge of writing “against the instrument” has been aimed at a number of great composers (notably Beethoven), Ravel seems to have been targeting Brahms, whose piano concertos struck him as self-consciously profound utterances that were arduous both to play and to hear. The G Major Concerto offers the opposite kind of enjoyment: no less sophisticated or intricate in its craft, no less rewarding to the listener, but far lighter in weight.

The Concerto in G’s abundance of musical invention mixes traditional and innovative elements. It presents in the Classical concerto’s three-movement form, with recognizable melodies in Ravel’s characteristically beautiful harmonizations. From the first movement onward we hear his typical elegance of construction combined with international references: an opening theme that mimics a Basque folk

### Joseph Maurice Ravel

**Born:** 1875. Ciboure, France

**Died:** 1937. Paris, France

### *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

**Composed:** 1917

**World premiere:** Apr. 11, 1919, with Marguerite Long as soloist

**Most recent Pacific Symphony performance:** Dec. 12, 2009 with Giancarlo Guerrero conducting

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes including piccolo, 2 oboes including English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, trumpet; harp; strings

**Estimated duration:** 17 minutes

### *Piano Concerto in G Major*

**Composed:** 1931

**World premiere:** Jan. 14, 1932, with Marguerite Long as soloist

**Most recent Pacific Symphony performance:** Apr. 16, 2016 with Carl St. Clair as conductor

**Instrumentation:** flutes including piccolo, 2 oboes including English horn, 2 clarinets including bass clarinet and e-flat clarinet, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, trumpet, trombone; timpani, percussion; harp; strings; solo piano

**Estimated duration:** 42 minutes

tune is followed by a Spanish-sounding second theme, then by jazzy syncopations reminiscent of Gershwin. There are echoes of Prokofiev, Satie and Stravinsky here, and the movement closes with trombone licks that could not have been written without knowledge of jazz.

Such diversity borders on the raucous. But in the second movement we have brilliant contrast: here is the slow, beautiful central section that Ravel seems to have meant when he cited Mozart and Saint-Saëns as his models. It was written, Ravel notes, “under the spell” of the *largo* movement of Mozart’s gorgeous Clarinet Quintet, but worked and reworked with typical thoroughness and skill until only Ravel’s artisanship—not the Mozartean source—is apparent.

The concerto ends with a brilliant *presto*—quick and energetic, with the exciting virtuosic display that Ravel felt a concerto should afford. The textures are iridescent and the pulse is polyrhythmic. In the space of three traditional movements, Ravel takes us from the serenity of a lullaby the splendor of fireworks, leaving us breathless.

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## Hector Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*



No composer was more deeply concerned with finding a way forward for the symphony following Beethoven’s revolutionary achievements in the form, and in

the *Symphonie Fantastique* Berlioz faces the challenge head-on in five movements (like Beethoven’s Sixth) that are monumentally scaled and formally innovative (like the Ninth). But where Beethoven’s Ninth embodies these traits in a work devoted to human freedom and brotherhood, Berlioz’s *Symphonie* is a fever-dream of love, pursuit, loss and damnation. It is said that the *Symphonie Fantastique* is one of the most graphic representations of drug-induced hallucinations in all of art, a claim that rings true as we listen. This is not a composer’s self-indulgence, but a vivid expression of the essence of European Romanticism—its passion, rebelliousness and quest for extreme experience. In the midst of all this wildness, the *Symphonie Fantastique* is meticulously crafted into a gripping musical narrative of romantic obsession.

In the early 19th century (the *Symphonie* dates to 1830), opium was not thought to be dangerously addictive, and dosing one’s self was a routine matter; Hector’s father, Louis-Joseph Berlioz, was a respected physician and regular user, and scholars believe that Hector took it as well in the preferred form of the era, the alcohol-based solution laudanum, in 1829 and 1830. He wrote frankly about its effects and about his overwhelming infatuation with the Irish actress Harriett Smithson. She is represented by the four-note *idée fixe* that emerges from the tumult in the *Symphonie*, a distillation of the composer’s yearning.

It is said that Smithson and Shakespeare were the two great loves of Berlioz’s life. Watching his romantic ideal in an 1827 performance of *Hamlet* in Paris was almost more than he could bear, even though he could not understand a word of Smithson’s Ophelia. Six years after seeing Smithson on stage he married her, though they still did not share a common language. (Perhaps few

husbands and wives actually do.)

We can listen to the symphony’s movements as if they were chapters in an evolving romantic obsession, beginning with the first movement’s announcement of Berlioz’ yearning, the motif of the *idée fixe*. The second movement, glittering with elegance, is titled simply “Un bal”—a ball. A gorgeously alluring waltz swirls through the movement, but in it the beloved seems tantalizingly out of reach. As the movement progresses, the sensuality of dancing merges with the breathlessness of pursuit. The artist’s quickening steps are never quite fast enough.

Berlioz described the third movement as an evening in the countryside during which the artist broods on his loneliness. It is slow and melancholy, with the artist musing on the faithlessness of a beloved who is not even his to begin with. Amid the silence, we hear ominous hints of distant thunder.

In the fourth movement the artist, unable to bear his loneliness, attempts to poison himself with opium. But instead of dying, he is plunged into a fever-dream in which he has killed his beloved and is condemned to death by hanging. With its nightmarish “march to the scaffold,” this movement is one of the most famous passages in Berlioz’s catalog. And it may well be a case of life imitating art: it was composed during the period when Berlioz himself was taking opium, and he is said to have written it like a man possessed, finishing it in a single night.

In the fifth movement, the artist’s downward slide reaches its end—not with his death, but with his funeral: a witches’ sabbath evoking demons and monsters of all sorts. The mood is jubilant yet ghoulish, like a diabolical orgy incorporating (shockingly, for observant Catholics of Berlioz’s era) parodies of the “Dies irae” as well as the *idée fixe*. The love story is complete.

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*Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and Louisiana Philharmonic, and editor-in-chief for The Santa Fe Opera.*

### Hector Berlioz

**Born:** 1803. La Côte-Saint-André, France

**Died:** 1869. Paris, France

### *Symphonie Fantastique*

**Composed:** 1830

**World premiere:** Dec. 5, 1830, with François-Antoine Habeneck conducting

**Most recent Pacific Symphony performance:** Jun. 5, 2016 with Carl St. Clair as conductor

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes including piccolo, 2 oboes including English horn, 2 clarinets including bass clarinet and e-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons; 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas; 4 timpani, percussion; 2 harps; strings

**Estimated duration:** 49 minutes



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Michelle Rohé is one of the great patrons of the arts in Orange County. She has invested in Pacific Symphony's artistic excellence and has a particular love of great pianists. Her kind spirit and willingness to support the arts make much of what we do possible. We are grateful to The Michelle F. Rohé Distinguished Pianist Fund for sponsoring our piano soloists this concert season.

## ALAIN LEFÈVRE

Hailed as a "hero" (*Los Angeles Times*), a "smashing" performer (*The Washington Post*), "a pianist who breaks the mold" (*International Piano*) and "who stands out from the typical trends and artifices offered on the international scene" (*Classica*), Lefèvre pursues a sparkling career, having performed in over 40 countries, in the most prestigious venues (Carnegie Hall, Kennedy Center, Royal Albert Hall, Royal Festival Hall, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Théâtre du Châtelet, Salle Pleyel, Teatro Colon, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Herodes Atticus Theatre, and Epidaurus Theatre) and at numerous international festivals such as Ravinia, Saratoga, Wolf Trap, Athens, Istanbul and Cervantino.

His dazzling performances are frequently described as "unequaled" (*Westdeutsche Zeitung*) and "unparalleled" (*Los Angeles Times*, *The Sacramento Bee*). Saluted for his "phenomenal technique" (*The Spectator*), his "sparkling playing resulting in fascinating interpretations" (*Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger*), his "sovereign mastery" (*Hamburger Abendblatt*), Mr. Lefèvre has been guest soloist of great orchestras such as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orchestre national de France, the Philadelphia Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, National Symphony, the China Philharmonic, the SWR, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, and the Moscow Virtuosi; and he has worked with renowned conductors such as James Conlon, Charles Dutoit, Christoph Eschenbach, JoAnn Falletta, Claus Peter Flor, Lawrence Foster, Jacek Kasprzyk, Jacques Lacombe, Kent Nagano, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Jukka-Pekka Saraste,

Vladimir Spivakov and Long Yu. He has revived the music of André Mathieu in concert in New York, Paris, London, Berlin and Shanghai, to name a few.

His discography covers a vast repertoire, from John Corigliano's Piano Concerto—which BBC Music Magazine considers the reference version—to Chopin's 24 Preludes, for which critics "celebrate Alain Lefèvre," placing his interpretation alongside the recordings of the "illustrious" Alicia de Larrocha, Ivan Moravec, and Arthur Rubinstein (Fanfare). He has won numerous prizes, including a JUNO, an Opus, 10 Felix awards (ADISQ), and the AIB Award (London) for "International Personality of the Year – Radio," for his radio program broadcast on ICI Musique/Radio-Canada. Alain Lefèvre is an Officer of the Order of Canada, Chevalier of the Ordre national du Québec and Chevalier of the Pléiade Order.

When not on stage, Alain Lefèvre spends time composing, releasing six titles so far: *Lylatov*, *Carnet de notes*, *Fidèles Insomnies*, *Jardin d'Images*, *Rive Gauche* and *Sas Agapo*. In 2017, he was named Honorary Patron of the Concours Musical International de Montréal (CMIM) for a three-year term.