

Berlioz

Les Nuits d'été

Villanelle
Le Spectre de la rose
Absence
Sur les lagunes
Au cimetière
L'Île inconnue

***Les Nuits d'été* ("Summer Nights")**

Hector Berlioz (*Eck-tor Bare-lee-ohz*)

Born December 11, 1803 in Cote-Saint-Andre near Grenoble, France

Died March 8, 1869 in Paris

Reveries, Passions---the title of the first movement of the *Symphonie fantastique* would serve well as the *idée fixe*—the central theme—of Hector Berlioz' life. He was dreamy, impulsive, passionate, wildly imaginative, and he was in love with love. In 1830 he had created a monumental, wildly successful symphony about his unrequited love for the actress Harriet Smithson. When he finally conquered her heart and they married, the dreamer entered his dream, then awoke to grim reality. Hector found Harriet a flawed jewel: an aging actress who had gone out of fashion, a jealous scold, and a hopeless alcoholic. They were separated in 1844. It's not certain when Berlioz met Marie Martin, the mezzo-soprano singer who became his mistress and, eventually, his second wife. Her stage name was Marie Recio and he called her "*les yeux noirs*"—"the black-eyed one." Her frank sexuality and headstrong willfulness fired Berlioz' creative furnace and inspired the creation of a cycle of songs for voice and piano that were published in the summer of 1841 as *Les Nuits d'été* ("Summer Nights"). Berlioz set to music six poems from *La Comédie de la Mort* ("The Comedy of Death"), a collection published in 1838 by his friend Théophile Gautier. The poems told of lovers buoyant and sad, near and far, alive and dead, and Berlioz wove them into a sequence whose essence is that of melancholy longing. Most listeners know the songs in their incarnation as an orchestral cycle, which Berlioz completed in 1856 at the invitation of the Swiss publisher Jakob Rieter-Biedermann. Berlioz dedicated these versions to six different singers, suggesting that they should be sung by women and men of various vocal ranges, and, indeed, performing all six songs can be difficult for a single vocalist without resorting to transpositions. Whatever the singer's range, he or she must be able to go straight into the heart of each song: the light, teasing mood of *Villanelle* and *L'Île Inconnue*, the languorous sensuality of *Le Spectre de la rose*, the inconsolable longing of *Absence*, the dark grief of *Sur les lagunes*, the eerie ghostliness of *Au cimetière*. *Les Nuits d'été* was the first orchestral song cycle ever written, and later cycles by Ravel and Mahler are its direct descendants.

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Les Nuits d'Été
Texts by Théophile Gautier

1. Villanelle

*Quand viendra la saison nouvelle,
Quand auront disparu les froids,
Tous les deux nous irons, ma belle,
Pour cueillir le muguet aux bois.*

*Sous nos pieds égrenant les perles
Que l'on voit, au matin trembler,
Nous irons écouter les merles
Siffler.*

*Le printemps est venu, ma belle;
C'est le mois des amants béni;
Et l'oiseau, satinant son aile,
Dit ses vers au rebord du nid.*

*Oh! Viens donc sur ce banc de mousse,
Pour parler de nos beaux amours,
Et dis-moi de ta voix si douce:
Toujours!*

*Loin, bien loin égarant nos courses,
Faisons fuir le lapin caché,
Et le daim, au miroir des sources
Admirant son grand bois penché;*

*Puis chez nous, tout heureux, tout aises,
En paniers, en lançant nos doigts,
Revenons, rapportant des fraises,
Des bois.*

When verdant spring again approaches,
When winter's chills have disappeared,
Through the woods we shall stroll, my darling,
The fair primrose to cull at will.

The trembling bright pearls that are shining,
Each morning we shall brush aside;
We shall go to hear the gay thrushes
Singing.

The flowers are abloom, my darling,
Of happy lovers 'tis the month;
And the bird his soft wing englossing,
Sings carols sweet within his nest.

Come with me on the mossy bank,
Where we'll talk of nothing else but love,
And whisper with thy voice so tender:
Always!

Far, far off let our footsteps wander,
Fright'ning the hiding hare away,
While the deer at the spring is gazing,
Admiring his reflected horns.

Then back home, with our hearts rejoicing,
And fondly our fingers entwined,
Let's return, return bringing fresh wild berries
Wood-grown.

2. Le spectre de la rose (The ghost of the rose)

*Soulève ta paupière close
Qu'effleure un songe virginal!
Je suis le spectre d'une rose
Que tu portais hier au bal.*

Open your closed eyelid
Which is gently brushed by a virginal dream!
I am the ghost of the rose
That you wore last night at the ball.

*Tu me pris encore emperlée
Des pleurs d'argent de l'arrosoir,
Et, parmi la fête étoilée,
Tu me promenais tout le soir.*

You took me, still sprinkled with pearls
Of silvery tears from the watering-can,
And, among the sparkling festivities,
You carried me the entire night.

*O toi qui de ma mort fus cause,
Sans que tu puisses le chasser,
Toutes les nuits mon spectre rose
A ton chevet viendra danser;*

O you, who caused my death:
Without the power to chase it away,
You will be visited every night by my ghost,
Which will dance at your bedside.

*Mais ne crains rien, je ne réclame
Ni messe ni De Profundis.
Ce léger parfum est mon âme,
Et j'arrive du paradis.*

But fear nothing; I demand
Neither Mass nor *De Profundis*;
This mild perfume is my soul,
And I've come from Paradise.

*Mon destin fut digne d'envie,
Et pour avoir un sort si beau
Plus d'un aurait donné sa vie;
Car sur ton sein j'ai mon tombeau,*

My destiny is worthy of envy;
And to have a fate so fine,
More than one would give his life
For on your breast I have my tomb,

*Et sur l'albâtre où je repose
Un poète avec un baiser
Écrivit: "Cigît une rose,
Que tous les rois vont jalouser."*

And on the alabaster where I rest,
A poet with a kiss
Wrote: "Here lies a rose,
Of which all kings may be jealous."

3. Sur les lagunes (On the lagoons)

*Ma belle amie est morte,
Je pleurerai toujours;
Sous la tombe elle emporte
Mon âme et mes amours.
Dans le ciel, sans m'attendre,
Elle s'en retourna;
L'ange qui l'emmena
Ne voulut pas me prendre.
Que mon sort es amer!
Ah! sans amour s'en aller sur la mer!*

*La blanche créature
Est couchée au cercueil;
Comme dans la nature
Tout me paraît en deuil!
La colombe oubliée
Pleure et songe à l'absent;
Mon âme pleure et sent
Qu'elle est dépareillée.
Que mon sort est amer!
Ah! sans amour s'en aller sur la mer!*

*Sur moi la nuit immense
S'étend comme un linceul,
Je chante ma romance
Que le ciel entend seul.*

*Ah! comme elle était belle,
Et comme je l'aimais!
Je n'aimerai jamais
Une femme autant qu'elle
Que mon sort est amer!
Ah! sans amour s'en aller sur la mer!
S'en aller sur la mer!*

My beautiful love is dead,
I shall weep always;
Into the tomb, she has taken
My soul and my love.
Without waiting for me,
She has returned to heaven.
The angel which took her there
Did not want to take me.
How bitter is my fate!
Ah! without love, to go to sea!

The white creature
Is lying in the coffin;
How all in Nature
Seems bereaved to me!
The forgotten dove
Weeps and dreams of the one who is absent;
My soul cries and feels
That it has been abandoned.
How bitter is my fate,
Ah! without love, to go to sea!

Above me the immense night
Spreads itself like a shroud;
I sing my romanza
That heaven alone hears.

Ah! how beautiful she was,
And how I loved her!
I will never love
Another woman as much as I loved her;
How bitter is my fate!
Ah! without love, to go to sea!
To go to sea!

4. Absence

*Reviens, reviens, ma bien-aimée;
Comme une fleur loin du soleil,
La fleur de ma vie est fermée
Loin de ton sourire vermeil!*

*Entre nos coeurs qu'elle distance!
Tant d'espace entre nos baisers!
O sort amer! ô dure absence!
O grands désirs inapaisés.*

*D'ici là-bas que de campagnes,
Que de villes et de hameaux,
Que de vallons et de montagnes,
A lasser le pied des chevaux!*

5. Au cimetière (At the cemetery)

*Connaissez-vous la blanche tombe,
Où flotte avec un son plaintif
L'ombre d'un if?
Sur l'if une pâle colombe,
Triste et seule au soleil couchant,
Chante son chant:*

*Un air maladivement tendre,
À la fois charmant et fatal,
Qui vous fait mal
Et qu'on voudrait toujours entendre;
Un air comme en soupire aux cieus
L'ange amoureux.*

*On dirait que l'âme éveillée
Pleure sous terre à l'unisson
De la chanson,
Et du malheur d'être oubliée
Se plaint dans un roucoulement
Bien doucement.*

*Sur les ailes de la musique
On sent lentement revenir
Un souvenir.
Une ombre, une forme angélique,
Passe dans un rayon tremblant,
En voile blanc.*

Come back, return, my well-beloved!
Like a flower far from the sun,
The flower of my life is closed
Far from your smiling ruby lips!

Between our hearts, what distance!
What space between our kisses!
O bitter fate! o harsh absence!
O great desires unappeased!

From here to there, how much land there is!
How very many villages and hamlets,
How very many valleys and mountains,
To weary the hoofs of the horses!

Do you know the white tomb
Where floats with plaintive sound,
The shadow of a yew?
On the yew a pale dove,
Sad and alone under the setting sun,
Sings its song:

An air sickly tender,
At the same time charming and ominous,
Which makes you feel agony
Yet which you wish to hear always;
An air like a sigh from the heavens
of a love-lorn angel.

One would say that an awakened soul
Is weeping under the earth in unison
With this song,
And from the misfortune of being forgotten,
Moans its sorrow in a cooing
Quite soft.

On the wings of the music
One feels the slow return
Of a memory.
A shadow, a form angelic,
Passes in a trembling ray of light,
In a white veil.

*Les belles de nuit demicloses
Jettent leur parfum faible et doux
Autour de vous,
Et le fantôme aux molles poses
Murmure en vous tendant les bras:
Tu reviendras!*

The beautiful flowers of the night, half-closed,
Send their perfume, faint and sweet,
Around you,
And the phantom of soft form
Murmurs, reaching to you her arms:
You will return!

*Oh! jamais plus près de la tombe,
Je n'irai, quand descend le soir
Au manteau noir,
Écouter la pâle colombe
Chanter sur la pointe de l'if
Son chant plaintif.*

Oh! never again near the tomb
Shall I go, when night lets fall
Its black mantle,
To hear the pale dove
Sing on the limb of the yew
Its plaintive song!

6. L'Île Inconnue (The Unknown Isle)

*Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?
La voile enfle son aile,
La brise va souffler.
L'aviron est d'ivoire,
Le pavillon de moire,
Le gouvernail d'or fin;
J'ai pour lest une orange,
Pour voile une aile d'ange,
Pour mousse un séraphin.*

Say, young beauty,
Where do you wish to go?
The sail swells itself,
The breeze will blow.
The oar is made of ivory,
The flag is of silk,
The helm is of fine gold;
I have for ballast an orange,
For a sail the wing of an angel,
For foam a seraph.

*Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?
La voile enfle son aile,
La brise va souffler.*

Say, young beauty,
Where do you wish to go?
The sail swells itself,
The breeze will blow.

*Est-ce dans la Baltique?
Dans la mer Pacifique?
Dans l'île de Java?
Ou bien est-ce en Norvège,
Cueillir la fleur de neige,
Ou la fleur d'Angsoka?
Dites, la jeune belle,
Où voulez-vous aller?
Menez-moi, dit la belle,
À la rive fidèle
Où l'on aime toujours!
Cette rive, ma chère,
On ne la connaît guère
Au pays des amours.*

Is it to the Baltic?
To the Pacific Ocean?
To the island of Java?
Or is it well to Norway,
To gather the flower of the snow,
Or the flower of Angsoka?
Say, young beauty,
Where do you wish to go?
Lead me, says the beauty,
To the faithful shore
Where one loves always!
This shore, my darling,
We hardly know at all
In the land of Love.