

Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra: The tormentor, the witch and the ghost

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LENOX -- The beloved is a tormentor. The beloved is a ghost. The beloved is a witch.

That's Berlioz. Pick any three of his works, and you're likely to find yourself in the toils of a grand passion. It could be Dido and Aeneas or it could be Romeo and Juliet, but it usually leads to abandonment, madness or death.

Pick three works with a tormentor, ghost and witch at the center, and you've got the all-Berlioz program the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra played Monday night. The forces of abandonment, madness and death combined at the end in the "Symphonie fantastique," which Stéphane Denève vividly -- no, viscerally -- conducted to crown the program.

The performance showed how radical this often-performed symphony, composed in 1830, only three years after Beethoven's death, was and is. Berlioz composed it while in the throes of a passion for the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, and when he couldn't at first claim her, he took to music to turn her into an *idée fixe*, enjoy opium dreams of her, guillotine her and make her a witch in a Walpurgis Night. (They later married and separated.)

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It doesn't take a French conductor to do French music, but the French Denève looked at this music from the inside out, as well as the other way around. With the violin sections divided, the play of detail in the still new-sounding orchestration was constantly illuminating, creating moment-by-moment intensity that built into a dramatic arch, a vision.

The sound in the quiet third-movement scene in the country had an enveloping beauty. The swirl of the ball scene carried a growing sense of madness. Madness then exploded in grisly detail in the beheading -- you could just about see the head rolling on the floor as the drum rolled -- and witches' carousing, enlivened by clanging bells and groaning brasses.

The excellent orchestral soloists were many but two particularly stood out: clarinetist Eric Anderson in the *idée fixe* and English hornist Corbin Stair as the lonely shepherd in the fields.

The symphony was preceded by the happy union of rivals in the "Beatrice et Bénédict" Overture and the melancholy specters of "Les nuits d'été."

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"Summer Nights," a song cycle, is usually sung by a single tenor or a mezzo-soprano. Taking a hint by Berlioz, the music center cast the piece with four student singers -- mezzo-sopranos Sara LeMesh and Reilly Nelson, tenor Jason Weisinger and baritone Conor McDonald -- alternating in the six songs. As Denève conducted gently elegiac accompaniments, the soloists evoked the sensuous but elusive quality called French style.

Student conductor Daniel Cohen opened the program with an exuberant performance of the overture. The "Symphonie fantastique" was preceded by a symphony of ringing cellphones in the audience. Fantastic.

