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### **A Comparison of Two Seemingly Dissimilar Works of Art**

Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* and Gabriel Garcia Marquéz's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* are two works of art that are, on the whole, vastly different — beginning with the most fundamental difference, that they represent two separate forms of art: a piece of music and a work of literature. The two are largely contrasting with regard to the content that the artist expresses, but despite the difference in media, the processes through which they are interpreted by the reader are somewhat similar. These differences are, in some respects, characteristic of the two forms of art in question.

Berlioz composed his *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1830, and it embodies many of the qualities of the Romantic era in music, to which it clearly belongs. As the title suggests, it is presented in the form of a symphony for large orchestra, in five movements; it differs from most other symphonies, however, in that it was one of the first program symphonies, meaning that there was a textual program included for the listener to refer to in order to understand the meaning of the work. In a sense, the symphony can be thought of as telling a story, and the program makes the outline of the story clear to the listener; it is therefore essential to understanding the symphony as a whole: the introduction to the program states that “Since this instrumental drama lacks the assistance of words, an advance explanation of the plan is necessary. The following Program, therefore, should be thought of as if it were the spoken text of an opera, serving to introduce the musical movements and to explain their character and expression. ... the distribution of this program to the audience is indispensable to the full understanding of the dramatic plan of the work” (Berlioz). The symphony, subtitled “Episodes in the Life of an Artist,” focuses on a musician

dominated by his love for a woman; the musician in question is representative of Berlioz himself, as he was obsessed with his love for an actress, Harriet Smithson, and the symphony serves as an expression of his emotions. It differs from most symphonic works from the preceding Classical period and other previous eras in the thematic consistency of the symphony as a whole; each of the five movements depicts a different scene, or episode, but they achieve unity through the use of a recurring melodic theme, the *idée fixe*, which represents the artist's beloved, and recurs as a part of each movement. Aside from this use of melody, the other striking element of the music is its use of tone colors; Berlioz calls for an orchestra considerably larger than traditional, and uses a number of unusual combinations of instruments to achieve new sounds. This use of tone colors helps to establish a sense of the setting of each movement as well as the prevalent emotion; for example, in the fifth movement, "Dream of a Witches Sabbath," various unusual sounds including violins played with the wood of the bow create a sense of a bizarre, mysterious atmosphere, and the use of the "squeaky" E-flat clarinet for the *idée fixe* makes it clear that the beloved is being mocked. Finally, it is noteworthy that, while the symphony makes use of traditional musical forms, it does not depend strictly on adhering to them; for example, the symphony has five movements rather than the more usual four. It seems that the overall purpose of the symphony is to express a set of emotional ideas, and the constraints of the traditional structures are ignored when they would interfere with this goal.

Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a novel written in Spanish, though the version with which I am primarily familiar is a translation; it provides a partially-fictionalized account of happenings in a small town in Colombia, based in part on an actual incident. Without going into too much detail with respect to the plot, the story centers upon the marriage of a young local woman, Angela Vicario, to a rich foreigner; this marriage fails when he discovers on their wedding night that she is not a virgin, and as a result her family suffers a massive loss of honor and must seek to regain it. To do so, Angela's two brothers, Pablo and Pedro Vicario are then obligated to seek revenge upon the man they believe to be responsible, Santiago Nasar, and they do so in the

extreme, stabbing him repeatedly until his death. This response is tolerated by the society, and indeed expected of the two, but Marquéz criticizes this standard, demonstrating that it is not just: both the narrator, who is investigating the incident some years later, and the magistrate who reviewed the murder case find themselves troubled by the lack of evidence of Nasar's guilt, but even so it is hardly questioned at all whether the murder is justified. By doing so, Marquéz shows that this notion of revenge in the name of honor is one common to the society at large rather than a character flaw in the two men, and that it is flawed because it resulted in an unjust, barbarous death. The focus of the novel, therefore, is on expressing points that make an argument; rather than expressing them directly, the author uses the storyline to illustrate an example of the argument and force the reader to ponder its significance.

Based on the descriptions above, these two works are clearly quite different; it is, in fact, difficult to directly compare the two because the aspects of one lack a clear analogue on the other. Even so, it is possible to find some basic similarities in the way these works are read and listened to by the reader, and interpreted. Most generally, both of these two, like nearly every type of art, can be viewed on multiple levels: on the simplest level, one can consider the aesthetics of the work alone, appreciating the development of the melodic themes or the tone of the sentences, even without understanding the meaning of the work; in my case, it was these compelling attributes that drew my interest in this symphony and this novel. However, they can become considerably more interesting when viewed in the larger context of the work as a whole; one can then become aware of smaller details that become evident with an understanding of the focus of the work, and these details can contribute to the overall picture, helping to illustrate the meaning. For example, after listening to the *Symphonie Fantastique* for the first time, I was able to get a general sense of the emotions of some of the movements, but after reading the program I was able to recognize, for example, that the sudden loud beat at the end of the fourth movement represents, in a quite literal symbolism, the execution of the character by guillotine, or that the strange, unnatural sounds of the fifth movement were conjuring the bizarre atmosphere of a witches' sabbath. Likewise, the first

time I read *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, I was able to understand generally the criticism the novel made; after rereading it with this theme in mind, I noticed details such as the allusions to the crucifixion of Christ in the stabbing of the protagonist, serving to make the criticism more powerful. On this level, the process of reading the novel and listening to the symphony and interpreting them is actually rather similar; the critical difference, therefore, is not so much the dissimilarity in media but rather the purpose of each. The understanding I gained was that the goal of Berlioz's symphony seems to be to tell a story enriched with musical illustrations of emotions. Marquéz's novel also tells a story, but it is used to make an argument, in a sense almost like an analytical essay. It is this difference that shapes the two works.

As described above, the principal difference between the *Symphonie Fantastique* and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* lies in what they are trying to express — emotions versus arguments. It seems reasonable that this affected the choice of medium: music is able to induce a more direct and immediate emotional response in me, while it is easier to construct and understand an argument using words. Of course, these works can hardly be considered representative of their vast genres as a whole, as there are so many other possibilities that they can express. However, the similarity that these works have with other art in general is that, regardless of everything else, they can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities alone.

### **References:**

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