

Program Notes by Dr. Eric Bromberger

L'Enfance du Christ, Opus 25

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Born December 11, 1803, La Côte-St. André, Grenoble

Died March 8, 1869, Paris

L'Enfance du Christ, one of Berlioz's gentlest and most endearing scores, took shape in a very unusual way. In 1850 Berlioz, then 47 years old and still angry about the failure of Parisian audiences to accept his music, tried once again: he helped found the Société Philharmonique, a presenting organization that would give concerts of his music and the music of others. For those concerts he wrote a brief work for chorus and orchestra titled *L'adieu des bergers* ("The Shepherd's Farewell to the Holy Family"), depicting the blessings and farewell of a group of shepherds as Mary and Joseph flee with the infant Jesus to escape the murderous edict of King Herod.

L'adieu des bergers was first performed in Paris on November 12, 1850, and—to the composer's surprise—was a critical and popular success. But Berlioz, who hated the critics in Paris, had set a trap for them. In the printed program for that concert, he hid the authorship of his new piece, describing it as a "Mystery by Pierre Ducré, choirmaster of the Sainte-Chapelle, Paris, 1679." The critics were completely taken in: no one of course had ever heard of the imaginary Pierre Ducré, and they were fulsome in their praise of this unknown composer from France's past.

Berlioz took a devilish delight in all this, but he was also aware of the music's success and wished to expand it into a full-length work, a process that took several years. *The Flight into Egypt*, as this section was called, became the middle movement of a three-part work titled *L'Enfance du Christ* (usually translated as "The Childhood of Christ"). Berlioz framed *The Flight into Egypt* by adding *The Dream of Herod* (1854) as the opening part and *The Arrival in Saïis* (1853-54) as the final part. The complete work had its premiere in Paris on December 10, 1854 and was a huge success, earning its composer 1100 francs. Now aware of the hoax, French critics claimed to detect a stylistic change in Berlioz's music, feeling that he had set behind his grand, dramatic manner for a simpler musical language. Berlioz would have none of that, and in his *Autobiography* he insisted that it was the subject matter that dictated the kind of music he wrote: "In [*L'Enfance du Christ*] many people imagined that they could detect a radical change

in my style and manner. This opinion is entirely without foundation. The subject naturally lent itself to a gentle and simple style of music, and for that reason alone was more in accordance with their taste and intelligence. Time would probably have developed these qualities, but I should have written *L'Enfance du Christ* in the same style twenty years ago.”

Berlioz himself wrote the text for *L'Enfance du Christ*, taking the basic situation from the Second Chapter of the Book of Matthew, which describes Herod's dream of being overthrown by a child, his decision to murder all male children under the age of two, and the flight of Mary and Joseph with their infant son into Egypt, where they find a new home in Saēs. Berlioz invented his own form for *L'Enfance du Christ*. It bears some relation to an oratorio, but certain scenes are conceived so dramatically that the work is sometimes staged. As he had done in *Romeo and Juliet*, Berlioz sometimes has the orchestra depict the action with purely musical interludes, and he also creates a narrator who appears periodically to set the scene or describe the action. The two principal characters are Mary, a contralto, and Joseph, baritone, and there are smaller parts for Polydorus, Herod, and the father of the family in Saēs (all sung by bass voice) and the centurion (tenor). The chorus plays a variety of roles: it can be the deadly soothsayers, then take the part of the shepherds blessing the departing family, then again be transformed into the vulgar mob in Saēs.

SYNOPSIS: *The Dream of Herod* opens with a Prologue in which the narrator describes both the troubled Herod and infant Jesus with his parents. This is followed by one of those scenes of “operatic” character. It is night in Jerusalem, and the orchestra depicts the nocturnal march of the Roman guards. Their captain, Polydorus, approaches Herod to announce the arrival of the soothsayers, who will advise the king about the ongoing dream that terrorizes him. Here Berlioz departs from the Book of Matthew, replacing the wise men with malevolent demons who confirm the truth of his dream and advise him to murder all newborn male children. To introduce their cabalistic conjuring, Berlioz gives the soothsayers a weird dance in 7/4, a meter virtually unknown at mid-nineteenth century. The soothsayers then depart with the advice that Herod proceed with his bloody plan. The scene now switches to the stable in Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph hover over their child. A chorus of angels appears and warns them of the danger, telling them to flee, and the opening section concludes as Mary and Joseph make haste to leave.

The Flight into Egypt, the original core of the work, is also the shortest of the three

sections. It opens with a brief orchestral overture, followed by the lovely *The Shepherds' Farewell*, which has become one of Berlioz's most famous choral movement. The movement concludes as the narrator returns to describe the holy family at rest, and an offstage chorus of eight "Angelic Voices" blesses them.

The Arrival at Saïs opens with another "operatic" scene. Mary and Joseph, now exhausted and desperate, arrive in the Egyptian city of Saïs, which is under Roman control and whose inhabitants slam the door in the face of the "vile Hebrews." After several rebuffs, Joseph knocks on the door of "a humble roof," and a generous family takes them in, cleans and feeds them, and offers a cradle for their child. The father of this family, a carpenter, invites Joseph to join him in his business. For the entertainment of their guests, the father asks his children to perform, and the children play a trio for two flutes and harps. Mary weeps from joy and relief, the exhausted family is put to bed, and the narrator summarizes their future: the family would remain in Saïs for ten years as the boy grew, and then they would return to Israel. It is left to the narrator and chorus to close out the music by bowing humbly before the mystery that has been told.