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Introduction

In his preface to *Roméo et Juliette*, made available to its first audience in 1839 (see Appendix 1a), Berlioz insists that it is ‘a symphony, and not a concert opera’.¹ The composer’s view is of course to be respected, but need not end the argument. The seven movements of *Roméo et Juliette* resemble no previous symphony, not even the obvious, indeed only, precedent for a ‘symphonie avec choeurs’. Beethoven’s Ninth, perhaps unknown to Berlioz when he first conceived *Roméo*, has the usual four movements, and voices appear only in the finale, as an additional sonorous resource and as bearers of a verbal message. In his *Pastoral* symphony, Beethoven required five movements, the last three playing continuously. Berlioz has five in the programmatic *Symphonie fantastique*, but while the ‘Marche au supplice’ and ‘Songe d’une nuit de Sabbat’ constitute, dramatically, a dream sequence as against the virtual reality of the first three movements, each movement is fully cadenced. This, rather than any work of Beethoven, is the nearest precedent for *Roméo*; but it does not, of course, involve voices.

Berlioz’s intentions are clear enough on at least one level. He aimed to use the language of ‘expressive instrumental music’ in order to present the essence of the play in a work for the concert hall rather than the theatre.² This choice, whether made out of aesthetic preference or because no other medium was available to him (see Chapter 2), enabled him to dispose instrumental and vocal forces freely in accordance with his preference for representing different aspects of the play in different ways: for instance, the lovers by instrumental music, the scene of reconciliation by music ‘in the domain of opera or oratorio’ (Preface, see Appendix 1a). The essential plot, for Berlioz, is that amid the fighting of two Veronese families, kept apart by the orders of the Prince, Romeo, a Montague, and Juliet, a Capulet, fall in love. They are married by Friar Lawrence who hopes thereby to reconcile the families. Strife resumes; Romeo kills Juliet’s kinsman Tybalt and is exiled; Juliet is ordered to marry Count Paris. Lawrence produces a drug which makes her simulate death; she is buried. Through a tragic misunderstanding Romeo finds her apparently dead; entering her tomb, he takes poison; Juliet, awakening, stabs herself. The

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families resume their quarrel but Lawrence shames them into reconciliation.

Denuded of all minor characters, this is hardly an adequate representation of Shakespeare's play. In any case, only Lawrence, in Berlioz's version, has his own voice, even if others are represented in the orchestra. But what Berlioz required was an outline to be fleshed out, not in the richly accumulating detail of personalities and articulate speech, but in the inarticulate expressiveness of music's most sophisticated medium.³ At the same time he believed in defining the limits within which the listener should experience his musical discourse: the auditor was expected to consider the particular dramatic circumstances which gave rise to the music. Yet no drama is to be enacted, and the movements do not follow a sequence which could convey, in a complete performance, the outline of the plot.

Reduced to generic types, the movements are (No. 1) a combative introduction and vocal Prologue, (No. 2) a scene of erotic meditation followed by a dance, (No. 3) a scene of nocturnal tenderness, (No. 4) a fleeting scherzo, (No. 5) a funeral procession with voices, (No. 6) a barely coherent, gestural scene of violent, conclusive action, and (No. 7) an operatic finale.⁴ Even with movement titles, which I have temporarily suppressed, *Roméo et Juliette* does not follow a direct narrative pattern. Some of the story is outlined in the Prologue and (retrospectively) in Lawrence's narration during the finale, but its dramatic incidents are reduced to a minimum: nothing corresponds to such crucial stages in the argument as the lovers' marriage, the resumption of strife, the death of Tybalt, the second love-scene (Shakespeare's III.5), and Romeo's exile. Knowledge of these is assumed until Lawrence's narration, and nothing in the score corresponds to them; where they come in the play, Berlioz supplies only a scherzo, displaced from the location of its inspiration, the colourful speech by Mercutio which comes before the Ball scene. It appears, therefore, difficult to conceive *Roméo et Juliette* as a dramatic form, related to the play in a fashion analogous to an opera. Table 1.1 shows the natural order of events in relation to Shakespeare's play. Scenes not reflected in the symphony are omitted; the table includes the short movement titles, used hereafter.

Conceived as a symphony, *Roméo et Juliette* is scarcely less anomalous than when it is considered as a dramatic form. Auguste Morel, an early commentator close to Berlioz, suggested that the second, third, fourth, and seventh sections could be regarded as analogous to Beethoven's Ninth, but this leaves a large proportion of the work out of account.⁵ Of the seven movements of its final form, the first is composite, and the last Berlioz admitted to be in the nature of an operatic finale. The original plan included a second Prologue, placed after the scherzo or, more pertinently, before the *Convoi funèbre*. The

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Table 1.1 Comparison of the play and the symphony

Play	Symphony
Act I Prologue Strife, intervention of the Prince	No. 1 <i>Combats, tumulte . . .</i> Strife, intervention of the Prince Prologue
Romeo and friends Mercutio's Queen Mab speech Ball at Capulet's	No. 2 <i>Roméo seul</i> <i>Grande fête chez Capulet</i>
Act II Garden. Love-scene The marriage	No. 3 <i>Scène d'amour</i> No. 4 <i>La reine Mab</i> (Scherzo)
Act III Death of Mercutio, Romeo kills Tybalt and is banished. Love-scene in Juliet's room. Juliet betrothed to Paris.	
Act IV Juliet takes potion and appears dead.	No. 5 <i>Convoi funèbre de Juliette</i>
Act V Romeo to the tomb, kills Paris, takes poison, dies. Juliet awakens, stabs herself, dies.	No. 6 <i>Roméo au tombeau</i> Romeo takes poison. Juliet awakens, brief reunion, Romeo dies, Juliet stabs herself, dies.
Lawrence's narration Prince forces reconciliation.	No. 7 Lawrence's narration Lawrence forces reconciliation.

grouping this implies – four movements followed by three – is still apparent in the definitive form; the symphony, from dramatic and musical points of view, divides sharply after No. 4. Up to this point the scene has been set and the love of Romeo and Juliet explored; the last three movements tend to the tragic dénouement and the culminating reconciliation of the warring families. Berlioz, indeed, suggested an intermission after the scherzo (see Appendix 1c).

Given the weight of Berlioz's finale, it appears that the theme of reconciliation was fundamental to his conception. Yet there is no doubt that most people in the nineteenth century would have considered the death of the lovers

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to be the real ending, and many performances of *Romeo and Juliet* ended there, thus falling in with a tendency in nineteenth-century theatre – in line with contemporary operatic tendencies – away from a governing theme and towards concentration on the fate of individuals. Many plots, of course, are designed to complement the closure of the public action with the death of one or more protagonists (*La Juive*, *Les Huguenots*, *Aida*). In *La Damnation de Faust* and *Les Troyens* Berlioz only partly conforms to this tendency, for in both he brings a wider issue – the fate of the Trojans, the mysteries of salvation and damnation – to the fore; the transfiguration of Marguerite hints at the possible future redemption of Faust himself, while Dido dies with a vision of the future splendour of Rome.⁶ This impulse towards elevating the general over the particular is still stronger in Berlioz's 'Dramatic Symphony'. Rather than viewing it as a series of beautiful or strange scenes (Nos. 2 to 6) within a more or less unsatisfactory frame (Nos. 1 and 7), we should consider the frame (the strife and reconciliation of the families) as of equal importance to the scenes within.

The public conflict and reconciliation which begin and end the work are the principal dramatic theme, symbolized by the transformation of the opening fugato as an operatic quarrel with voices. Shakespeare's prologues go some way towards justification of Berlioz's strategy. The first, before Act I, epitomizes the drama:

Two households, both alike in dignity,
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life . . .

Only one line concerns the title-roles directly; the primary theme of the play is the evil of faction and the virtue of reconciliation.⁷ The tonal departure of Berlioz's No. 1 from its opening key of B minor to tonal areas associated with later instrumental sections corresponds to a shift in dramatic concentration from public conflict to the private domains of eroticism, love, and dreams. The ball scene embodies open domestic harmony with no more than a rumbling of discontent, and the funeral procession is undisturbed by strife; the apparent death of Juliet is not attributed to any act of the Montagues. In Nos. 3 and 5 voices reappear in lyrical, then elegiac vein, and in the style of an opera, although no named characters appear until the finale. Berlioz's consistent policy is to represent the lovers' tragedy by instrumental music; hence the tomb scene, despite being representational in its essence, terminates the

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symphonic part of the scheme. Finally, the primary theme proposed as strife in the Introduction is recovered and complemented by the overtly dramatic finale and its scenes of renewed strife and reconciliation.

This point is emphasized by a broad tonal structure. That Berlioz begins and ends in the same key, or at least with the same tonic (the introduction in B minor and the oath of reconciliation in B major) might seem unworthy of comment, since symphonies before Mahler hardly ever behaved otherwise; they are designated by their keys for just this reason.⁸ But given that the symphonic heart of *Roméo* is generally agreed to be the three movements in F, A, and F (No. 2, introduction and allegro; No. 3, slow movement; No. 4, scherzo), followed by movements in E and A (Nos. 5 and 6), the framing key of B appears alien; indeed, the central keys are only feasible because the Prologue ends, and the finale begins, in keys other than B (see Table 1.2).

Tonal ‘unity’, therefore, is not an issue in this symphony, and it plays no role in my analysis (Chapters 4–6). But the over-arching tonal connection is delineated by an audible cross-reference, like an operatic reminiscence: the opening of the introduction, a brusque fugato in B minor, reappears in the finale at the moment which re-establishes B as a tonal centre. This event (No. 7, bar 240) coincides with a coming together of divergent musical forces. The fugato introduction is headed ‘Combats, tumulte’, and the brief reworking of this section in the finale is a declaration of continuing hatred between the warring families, to the words ‘But our blood reddens their swords; and ours rises up against them. Villains! no peace! Cowards, no mercy!’, interspersed with a catalogue of the dead. Instrumental and vocal music combine; the instrumental fugato is sung, and Berlioz’s means of expression find a measure of reconciliation, although in a context which threatens to overwhelm the pleas of Friar Lawrence.

A major theme of the critical reception of *Roméo et Juliette*, even into the present century (see Chapter 8), at least when performances were rare and recordings non-existent, has been to deplore the overall design and regard with some scepticism the choral movements and *Roméo au tombeau*, while professing warm admiration for the first three instrumental movements (Nos. 2–4), which are frequently extracted to form a concert suite. The problem is one of genre: of a framework within which the work can be ‘understood’. There has been some reluctance to accept that a work may be *sui generis*, generically mixed but nevertheless satisfying on its own terms, and Berlioz’s own symphonic claim does not help. For there was no symphony like it in 1839, nor has it started a tradition. In Chapter 9 I explore the view that *Roméo et Juliette* should not be regarded primarily as a symphony. Not only are its

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Table 1.2 Tonal outline of *Roméo et Juliette*

No. 1	Introduction: combats	B minor [D–V/b]
	Intervention	various: ends V/b
	Prologue	from V/b: various
	Ball music	A–F
	Romeo sighs	D
	Love music	E
	Strophes	G
	Scherzetto	F
	Tragic foreboding	A minor
No. 2	<i>Roméo seul: Tristesse:</i> <i>Grande fête chez Capulet</i>	F major
No. 3	<i>Scène d'amour</i>	A
No. 4	Scherzo	F
No. 5	<i>Convoi funèbre</i>	E minor ⁱ
No. 6	<i>Roméo au tombeau</i> Reunion and death of the lovers	E minor, C sharp minor A major
No. 7	Families enter	A minor
	Lawrence's narration	C minor
	Aria (Larghetto)	E flat major (Allegro) B major
	Strife resumes	B minor (to V/D)
	Lawrence's response	D/B minor: B major
	Oath of reconciliation	B major ⁱⁱ

ⁱ No. 5 ends in the minor despite its final key-signature of E major.

ⁱⁱ No. 1 (B minor to A minor) and No. 7 (A minor to B) are 'palindromic', but this is hardly audible, and the end of No. 1 is qualified by the chiming of the pitch E which anticipates the E minor of No. 5.

overtly symphonic elements qualified (as in the *Symphonie fantastique*) by demonstrably programmatic intentions; its anti-symphonic elements are indispensable to a conception which in a curious and perhaps unique way fulfils the implications of the generic term Berlioz explicitly rejected: 'concert opera'.

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The genesis of Roméo et Juliette

From 1827: inspiration

The 'supreme drama' of his life has never been better told than by Berlioz himself.¹ It occurred during the 1827 Shakespeare season given in Paris by a British troupe, a season which made an enduring impression on all French Romantics (see Chapter 3); but even the poets and playwrights were not more profoundly affected than the composer, who wrote: 'I saw Harriet Smithson, whom I married five years later, playing Ophelia. The impression her outstanding talent, indeed her dramatic genius, made on my heart and mind, is only comparable to the upset which I suffered from the poet whose worthy interpreter she was. I can say no more.' He nevertheless describes his perturbation of mind and body, then, his sense of irony reviving, continues:

When I came out after the performance of *Hamlet*, terrified by what I had experienced, I solemnly swore not to expose myself for a second time to the Shakespearean fire.

Next day they announced *Romeo and Juliet* . . . I had my pass to the Odéon pit; so, afraid new instructions might be given to the porter which would stop me getting in the usual way, as soon as I saw the announcement for this drama, I made doubly sure of my place by rushing to the box office to buy a stall. [. . .].²

After the melancholy, the heart-rending suffering [. . .], after the icy winds of Denmark, to bask in the ardent sunshine and balmy Italian night, to watch the growth of this love, swift as thought, boiling like lava, imperious, irresistible, immense yet chaste and lovely as an angel's smile, those furious scenes of revenge, those desperate embraces, the despairing struggles of love and death, were all too much. So by Act III, scarcely breathing, suffering as if an iron fist were clutching my heart, I told myself with perfect certainty: I am lost! – I must add that I knew not a word of English at the time, that I only glimpsed Shakespeare through the fog of Letourneur's translation, and therefore I saw nothing of the poetic thread whose golden tracery enfolds his marvellous ideas.³ [. . .] But the acting, especially that of the actress, the succession of scenes, the gestures and vocal inflections, meant more to me and were a thousand times more effective than the words of this bland and inaccurate translation in penetrating me with Shakespearean ideas and passions. An English critic last winter

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wrote in the *Illustrated London News* that after seeing Miss Smithson play Juliet I exclaimed: 'I shall marry this woman! and I shall base my greatest symphony on this play!'⁴ I did it, but I said no such thing; my biographer ascribed to me an ambition larger than life.

Although the London journalist is unlikely to have scented such specific smoke without any fire at all, we may never know when Berlioz first considered using the play as the basis of a symphony, particularly as some of his early thoughts tended in the direction of a *Romeo and Juliet* opera. But there is also evidence that the form of *Roméo et Juliette* was not merely a response to his rejection by the operatic establishment after the failure of *Benvenuto Cellini* in 1838, and that a symphonic conception may date back ten years or more, before its completion in 1839, to a period not long after his first encounter with Shakespeare.

One pointer to this is Berlioz's encounter with Beethoven, described in Chapter 20 of his *Memoirs* in connection with the opening of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire conducted by Habeneck, on 23 March 1828. The first concert included the *Eroica* symphony. However, Berlioz had almost certainly become acquainted with Beethoven before then. His first two symphonies were in the repertoire of the Concert spirituel;⁵ and Berlioz may have heard something during Habeneck's notoriously prolonged rehearsal periods. He was in Italy at the time of the first Paris performance of the Ninth, but he had certainly read the score before discussing the work in his first articles on Beethoven, published in 1829.⁶

The general influence of Beethoven is well expressed by David Cairns: Berlioz 'grasped at once that the symphony . . . was a dramatic form. The effect of the Conservatoire concerts was not to shake his allegiance to dramatic music but to widen his whole concept of it to include the symphonic.'⁷ It was surely Beethoven who led Berlioz to his view that 'instrumental language' could in certain cases be 'richer, more varied, less inhibited and, by its very indefiniteness, incomparably more powerful' than vocal music (preface to *Roméo et Juliette*; see Appendix 1a). The first practical manifestation of this enthusiasm may have been a revision of the 1826 overture *Les Francs-juges*.⁸ In 1830, he completed the *Symphonie fantastique*: the crystallization of its conception displaced ideas for 'a descriptive symphony on *Faust*' contemplated early in 1829.⁹

Given Berlioz's lateral mode of thought, it is not surprising that he associated Shakespeare with Goethe's drama, just as he later used lines from *The Merchant of Venice* for the love-duet in *Les Troyens*. In April 1829 Berlioz published his Goethe settings, *Huit scènes de Faust*. Each movement in the

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work he proudly labelled 'Oeuvre I' bears a Shakespeare epigraph in English: five are from *Hamlet*, the rest from *Romeo and Juliet*. This was an implicit manifesto of the profound rapport he considered to exist among the truly great, and the choice of epigraphs is significant for the later symphony. No. 2 of the *Huit scènes* ('Paysans sous les tilleuls') is a brisk, rather lewd dance; the epigraph is from the ball scene: 'Capulet: Who'll now deny to dance? She that makes dainty, I'll swear hath corns' (I.5). No. 3 is the seductive, dreamlike *Concert de Sylphes*, preceded by 'Mercutio: I talk of dreams, which are the children of an airy brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy; which is as thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind.' These words follow the Queen Mab speech (I.4), inspiration for Berlioz's equally seductive and dreamlike scherzo. No. 7, Marguerite's Romance, is preceded by 'Romeo: Ay me, sad hours seem long' (I.1). Almost his first words, this phrase is clearly part of the inspiration for Berlioz's own invention, the erotic meditation *Roméo seul*.

These details, as well as the *Mémoires*, make it clear that Harriet and *Romeo and Juliet* remained in Berlioz's thoughts well after 1827. Berlioz's eventual librettist Emile Deschamps claimed in 1844 that the composer had approached him about words for the symphony ten years before its completion. This is often assumed to refer to the period of the first impact of Shakespeare (1827), twelve years before; but it is more likely that Deschamps meant 1829, a year in which, having by now absorbed a great deal of Beethoven, Berlioz might well have been thinking of a symphony.¹⁰ Yet Deschamps' memory may have been affected by the actual composition of the symphony in the meantime; the possibility should not be ruled out that what he originally discussed with Berlioz was an opera. During his period as Prix de Rome laureate in Italy (1831–2), Berlioz was still preoccupied with the play. When he saw it in Florence, he included Bellini's *Romeo and Juliet* opera, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, among the calamities of modern Italian culture; prejudice concealed its excellent qualities. He hated hearing a woman sing Romeo, and, unaware that Romani's libretto used sources other than Shakespeare, he could not understand its organization: 'no ball at Capulet's, no Mercutio, no chattering nurse, no grave and serene hermit, no balcony scene, no sublime soliloquy for Juliet as she takes the hermit's drug, no duet in the cell between the banished Romeo and the distressed friar, no Shakespeare, nothing – a botched piece of work'.

He offers a more accurate catalogue of the contents of the future symphony a little earlier, as he affects to recall his excited anticipation of the Bellini opera:

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What a subject! How well made for music! First the glittering ball at Capulet's, where, among the busy swarm of beauties, young Montague first sees *sweet Juliet*, whose fidelity will cost her life; then the ferocious street-fighting in Verona, with Tybalt simmering over it like the genius of anger and revenge; the incomparable nocturne on Juliet's balcony, where the lovers murmur their concord of love tenderly, softly, chastely, like the friendly watching moonbeams; then insouciant Mercutio and his sharp-witted buffoonery; the simple chatter of the old nurse; the solemn character of the hermit, vainly seeking to impose calm upon the flood of love and hatred which even penetrates his cell . . . then the terrible catastrophe, ecstasy of happiness struggling with that of despair, loving sighs turning into a death-rattle, and finally the solemn oath of the warring families, swearing, too late, on the bodies of their unhappy children, to extinguish the hatred which shed so much blood, so many tears.¹¹

But these comments refer explicitly to *Romeo and Juliet* as an opera. Auguste Barbier says that Berlioz, in Rome in 1832, asked him for a *Romeo and Juliet* libretto; probably an opera was again in question, for a Prix de Rome winner could expect an invitation to write one on his return to Paris.¹² Nevertheless, in conversation with Mendelssohn Berlioz let slip a clue to what may have been a latent symphonic intention:

It was on one of my riding trips in the Roman Campagna with Felix Mendelssohn that I expressed surprise that no one had yet thought of writing a *scherzo* on Shakespeare's sparkling little poem *Queen Mab*. He showed equal surprise, and I repented at once having given him the idea. For many years after I was afraid of hearing that he had used this subject. He would certainly have made impossible, or at least decidedly rash, the double attempt that I made in my symphony *Roméo et Juliette*. Luckily for me he did not think of it.¹³

Early in 1833, Berlioz's enthusiastic anticipation of again seeing Harriet as Juliet led him to babble, in pseudo-Shakespearean English, in a letter to Albert Du Boys: 'I am mad, dearest I am dead!! Sweetest juliet! my life, my soul, my heart, all, all, t'is the heaven oh!!!! . . . parle donc, mon orchestre'.¹⁴ The final words in French remind us of an association between Harriet and a symphonic ideal already apparent from the *Symphonie fantastique*.

First musical ideas

In 1829, the year of his original discussion with Deschamps, Berlioz composed, in addition to the *Huit scènes de Faust*, two other pieces which are related to his Shakespeare symphony. Composed some time between April and December, *Le Ballet des ombres*, a chorus with text by Du Boys, is the source of the theme for the antique-cymbal episode in *La reine Mab* (see below,