

The Cambridge Companion to
BERLIOZ

EDITED BY
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1 Berlioz as man and thinker

JACQUES BARZUN

It has been well said that the pervasive elegance in the music of Berlioz is a reflection of his cultivated mind. Genius, it is true, can create masterpieces without the aid of intellect and general culture. But their presence does no harm; they develop that second-level simplicity which, when allied to conciseness, yields elegance. In every art one can distinguish those masters who have been men of thought from those in whom native gift has reigned alone. Turner and Daumier in painting, Schubert and Brahms in music come to mind as projecting the artistic power in its first simplicity. That characteristic implies no limitation of sensibility or technique.

The other category – take for examples Delacroix and Schumann – is the one to which Berlioz belongs. His uncommon upbringing ensured that he would have the self-awareness and detachment of the highly literate. It proved a source of imaginative richness in his music and of spiritual distress in his life.

As he makes a point of telling us in his *Mémoires*, Berlioz was reared in the Holy Apostolic Roman Catholic Church. His mother was a believer, his father an eighteenth-century “encyclopedist”; that is to say a man of advanced ideas, for whom religion had a much attenuated meaning. As a physician he rejoiced in the progress of science and passed on to his son his own broad curiosity about it. Scientific method implied an a priori rejection of the supernatural and a steady skepticism. But the doctor was a mild, not a militant skeptic; nor was it necessary for a good *philosophe* to be an atheist. Deism sufficed – the belief, free of fervor, that a Great Architect had created the cosmos and was letting it run without interference. The deity had laid down the laws by which nature, a machine in perpetual motion, took care of itself.

Reared in both the creeds that fought each other in the eighteenth century, young Berlioz reached manhood imbued with their opposite truths. This equipoise was one rather of principles and sentiments than of systematic dogmas. But to a mind as penetrating as his, the disparate conceptions of the universe, while doubling the range of his intuitions, must sooner or later confront him with an unresolved intellectual conflict.

[11] Nor was this all. As a boy wandering in his native fields, he knew

without any need of teaching that Nature is alive. In the French Alps, where sun, wind, cloud, storm, light and dark enact spectacles ranging from placid beauty to ruthless havoc, how could it seem the push–pull of a mere machine? The naïve beholder, aware of all that lives besides himself, sees Spirit diffused through all things: Berlioz was a pantheist before he knew the meaning of the term.

When he came to compose, he drew alike on his intimacy with nature and on the human meaning of the Christian ritual. For it, too, modulates from tenderness and mercy to wrath and punishment. This two-fold vision from two sources is manifest in most of the mature works. The quiet prayers in the *Requiem* and *Te Deum* alternate with the terror of the Last Judgment; and the simple piety of *L'Enfance du Christ* recalls the child Berlioz's pastoral emotions. Yet even there wildness and gloom enter with the whirling dervishes' effort to allay by a prophecy the dark thoughts of the brooding Herod.

The third movement of the *Symphonie fantastique* embodies impressions of nature serene, with a storm in the distance; a scene of glorious sunshine opens *La Damnation de Faust*; and then toward the end, in the Invocation to Nature, the pantheist pays tribute to her thunderous mood. His adoration speaks not through the music alone: the poem is by Berlioz. But next come a credible Hell and a longed-for Heaven.

The two founts of inspiration, however inconsistent as doctrines, were all to the good for the making of music. But where do they leave the thinker? The adult Berlioz was no longer a Catholic believer, nor was he a have-it-both-ways Deist, and he felt the presence of spirit – in nature, in his works, and in art and thought at large. But he was also in touch with his time. In the nineteenth century, men of science were telling all who would listen that the true reality is bare matter. Its unbreakable chain of cause and effect determines everything that exists.

This world view, persuasively simple and sufficient, obviously takes spirit out of pantheism – as Berlioz could not fail to perceive. Just past the threshold of his *Invocation* he admits a doubt: “et je crois vivre enfin” – “I think I truly live at last.”

Berlioz had encountered the materialist assumption in his medical training. The dogma was reinforced by his lifelong association with physicians, as well as by his reading in geology and other earth sciences that were his enduring interest. The recurrent hints in his writings of metaphysical sufferings are accounted for by this second form of the conflict between incompatible faiths.

I say hints, because in spite of appearances, he was not one to open his soul to a large circle. Besides, throughout early and middle life Berlioz was

in the throes of incessant creation and preoccupied by the duties that it entailed – conducting, writing, and serving as his own impresario. In this output of energy, philosophical questions could be subdued or temporarily forgotten. To compose in one decade the *Requiem*, *Benvenuto Cellini*, *Roméo et Juliette*, the *Symphonie funèbre*, and the *Damnation de Faust*, while also performing Weber, Gluck, and Beethoven, was to plunge the whole man in a realm governed by another religion, and one seemingly free of all contradictions.

This was the religion of art, a nineteenth-century innovation. It can be readily defined by quoting Walter Scott, whom no one would call a rash enthusiast: “Our forerunners in poetry are gods or they are nothing.” Berlioz would have countersigned the maxim. These gods were also being revered as “geniuses,” a new use of the word. Formerly, one “had a genius for – ” some particular thing, perhaps for poetry, perhaps for a trait as ordinary as a good memory. Now one *was* a genius; the “guiding genius” (the same as the ancients’ *daemon* within) had become the whole self and was endowed with supernormal powers.

The religion of art arose after the French Revolution, in parallel with the revival of Catholic and Protestant piety, the old faiths and the new both being responses to the emotional void left by the *philosophes*. But the religious fervor was restricted to certain groups in each country; the artistic was widespread and international. Romanticism was its expression for two generations of artists, who did not need any catechism to be ardent worshippers. They gave Art for the first time its capital A. Art was the highest conceivable expression of Man. Art was the infallible critic of life and society. Art was the explicit condemner of the bourgeois and his gross concerns. Art bound all true artists in brotherhood against false ones, commercial and academic. Art was spirit and therefore immortal.

For Berlioz, this religion, though he practiced it fervently, became on reflection also untenable. Aware of history, he knew that art was not immortal. He saw his particular gods – Gluck, Spontini, Weber, with their works and their fame – fading from memory. He knew in addition that no agreement exists, at any time, about art and artists. Beauty, he pointed out in despair, is a matter of opinion – perhaps an illusion in certain men and women favored with a special sensitivity – but not all of them by the same illusion. Art was a will-o’-the wisp – though to each beholder as real and solid as a mountain.

So the critic, if self-aware, faced his daily task with a divided mind. He knew that mighty works (such as Beethoven’s), derided at first and denounced as unintelligible ravings, turned out later to be luminous, divine, “unquestionable” masterpieces. The unhappy creator had to forge the taste by which he should be judged, only to sink back into a second

obscurity in the end. And his long wait for recognition was due not alone to the obtuse public but just as much to the stubborn critic and connoisseur. Berlioz in his reviews warned against their verdicts, including his own.

It is no wonder that with such thoughts in mind he spoke out harshly against another novelty: aesthetics. Coined in the mid-eighteenth century, the word soon appeared in essays and books and has come to denote a discipline by itself. It ranks as a part of philosophy and professes, often with comic gravity, to clear up the confused debate about the form and contents of the several arts. The result has not come about. The main effect of aesthetic doctrines has been to pressure artists into explaining and justifying their work by means of theory, current or of their own making.

In Berlioz's day it was Wagner who most conspicuously acted on this plan. He expounded his views *viva voce* to Berlioz in London and got a chilling response in the midst of an otherwise extremely friendly meeting. Later, the Wagnerite slogan of "the music of the future," which promised to cast Beethoven and other masters into the shade, was bound to infuriate Berlioz. It made him commit the one willful injustice of his career, when he burst out angrily (though only in private) about the production of *Tannhäuser* in Paris. At the same time, his sense of responsibility as a professional (and ethical) critic kept him from using his authority in Paris to attack a composer of stature who differed in method and felt the need of a system to validate his art.

One may ask whether Berlioz himself did not theorize in his feuilletons, their doctrine being later reissued in book form for permanent reference. The answer is that Berlioz expounds but a single principle: music by itself is (or can be) dramatically and psychologically expressive. He does not erect a system with moral, metaphysical, or social corollaries. He denied more than once that there could be an inherently religious music. And he never explained his "methods," as a respector of aesthetics should do. This is a pity, because it might have shortened the time it has taken to discover them. It might also have enlarged his contemporary fame, because in a journalistic civilization a work of art greatly benefits from a public argument that seems to be about merit and meaning, but is really about something else.

*

After the flood of Romanticist masterpieces, the decades of the second half of the century proved a time of despair for artists and the thoughtful in any domain. The triumphs of science and engineering persuaded the general mind that what could not be measured or counted did not exist. While Berlioz and others were still producing and celebrating Art, its support and its place in society were growing uncertain. Industry,

machines, coal and iron, the railroad – in short, material progress was the center of marveling attention. As Emerson said, “Things are in the saddle and ride Mankind.”

In the world of music, as Berlioz had to note week after week in the *Journal des débats*, it was spectacle – grand opera, with the real waterfall and the live goat – that attracted the crowd; or else it was the virtuoso at the keyboard – spectacle again. To create and promote as he did *le genre instrumental expressif*, which was neither spectacular nor gymnastic, was to address unheeding ears.

Equally dispiriting, politics brought on a succession of catastrophes. First, a revolution starting in France and spreading abroad subjected Europe to four years of savage war. Artists lost their livelihood; some were shot (Wagner barely missed being of the number); others like Berlioz had to take refuge in hospitable England. The issues were confused; the claims of nationalism, liberalism, and socialism concealed raw interests; *Realpolitik* bewildered the acutest minds.

Berlioz in any case could not be a partisan. As a young man he had been attracted for a very short time by the Saint-Simonian socialist movement, which promised a harmonious world. But unlike his friend Liszt, he had been unable to follow their windy rhetoric or their street parades in troubadour costume. Though he could exercise diplomatic skill in dealing for music’s sake with the powers that be, he remained all his life apolitical.

What is more, in an age of increasing national hostilities, Berlioz kept displaying a cosmopolitan mind. He made warm friends all over Europe, with musicians, writers, actors, critics, and even with crowned heads. Again and again he reminded his readers that in matters of thought and art nationality made no difference. He castigated a writer who denounced Mendelssohn’s works as “Jewish music,” and he was impatient of “French ideas,” by which he meant the parochial suspicion and rejection of things foreign.

Berlioz never had time to learn German, Hungarian, Czech, or Russian, which would have been of help in his concert tours; but he could read and speak Italian and English, and Latin was to him a second language since adolescence. His taste in literature was correspondingly broad. Though he never properly went to school – the Napoleonic years of his childhood rather stunted the lycées in remote parts – Berlioz was familiar with the French classics in poetry and prose, as one finds from his frequent quotations in his essays. Shakespeare he learned to read and worship during the eighteen-twenties in Paris, and at the same time Scott, Byron, and Thomas Moore – all favorites of the young Romanticists. To these in England, he added Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper. For his

adaptation of *Faust* and of Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita*, he had recourse to translations. Of contemporary French writers, he relished especially Hugo, Balzac, Gautier, and Flaubert.

It was the Shakespearean construction by detached scenes which, reinforced by Goethe's example in *Faust*, shaped Berlioz's way of compositing his librettos. The novelistic palaver of the usual operatic recitatives is got rid of, and only those that carry live emotion and are "musicable" remain.

A noteworthy aspect of his love of literature was his strong revulsion from horror in art or life. In make-believe, such as some of his short fictions, he did describe fearsome acts of revenge. But he abandoned composing for a libretto of Scribe's that was based on *The Monk*, by Gregory Lewis, because the quasi pornographic episode chosen was that of the Bleeding Nun. For the same reason, historical scenes of carnage or cruelty repelled him. To be sure, for the *Symphonie fantastique* (actually for the earlier score, *Les Francs-Juges*) he composed a March to Execution. He associated it with the poet André Chénier's death on the guillotine. But the piece was a somber march, not a scene of mob rejoicing at the killing of a human being. Other hearsay memories of 1789 no doubt implanted the horror of horror.

The revolution of 1848, the second that Berlioz lived through, ended in France with the régime of Napoléon III, which generated an atmosphere not deliberately hostile to art nor to social betterment, but one marked, like all periods of boom and a new money crowd, by ostentation and complacency. Such an atmosphere, Berlioz described years before the fact in the account of the state of "Sicily" in his story *Euphonia*. Only in the town of that name are conditions fit for music.

What Berlioz calls for has been called utopian. Yet when Bayreuth years later came into operatic existence, a parallel was drawn. It is inexact. Berlioz wanted more than an opera house and certainly not one limited to producing one master's works. He specifies resident musicians dedicated to their art and able to perform every variety of the best music. With due exaggeration for narrative emphasis, his demands seem applicable to any musical enterprise anywhere: musicians trained to understand as well as perform; a single directing mind; respect for the composer's score; and an audience of connoisseurs in the strict sense of the term. What frustrates such an outcome in all actual towns, today or yesterday, is a trifle: the economics of the situation and the bad habits of those involved.

Euphonia is also a story of love, and one that ends in a scene of horrendous revenge by means of machinery. The love that leads to this fantasy is also beyond human measure. For the Romanticists generally and for Berlioz in particular, that passion was all-encompassing. Unlike the gallantry of the preceding age, it was not a form of entertainment through sexual conquest or light-hearted dalliance. Love took possession of the

whole being; it was the twin of art as well as its source, both alike mysterious and awesome. That is why poets sang its praises and passionate souls killed or died for it. Indeed, tradition said it was as strong as death.

Modern psychologies tend to validate the linkage with art, which they find rooted in the unconscious drive they call libido. The Romanticist heightening of guiding genius into genius *tout court* made the same connection. Berlioz put it tersely: music is “our passions poetized.” For unlike the gush of eighteenth-century sentiment, nineteenth-century love imposes a duty on the artist: one must “ruthlessly plow the heart-and-mind to sow inspiration.”

About the listener and the experience of music, Berlioz also had much to say. That he derived sensuous delight from sheer sound, we know from his delicate blends of tone color. But when all the elements of music were fused into an expressive whole, hearing the work was to him no ordinary pleasure. As readers of *À travers chants* will recall, it affected his nervous system like a current of high voltage. The description of this galvanism has sometimes been deemed an exaggeration; but similar accounts are on record as far back as the ancient Greeks. A more recent one by the physiologist-philosopher Diderot confirms them: “There are some men,” he says, “in whom the fibers vibrate with such rapidity and vivacity that in experiencing the violent motions that harmony causes, they foresee the possibility of a kind of music that would kill them with bliss.”

This susceptibility need not imply physical weakness. It certainly did not for Berlioz. He could not have met the demands of his complex career as composer-conductor and organizer of concerts without a sturdy constitution. When after years of unrelenting exertion he suffered bouts of illness (probably due to stomach ulcers), it was the expectable result of the strain and poor regimen to which he had subjected his organism.

But why, it has sometimes been asked, did he feel this vast effort necessary? Was it not excess ego to travel all over Europe chiefly to perform his own works? The question betrays naïveté. An artist has every right – one may even say a duty – to exhibit his productions as prominently as he can. Self-confidence is one ingredient of genius. It prompted Horace and Shakespeare to award themselves an eternity of fame. From the towering figures we must not expect the modest cough of the minor poet.

Berlioz had very good reasons for his promotive tours: his works constituted an original genre and were denied performance in Paris. And if never played, his scores would find no publisher. Unless he wanted to bequeath to posterity a collection of manuscripts, he had no other choice but to raid London, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and other centers where he found willing orchestras and audiences, and to “forge the taste by which he should be judged.”

His activity in Central Europe and elsewhere had the result he wanted and an enormous side-effect, as Wagner, Hanslick, Damrosch, and others noted: besides gaining European fame, Berlioz taught European performers the precision that modern works, from Beethoven's onward, demanded from singers and instrumentalists. Last and most important, playing his music enabled him to test his innovations by ear. His attention to detail was minute and he had cause for regret when, as it turned out, he never heard the first two acts of *Les Troyens* or that small gem, the *Marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d'Hamlet*.

*

Most scientific materialists can be happy knowing that their scheme serves their work of research. On top of this, they enjoy the game of telling the laity how foolish faith is and how groundless. But try telling an artist that the act of creation is a blind product of matter in motion. In the eighteen-fifties a good many people other than artists and religious believers – indeed, more than one scientist – rebelled against the idea. And some made efforts to prove the reality of spirit by recourse to table turning and other “manifestations” of *Spiritism*. It captured for a time the imagination of Victor Hugo.

Berlioz was too sagacious to join in. His sense of humor also came into play and he made fun of the “revelations” of mediums, perceiving, no doubt, that they were but materialism in reverse. And when one reads him closely, one notices that he never expresses any longing for personal immortality. To be sure, his deep attachment to his father, his younger sister, and his son, together with his whole-hearted loves and friendships, would have caused him to welcome evidence of reunion in the hereafter. But if that thought ever crossed his mind, it weighed little in comparison with what he felt about the materialist philosophers' negation of thought and annihilation of art. “When will it be our turn at the bottom of the abyss?” asks the artist hero in *Euphonia*.

Urged not solely by the root desire of the mind to keep forever conscious, but also by the welling up of creative power, an artist may be tempted to accept contradiction – to believe and not to believe, simultaneously. To live thus, married to a dilemma, is not exclusively a subterfuge of the nineteenth century. In our own, Montherlant confided (in *Don Juan*): “There is in me a high excitement and a passion that require me to have recourse to God, even though I do not believe in God.” Berlioz, having struggled long, in the end refused this intellectually untenable position. Late in life, in a few letters and the *Mémoires*, he declared himself an atheist. His telling expression is: “There is only Nothingness” (*le Néant*).

He had come to the very modern Existentialist conviction that the uni-

verse is blind, cold, and senseless. He saw death and dissolution as the goal of existence. For the last word in the *Mémoires* he called on Shakespeare for a definition of life: it is “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.”

The wonder is that with this anguish in his heart Berlioz was able to go on producing great music – *Les Troyens* and *Béatrice et Bénédict*. Here again his characteristic humor helped to sustain the balanced mind. The dialogue of the sailors at Carthage and Somarone’s antics in Sicily are not the products of an embittered soul, any more than the letter from Baden to the French Academy or the private joke of composing *Nuit sereine* during a dull speech in that same Academy. True, none of these implies wild gaiety, but who does not know that humor and melancholy dwell together?

To the last also, Berlioz maintained the moral dignity that had never failed him but in the *Tannhäuser* episode. Neither in manners nor in mores had he ever been the Bohemian artist who must be forgiven a great deal, including his ubiquitous debts. In the eighteen-fifties and sixties, when this departure from “bourgeois values” was becoming expected of the true artist, along with recrimination against “his society,” Berlioz observed the standards of an earlier age. He died, as Havergal Brian remarked, a Stoic.

But his nature, as all agree, was “fire and ice.” The ice of Stoicism in late life did not cool the fire of love. Hence his courtship of the Estelle of his youngest days, a Romanticist love matured, but springing from the same fount as that which in the adolescent of 1815 had yielded the melody that opens *Rêveries*, *Passions* in the *Fantastique*. It is fitting that in writing about Berlioz, W. J. Turner came to define music as “the imagination of love in sound.”