8 The songs

ANNEGRET FAUSER

Berlioz's *romances* and *mélodies* – in particular *Les Nuits d'été* – occupy a key position in the historiography of French song. Berlioz, the "renovator" of so much French music, has been seen as the composer whose various accomplishments include the transformation of the apparently insipid *romance* into a serious form on the model of the German *Lied*.[1] His admiration for Schubert's songs, expressed directly in his reviews and indirectly in his orchestration of *Erlkönig* as *Le Roi des aulnes* (1860), serves as evidence of his esteem for the more exalted genre just as much as does his oft-stated scorn for salon *romances* and for the dilettante musicianship usually associated with them. Thus, to the notion of Berlioz the creator of the ideal romantic symphony has been wedded the notion of Berlioz the creator of the ideal romantic song.

Similarly, *Les Nuits d'été*, his "masterpiece," seems to tower over all other "normal" contemporary song production. How then, in the "shadows" of *Les Nuits d'été* (to use Peter Bloom's expression), are we to view normal works in the category – including Berlioz's own – and how can such normal works enlighten our understanding of French song as a whole?[2]

Romances

Berlioz's *romances* pose a problem for musicologists who adhere to the ideology of musical progress which demands that a composer canonized as a "genius" compose art for art's sake and put his stamp both upon the music of his own period and upon posterity. Indeed, Berlioz himself was instrumental in creating the concept of the "great composer" – his prime example was Beethoven – as the progressive genius who transgresses the conventions of musical genre. His *Symphonie fantastique* became the prototype of the artwork that breaks the boundaries of form and tradition; and his almost obsessive self-exposure through carefully created autobiographical documents both musical and literary – from *Lélio* to the *Mémoires* – supports the claim for such revolutionary innovation. Berlioz, like other poets, artists, and writers of the time, tended to explain

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himself on the "authority of personal experience" and in so doing to shape the union of subject and object in romantic art in ways that, despite the contentions of deconstructivists such as Roland Barthes, still influence us today.

Berlioz's strategy can be understood, then, as attempting to control not only the creation of a musical work but also its reception, to limit the text to his own authorized reading. But while the *Symphonie fantastique*, the *Damnation de Faust*, *Les Troyens*, and even the *Neuf Mélodies* have been provided with an aura of romantic inspiration and autobiographical meaning, most of Berlioz's *romances* resist such appropriation: they were commercial ventures, written in familiar forms and for specific markets.[3] Their strength lies not in transgression but rather in adherence to convention.

By the eighteen-thirties, the *romance* had become an established genre overlaid with contradictory strata of reception history, which, paradoxically, guaranteed its continuing place in contemporary French music. On the one hand, the *romance* was explained by the dominant culture as a staple of the repertory of the bourgeois woman's salon (and may thus have been seen as feminized); on the other hand it was more broadly appreciated through a nationalist discourse that saw it as genuinely French vocal music.[4] Famous *romances* could therefore have considerable shelf-lives, with pieces such as Martini's *Plaisirs d'amour* (1785) part of a musical experience that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, Berlioz orchestrated this piece for concert performance, after completing *Les Troyens*, as late as 1859. For the young Berlioz, *romances* were important elements of his musical upbringing: as he wrote in the first chapter of the *Mémoires*, his first "moving" musical experience was hearing Dalayrac's *Romance de Nina* (1786) sung by the choir at his first communion, when he was eleven years old. Four or five years later, he copied popular *romances* from opéras comiques and other sources and made them into his *Recueil de romances avec accompagnement de guitare* (1819–1822).

When Berlioz began to compose *romances*, the genre had been in existence for more than a hundred years, bridging the social space between public and private performance by contributing substantially to the opéra comique and by defining musical performance in the salon.[5] Not only could *romances* move from the stage to the salon as a part of the dissemination of opera, but popular *romances* could also move from the salon to the stage: such singers as Adolphe Nourrit, for example, sometimes inserted them into performances of opéras comiques.[6] During the revolutionary years after 1789, *romances* were also commonly sung in the

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Fig. 8.1 A musical soirée in the Paris of the eighteen-twenties illustrated by Achille Devéria. The pose and expression of the women represented in this lithograph reflect the *romance*'s typically languishing emotional content, such trivialized romanticism having become an essential element of the composition and performance of salon *romances* of the period – something revealed in (among other places) a comment by Pauline Duchambge (1778–1858), a successful composer and singer of *romances* in the eighteen-twenties: "J'ai composé mes romances avec mes larmes" ("I composed my *romances* with my tears").

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streets as vehicles of political expression.[7] Such promiscuity of genre is a characteristic trait of the *romance*, as Berlioz surely understood. He composed *romances* for dramatic works – the *Romance de Marguerite* in *Huit Scènes de Faust* (and later in the *Damnation*); the *romance* "La Gloire était ma seule idole" sung by the hero in the Deuxième Tableau of *Benvenuto Cellini* – and for the salon, although *Je crois en vous*, for voice and piano (1834), did later become the *Ariette d'Arlequin* in the finale of Act I of *Benvenuto Cellini* (in the form of a sublime if ironic solo for the English horn).

But Berlioz also catered to popular taste with *romances.* Most of these were probably composed for consumption in the salon, a social institution whose musical practice was dominated by the performance of such works. Wagner's report from Paris is only one of numerous accounts that are characteristically dismissive of the custom: "The singers of the salon are usually dilettantes, or rather female dilettantes, of whom there are many, because they all seem to find it easy to dabble in singing. They generally sing *romances* by Demoiselle Puget."[8] We find representations of the salon in paintings and engravings by various artists of the period, among them Achille Devéria (see Fig. 8.1).

Here the performance sets the stage for the objectification not only of the singer but also of the other women present, an effect particularly obvious in the expression of the woman to the right, who seems to be posing for the camera as though complicit in the male gaze. The man at the piano focuses his own gaze less on the music than on his female partner, while the piano and the pillar form a slyly phallic pictorial ensemble at the center of the picture.

The veiled and domesticated eroticism of these social rituals may also be seen in Sophie Gay's account of the performance of *romances*, which speaks of

> these young women who had been advised to manifest deep feeling (as though such an affliction could actually be acquired), and who thus believe that, by raising their eyes to the ceiling and by pronouncing the word "baiser" in *La Folle* as though it had four B's, they could attain a paroxysm of dramatic emotion from the music. Is it not rather unseemly to hear such erotic moans from such virginal voices?[9]

Gay, herself a fine singer and professional composer, reacts with disdain to the "cheap thrills" produced by over-emphasizing sexually evocative words, such as "kiss," in the repressed social context of the salon.

These *romances* were published by the thousands in the eighteen-thirties and -forties. Specialist journals such as *L'Abeille musicale* (edited by the famous *romance* composer Antoine Romagnesi) and *La Romance*

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continuously fed the demand. And other periodicals – *Protée: Journal des modes* and *Le Monde musical*, for example – used annual albums of *romances* by well-known composers as an incentive to subscribe. This was big business, for a single *romance* could earn its author up to 500 francs, and a collection of six, by a fashionable composer, could bring her as much as 6,000 francs. The 200 francs that Berlioz received for his *Le Chasseur danois*, commissioned by Bernard Latte for the annual *Album de chant* of *Le Monde musical* in 1844, was thus, by comparison, a wholly modest sum.

This was the fifth *romance* that Berlioz had composed for such publications; the earlier ones include *Les Champs* (1834), *Je crois en vous* (1834), *La Mort d'Ophélie* (1843), and *La Belle Isabeau* (1843). It is possible that *Zaïde* (1845) was also written with Latte's *Album* in mind,[10] but the vocal part, too demanding for a dilettante, might have caused that publisher to reject it.

We know, from their separate publication as sheet music, their texts, and their structures, that Berlioz's earlier *romances* (from the period in and around 1820) were also aimed at the salon market. Frits Noske finds that these compositions follow the traditional mold of the *romance* with their *bergerette* texts (texts, that is, of a gently pastoral and amorous sort), mainly strophic forms, melodic formulas, and generally unassuming musical language reminiscent of that of the *ancien régime*.[11] However, simplicity, regularity, and popularity of tone are musical signifiers that are hardly innocent in the context of French song. For more than a hundred years they were identified as *the* characteristic elements of two musical genres understood in a philosophical sense as quintessentially French – the opéra comique and the *romance*. Here, then, a nationalist discourse offered aesthetic justification for a kind of music which, in compositional terms, was no longer in the vanguard. *Romances* retained musical and aesthetic *raisons d'être* in spite of contemporary notions of musical progress, which was usually measured with reference to German music and, in this context, to the *Lied*.

Berlioz's *romances* are thus compositions that allowed him to participate in the musical marketplace, but they are also works that underline his identity as a French composer. His allusions to earlier *romances*, whether through his choice of poetry, his musical means, or his reworking of a piece such as *Plaisir d'amour*, may be seen not only as signs of a tradition-based approach to music that critics have more often tended to find in Berlioz's later compositions, but also as signifiers of what one might call cultural continuity.

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Neuf Mélodies (1830)

Of all Berlioz's major works, the *Neuf Mélodies*, which Berlioz often called *Mélodies irlandaises* (*Le Coucher du soleil, Hélène, Chant guerrier, La Belle Voyageuse, Chanson à boire, Chant sacré, L'Origine de la harpe, Adieu Bessy, Élégie en prose*) is probably the one most neglected by Berlioz scholars. Like other *romances*, those of this collection pose problems for historians who search for progress and linear consistency within his œuvre as a whole. Although no one now cares to repeat Adolphe Boschot's verdict that they represent "a halt, if not a step backward,"[12] one does have the impression that they are widely considered inferior to Berlioz's other compositions of the period in and around 1830. The composer himself seems to suggest as much in an anecdote recounted in the *Mémoires*, when, in his Roman days, he spent time bantering with Mendelssohn:

> [Mendelssohn] was also fond of getting me to hum, in my plaintive voice and in the same horizontal position [in which Berlioz had just sung an aria by Gluck], two or three of the tunes which I had written to poems by Moore, and which he liked. Mendelssohn always thought rather highly of my . . . *chansonettes*."[13]

Is Berlioz here rejecting the "little songs" of his youth? Or is he rather simply relating a moment of shared *ennui* – two romantic musicians stirring their refined sensibilities with music that was in fact deliciously naïve. (The scene lacks only the pipe and the opium.) Much speaks for this second reading, in particular the suggestive ellipsis and thus the ironic twist of Berlioz's last sentence, whose delicate self-deprecation is an occasional feature of his more playful prose.

The *Neuf Mélodies* pose a hermeneutical challenge. At first sight they appear to be a heterogeneous group of vocal pieces linked only by their texts – all taken from Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*. The settings include solo *romances*, duos, and choral pieces, all accompanied by the piano (see Table 8.1).

Hugh Macdonald calls the collection "a miscellany, not a cycle"; D. Kern Holoman laments that its diversity "tends to preclude performance."[14] However, a closer look at the work – spread over two volumes of the *Old Berlioz Edition* and the *New*[15] – reveals, I think, that it is a well-structured and premeditated entity whose wholeness lies not in the traditional zone of the performable score but in an imaginative realm not entirely different from that of the *Symphonie fantastique*.

Like *Huit Scènes de Faust* (Berlioz's Œuvre 1, issued in the spring of 1829), the *Neuf Mélodies* are marked with an opus number (Œuvre 2) on

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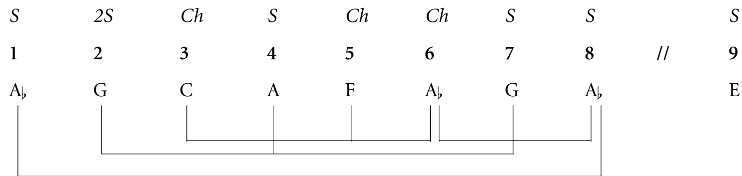
Table 8.1 The structure of the *Neuf Mélodies irlandaises*

	Title	Voices	Key	Meter
1	*Le Coucher du Soleil* (Rêverie)	Tenor	A-flat Major	6/8
2	*Hélène* (Ballade)	Tenor (or Soprano), Bass (or Contralto)	G Major	6/8 (prelude and interlude) 2/4 (strophes)
3	*Chant guerrier*	Tenor, Bass, Chorus	C Major	4/4
4	*La Belle Voyageuse* (Ballade)	Tenor	A Major	6/8
5	*Chanson à boire*	Tenor, Chorus	F Major	2/4
6	*Chant sacré*	Tenor or Soprano, Chorus	A-flat Major	3/4
7	*L'Origine de la harpe* (Ballade)	Soprano or Tenor	G Major	4/4
8	*Adieu Bessy*	Tenor	A-flat Major	6/8
9	*Élégie en prose*	Tenor.	E Major	3/4



S = soloist; *Ch* = chorus

the lower left corner of the title page; the earlier work bears a quotation from Moore's *Irish Melodies*, while quotations from *Faust* can be found as epigraphs for some of the *Neuf Mélodies*. Such cross-references suggest that Berlioz's Œuvres 1 and 2 may well be more closely connected than merely by their appearance as "miscellaneous" settings of texts from a single literary work and etched (as they seem to be) by the same engraver.[16] The rich web of intertextuality that Berlioz created between these two works, among others, refers to a kind of "private mythology" in which such cross-references grow into a poetic narrative that would be understood by the literate listeners and other Parisian intellectuals of the eighteen-thirties – of whom some, despite Wagner's deprecation, were clearly found in the salon.[17] Berlioz could rely on his peers, men and women, to comprehend his internal and external references and in a sense to create their own text from what was a kaleidoscopic maze of fragments. Their readings would, however, be controlled by his choice of referents.

The genesis of the *Neuf Mélodies* permits a further glimpse of their meaning. Berlioz composed the first eight *mélodies* in the summer and autumn of 1829, using translations in verse by his friend Thomas Gounet, and closely monitored their engraving, as we see in his correspondence from December 1829 through February 1830. Only late in the process, on the spur of the moment, probably after the first eight works were

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engraved, did he compose the *Élégie en prose*. In this case the text came not from Gounet, but from Anne-Louise Swanton-Belloc's 1823 prose translation, *Les Amours des anges et les mélodies irlandaises de Th. Moore*. It is therefore appropriate to ponder the logic of the first eight songs, and only then to interrogate the last.

The autobiographical references here have often been mentioned: not only was Berlioz's "distant beloved" Irish (I refer to Harriet Smithson), but Moore's poetry seemed to echo Berlioz's own concept of self-reflective creation.[18] Furthermore, Ireland (despite incipient famine and violent rebelliousness against the English landlord) could be stylized into a place of exquisite, utopian exoticism – not the sensuous "east" of Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales* (which attracted Berlioz only months later, and which provided him with a remarkable *succès de salon* with his setting of *La Captive*),[19] but rather (merged with vague images of her English-speaking neighbors) the idyllic "north" of Ossian, Shakespeare, and Walter Scott. Gounet and Berlioz arranged their eight poems to evoke a range of images: the longing for a distant island, where women love shepherds, where warriors make war and drown their pain in drink, where people seek comfort in the deity, where maidens move about freely with their honor safely intact. As in a classical tragedy, the penultimate piece, *L'Origine de la harpe*, may be interpreted as the moment of crisis – when song is borne from suffering, as the body of an Ophelia-like mermaid is transformed into a harp, and her hair into golden strings. The final poem of the eight, *Adieu Bessy*, then, takes on the character of an epilogue, removing us from the island:

> Plaisirs passés que je déplore
> Auriez-vous fui pour toujours?
>
> [Pleasures past, for which I weep, are you gone forever?]

The first and eighth poems provide a frame of longing and memory which lends a circular character to the narrative as a whole. The island, whatever it might represent (some remembered truth? some myth of musical creation?), is distant, not present, and "in the distance," as Novalis has it, "everything becomes *poetry – poem. Actio in distans.* Distant mountains, distant people, distant events, etc., everything becomes romantic . . ."[20] Indeed, we *see* this sort of romantic contemplation in Barathier's lithograph for *Le Coucher du soleil*, where the romantic island is itself not visible (see Fig. 8.2.).

Berlioz's settings strengthen the bonds of the narrative in these eight pieces with changing forces and tonal relationships that are, it turns out, carefully calculated, as can be seen in Table 8.1. The two framing *romances*

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Fig. 8.2 Lithograph by Barathier with the text of the first stanza of *Le Coucher du soleil.* Hector Berlioz, *Neuf Mélodies irlandaises* (Paris: M. Schlesinger, 1830) (British Library, Hirsch IV. 699).

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are in A-flat Major and are sung by a tenor. The second and seventh pieces are *ballades* in G Major, for solo voice or voices; the central, fourth piece, *La Belle Voyageuse*, is also a *ballade* for solo voice, this one in A Major. *La Belle Voyageuse* is framed by two choruses (which relate to each other as dominant, C, to tonic, F), linking these three middle numbers into a vignette of rural life in Ireland. The three scenes with chorus also feature soloists; the chorus sings the refrain.

Any of these eight pieces might have found a place in a contemporary opéra comique; indeed the piano writing seems almost to evoke that of a reduction of an orchestral score. And the epigraphs in the first edition, especially the conversation between John, Dick, and Max before *Hélène*, could well be literal cues from an opera's piano-vocal score. It is almost as though these *mélodies* were segments of some unknown drama, making reference to some narrative preexistent to the one created by Berlioz and Gounet – possibly an autobiographical meta-drama, returned to life in this composition.

A key role in such an autobiographical fiction of the *Neuf Mélodies* is played by the last number, the *Élégie en prose*, whose anonymous epigraph, with its Ossianic resonance and its images of the graves of Orpheus and Fingal, prepares us for the song's crucial part in the narrative: "He died. His lyre was placed on his tomb. On stormy nights the winds drew from it harmonious moans, with which the strains of his last forlorn lament seemed to mingle still."[21] The *Élégie*, presumably dedicated to Harriet Smithson (the initials "T. H. S." on the title page have been interpreted to mean "to Harriet Smithson"), turns the other eight *mélodies* around. The words are by Moore but the text (by a different translator) is in prose, not verse, and the music is through-composed, not strophic. Its emphatic melodic gestures and tremolo accompaniment are far closer to opera than anything found in contemporary collections of songs.

The *Élégie* seems to suggest that we read the preceding eight as an illusion, as a dream; it seems to transform what went before into a reading of Berlioz's life as it turns itself into a document of self-referentiality. It shatters the earlier, melancholic "autobiography" of the first eight, now "distant" (romantic) songs, and, with prosaic immediacy, exposes their character as delusional. Indeed, the *Élégie* creates romantic irony in a Heinesque manner, and gives the *Neuf Mélodies* a potency well beyond that of the typical salon piece. In chapter 18 of the *Mémoires* Berlioz leads us to such a reading in a passionate narrative where he has himself returning from a soul-searching walk in the country to find Moore's text open on the table in his room. Music for it welled up from the depth of his soul and led to the "sole occasion," he tells us, on which he was able to express a feeling of the sort "while still under its active influence." The fiction is thus

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complete: subject and object are no longer alienated; Berlioz would have us believe that we witness his innermost self whenever we hear the music or read the score.

When two of the *Neuf Mélodies* were performed in 1830, critics took them as serious additions to the repertory.[22] As late as 1834, François Stœpel dedicated three pages in the *Gazette musicale de Paris* to the *Neuf Mélodies*, first considering the relationship between the composer's character and that of his work, then examining various pieces to see if they ought to be considered beautiful or bizarre. (Simple *romances* were almost never accorded so much space – as much as that of an opera review – in this important journal.) Stœpel, clearly a conservative thinker (and therefore disapproving of the irregular form of *Le Coucher du soleil* and of the "violent passions" of the *Chant guerrier*) but nonetheless a colleague of Berlioz's at the *Gazette*, was constrained to find positive aspects of the *Neuf Mélodies.* His comments on the centerpiece of the group, *La Belle Voyageuse*, consist of a sequence of exhilarated exclamations: Berlioz "seems to abandon himself with a kind of magic charm, and everything that he produces thus breathes the divine pleasure of a pure joy, of a delicious ecstasy. What grace! What exuberance in the melodies of these scattered verses! What originality, even within the confines of rhythmic symmetry!" In the end Stœpel's verdict is negative, but he does set the *Neuf Mélodies* apart from the normal fare for dilettantes and reveals the work as a product of the new romantic school, in which Berlioz "submits to the influence of a poetic idea to the point of passing successively from rapture to bitter grief, from tears to violent despair."[23]

Les Nuits d'été

Les Nuits d'été, six settings of poems by Théophile Gautier (*Villanelle, Le Spectre de la rose, Sur les lagunes: Lamento, Absence, Au Cimetière: Clair de lune, L'Île inconnue*), is the best-known collection of songs by Berlioz. Like the *Neuf Mélodies*, it represents an engagement with a single poet, with verses carefully selected to form a narrative of crisis and transformation. The six pieces are bound together by their tonal disposition and their symmetrical grouping (see Table 8.2).[24]

Although the strophic *romance* is still predominant as a musical model, through-composed songs (*Le Spectre de la rose* and *Sur les lagunes*) play a role of some importance. By this time (the fourth decade of the century), Berlioz was familiar with the *Lieder* of Schubert, having called him, in a review of 1835, "one of the greatest geniuses ever to honor the art of music."[25]

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Table 8.2 The Contours of *Les Nuits d'été*

Title	*Form*	*Key in 1841*	*Key in 1856*
Villanelle	Strophic	A Major	A Major
Le Spectre de la rose	Through-composed	D Major	B Major
Sur les lagunes	Through-composed	G Minor	F Minor
Absence	Strophic (ABA)	F-sharp Major	F-sharp Major
Au Cimetière	Strophic (ABA)	D Major	D Major
L'Île inconnue	Strophic with refrain (ABACA′DA″)	F Major	F Major

The poems Berlioz chose came from Gautier's *La Comédie de la mort*, published in Paris in 1838. Like Gounet, who provided translations for the *Neuf Mélodies*, Gautier, too, was a close friend of the composer, and a member of that lively, intellectual inner circle of artists and critics who were active in defending the cause of romantic art. With its rich images, attention to the positioning of key words and careful vowel placement, the poetry of *La Comédie de la mort* was well suited to musical setting and inspired many composers to attempt it, among them Bizet and Fauré. To give but one small example, the opening of *Le Spectre de la rose* plays with the alternation of light and dark vowels, strategically placed to emphasize the contrasting images of innocent virginity and sexual awakening as evoked by the symbol of the rose:

> Soulève ta paupière close
> Qu'effleure un songe virginal,
> Je suis le spectre d'une rose
> Que tu portais hier au bal.

Apart from *Villanelle*, Berlioz's selections loosely follow the order of Gautier's fifty-seven poems, four of Berlioz's six being neighboring pairs. These form a narrative which leads from a spring-born *joie de vivre* (*Villanelle*) and a loss of innocence (*Le Spectre de la rose*), to the death of a beloved (*Sur les lagunes*), a dirge (*Absence*), the obliteration of her memory (*Au Cimetière*), and the beginning of a new future (*L'Île inconnue*). This sequence has sometimes been interpreted in autobiographical terms as reflecting the breakdown of Berlioz's marriage to Harriet Smithson and his turn towards a future with his mistress, Marie Récio,[26] though this is a far from verifiable proposition.

The significance of the title is similarly unclear: *Les Nuits d'été* is Berlioz's expression, not Gautier's. Alfred de Musset's collection of poems, *Les Nuits*, was published in 1840 (when Berlioz's work was composed), and so, too, was a collection of short stories by his friend Joseph Méry, *Les Nuits de Londres*. The preface of Méry's book in particular speaks of summer nights in which he and his fellow wanderers tell stories to the break of dawn, following the maxim that "It is the hour of living

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under the stars; the nights are the days of summer."[27] More generally, Berlioz's title could suggest some sort of fantastical night-piece in the tradition of E. T. A. Hoffmann, or even another Faustian dream.

The emotional roller-coaster of the poems is reinforced by Berlioz's musical settings, which explore the expressive range of Gautier's language through a variety of musical means – structural, harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic. The opening song, *Villanelle*, is deceptively simple and cheerful; it is a strophic piece in A Major celebrating the advent of spring. In fact subsequent occurrences of the principal melody are slightly varied in ways that are peculiarly subtle and revealing. As Julian Rushton has shown, the gesture in the second part of the first verse, for the words "que l'on voit au matin trembler" (bars 27–31), which rises to a dramatically flattened sixth, F-natural, causes the expected diatonic sixth, F-sharp, at the second verse's "pour parler de nos beaux amours" (bars 67–71) to sound exceptional: "diatonicism," quite remarkably, "becomes an expressive nuance."[28] *Villanelle* thus offers important musical material to which Berlioz alludes, with similar chromatic adjustments, in the later songs.

Such melodic interrelationships take nothing away from the individuality of each setting. Whether the larger tonal organization is a unifying force is more questionable: the version of the 1841 publication proceeds down a circle of fifths to *Sur les lagunes* and, after a semi-tonal shift, through a circle of thirds from *Absence* to the end; in the later orchestral version no such obvious progression is apparent, though the persistence from one song to the next of emphasized chords and pitches again suggests some larger continuity. In neither version do we find tonal closure in the key in which we began.

As already noted, Berlioz reworked and orchestrated *Les Nuits d'été* in 1856, although one song, *Absence*, had earlier been orchestrated for performance by Marie Récio in 1843. There is no doubt that he considered the orchestral version as a "whole," as a "work" in its own right, for he lamented both the fact that it was "completely unknown in France" and that he, himself, had "never heard it in its entirety."[29] What occasioned the orchestral version of 1856 was a request from the Swiss publisher Jakob Rieter-Biedermann, who had been impressed on hearing *Le Spectre de la rose* in Gotha in February of that year. The new keys for two of the songs could seem to contradict the notion that the collection is a cyclic unity, since they now make it necessary to have at least two singers on hand for performance: if only one is available, transposition is required – and for a composer who was highly sensitive to orchestral register and to the colors and sonic nuances of all of the instruments, transposition is highly undesirable.

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Indeed, the orchestra of *Les Nuits d'été* is carefully balanced; its weight – always the great danger in the orchestral song – is never too heavy for the voice. At the beginning of *Le Spectre de la rose*, for example, the singer's line is enveloped in a dream-like soundscape of contrasting winds and strings, the latter taking advantage of the "most erotic range of the viola," as Holoman has put it.[30] In the original version for voice and piano, the chromaticism of the melody and harmony emphasize the eroticism of Gautier's text, but the atmospheric quality of the orchestral sound clearly brings its sensuality more immediately to the fore.

Whether Berlioz is the "creator" of the orchestral song and the forebear of Gustav Mahler's large cycles is debatable, but there is no question that now the orchestral *Nuits d'été* are almost universally considered one of the finest examples of the genre.

Autobiographical construction

Given Berlioz's extensive experience as composer and conductor, we may well ask why he produced such an unperformable or at least problematically performable score as that of *Les Nuits d'été*. The self-evident answer – that he sought to take advantage of the frequent presence of several singers on his concert programs – is perhaps not entirely satisfactory. Like the *Neuf Mélodies*, *Les Nuits d'été* can also be understood as a document of aesthetic autobiography, as a kind of romantic fragment, in which the "tension between the revealing and the concealing" creates "rich ambiguity" and "symbolic artistry."[31] Indeed, for both works, the matter of complete performance may well be irrelevant, and even, in a sense, counterproductive.

In the case of the *Neuf Mélodies*, it is not the performance that may be understood to constitute the "work," but rather the published text of 1830. Later incarnations of the collection – under the title *Irlande* (1850) and as incorporated in the *Collection de 32 Mélodies* (1863) – add to it new layers of meaning, as Berlioz attempts to redirect its reading and its reception. When Berlioz reissued the *Neuf Mélodies* as *Irlande*, for example, the dedication to Harriet Smithson and the Ossianic epigraph (among others) simply disappeared. The composer now dedicated the *Élégie* to the memory of the Irish freedom fighter Robert Emmet, and attached an explanatory note to the score regarding Emmet's destiny and love for "Miss Curren," adding a new layer of meaning and suggesting a new reading of the whole. Thus, despite the fact that the *Mémoires* give us only the Harriet Smithson story, the *Neuf Mélodies* may now be seen to have become a drama of futile freedom fighting, of paradise yet to come.

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That the orchestrated songs of *Les Nuits d'été* are individually dedicated to specific singers at the court theatre in Weimar could also, in similar fashion, be an effort to create romantic distance from the first layer of the autobiographical fiction of the original version for voice and piano. If we assume that that original version was composed at the time of Berlioz's waning passions for Harriet Smithson and waxing ones for Marie Récio, then the theme of *Les Nuits d'été* – mourning but then leaving a deceased love and departing to an unknown island with a new one – could easily be related to an episode in the life of the composer. However, a simple transposition from "life" to "work" would be reductive and has so far been avoided by most scholars, following the lead of Berlioz himself, who, in Macdonald's words, "was shy to the point of silence about one of his most beautiful works."[32]

But this silence may be a part of the autobiographical fiction, like the "unperformability" of the orchestral score. Both the *Mémoires* and the orchestrated version are retrospective in relation to the moment of the creation of the cycle. Berlioz's silence – and his reworking of the score – perform a role similar to that of the re-dedication of the *Élégie en prose*: they create romantic distance, they transform a piece that was an immediate interpretation of a biographical event as a part of a "hermeneutical experience" into a fragment from the past whose context the reader may or may not (re-)create.[33]

In the context of this interpretation, the final publication of the two works in the *Collection de 32 Mélodies* of 1863 adds yet another level of reading to both. Here the *Neuf Mélodies* appear immediately *after* the *Nuits d'été*. They become the second "adventure" of, or a flashback to, a new narrative in the later cycle. The final song of *Les Nuits d'été*, invoking the "île inconnue" to which "la jeune belle" sets out (is she the "ma belle" of *Villanelle*?), renders concrete something of which the hero of the *Neuf Mélodies* only dreams. And beyond juxtaposing *Les Nuits d'été* and the *Neuf Mélodies*, Berlioz creates new layers of meaning for others of the *32 Mélodies* as well, by carefully arranging the various items he selected for inclusion. What ought we to make of the fact that the centerpiece of the new collection is the patriotic *Hymne à la France* (1844), followed by *La Menace des Francs* (1848)? Of the fact that the *La Mort d'Ophélie* (1848) and several other orchestral works were reduced for piano for the 1863 publication? Of the fact that the concluding item, *La Belle Isabeau* (1843), was originally composed for Marie Récio – who died in June 1862, only some eighteen months before these thirty-two songs were published?

Precisely when Berlioz began to compile the *32 Mélodies* is not known, but the lithograph that adorns the Richault edition (see Fig. 8.3) turns it into one large and unified opus.

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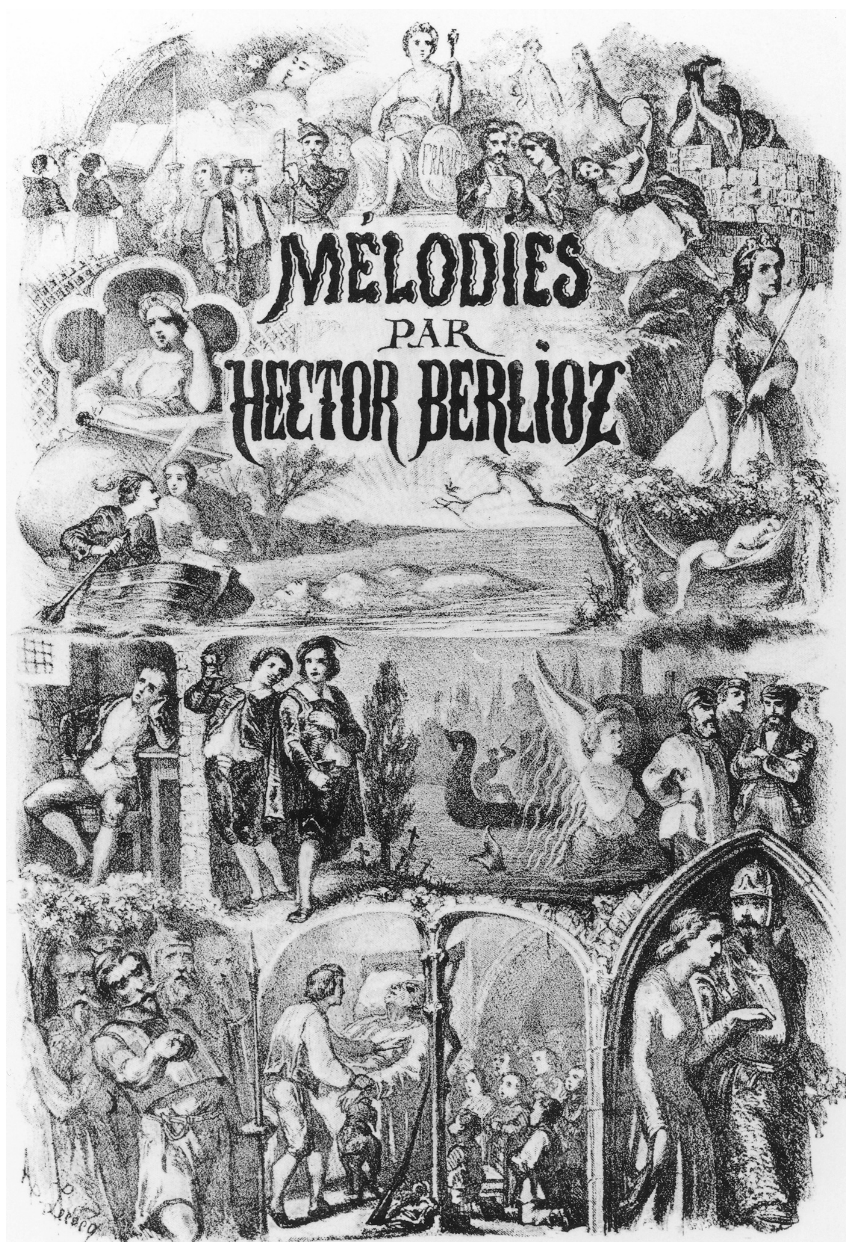

Fig. 8.3 Pictorial title by A. Lecoq for Hector Berlioz, *Collection de 32 Mélodies pour une ou plusieurs voix et chœur* (Paris: Richault, 1863). All the songs in the publication are given their place in this lithograph, from down-to-earth drinkers and workers placed in the lower regions to a representation of France as "Francia" (in the space normally reserved for Jesus Christ) at the top – referring to the centerpiece of the collection, the *Hymne à la France.* In the center of the lithograph we see Ophelia floating – or is it the unnamed mermaid of *L'Origine de la harpe*, lamenting her lover, whose body is transformed into the Irish harp?

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Modeled after medieval representations of the world, the title page seems to weld the different *mélodies* into one narrative universe, into a "private mythology," again to use Dahlhaus's expression. Given Berlioz's characteristically interventionist approach to publication, we may well imagine that the artist's rendering was at least prompted by a suggestion from the composer. Be this as it may, the lithograph obviously reflects an awareness of the range of Berlioz's *romances* and *mélodies*, as it does the very act of creating layers of aesthetic autobiography via the continuous transformation of song.

The fluidity between the real and imaginary spaces of the stage and the salon, between genres, and between the meanings of particular works in their incarnations as individual items and as members of collections, provides one of the riches of the corpus of Berlioz's *mélodies* as it does of mid-nineteenth-century French vocal music in general. In this light it is thus less important to consider the question of whether Berlioz is the "creator" of French art song – probably not – than it is to recognize that he took part in an on-going process, responding to developments in the genre and contributing his own strategies, innovations, and audacities to it. Berlioz appropriated song for his autobiographical project, one might also say, and provided us with a dense web of possible readings of it both by way of his *Mémoires* (leaving aside the eternal question of their actual veracity) and through the act of republication in successive editions and in changing guises.

Not only *Les Nuits d'été* but also Berlioz's more normal *romances* and *mélodies* are unusual works even when they remain within traditional molds. Particularly read in context (the *Neuf Mélodies* as a "twin" of the *Huit Scènes de Faust*, for example), they cause us to see the advantages of an approach, such as Suzanne Nalbantian's, which would have us understand that what constitutes a musical work goes beyond the musical text and its performance and on to its existence as a document of aesthetic autobiography – a document that does not necessarily reflect the author but that *creates* him or her in the person of the listener or reader.

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