PART III

Major writings

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9 The *Mémoires*

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Many celebrated authors, Rousseau and Chateaubriand among them, have written memoirs that became the crowning achievements of their literary careers. But such achievements have been rare among musicians, and it is surely Berlioz who gives us the first great example. Grétry preceded him, of course, by beginning to bring out memoirs (while he was still living) in 1791. Berlioz probably knew this book – an amalgamation of biographical matters and technical details – but his musical and literary skills were frankly superior to Grétry's. One of Berlioz's heroes, Carl Maria von Weber, also wrote a somewhat autobiographical novel, but Berlioz, though probably aware of its existence, could not have read the whole text, which was published only in German. So Berlioz was a pioneer, and a rather unique one at that, for most composers, when they felt the need to express something, usually expressed it in music. How is it that Berlioz did so in writing?

For this to have come about, it was surely necessary that Berlioz *not* be one of those children who, from earliest childhood, are destined for music either by family tradition or by recognition of extraordinary skill, and who are thus encouraged first and foremost to develop their musical talents at the expense of all others – something that, for such individuals, usually leads to underdeveloped literary skills and ineptitude in confronting the written word. Berlioz – son of a doctor, recipient of a bachelor's degree, medical student, and, from the moment of his arrival in Paris, companion to young people literally starved for literature – was in no way devoted solely to the cult of music. Along with Gluck, Weber and Beethoven, his gods, let us remember, were Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Byron. Throughout his life he exhibited a literary turn of mind. For evidence one need only open his *Mémoires*: after an epigraph taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – the very lines from which, in more recent times, Faulkner would construct the title of *The Sound and the Fury* – we find a two-page preface with citations from both Rousseau and Virgil, a preface in which the ghost of Chateaubriand seems to lurk just beneath the surface.

It was also necessary that his existence be rich in intrigue, in excitement and misery, in triumph and failure, in travel, in contact with famous women and men, and in love both varied and intense, in order for all of this to be worthy of continued interest and of recounting in written form.

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And perhaps it was most of all necessary – this third condition subsumes the second, at least in the main – that Berlioz live during the romantic era, that is to say during a period in which the arts and literature were closely united not by chance, but by one grand and common impulse. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in the domain of the plastic arts, the same phenomenon would occur, with a Delacroix keeping a journal of great literary vitality, and a Hugo manifesting tremendous talent in drawing.

At the age of twenty, not long after his arrival in Paris, Berlioz began to publish articles on music in various periodicals. There he developed the style – combative, virulent, ironic – that would remain with him, in his feuilletons, until the end of his life. The long articles that he wrote on Beethoven, and the other early pieces in which he exposed more or less directly his own musical ideas, were soon to make of him a writer. His regular contributions to the *Journal des débats*, starting in 1835, continued to refine his now easy style. And if, for his *mélodies*, he used the texts of others – Hugo, Béranger, Gautier, Lamartine, Musset, Dumas, Barbier, Goethe, Thomas Moore, and others less well known – he contributed words of his own to some of his large-scale compositions, first, with some awkward exaggeration, in *Le Retour à la vie* (later *Lélio*), then with gradually greater skill, in large parts of *La Damnation de Faust*, in *L'Enfance du Christ*, in *Les Troyens*, and in *Béatrice et Bénédict*.

From the very beginning of his literary career, Berlioz made it a practice to intrude himself into his writings, as did others at the time, to make his presence felt and his individuality apparent. He is never impersonal; his own views always taint his observations and color the facts. The same thing happens in his music, as we see from the program of the *Symphonie fantastique* and even more from its sequel, *Lélio*, in which the artist-hero, as conductor, has a speaking role on the stage. It is thus perfectly natural that early on Berlioz should think about writing a volume of memoirs in which he would at once inscribe his opinions, his musical experiences, and – hardly separable from the rest – his autobiography.

It was in March 1848, after being in London for some four months, that he conceived the idea of writing his memoirs. Apart from the general need to commit his recollections to paper, we may suggest three rather more precise reasons that led him to do so at this time. The first has to do with the notoriety of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, which everyone knew were to appear immediately upon the death of their author, François-René de Chateaubriand. On the model of the writer whose work dominated French romantic literature, the composer whose work dominated French romantic music might also have determined to leave a portrait of himself and a narrative of his life. Second, about a year before he concretized his idea, Berlioz took one of the most serious and least deserved

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blows of his career – the failure of *La Damnation de Faust*, which led him to wonder, as he would at various times in the years to come, whether his work and his name were heading for total oblivion. Writing memoirs could be a way of explaining and defending himself before posterity, and a way of portraying himself as he actually was, since during his lifetime so much hue and cry had obscured his voice. Finally, Berlioz was abroad when the revolution of February 1848 broke out, with its after-effects in the German states and the Austro-Hungarian Empire – the very countries, that is, in which he had been most warmly received. On 15 March, eight days before setting pen to paper, he wrote to his friend Joseph d'Ortigue:

> To further my musical career I can now think only of England or Russia; I long ago gave up hope for a future in France, and the latest revolution has made my determination even more urgent and firm. Under the former government I had to do battle with the ill will generated by the articles I wrote decrying both the ineptitude of those who controlled the theatres and the indifference of the public. Now, in addition, I would have to do battle with the whole host of great composers newly hatched by the Republic, with their popular, philanthropic, national, and economic music. The arts in France are now dead, and music in particular has begun to decompose. I hope it will be buried sometime soon, for I can smell from here its rotten stench.

The story of Berlioz's life is thus that of the existence he led up to this moment, which he took to be a decisive turning point, but which he experienced alone, with a certain melancholy spirit, in the midst of a people whose language he could barely manage to speak.

By a curious coincidence, the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* began to appear in October 1848, just over three months after their author's death. It was in the final months of the very same year that Berlioz wrote, revised, and adjusted the greater part of his own *Mémoires*, which he, too, intended for posthumous publication: posthumous because – and it is here that he distanced himself from Rousseau and Chateaubriand – he had not painted the picture of his life as he lived it, starting with his birth, that is, and following along in chronological order. He does open the narrative in this way, but he soon begins to add chapters that had already been published, some many years earlier, in various journals and books. For even before he reached the age of thirty, without explicit intention, he had already begun to write his autobiography in fragmentary form, at first in little episodes, and then in somewhat larger segments. Up to 1836, we have only certain articles in the *Revue musicale* and the *Gazette musicale* (the two magazines merged in 1835), as well as in the *Revue européenne*, *Le Rénovateur*, and the *Journal des débats*. In 1836 we get the first extended

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piece and the first to appear in a bound volume, when the "Voyage musical en Italie" – twenty-four pages in quarto format, with two compressed columns per page – was printed in a collective volume entitled *L'Italie pittoresque.* Even here Berlioz made use of previously published articles, now somewhat modified for the present purpose.

In 1843 and 1844 another large and homogeneous group of writings appeared. After his concert tour through the German states, in 1842–1843, Berlioz published a series of feuilletons in the *Journal des débats* (from August 1843 to January 1844) as ten "Lettres sur l'Allemagne." He used these, with only very few changes, in the two-volume work he published in August 1844 as the *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie* in which Germany, which he had visited most recently, rather oddly occupies the first volume, and Italy, which he had visited twelve or thirteen years earlier, occupies the second. (Berlioz never explained why he structured the book in this way.) Various other musical writings – essays and novellas – complete the ensemble. Six further letters, concerning his concert tour of 1845–1846 in Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia, appeared in the *Journal des débats* and in the *Revue et Gazette musicale* in 1847 and 1848. And then, in March 1848, at age forty-four, Berlioz began to put together his *Mémoires*, with the obviously deliberate intention of incorporating a goodly number of his previous writings.

What results from this method of construction is a volume whose reliability is highly variable. The account of the expeditions in Germany and Central Europe is essentially true, but the account of the trip to Italy is far less so. The chronology of the latter is chaotic, largely because Berlioz freely stitched together certain events that he had recounted earlier, at various times and in various publications, in articles that were themselves perfectly coherent. This, then, is the part of the *Mémoires* that is most fictionalized – but it is also the part that is most literary, if only for its evocation of the Italian landscape, something that is much reduced in the letters from Germany. As for the chapters in which Berlioz evokes his personal and professional life in Paris, these, too, are for the most part trustworthy, although two factors tend to limit their veracity: first, the time that had elapsed between the events and their retelling, which sometimes caused confusion, as Berlioz was always vague about dates; and second, the need to spare the feelings of certain persons who were still alive. It is simply impossible, for example, accurately to reconstruct Berlioz's love-life solely from what is told in these pages.

Of the four women who meant a great deal to him, only one is here depicted as she actually was: Estelle Dubœuf, later Estelle Fornier, six years Berlioz's senior. He first saw her when he was twelve years old; he worshipped her in silence for three years, from 1815 to 1818; he saw her

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for an instant, probably without saying a word, in 1832, when she had already been married for several years. He remembered her in 1848, when he revisited the place where he had first known her, and he sent her a letter, though we do not know if she received it, since no reply has been preserved. It was only in 1864 that he would write to her again, and eventually see her. He was now sixty-one years old, while she was sixty-seven and a widow. He would ask her to marry him (although he doesn't say so in the *Mémoires*), but in vain. Their occasional encounters would extend over a period of three years. This was a dream-like love, Platonic, tenacious, profound, the most constant and ethereal of Berlioz's entire life, and the only one about which practically none of the details is misrepresented in the *Mémoires.*

Then there was the great explosion in 1830 for the beautiful young pianist Camille Moke, whose actual name is nowhere to be found in the *Mémoires.* She threw herself at Berlioz, became his fiancée and his mistress – he tells us colorfully that he allowed himself to be "Potiphared" – only to leave him in the lurch one year later, ignominiously leaving it to her mother to tell Berlioz that she was going to marry someone else. Of the entire episode, we have here only a few elliptical allusions, and two ironic narratives – one about the seduction of the naïve genius by the libidinous virtuoso, the other about the jilted musician's comical voyage from Rome to Nice, possessed as he was by the desire to kill the infidel along with her mother and her newly intended before doing away with himself. (How much of this adventure found its way into the story of the *Symphonie fantastique* remains entirely untold.)

Berlioz's love for the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, whom he adored from afar for some five years, is told in a far more detailed narrative that extends to their marriage in 1833 – a narrative that is largely truthful, although one attempted suicide is here passed over in silence. About many episodes however – the disappointment that followed the marriage; the couple's poor relations and mutual misunderstandings; the psychological problems that tortured a woman who was excluded from exercising her profession because of her foreign accent and who, to console herself, took to drink, suffered a series of strokes, and finally arrived at a state of total ruin and paralysis; the drama experienced by their son, troubled by the increasingly wide gulf between his parents, rebellious and unstable until he was twenty, at times little understood by his father – Berlioz was constrained to say nothing.

The last is Marie Récio, the only one of this group who attracts almost no sympathy. She was, it would appear, not only more than mediocre as a singer, but also possessive, petty, arrogant, selfish, and resentful. Still, she was good at taking care of the affairs of a household and, probably, of

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taking care of the man to whom she was attached with talents of a different sort. For information about all of these things, however, one must look elsewhere than in the *Mémoires*, where her person – in what may be a case of posthumous revenge – is almost nowhere to be found. We hear of her in 1842, when Berlioz was about to leave for Belgium, as "a traveling companion who, since that time, has accompanied me on my various excursions." Later, evoking Harriet at the time of her death, Berlioz speaks of his wife's "incessant jealousy that finally became justified." Of his marriage to Marie, Berlioz writes with a brevity that is as bitter as it is brutal: "I had to do it." Finally, he makes mention of Marie's death, which occurred in 1862. But one would search the *Mémoires* in vain for any more precise comments about this woman, even though the book was written under her "reign": in fact Berlioz lived with Harriet for only eight or nine years, while Marie Récio shared his life for more than twenty, twelve as his official mistress and eight as his second wife.

The silences and lacunae in the narrative reflect the various stages of Berlioz's intimate existence: first legally married, then separated from his wife, then, in 1854, briefly widowed but soon thereafter remarried. Still, if there is one point that he underlines, it is that only twice in his life was he truly and deeply in love, once with Estelle and once with Harriet.

It is true that the method of composition of the *Mémoires*, which more resembles careful alignment of pre-existent elements than it does architectural construction with new materials, hardly encouraged Berlioz to be exhaustive. We find here almost no trace of his important friendships, such as the one he had with Alfred de Vigny, and almost no trace of other events that were of tremendous impact, such as the death in 1839 of his nineteen-year-old brother Prosper, who was at boarding school in Paris at the time, whom Berlioz saw often, and in whose studies he took great interest. Berlioz is similarly silent about his feud with his parents – out of respect for conventional propriety, and for his sisters – which would distance him from them for several years after his marriage to Harriet.

Even the chapters written with the intention of constituting a true autobiography are not all of the same tone. The first three, written in March and April of 1848, tell the story of his childhood and the beginnings of his adolescence. But in the middle of chapter 4, the narration takes on the appearance of a diary, with notations of the precise date: 10 April, 12 July, 16 July 1848. The chapter is divided between the end of his stay in England and his return to France. He continued to work on it in September 1848: in chapter 8 he mentions the recent death of Prince Lichnowsky, which occurred in that month. By the end of 1848 about four-fifths of the text of the *Mémoires* had been drafted, but then his writing nearly came to a halt. Berlioz always wrote more prose – this is

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true of his correspondence, too – when he was not writing a lot of music. But from October 1848 to 1850, he would compose the *Te Deum* and *La Fuite en Égypte,* which was incorporated in 1854 into *L'Enfance du Christ.* A few pages of the *Mémoires* – notably chapters 48 to 51 – probably date from 1851. It would be only in 1854, after Harriet's death, in March, and perhaps after the completion of *L'Enfance du Christ,* in July, that Berlioz finished chapters 52 to 59, thus bringing the *Mémoires* to a close. The date of completion, inscribed at the end of the last chapter, is 18 October 1854 – the eve of his marriage to Marie . . .

It is in this last section that we find chapter 54, devoted to *La Damnation de Faust*, chapter 57, on the aborted opera *La Nonne sanglante*, and chapter 59, containing Berlioz's artistic will and testament. From that point on Berlioz considered his *Mémoires* completed. Already ill, having no idea how much longer he had to live, and sometimes literally pleading for death because of suffering both physical and mental, he had hastened to finish the autobiography. He had the manuscript bound, and kept it not in his apartment but – hidden from the possible gaze of his wife – in his office at the library of the Conservatoire. For a time he thought about bringing out a foreign edition, since he was still far from appreciated in France. On 9 May 1855 he sent the manuscript to Liszt, with a view towards having Richard Pohl make a translation into German that would be published after his death. In fact he gave Liszt a number of very precise instructions: if he were to die before the manuscript could be sent back to him, Liszt was to have it sent directly to the Parisian firm of Michel Lévy for publication, with the royalties to be divided between his wife and his son. Further, when Liszt wrote back to acknowledge receipt, he should be sure to speak only of a "package," for Marie was to know nothing about the book. In the end this all came to naught. In May 1856, when the journalist Eugène de Mirecourt expressed interest in devoting one of his little biographical studies to Berlioz, the composer sent him the manuscript of the *Mémoires*, from which Mirecourt in fact extracted very little of genuine interest. The long letter that Berlioz included in the packet for Mirecourt was itself to find a place in *Mémoires*, where it is entitled "Post-scriptum"; here he speaks of the fundamental opposition between his own musical sensibilities and those of the Parisian public.

In February 1858, when Berlioz published in the weekly *Monde illustré* a well-received account of his work on *Der Freischütz* at the Opéra in 1841, the director of the magazine asked the composer if he had written anything else about his life, and Berlioz sent him the manuscript. "Inscribed here," he wrote, "are the innumerable changes in the stormy atmospheric conditions in which I have lived up to this day. This, if I may

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use a nautical expression, is the log-book of my painful voyage." From 25 September 1858 to 10 September 1859, with a few interruptions, *Le Monde illustré* would publish these "Memoirs of a Musician." The chapter numbers of the original manuscript are maintained, but those devoted to the excursions to Italy and Germany are omitted, since they had already appeared earlier in book form. As for the rest, Berlioz made a number of cuts, which are sometimes indicated in the text by several dotted lines, and sometimes not indicated at all. Naturally, since the domineering Marie Récio would have read them, all the passages having to do with Harriet Smithson were suppressed. So, too, were passages critical of living musicians, such as the conductor Narcisse Girard, and of deceased musicians, such as Boieldieu, so as to avoid speaking ill of the dead. As for Cherubini: Berlioz does evoke the squabbles he had with the Italian musician, but he excludes the ridicule of his Italian accent, perhaps because it would have been considered unseemly for one member of the Institute to make sport of a predecessor. These satirical passages were nonetheless restored when the book was published, posthumously, in its entirety. But even with these cuts, Berlioz appears as singularly imaginative and hardly stuffy in the manner of a proper academician. This partial publication is of especial interest, then, because it highlights what Berlioz was willing to say publicly during his lifetime. The rest would appear only after his death, when he would no longer be present to suffer the consequences.

The story of the publication does not quite end here, however, for in the spring or summer of 1864, a "Postface" was added to the text, into which ten years are squeezed in fewer than twenty pages that recount the story of the two last great works, *Les Troyens* and *Béatrice et Bénédict*. Immediately thereafter, Berlioz would see Estelle Fornier, whom he had loved so passionately. He relates their encounter and once again enlarges his manuscript by adding to it his recent correspondence with her. This third series of supplementary pages, entitled "Voyage en Dauphiné," did in fact become the last. But its final words changed the tonality of the end of the *Mémoires*: the "Postface" concludes with a reflection upon the stupidity and cruelty of man, and with an appeal to Death to come as soon as it should like. But at the conclusion of the "Voyage en Dauphiné" – in a last-minute shift from the darkness of the minor mode to the light of a final major chord – Berlioz writes that "I shall now be able to die with neither anger nor bitterness."

It remains to be said that Berlioz, who, in May 1858, wrote to his sister Adèle that he had been correcting and refining his style for six years "without being able to render it wholly satisfactory," would, after October 1854, never modify the arrangement of the first fifty-nine chapters: the three texts that followed suit were for him simply complements to the

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larger work, as though he were dead as a man in 1854 but continued to live thanks to some sort of extension of indeterminate length.

Berlioz always insisted that after his death his text should appear in its entirety, with neither modifications nor cuts. To maintain the integrity of the work he was counting on his brother-in-law Marc Suat, but Suat died before Berlioz. There was also his son, Louis, of course, but he was sailing the high seas and could not supervise the publication. How could he be sure that the work would appear according to his wishes? He decided to have the book printed at his own expense, at the beginning of 1865. In July, after the proofs were corrected, twelve hundred copies of the work were printed; these were stored at the Conservatoire, in the library office that remained at Berlioz's disposition. In August, he presented a bound copy of the book to Estelle Fornier, whom he saw at her son's home in Geneva. He also gave copies to a few of his close friends. The rest were put on sale only after his death.

These *Mémoires* thus in no way constitute the serene and melancholy recollections of a man approaching the end of his life. They rather present a chronicle, written from day to day, or shortly after the events described took place – as in the case of the voyages in Italy, Germany, Central Europe, and Russia, which occupy such a large part of the book. The chronicle was of course revised, here in small detail, there in depth, at times with cuts, at times with additions. When his point of view had changed between first writing and rereading, he often troubled himself to add only a note to this effect, sometimes dated, sometimes not. One might attribute this to laziness in certain cases, but in others it serves consciously to highlight the successive stages of his writing. The reader, without forewarning, is thus invited to identify with Berlioz in all periods of his life, sometimes arranged in non-chronological order, as in certain twentieth-century novels and films, where unannounced previews and flashbacks remove us from the central axis of the narration: indeed, this is one of the reasons for the modernity (not always premeditated) of Berlioz's autobiography.

Given the way they were composed, we might well wonder if the *Mémoires* are unified at all. Certain chapters, as we have seen, are given as they were first written, as early as 1832. Others came as much as a third of a century later. From the young hatchling of less than thirty to the old eagle withered by failure, sadness, and illness is, after all, no small distance! But most of the book is equally balanced between these two extremes, written in full maturity between the ages of forty and fifty, in the years that surround the composition of *La Damnation de Faust*, at a time when Berlioz had already had the double experience of triumph and defeat – an alternation that would pursue him throughout his life. He was

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sufficiently close to his youth to relive its ebullience, since he still felt it bubbling within him. But he was also able to distance himself from his youth long enough to write about one or another episode of his past with irony – regarding his excessive irritability, rage, or despair. Never blasé, never going back upon what he has said, he appreciates with a clear head his actions, his dreams, and his spontaneous impulses with a lucid and discerning smile.

Should the work be taken as an historical document? It is not difficult to find in it contradictions and inexactitudes, to which many commentators have enjoyed drawing attention. The story of the "suicide" of 1831 is hardly believable. Berlioz describes the Sistine Chapel without in fact having seen it. He did not have as much difficulty getting paid for the *Requiem* as he suggests in the book. And one could go on. But it is of very little use to scoff at every single distortion of "objective" reality. First of all, such distortions are not so numerous as some have suggested on the basis of testimony opposed to Berlioz's – testimony that is in fact less reliable than his own. Some are due simply to the memory lapses that one would expect after so many years had gone by. It happens that Berlioz mistakes one concert for another, and thus confuses his chronological narrative. In fact he had little sense of the clock and the calendar. From time to time he gives a precise date, but most often he speaks in approximations by saying "one year later," for example, when in reality the time elapsed could be less than eight months or almost two years. His quotations, whether from Virgil, Shakespeare, La Fontaine, or Hugo, are always from memory, and often faulty – sometimes deliberately so, so as to make them fit the context into which they are introduced. Furthermore Berlioz does not always indicate that he is quoting – something that makes identifying his sources difficult indeed. At the time of publication, he made only hasty revisions, and let slide a number of inconsistencies, lacunae, and errors.

Second, certain distortions are the result of the secret workings of a frenetic imagination upon episodes that had touched him profoundly and which he found it impossible to write about with a cool head. Is it possible, as one sometimes feels from these pages, that Berlioz suffered from a persecution complex? Perhaps. Is it not difficult to believe that an experienced orchestral conductor such as Habeneck, at the time of the first performance of the *Requiem*, would have put down his baton, at the crucial moment when the brass choirs make their entrance, and taken up his snuffbox, thus risking a disaster whose shameful consequences would have redounded as much upon him as upon the composer?

But when a man is conscious of being the only great musician of his own country as well as the greatest living orchestral composer in all of Europe, at least for the several-year period between the deaths of

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Beethoven, Schubert, and Weber and the ascensions of Schumann and Liszt; when such a man has spent his life confronting the most severe material difficulties, seeing his family opposed to his calling, and chained for survival to a column of music criticism that he detested and dreaded almost to the point of apoplexy; when he could not obtain the conductor's post at the Paris Opéra, even though he was one of the best conductors of his day and was admired across the European continent; when he found himself denied the harmony class at the Conservatoire, even though he was one of the greatest harmonists of the century; when the only official post offered to him for many years by the magnanimous powers-that-be was that of associate librarian at this same Conservatoire; and in view of the fact that the public failed to appear at his concerts, that intrigue or indifference led to the ignominious failure of masterpieces such as *Benvenuto Cellini* and *La Damnation de Faust*, that the doors of the halls of the Conservatoire and Opéra were closed to him, and that he saw himself rejected by the Institute in favor of Ambroise Thomas, Onslow, and even Clapisson – in view of all of this, can we really reproach Berlioz with a kind of indulgent smile for having let himself be carried away by his more fiery emotions?

It is certain that the distortions of reality in the *Mémoires* do not always occur unconsciously. Sometimes Berlioz carefully embroiders the facts, minimizes his adroit self-publicity, or otherwise gives himself the leading role. But where is the great man, especially during the romantic era, who did not consider himself to be one of the principal elements of his work, who did not sculpt his own statue with a view towards preserving his image for posterity? Rousseau and Chateaubriand provided the example. Like the *Confessions* of the former and the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* of the latter, the *Mémoires* of Berlioz are a justification, but also a work of art; their distance from reality is the same as that of a painting (in comparison to that of a photograph). Sometimes Berlioz added details in order to make the picture more colorful, only later to rectify the matter by adding a note such as: "This is a fabrication and results from the tendency that artists always have to write something simply for the sake of effect." If certain contrasts and oppositions are accentuated, it is to confer upon the work a larger unity and a greater concentration, to underline what is essential: so the detail and disorder of reality disappear here in the light of a truth that has been felt and lived.

On the whole, then, Berlioz's *Mémoires* give us a faithful portrait of the man and his work. He was in actual fact the impulsive and passionate man portrayed in the book, the man so uncompromising about what was for him of absolute value – namely, music; the intransigent composer who, despite various requests and despite obvious financial advantages, always

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refused to write both for solo piano, because what he had to say could not be expressed by that instrument alone, and for small orchestra, because he felt a need for large masses of sonority. He was in actual fact the combative fellow so fanatical in his defense of those whom he admired, so forceful in his attacks upon manipulators and mediocrities, but sufficiently modest to render service to other musicians – Weber and Gluck first of all, but also Couperin, Méhul, Schubert, Padre Martini, and Bortniansky – by making transcriptions, arrangements, and adaptations that attempted to remain faithful to their essence as he perceived it, and to recognize the merits of his adversaries.

He was in actual fact the man who, in the fullness of his happier years, when he enjoyed a period of prolonged creative intoxication, was struck from time to time by the cruelest of blows, not only because his own impulsiveness brought them on, but also because, it almost seems, he was pursued by a kind of inevitable doom. He was in actual fact the man whose entire life was a struggle to have his music heard, a struggle to counter the traditional routine, prejudice, indifference, and incomprehension of the public, the press, and the persons in power. He was in actual fact the man who, almost fifty years old, had to give up on the idea of writing a symphony that he was meditating in order to avoid increasing the financial difficulty in which he was mired because of the illness of his wife; the man who proclaimed on two occasions, in his full maturity as a composer, that he hoped to be able to resist the desire he felt to compose new works because he knew that they would lead only to failure, despair and financial ruin; the man who – and this is perhaps the saddest fact of all – was never privileged to have performed, and thus to hear, certain of his works: not only most of the cantatas written for the Prix de Rome, not only fragments of the incomplete operas *Les Francs-Juges* and *La Nonne sanglante*, but the compositions that are now recognized as his masterpieces: the orchestral versions of most of *Les Nuits d'été,* the *Marche funèbre pour la mort de Hamlet*, and especially the first two acts of *Les Troyens.* If it happened that he did hear his comic opera *Béatrice et Bénédict*, it was only because it was performed in Germany, never in France.

Finally, he was in actual fact the man who literally found himself portrayed in several of the great romantic myths, who lived with such profound intensity the lives of Romeo, Hamlet, Childe Harold, and Faust that his own life became one that went beyond individual adventure to take on a genuinely universal resonance. Such a man, the reader of the *Mémoires*, whatever his presuppositions may be, cannot fail, it seems to me, not only to admire but also to love – as did certain of Berlioz's friends who, over the course of his lifetime, remained as faithful to him as he was to them. For

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Berlioz was one of those men who believe in friendship; whenever he encountered it in others, he underlined it with especial warmth.

But let us not pretend that he was perfect. Indeed, the very notion of perfection is inconsistent with the notion of romanticism, whose very ardor implies excess. Not only in his youth but throughout his life, Berlioz was sometimes inconsiderate and unjust, even in his own field of endeavor. At a time when the writing of music history was beginning to develop, he remained ignorant of the music of earlier centuries. We observe him belittling Palestrina and totally misconstruing Bach, and in one of his letters he is equally reckless with regard to Handel; we are surprised to see him criticizing certain "unpardonable" excesses in *Don Giovanni*: "it is now time to have done with all this admiration for Mozart, whose operas are all alike, and whose cool beauty is tiresome and distressing," he writes in the *Mémoires*, though elsewhere he does recognize Mozartian grandeur. Even his friends did not always escape his severe regard, and it seems clear that he failed to appreciate the genius of Chopin, "who went far beyond mere rhythmic independence" and was simply "*unable* to play in strict time." In old age he understood neither the evolution of Wagner's musical style nor Liszt's, while he harbored an admiration for Spontini that has hardly been ratified by posterity. But his other great heroes – Gluck, Weber, and especially Beethoven – underline the vitality and penetration of his musical judgment. He also was fair to some of those whom he utterly disliked (and who returned his "affection"): he praises Cherubini's *Messe du sacre* in the *Mémoires*, Rossini's *Barbier de Séville* and *Guillaume Tell*, and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

He is never lukewarm; his enthusiasm and indignation persist to the end. And on many levels he remains full of sharp contradictions. Strong as he was in writing music and in getting it played, Berlioz was surprisingly weak in dealing with women, sometimes even to the point of running away. He left on tour to Belgium without even telling Harriet of his departure. And in Germany, a few months later – though he doesn't mention this in the *Mémoires* – he left Frankfurt surreptitiously, leaving Marie Récio behind. But she made inquiries, found him in Weimar, and insisted on remaining by his side. Several years later, he had to construct an elaborate subterfuge in order to take off without her for Russia and, subsequently, England. Elsewhere, as "Mme Berlioz" – a title she did not yet enjoy – she would accompany and keep an eye on him, without his being able to escape.

Another contradiction: he found it difficult to stomach the disdain of the Parisian musical establishment and the nullity of the artistic life of the capital, and he never missed an opportunity to drag the town in the mud. And yet, when he was offered a post abroad, whether in Germany or

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Russia, he found it impossible to accept, unable as he was to live far away from the very Paris he claimed to detest.

In his feuilletons and his conversations he rarely hesitated to exercise his caustic wit, even and indeed especially upon those who were in a position to assist or to hinder his efforts. He refused to make concessions himself – but never failed to express indignation when he was not treated with kindness by others. He lit tooth and nail into the Académie des Beaux-Arts, to which he presented his candidacy on four occasions, finding it scandalous to be passed over by others while doing almost everything possible to guarantee his exclusion.

But it is not only a musical personality that transpires through these *Mémoires*, it is a musical technician, whose narrative brings to life the concerts of his day, the instrumentalists, the conductors and choruses, the concert-halls and managers – the whole kit and caboodle of the musical world with all of its idiosyncrasies, aberrations, prejudices, enthusiasms, and devotions. And around this mass, with both brio and simplicity, he brings to light an entire era with which he was profoundly engaged. Naturally, writers and artists occupy the front rank. The literary profiles that grace these pages include those of Victor Hugo, who intervened in 1848 in such a way as to maintain Berlioz's position as librarian at the Conservatoire, of Balzac, who gave Berlioz advice about his trip to Russia, and of Heine, Lamennais, and Dumas. The most striking figures are those of the musicians who stood at his side and who, almost to a man, were born outside of France: Chopin, who participated in a benefit concert for Harriet; Paganini, who bowed down in public before Berlioz and who, with a gift of royal proportion, enabled him to write one of his greatest masterpieces, *Roméo et Juliette*; and especially Liszt, who was won over by Berlioz on hearing the *Symphonie fantastique* and who was devoted to him for more than thirty-five years, sparing neither effort nor time to arrange performances of his friend's music, and inviting the public to recognize his genius. If Berlioz found the reception he deserved abroad, in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and Russia, it was particularly due to a group of musicians, most of them German: Mendelssohn, whom Berlioz met in Rome and later in Leipzig, and who worked tirelessly on his behalf, playing a bass part on the piano, correcting copyists' errors in the parts, and conducting the chorus of *Roméo et Juliette*; Schumann, who wrote an enthusiastic article about the *Symphonie fantastique* on the basis of the piano transcription alone, and who expressed to the composer his own great admiration for the *Offertoire* of the *Requiem*; and Wagner, who applauded *Roméo et Juliette* in Paris, welcomed the French composer in Dresden, and put his own labor and prestige at the disposal of a man with whom he would only later fall out.

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The spiritual climate of the nineteenth century can also be felt in these *Mémoires*. Berlioz's romanticism is that of 1830, the year that opened with *Hernani*, that climaxed with the "three glorious days" of the July Revolution, and that culminated with the *Symphonie fantastique*. Its musical dynamism is but one of the manifestations of a new vitality that uplifted an entire generation, a vitality sparked by a desire – felt or expressed in a thousand different, sometimes bizarre and sometimes contradictory ways – to be involved as humanity marched forward in history. One aspect of this desire was necessarily "political" in the larger, noble sense of the term, implying the idea of liberation, or rather, rebellion. And Berlioz had been a rebel from the moment of his arrival in Paris – against his family, which opposed his musical career; against the *dilettanti*, who embraced Italian music only; and against Cherubini, who barred him from one of the doors of the Conservatoire.

Rebellion and liberty: these notions appear frequently both in Berlioz's œuvre and in his life, and they are readily found in his *Mémoires* as well. As early as 1826, he wrote *La Révolution grecque*, "an heroic scene for large chorus and large orchestra," as a tribute to the combatants in a war of liberation. In 1827 and 1828, he began to work out his opera *Les Francs-Juges*, which highlights a struggle against tyranny (the opera was never completed), and he composed a *Waverley* Overture, inspired by the novel by Walter Scott, which glorifies the Scottish uprising against their oppressors. He furthermore considered writing an opera on Robin Hood, in which the common people would clearly be portrayed more favorably than certain classes of the nobility. In these same years Berlioz set two poems on the subject of bandits and pirates that give evidence of a theatrical but sincere sort of anarchistic imagination.

At the time of the July Days, in 1830, while Liszt dreamt of a *Symphonie révolutionnaire*, Delacroix conceived his *Liberté défendant les barricades*, and Hugo wrote the *Chants du crépuscule* devoted to the "Trois Glorieuses," Berlioz – just after quitting the tiny studio at the Institute where he wrote the soon-to-be victorious Rome Prize cantata – ran through the streets of Paris, armed and ready to fire if and when the occasion was right. Of all the young romantics, he was the only one, along with Alexandre Dumas, to seek action in this way. Later, in a covered gallery, he led a group of Parisians several hundred strong in the singing of the *Marseillaise*, which he himself had arranged. He also arranged the *Chant du neuf thermidor* by the same poet, Rouget de Lisle. And in 1831 he proclaimed his allegiance to the Saint-Simonian "faith."

In 1831, in Italy, he took up the theme embodied in *Waverley* by writing the *Rob Roy* Overture. The overture *Le Corsaire* and particularly the admirable symphony *Harold en Italie* make reference to Byron – who

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died at Missolonghi, where he had gone to fight alongside the insurgent Greek patriots. The cantata *Le Cinq Mai* sings of Napoléon who, in our day, may be viewed as a symbol of despotism, but who was the veritable god of the liberal thinkers during the period of Berlioz's formative years in the eighteen-teens and twenties. At first glance, the *Requiem* may seem at odds with these tendencies, and yet it was conceived for a service to honor the memory of the victims of the Revolution of 1830. Furthermore, although Berlioz had long since renounced the Catholicism of his youth and had become a confirmed non-believer, it would be a mistake, in the context of the romantic era, to suggest that this sort of atheism was radically opposed to religious faith, for the religion of the progress and achievement of humanity was, for many figures of the period, nothing if not a new form of belief: like a wave, which rises and breaks upon its predecessor, so, too, did the new religion, spawned by the same forces as the old, supersede that which had gone before. Herein lies one of the explanations (of which others are to be found in the realm of aesthetics) of the "atheist's Mass" that is Berlioz's *Requiem*.

The opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, too, seems at first rather removed from the historical circumstances of the moment, but August Barbier, one of the authors of the libretto, tells us in his *Études dramatiques* that the work was at first supposed to begin with the sack of Rome, where Cellini, who would have raised an independent army to defend the city, was himself to take part in the execution of the attacking Bourbon constable. Thus the sculptor – the symbol of the composer – was originally designed as a freedom fighter. In this context there is hardly any need to remark upon the *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, written for the tenth anniversary of the July Revolution. The *Chant des chemins de fer* at once glorifies the scientific techniques that were engines of progress and the workers who realized their potential – yet another manifestation of the Saint-Simonian ethic. And when, in February 1846, Berlioz wrote the *Marche hongroise* (soon incorporated into *La Damnation de Faust*), he knew perfectly well that he was lending an orchestral hand to the insurgent Hungarian partisans. The following year, in October 1847, at the opening of his "Letter from Pesth," he wrote ironically of Hungarian and Bohemian "devotion" to the Austrian Empire in "body, soul, and estate, much like Irish devotion to England, Polish to Russia, Algerian to France, and all subject peoples' attachment to their conquerors." This was clearly to indict territorial and especially colonial occupation, and thus to affirm a stance that was in no way reactionary. Again, in March 1848, only eight days before setting out to write his *Mémoires*, Berlioz made an arrangement of Méhul's *Chant du départ* and Rouget de Lisle's *Mourons pour la patrie*, something which suggests that he was hardly opposed to a change of regime.

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These liberal ideas were to undergo radical change during the Second Republic. After the uprisings in February 1848, Berlioz, henceforth horrified by such violence, dismissed both camps without pronouncing favor upon either. Soon, however, both the collapse of Parisian musical life and the demagogic rhetoric of such political figures as Ledru-Rollin gave birth to an about-face that led Berlioz not only to reject his earlier ideas but even to position himself in the opposite camp: in his letters and in a note in the *Mémoires* we see him proclaim a sympathy for the Prince-President, Louis-Napoléon, that persisted even after the coup d'état by which Louis became Napoléon III. Perhaps there was a whiff of self-interest in such expressions of support, for Berlioz surely hoped that the Emperor would see to it that his works were performed and, more generally, that he would govern in a way that would be advantageous to the institutions controlling musical life in France. Such hopes were disappointed: Napoléon III was no more interested in music than Charles X or Louis-Philippe. But Berlioz's reactions were never motivated by self-interest alone, for age and experience, too, caused him to abandon certain youthful illusions.

Age and experience also lessened the virulent intensity of his creative imagination, for it is in his work from before 1848 that we find most of the innovations he brought to the art of music: the new kinds of orchestration – pianos used as orchestral instruments, basses played *divisi*, extreme high and low registers combined with no interior sonorities, brass fanfares played away from the orchestral mass, percussion sections augmented and diversified; the irregular rhythms, sometimes curiously superimposed; the substitution for traditional modulation by occasionally brusque tonal shifts – in short, the rejection of everything that Berlioz considered the "tyranny" of acquired habit (a rejection that opened the way to innovators such as Musorgsky and Debussy (for there are a number of passages in Berlioz that are indeed impressionistic) and especially to the great tradition-shatterers of the twentieth century, among them Stravinsky, Bartók, and Boulez.

In his work after 1848, we find abatement in his search for novelty. Despite what has been written, *L'Enfance du Christ* marks not a mutation of his aesthetic (as was claimed by certain critics of the time) but rather a cessation of his desire to conquer new worlds. And a work such as *Les Troyens* capitalizes upon previous discoveries more than it breaks new ground (as had the *Requiem*, *Roméo et Juliette*, and *La Damnation de Faust*). Only in isolated moments here is Berlioz the romantic of his youth; now he has become a classic in the broadest and most profound sense of the word.

All of this appears beneath the surface in the *Mémoires*, where Berlioz

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only hints at the evolution of his musical style, perhaps fearful of giving the impression – which he would have been horrified to do – of repudiating his earlier work.

What is abundantly clear, by contrast, is his capacity, while following the story of his life as a creator, to move from one strong emotion to another, and to cause these to be felt by the variety of his style and the freshness of his narration. These *Mémoires* are as vivid as any ever written. If Berlioz occasionally enters into technical detail regarding the worth of the different German orchestras or the evolution of the different wind instruments, if he is occasionally didactic (in a constructive way) regarding the courses that ought to be added to the curriculum of the Conservatoire, he nonetheless moves on quickly to something else, for he wants above all to change tempo and thus to keep the reader in suspense. Whether confronted with Shakespeare, Byron, Virgil, Schiller, or the Italian countryside, Berlioz writes with exalted lyricism; his lyricism becomes elegiac when he distantly recalls his first communion and his first meeting with Estelle; and it becomes dramatic when he relives the falling-out that he had with his mother. We sense a frenzied romanticism on reading such (untranslatable) expressions as "Mort et furies!," "Cinq cent mille malédictions!," "Sang et larmes!," "Feux et tonnerres!," "Extermination!" We feel his enthusiasm when he hears and analyzes the music of Weber, Mendelssohn, and Gluck; and we feel his virulence when he settles his accounts with the Institute, Italian music, Fétis, Castil-Blaze, Costa, and Girard – who mutilated the scores of the masters or who, out of personal interest, blocked his path.

Berlioz takes himself seriously as a musician, but he is able to laugh at himself as a man as he recounts a number of his experiences: learning to play the guitar and the flageolet as a child, dissecting corpses as a medical student, living penniless as a fledgling artist, witnessing the fiasco of the rehearsal of his first Mass, creating a scandal by shrieking out (with his band of conspirators) during a performance at the Opéra, watching the catastrophic performance of his Rome Prize cantata or the abortive first rehearsal of the *Symphonie fantastique*, auditioning as a chorister for the Théâtre des Nouveatés, planning vengeance against Camille Moke and attempting suicide on the Ligurian coast (from which he creates a chapter out of a comic novel), conversing happily about hunting in Italy, complaining bitterly about choral singing in Paris. Whenever possible he transcribes his conversations directly, in a theatrical manner. The humorous way in which he describes the reception he received from his colleagues at the Villa Médicis sounds like something out of Balzac: this kind of artist's joke can also be found in *La Rabouilleuse.* Also like Balzac is

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Berlioz's habit of imitating in prose the foreign accents of Cherubini and Guhr, or the Italian of the outlaw Crispino and of the wife of the Roman countertenor, or the elementary French spoken by the usher at the Institute. Berlioz reproduces his comical conversations with a policeman in Nice, with the directors of the Opéra and Théâtre Lyrique in Paris, and with various persons who came to him with extravagant requests for favors, but he also reproduces his more serious conversations with the King of Prussia and the King of Hanover, who bestowed upon him their compliments, and with Estelle Fornier, whom he loved until the end. He gives musical quotations when music communicates better than words. He is especially sensitive to contrast, such as that between the grandeur of Saint Peter's Cathedral and the insipid music that he heard there. He knows well how gradually to vary an atmosphere: one of the most admirable pages of the *Mémoires* may be found in the letter addressed to Liszt, from the *Travels in Germany*, where Berlioz recounts the anguish of his life as an itinerant composer who must constantly direct concerts in foreign cities with orchestras he does not know, the difficulty of preparing the materials, the desperation of the first rehearsals, and then, little by little, after four days of trial and tribulation, the mastery of the score and its triumphant performance under the baton of the composer who, filled with rapture, speaks of having "played the orchestra."

Such moments, when a long-meditated dream had become a carefully crafted work of art, were for Berlioz his true *raison de vivre*. In these singular *Mémoires*, where wisdom and enthusiasm, reflection and haste, gravity and humor, evasiveness and passion succeed one another with tremendous vitality and élan, let us recognize, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes more concealed, the image and the voice of an artist who was free, proud, truthful, and exacting: a prince.

Translated by Peter Bloom

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