

Book Review

Francesca Brittan, *Music and Fantasy in the Age of Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). xv + 357 pp. £94.99.

Poised at the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the worldly and the otherworldly, fantasy defies neat categorization. It is, as memorably depicted in the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, an aesthetic mode that transgresses the borders of all that is familiar, probing the strange, irrational side of human psychology. While studies in the fields of literary criticism and the visual arts have grappled with the ontological slipperiness of fantasy,¹ its aural dimensions, particularly in the context of nineteenth-century culture, have evaded sustained exegesis. Music, in Francesca Brittan's words, 'is the final hurdle, the most difficult medium to capture and theorize. But in the case of fantasy it is – quite obviously – crucial' (p. 4). In this thought-provoking and eloquently written book, Brittan more than rises to the challenge, capturing with imaginative flair the sound of fantasy in contexts that range from the magical and the oneiric to the demonic and the grotesque.

In the Introduction, which maps out the book's critical terrain, Brittan notes that her study is 'concerned with the ways in which music interfaced with literary and visual fantasy and, more pointedly, with fantasy's emergence as a compositional category' (p. 5).² To address these avenues of enquiry, she pursues a multisensory and multidisciplinary approach, inviting the reader to enter the 'interstitial space between reading, hearing, seeing, and sensing' (p. 5), a space from which one will emerge with a deepened understanding of the pervasive yet complex status of fantasy in the nineteenth century. Brittan encapsulates her methodology thus:

To discover where fantasy resides and how it works, we must be willing to ... slip from visual and musical discourses through literary, medical, philosophical, and technological ones, often occupying between-spaces. This kind of intermediality and disciplinary blurring can feel precarious, compromising our status as experts, forcing us into foreign or uncertain territory. But it is also emancipatory, allowing musicological questions to become broader inquiries about the nature of intellectual (poetic, magical, made-up) history (p. 13).

¹ See for example Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); David Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Roger Schlobin (ed.), *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); and Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Brittan notes that her use of the term 'fantastique' should be separated from fantasy (*phantasie, fantaisie*) as a musical genre. 'Fantastique as applied to Berlioz's work', she argues, 'was connected to a new kind of orchestral sound and a novel approach to magical representation rather than to the improvisatory procedures associated with the *stylus phantasticus*' (p. 6). For a complementary discussion of the latter, see Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), which, like Brittan's study, is published in the *New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism* series.

As this excerpt suggests, Brittan's aim is not to 'simplify or contain' fantasy (p. 5), but rather to explore the intricate ways in which fantasy intersected with developments in the wider world. It is precisely this critical sensitivity, her willingness to take intellectual risks and to embrace epistemological gaps, that marks *Music and Fantasy in the Age of Berlioz* as a *tour de force*.

Throughout the book, which comprises six main chapters,³ two well-known figures take centre stage: E.T.A. Hoffmann and Hector Berlioz, both of whom were time and again captivated by the allure of fantasy. In regard to the former, what interests Brittan is 'Hoffmann's role in establishing a framework – literary, visual, and especially musical – for French fantasy' (p. 6). She proposes that Hoffmann helped to usher in what French critics of the time understood as a "'modern" conception of the fantastic', one that referred not to 'imaginative worlds at large, but to a new form of rational enchantment first introduced in the literature and aesthetic theory of the late eighteenth century'; 'at its heart was a breakdown of entrenched barriers between reason and imagination, reality and the unreal' (p. 6). Against this backdrop, Brittan examines the ways in which Berlioz was 'bound up from the 1830s onward with fantastic rhetoric, positioned as the promulgator of a newly literary, Hoffmannesque, and more broadly "German" musical mode' (p. 5). Her central premise is that Berlioz's music, like the *contes fantastiques* of Hoffmann and his contemporaries, hovers 'between aurality and textuality', embodying a form of "'radical" sonorous experimentation whose very liminality was the marker of a fantastic modernity' (p. 12).

Chapter 1, establishing a backdrop for understanding nineteenth-century conceptions of the *fantastique moderne*, gravitates around a pivotal moment in the history of fantasy: Hoffmann reception in 1820s France. Though not the 'creator' of the fantastic, Hoffmann, as Brittan points out, 'sparked the first sustained theorization of the mode' in France, and soon became 'among the most-read and much-discussed authors of the moment' (pp. 17–18). Behind his fantastical tales lies what Brittan refers to as the 'destabilisation of language': 'his writing overstepped the boundaries of text, the literary spilling over into the musical, the semantic hovering on the edge of the purely sonorous' (p. 21). We learn that critics at the time were simultaneously drawn to and repelled by fantasy's curious ontology: Charles Nodier, for example, viewed it as 'the product of revolution, a mode shaped by violence and rupture, by the forceful dissolution of established social and aesthetic systems' (p. 21), while for Pierre Larousse it was a 'species of terror', a 'form of monstrous realism' (p. 24). Such views, which persisted throughout the century, encapsulate the transgressive nature of fantasy; it was seen and heard as something that hovered uneasily between the realm of imagination and the horrors of the real world.

These tensions are articulated in Chapters 2 and 3, which establish new contexts for interpreting Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, 'the flagship work of a burgeoning école fantastique' (p. 8), and its little-known sequel, *Le Retour à la vie*. Weaving together literary and medical perspectives, and moving freely (though not uncritically) between biography and music, Brittan locates the *Symphonie* (and Berlioz's

³ Chapters 2 and 6 are developed from the following articles: Francesca Brittan, 'Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography', *19th-Century Music* 29/3 (2006): 211–39; and Brittan, 'On Microscopic Hearing: Fairy Magic, Natural Science, and the *Scherzo fantastique*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64/3 (2011): 527–600.

personal correspondence from the time) at the intersection of *Sehnsucht*, 'the desire for an unattainable perfection, a lost plenitude' (p. 63), and monomania, whose primary symptom was the unhealthy fixation on a single idea. In this context, where metaphysical, literary and psychiatric discourses converge, fantasy becomes pathological, the product of intense yearning and self-estrangement. We need take only a small hermeneutic step to hear the famous *idée fixe* that haunts the *Symphonie* as a signifier of these ideals – it is, as Brittan tell us, at once an 'idealist' and 'medical' symbol, 'a melody with clear physiological resonances': 'its rapid undergirding heartbeat (the pulsing figures in the low strings) and jerky treble syncopations evoke a body convulsed with nervous energy, in the grip of physical distress' (p. 65). In Hoffmannesque fashion, the *idée fixe* falls prey to the condition of 'chronic dualism',⁴ simultaneously inviting and resisting identification as Berlioz's symphonic alter ego, and thereby suggesting an uncanny resemblance to the figure of the *Doppelgänger*, a fantastical trope *par excellence*, where identities become doubled and divided.

If the *Symphonie* constructs a mode of fantasy that revolves around pathologies of the fractured self, its sequel *Le Retour à la vie*, the subject of Chapter 3, is interpreted by Brittan as Berlioz's critical meditation on the 'terrible power of his *idée fixe*', a work in which he 'begins to situate his famous melody not just as a symptom of pathological yearning, but a signal of fantastic listening' (p. 94). He does so by conflating the supernatural with sounds drawn from the natural world, showing that the ideal is paradoxically grounded in an acute perception of the real.

Chapter 4, turning from pathology to semiotics, traces a connection between the grammatical disruptions of Berlioz's *fantastique* mode and wider innovations in literary form – innovations that were motivated by a desire to explore new semantic possibilities and alternative realities in the aftermath of the 1789 and 1830 revolutions. Particularly engaging is Brittan's focus on the emerging fascination with the aesthetic of the grotesque, which is characterized, as she notes in her exegesis of the Preface to Victor Hugo's *Cromwell*, by its 'free conflation of forms, images, shapes, and sounds' (p. 137). At its core is an emphasis on the subversion of beauty and the 'championing of ugliness, deformity, even vulgarity as legitimate subjects of literary depiction' (pp. 137–8). It is within this context that Brittan situates Berlioz's grammatical eccentricities, inviting us to hear afresh those instances of structural disorder, melodic disruption and rhythmic distortion in his music as markers of revolutionary fantasy steeped in the poetics of the grotesque.

Chapter 5, 'Listening in Hell', devotes attention to a darker, more disturbing mode of fantasy that belongs to the realm of the inferno: *the fantastique terrible*. As in previous chapters, Brittan takes the music (and critical writing) of Berlioz as her starting point, noting that his new formulation of the terrible fantastic was a 'product of a topical and more broadly stylistic and epistemological convergence, a new kind of permeability' (p. 208), rooted in the amalgamation of *ombra* and *exoticism*, two long-established systems of signification associated with horror and 'otherness'. Her reading of Berlioz's opera *Les Francs-juges*, Berlioz's first extended essay in the 'exotic-demonic interface' (p. 213), provides revealing insights into his compositional approach. Here, she illustrates how Berlioz fuses *ombra* tropes from the supernatural music of Mozart and Weber with Gluck's

⁴ For more on this concept, see Andrew J. Webber, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Chapter 3, 'Hoffmann's Chronic Dualisms'.

Scythians, notably their ‘trademark drum, cymbal, and piccolo clash’ (p. 209). Situating Berlioz’s music within this web of intertextual resonances allows Brittan to demonstrate that his portrayals of hell were not only ‘phantasmagorical’ but also a ‘quasi-ethnomusicological place’ that moved away from the ‘purely imaginary sound of older infernos toward a conflation of “natural”, exotic, and supernatural effects’ (p. 201). After identifying further convergences of ‘supernatural terror’ and ‘terrestrial savagery’ (p. 217) in Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust* and his *Harold en Italie*, Brittan turns her attention to a wider range of composers, among them Giacomo Meyerbeer, Charles Gounod, Arrigo Boito and Franz Liszt, exploring the absorption of exotic bacchanale into infernal scenes, the ‘final stage in this process of musical darkening’ (p. 250).

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those depictions of fantasy that proliferate within the domain of fairy music – an area that forms the focal point of the book’s final chapter, ‘Fairiology, Entomology, and the *Scherzo fantastique*’. Whereas the *fantastique terrible* is marked by its foreboding demeanour, fairy music, representative of what Berlioz termed the ‘gracious fantastic’, is distinguished by its dainty proportions and emphasis on miniaturism. The natural habit for such music, as Brittan shows, was the genre of the scherzo, demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in the third movement of Mendelssohn’s Octet, Op. 20 – where ‘a persistently quiet dynamic level, delicate ornamentation, and fleet contrapuntal elaboration’ work together to conjure a soundscape that blurs the boundaries between the sounds of fairies and those of insects (p. 276). What is striking about this chapter is the way in which Brittan weaves together music and science, drawing parallels between the intricately conceived worlds that take shape under the microscope and the fairy-insect fusions found in works ranging from the Overture to Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* to the fourth movement of Berlioz’s *Roméo et Juliette*. In so doing, she provides a new framework for hearing fantasy in the gaps between ‘artistic reverie and scientific reality’ (p. 325).

There is much to admire about *Music and Fantasy in the Age of Berlioz*. As will be clear from the commentary thus far, one of the most valuable aspects of the book is its interdisciplinary breadth, a sense of which can be gleaned from leafing through the wide-ranging bibliography. Brittan’s approach – which combines musical hermeneutics with forays into literary studies, the visual arts, cultural history, medicine and science – not only provides a vivid account of the ways in which fantasy permeated nineteenth-century life and culture but also encourages us to rethink how we approach music from this period more generally. Her study thus represents an important contribution to the ongoing mission of humanizing music history, whereby narratives framed in terms of ‘great works’ are dismantled in favour of an approach that emphasizes ideas, feelings and emotions. What completes the picture is the depth of thought that Brittan attaches to her subject and the rhetorical poise with which she (re)animates the novel sounds that Berlioz and his contemporaries created under the rubric of the *fantastique*.

A book as stimulating as this one will naturally spark new ideas, complementary perspectives, and fresh ways of thinking about the discipline. It is within this spirit of dialogue that the following thoughts are shared. At various points throughout the book I found myself contemplating the ways in which Brittan’s study potentially feeds into and builds on recent developments in scholarship on eighteenth and nineteenth-century music. While the originality of this book is clear from the outset, its scholarly purview might in places have benefitted from further reflection on its relationship to existing literature. In Chapter 2, for example,

more explicit engagement with studies by Matthew Head,⁵ Elisabeth Le Guin,⁶ and James Davies,⁷ which have explored the intermingling of music and medicine in this period, would have helped to situate the implications of her new contribution within a wider disciplinary context. Equally, in the analytical portions of the study, Brittan might have probed a little deeper into the musical materials, particularly in relation to the pathological reading of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, where the suggestion that the *idée fixe* functions as both a 'medical' and 'idealist' symbol invites closer semiotic and hermeneutic exploration. The same applies to the discussion of Berlioz's engagement with the grotesque in Chapter 4; this might have dwelled more deeply on the musical representation of ugliness, monstrosity and such processes as hybridity and metamorphosis, to enrich the analysis of syntactical distortions and grammatical imaginaries. Finally, I paused over the closing pages of the book, which end slightly abruptly with a discussion of Stravinsky's inheritance of nineteenth-century fantasy, and wondered if an epilogue might have been desirable, not least in terms of rounding off the study and allowing Brittan to bring together the various forms of fantasy encountered throughout the preceding chapters.

These small quibbles by no means detract from what is a rich and compelling contribution to nineteenth-century studies and musicology more broadly. Innovative in both its scope and outlook, Brittan's book has the potential to transform how we hear, see and interpret fantasy in the musical and artistic worlds that we inhabit in our daily lives.

Joe Davies
University of Oxford
joe.davies@music.ox.ac.uk

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⁵ See Matthew Head, 'C.P.E. Bach "In Tormentis": Gout Pain and Body Language in the Fantasia in A Major, H278 (1782)', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 13/2 (2016): 211–34.

⁶ See Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁷ See James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).