11 The criticism

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For Berlioz, music journalism was a double-edged sword: a financial necessity and a burden, on the one hand; an opportunity to make his views heard and to change public taste, on the other. During nearly four decades of activity as a music critic he left over nine hundred journalistic items ranging from opera and concert reviews to stories, discussions of aesthetics, and technical articles on conducting, organology, and pitch.[1] Musical insight and literary flair combined to produce a body of criticism unparalleled in its richness but tinged, for the modern reader, with the regret that in writing so much journalism Berlioz necessarily wrote less music. Yet in using criticism to justify his art, Berlioz was at the forefront of a nineteenth-century tradition presaged by E. T. A. Hoffmann and continued by both Schumann and Wagner – a tradition of educative and even propagandistic writing (at its Wagnerian extreme) that acknowledged and attempted to close the gap between avant-garde composition and a predominantly bourgeois public with considerable purchasing power but conservative taste.

The peril of such didactic writing lay in the critic's duty to denounce what he saw as artistically suspect, which in Berlioz's case meant the music of contemporaries almost all of whom were more commercially successful than he. As a critic of integrity, Berlioz had little option but to allow his readership to know, or at least to glean, his own points of view; as a composer in need of support from more established figures at the Opéra, Conservatoire, and Académie des Beaux-Arts, he could ill afford to be perceived as a petulant spoiler of reputations. Inevitably, the critic's mantle, which gave him the power to judge others (and a defensive "weapon," as he notes in chapter 47 of the *Mémoires*, without which he felt unacceptably vulnerable), became an obstacle to his own career. His central problem was that he canonized only the dead and lampooned too many of the living.

Although Berlioz contributed to a dozen newspapers during his journalistic career, his regular paid work came from only two, on which I shall concentrate here: the Bertin brothers' daily and politically mobile *Journal des débats*, for which he was music critic from 1835 (and, in addition, opera critic from 1837) until 1863; and Maurice Schlesinger's *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, on whose masthead his name appeared from its

foundation in 1834 until the year before his death. Readers who subscribed to the *Journal des débats* looked to the feuilleton running across the bottom of each page for light and largely non-technical relief from the weighty political matters discussed above. By contrast, the *Revue et Gazette*'s readers were both musically literate and, at least during Schlesinger's directorship (through 1846), part of an experiment to bring elements of German romanticism to French musical consciousness. Here, Berlioz's reviews were emblematic of a new aesthetic in which "professional" critics such as François-Joseph Fétis and Castil-Blaze were supplanted by artists – both literary and musical – whose authority to write about music came not from technical expertise but from first-hand experience of the processes of inspiration as applied to their own art.[2] In its bringing together of writers and musicians, the *Revue et Gazette* provided the ideal platform for a romantic idealist who had already, in articles dating from 1823 onwards, proved his literary ability.

The literary stylist

Berlioz's most poetic moments are to be found in his "admirative criticism" of heroes, particularly Beethoven and Gluck.[3] His role in such articles is not to judge the quality of the music directly, but rather to explain its beauties in such a way that a reader who has never heard it can nevertheless experience something of its effect through poetic description. The technique is characterized by certain recurring elements, which may be outlined as follows: sensitivity to rhythm in prose, often reflecting the overall shape of the music; an ability to suspend closure and build to a climax, thereby observing what Berlioz calls the *loi du crescendo* – "the law of crescendo";[4] a drawing in of the reader through exhortations such as "Listen!" or "See how . . .";[5] integration of technical explanations relating to harmony, instrumentation, and phrase structure into poetic prose; reference to the category of the romantic sublime, expressed either in terms of the listener's extreme emotional reaction, or by means of analogies of vastness and natural tempestuousness applied to the music itself;[6] interpolation of literary quotations, often from Shakespeare or Virgil; and, finally, an explicit distinction between Berlioz's own view and that of (postulated) uncomprehending philistines – a device that neatly interlocks with the drawing in of the reader by encouraging a sense of solidarity: critic and reader become fellow initiates.[7]

Such elements are thickly scattered in one of the centerpieces of Berlioz's criticism: the series of essays of 1837–1838 on the Beethoven symphonies.[8] In this limited space, a single example of their application,

from the essay on the Allegretto of the Seventh Symphony, must suffice. Here, Berlioz mirrors the effect of cumulative rhythm reaching towards a climax and, finally, dying away as the movement reaches its close. Such prose is so organically – one might even say contrapuntally – written as to be impossible to excerpt without doing violence to the overall sense.

> It is rhythm again, a rhythm as simple as that of the first movement but different in form, that is the chief source of the incredible effect produced by the Allegretto. It is merely a dactyl followed by a spondee, struck without cease, sometimes in three parts, sometimes in one, then in all parts together. Sometimes they serve as an accompaniment; often they hold center stage; now they furnish the first theme of the short episodic fugue with two subjects in the strings. The rhythm first appears *piano* in the lower strings, and is soon repeated in a *pianissimo* full of sadness and mystery. It then passes to the second violins, while the cellos sing a kind of lament in the minor mode. The rhythmic phrase keeps rising from octave to octave until it reaches the first violins; they transmit it by way of a crescendo to the winds in the upper regions of the orchestra, where it explodes with full force. Thereupon the songful lament, now stated more energetically, becomes a convulsive wail, and incompatible rhythms compete harshly one against the other. These are tears, sobs, entreaties; they express a boundless sorrow, an all-consuming anguish. But after these heart-rending strains a glimmer of hope appears: a nebulous melody, pure, simple and sweet, sad, resigned, *like patience smiling at grief.* The basses alone keep up their inexorable rhythm beneath this melodious rainbow. To borrow again from English poetry:
>
> > One fatal remembrance, one sorrow that throws
> > Its black shade alike o'er our joys and our woes.
>
> After alternating several times between anguish and resignation, the orchestra, as if exhausted by its arduous struggle, is reduced to playing only fragments of the main theme; then it collapses and dies away. The flutes and oboes take up the theme again but in a faint voice; they are too weak to complete it. It is the violins who do so with a few barely audible pizzicato notes, after which the winds, reviving suddenly like the flame of a dying lamp, breathe a sigh over an indecisive harmony and – *the rest is silence.*
>
> The plaintive cry that begins and ends the movement is created by a tonic six-four chord that tends always toward its resolution; its harmonic incompleteness is the only way of concluding so as to leave the listener in uncertainty and increase the impression of dreamy sadness inevitably produced by all that precedes.[9]

Close attention to the beginning of this passage reveals structural features related to those of the music itself: repetition, stasis, and short phrases. Like the famous repeated-note theme that opens Beethoven's movement, the phrases at the beginning of Berlioz's description are

cumulative, their internal structure delineated by direct repetition of individual words (such as "rhythm"), or by tripartite grammatical constructions involving either repetition ("sometimes . . . sometimes . . . then" – *tantôt . . . tantôt . . . puis*) or the use of parallel verbs with related modifiers ("Sometimes they serve . . . often they hold . . . now they furnish" – *quelquefois servant . . . souvent concentrant . . . ou fournissant*). Gestures similar to the 2 + 2 + 4 or AAB form of Beethoven's melody (one might wish to call it a "bar") are detectable not only in the two tripartite constructions mentioned (in which, it should be noted, the second follows directly from the first, thereby enhancing the rhythmic effect), but also in the first sentence, where the repetition of "rhythm" marks the second section of an AA′B structure with a parenthetical interpolation at the phrase "but different in form."

As Berlioz's attention shifts from analysis of the repeated-note theme to a consideration of the whole movement, two things happen: firstly, the taut structures of the opening give way to a more expansive narrative style devoid of internal repetition; secondly, the vocabulary becomes more emotive (the "songful lament," the "convulsive wail"), particularly with reference to the movement's lyrical elements. There is, however, no abrupt change, since Berlioz overlaps the beginning of the narrative ("The rhythm first appears") with the final phrase of his discussion of the repeated-note theme. Instead, there is a gradual acceleration and concomitant intensification – the *loi du crescendo* – as layer upon layer of poetic description leads from the static opening to the climactic reference to "all-consuming anguish" at the height of the movement. Such was the sophistication with which Berlioz could suggest the dynamics of music in prose.

But the Beethoven essays in *À travers chants*, rightly regarded by Berlioz and later commentators as the pinnacle of his critical art, are in fact unrepresentative of his criticism as a whole. Adapted from a set of reviews of concerts given by the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, they were, even in their original versions, a spectacular example of Berlioz's ability to turn a conventional review into an occasional piece in which he was able to indulge his own passions. Comment on other pieces on the Conservatoire's programs was squeezed out as he concentrated virtually all of his attention upon the Beethoven. For *À travers chants*, the process of winnowing was further taken to its logical conclusion. Such selectivity and reordering, practiced on a larger scale in *Les Soirées de l'orchestre* and *Les Grotesques de la musique*, present an image of Berlioz the critic which is self-consciously literary. To recapture the experience of Berlioz the critic rather than Berlioz the literary perfectionist we need rather to return to the original context of his work: the journalistic articles themselves.

In a glass house

Much as he would have liked to, Berlioz could not choose the subjects of his reviews. His position at the *Débats* forced him to cover a succession of second-rate works which were only occasionally interspersed with operas that moved him to genuine enthusiasm. In his criticism of weaker offerings he was aided by a tradition, stemming from the late eighteenth century (when opera criticism was written by drama critics), that caused readers of the *Débats* to expect that an analysis of the libretto would precede an evaluation of the music. On occasion Berlioz gave them little else, allotting approximately three-quarters of his review to the libretto and the remaining one-quarter to the score and the performance. Alternatively, Berlioz used the strategy of truth by omission: rather than evaluating a weak opera in its entirety, he found it more palatable to home in on a few discernible artistic peaks, leaving most of the music judiciously hidden in the clouds below. (Since space in the *Débats* was restricted, this practice could plausibly be defended as a practical necessity.[10]) Such *feuilletons du silence* in the face of low-grade yet potentially successful works featured throughout Berlioz's critical career, and formed part of an extensive repertory of critical ruses intended as exercises in damage limitation.

One of the most important among such ruses stemmed from Berlioz's genuine view that no composer could make up for the deficiencies of a weak libretto if he faithfully followed its dramatic implications (as he believed any opera composer should). The circular fatalism of such an argument was invaluable to Berlioz in that it offered him the opportunity to express disapproval of certain passages while absolving the musician of blame: application of the technique to the unblushingly decorative and static music for the opening of Act II of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, for example, meant that he could avoid reproving Paris's most influential opera composer (with whom he shared the favor of the publisher Maurice Schlesinger). Indeed, it became a perverse, if unconvincing, proof of Meyerbeer's dramatic capacity that he should have failed to turn undramatic verse into dramatic opera.[11] As late as 1862, we find the same procedure in a review of Gounod's *La Reine de Saba*:

> It seems to me that this libretto is difficult to set, and must have made the composer's job arduous. M. Gounod is such an adroit [*habile*] musician that he has nevertheless succeeded in conveying the main dramatic situations. It is not his fault if he has not always been able to avoid the pitfall of monotony.[12]

Neither passage leaves the reader in any doubt as to Berlioz's opinion, but an almost courtly decorum is nonetheless preserved.

Berlioz likewise attempted to maintain propriety, when reviewing works that tested his diplomatic skills, by employing a deft and imaginative vocabulary. While his reviews of favored works are replete with superlatives and sublime oxymorons intended to overwhelm the reader, those treating music of lesser quality (as Berlioz perceived it) engendered a less powerful vocabulary, of which the word *habile*, applied to Gounod, is a prime example. Yet such "secondary praise," to borrow Kerry Murphy's term,[13] loaded with sarcasm and obviously pejorative, was arguably more damaging to Berlioz's compositional future than even outright condemnation would have been. His main objects of derision were the established composers of opéras comiques: Auber, Hérold, Adam, and, from the next generation, Ambroise Thomas – composers who, in Berlioz's opinion, had presided over the degeneration into vaudeville of a once-noble French tradition.[14] The following demolition of Adolphe Adam's *Le Toréador*, from the *Journal des débats* of 9 June 1849, is typical of the genre.

> On this canvas – a highly amusing one, I assure you – and for scenes of dialogue constructed in an extremely witty fashion (though you would hardly guess so from reading my own retelling of them), M. Adam has embroidered [*brodé*] some fine and charming arabesques [*charmantes arabesques*]. His music is upbeat [*gaie*], vivacious, farcical, and even, when the subject demands it, agreeably demoralizing.

The vocabulary of "secondary praise" makes up at least ten per cent of Berlioz's prose, the words *broder*, *charmant*, and *gai* being among his commonly employed expressions. The undermining of each positive with a negative is also characteristic. Moreover the bathetic oxymoron that ends the passage subjects Adam to cruel ridicule in a reworking of the "fidelity to the libretto" principle, which offers his hapless victim no escape from humiliation. Even in deprecation Berlioz observed the *loi du crescendo*, in a mode of criticism which he recognized as self-destructive but could not quell.[15]

The significance of Berlioz's criticism

It is to Berlioz's awareness of this tension, and to his ultimate inability to resolve it, that we owe much of the poignancy of his concert and opera criticism. We may usefully turn to Berlioz as a chronicler of his times and as an interpreter of the music of his contemporaries, but we must keep in mind that he was chiefly a chronicler of himself. Was he really talking about the arch-classical Henri Reber when he reviewed four of

Reber's symphonies as published by Richault in 1861?[16] Given his Hoffmannesque descriptions of the nocturnal workings of inspiration and the trials of a serious composer trying to convince publishers and orchestras of the quality of his music, I think not. Reber has only a walk-on part in what could be a Berliozian self-portrait dating from the eighteen-thirties. The Beethoven essays of 1837–1838 are similarly autobiographical in that the details dwelt upon by the critic reveal something of the preoccupations of the composer as he prepared the dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette*: the use of thematic fragmentation to conclude a movement (the Funeral March of the *Eroica* Symphony and the Allegretto of the Seventh; Berlioz's opening crowd scene and *Roméo au tombeau des Capulets*); and the problem of finding a "bridge" to link the orchestral and choral portions of a symphonic work (the finale of Beethoven's Ninth; the dramatic symphony's orchestral and choral fugue on "Jetez des fleurs pour la vierge expirée"). Just as he wrote memoirs, confessional stories, and autobiographical compositions, so, too, did Berlioz use criticism to reflect on aspects of his own career.

The interdependence of composition and criticism meant that as soon as he ceased composing – his last significant work, *Béatrice et Bénédict*, was completed in 1862 – Berlioz was free to put down his critic's pen. In October 1863 he reviewed the young Georges Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs des perles*, given at the Théâtre Lyrique, and turned his closing paragraph into one last arrow aimed at the institution that had denied him operatic success in Paris:

> As for the Opéra, from time to time it puts on *La Favorite* and the other masterpieces in its immortal repertory. People are wrong to reproach it for offering nothing new: it has offered its resignation.[17]

But this time the protest was mostly rhetorical. For after forty years of struggle, Berlioz, too, had resigned.