

## 17 Berlioz and Wagner: *Épisodes de la vie des artistes*

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Glaub' mir – ich *liebe* Berlioz [...]: er *kennt* mich nicht, – aber *ich* kenne *ihn*.  
(WAGNER TO LISZT, 8 SEPTEMBER 1852)

Wagner est évidemment fou.  
(BERLIOZ TO HIS SON LOUIS, 5 MARCH 1861)

“Au Grand et cher auteur de *Roméo et Juliette*, l’auteur reconnaissant de *Tristan et Isolde*” – so reads the dedication on the copy of the full score of *Tristan* that Wagner sent to Berlioz, on 21 January 1860, accompanied by a brief and touching letter:

Cher Berlioz,  
Je suis ravi de vous pouvoir offrir le premier exemplaire de mon *Tristan*.  
Acceptez-le et gardez-le d’amitié pour moi.  
A vous.  
Richard Wagner.

“I am delighted to be able to offer you the first copy of my *Tristan*,” writes Wagner, who urges Berlioz to accept the score “as a token of friendship.” Such attentiveness is a small indication, I think, that even as a mature composer nearing his forty-seventh birthday, Wagner continued to regard Berlioz, then fifty-six, as his senior and by no means conventionally benevolent colleague.<sup>1</sup> In fact the gift was one of extraordinary generosity, both because this was indeed a first, and rare, pre-publication copy, sent by the publishers to Wagner only one week earlier, and because it was a costly item, whose list price of thirty-five thalers, or one hundred and forty-four francs, was equivalent at the time to the monthly income of many a professor, government functionary, or itinerant musician. What led Wagner to bestow such bounty upon Berlioz? And why, for Wagner, was the Frenchman still the “grand and dear author of *Roméo et Juliette*” – the now more than twenty-year-old dramatic symphony of 1839?

It may be because French Wagnerianism flourished in the period immediately following Berlioz’s death – in remarkable counterpoint with French Germanophobia – that subsequent generations have tended to pair Berlioz and Wagner as they have Bach and Handel (who were born in the same year) and Haydn and Mozart (who reached compositional maturity in the same decade). But apart from their differing views of the world (broached in Jacques Barzun’s contribution to this volume), the

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nature of the relations between the composer of *Roméo et Juliette* and the composer of *Tristan und Isolde* are best understood in light of the differences between their ages and between the trajectories of their careers.

### Early impressions

It is logical to assume that Wagner knew the name Berlioz well before arriving in Paris in 1839. If the winner of the Academy's Prix de Rome in 1830 was not mentioned in the vivid accounts of the July Revolution that made history "come alive" for the seventeen-year-old German reading the *Leipziger Zeitung*, he was mentioned in reports from Paris carried by such music journals as Leipzig's celebrated *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, where Berlioz's name occurs as early as December 1829, and later, in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, where, in July and August of 1835, Robert Schumann published his astonishing review of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Berlioz's overture to *Les Francs-Juges* was played in Leipzig in November 1836, but by then Wagner had left his native city for Königsberg, there to make preparations for his marriage to Minna Planner.

Three years later Wagner arrived in Paris, in the autumn of 1839, with letters of introduction provided by Meyerbeer to some of the city's musical luminaries. He first encountered Berlioz at Maurice Schlesinger's shop, in the rue de Richelieu, a meeting place and gossip-mill for musicians foreign and domestic,<sup>2</sup> and he soon attended one of the three successive performances, probably the first, of Berlioz's new dramatic symphony.<sup>3</sup> On p. 64 of the autograph of *Roméo et Juliette*, there is a note in Berlioz's hand that reads: "M<sup>r</sup> Wagner / rue Monmartre." The suggestion – even though Richard Wagner's official address at the time was 3, rue de la Tonnellerie (in the same neighborhood) – is that Wagner made himself known to Berlioz at a time when the composer, who conducted from the manuscript, had the score in hand.

*Roméo et Juliette*, the greatest success of Berlioz's career to date, was thus the first work of his that Wagner heard. Now, Wagner tells us that he experienced an epiphany on hearing the first three movements of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony rehearsed by the Société des Concerts in the first two weeks of December 1839 – perhaps on 7 December 1839, when Habeneck rehearsed something of Wagner's as well – but obviously the revelation was enhanced by hearing, at almost precisely the same time, Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*.<sup>4</sup>

Further works by Berlioz that were performed during Wagner's stay in Paris include the *Symphonie fantastique*, *Harold en Italie*, the overture and

Teresa's cavatina from *Benvenuto Cellini*, excerpts from the *Requiem*, the *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, *Sara la baigneuse*, *Le Cinq Mai*, the recitatives for *Der Freischütz* along with the orchestration (for the ballet) of Weber's *L'Invitation à la valse*, and the *Rêverie et Caprice*. In his three years in the French capital Wagner thus came into possession of almost the entirety of the repertory of Berlioz's most fertile decade. When he departed, on 7 April 1842, it was to prepare performances of the two operas he had miraculously managed to complete during what had been a period of such urgent financial need that he had even had to seek meager employment as a chorister in a popular theatre on the boulevard: "I came off worse than Berlioz when he was in a similar predicament," he later told Edward Dannreuther. "The conductor who tested my abilities discovered that I could not sing at all, and pronounced me a hopeless case all around."<sup>5</sup> *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* soon secured for their composer a brilliant reputation of his own, however, and a secure position as Kapellmeister at the court of the King of Saxony.

By curious coincidence, Berlioz, too, departed from Paris in 1842, in an official capacity, to investigate and report upon musical conditions in Germany, with assistance from the Ministry of the Interior, and in an unofficial capacity, to seek acceptance for his own brand of dramatically expressive instrumental music, to establish his reputation abroad, and thereby to improve his standing at home. Between December 1842 and May 1843 Berlioz visited the cities, some more than once, of Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hechingen, Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Weimar, Leipzig, Dresden, Brunswick, Hamburg, Berlin, Magdeburg, and Hanover. "Here I am, home from my long travels throughout Germany," he subsequently reported to his father, on 5 June 1843:

I am still extremely tired (which I would have been even had my efforts been less demanding) because in five months I directed fourteen concerts and forty-three rehearsals. Fortunately, the results of my labors were highly beneficial in terms of my musical reputation, and perfectly satisfactory in terms of my financial gain, which could not under the best of circumstances have been very great in view of the enormous expenses entailed by such a venture – one without precedent in the history of art. This musical journey created a tremendous stir in the German press and, as a result, in the French, English, and Italian presses as well. A composer traveling across Germany to mount and to direct by himself a series of concerts devoted exclusively to the performance of his own works is something that has simply never before been seen.

Berlioz then adds a note characteristic of such communications to his family, suggesting epigrammatically an artistic, financial, and political creed:

If I had been born in Germany, if I were Saxon, or Prussian, I would by now have a post guaranteed for life with a salary of ten or twelve thousand francs and a pension that would, after my demise, satisfy the needs of my family . . . In France I have . . . a liberal constitution.<sup>6</sup>

– a constitution, Berlioz goes on to say, whose “liberality” would allow to starve not only those who might shower honor upon their country (among them himself), but even those who might more coldly be seen as *materially* useful to it. In June 1843 it seems fair to conclude that he was still feeling the loss of his protector, the duc d’Orléans, Louis-Philippe’s eldest son and the heir to the throne, who had been killed the year before in an accident that deprived the country of a widely admired successor.

When he later made a formal report on his German trip to the Minister of the Interior, comte Duchatel, on 23 December 1843, Berlioz again voiced a concern for the welfare of the artist, this time less cynically, by accentuating the positive aspects of what he had just observed:

A pension plan for artists has been established at all of the German courts, and is responsible for the zeal and assiduousness with which their chapel services are conducted. Instrumentalists and chorus members there are paid livable wages and can count on a kind of future security that is simply unavailable to artists in France. The composer-chapelmaster is able to create and to reflect upon his creations without undue distraction. He does not have to compose in order to live: the sovereign upon whom he depends has rather made it possible for him to live in order to compose.<sup>7</sup>

With Berlioz’s favorable view of the princely support of the arts in mind, we may better read the specific account of his visit to Dresden, where he spent twelve days, from 7 to 19 February 1843, where he found resources richer than those available in many of the other German towns, where he conducted eight rehearsals and two concerts and, finally, where he encountered Richard Wagner – now on far more familiar turf and stable ground than during his years in Paris. On the 7th Berlioz heard the fourth Dresden performance of *Der fliegende Holländer*, under Wagner’s direction, and on the 19th he heard *Rienzi*, under the baton of the senior Dresden Kapellmeister, Carl Gottlieb Reissiger. In fact what he heard was *Rienzi’s Fall* – the last three acts of the original opera – which, like *Les Troyens* at a later date, was considered too long for one evening’s entertainment and was thus hewn in half.

Berlioz’s report from Dresden first appeared as an open letter in the *Journal des débats* of 12 September 1843: the “recipient” was Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, the German violinist whom Berlioz had known in Paris for some ten years. This letter was soon incorporated into his *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie* (1844), with some small changes, and was

later entered into the *Mémoires*. In it Berlioz speaks of Wagner in some detail, for the latter's first official duties had been to assist the visiting Frenchman with his rehearsals – something Wagner did, Berlioz tells us, “with zeal and excellent good will.” Berlioz describes Wagner's pleasure and “glowing satisfaction” when he was formally installed as associate master of the chapel, and goes on to speak of his work:

Having endured in France the untold hardships and all the mortifications that come when one is a little known artist, Richard Wagner, now back in his native Saxony, had the audacity to embark upon and the good fortune to complete the composition of both the words and music of a five-act opera, *Rienzi*. This work had a brilliant success in Dresden. It was soon followed by *Le Vaisseau hollandais*, a two-act opera whose theme is the same as that of *Le Vaisseau fantôme* (given two years ago at the Opéra de Paris), and for which he again wrote both words and music.<sup>8</sup> Whatever one's opinion of these works may be, it must be conceded that there are not many men capable of successfully accomplishing a double feat of this kind, and thus that M. Wagner has a remarkable capacity to focus interest and attention upon himself. This is precisely what the King of Saxony understood. And on the day that he gave to his senior Kapellmeister a colleague in the person of Richard Wagner, thereby guaranteeing the latter an honorable livelihood, lovers of art must have spoken to His Majesty the very words that Jean Bart replied to Louis XIV when the king informed the intrepid old sea-dog that he had appointed him commodore: “Sire, you have done well.”<sup>9</sup>

Here Berlioz underlines the still remarkable fact that the librettos of *Rienzi*, premiered in Dresden on 20 October 1842, and *Der fliegende Holländer*, premiered there on 2 January 1843, one month before Berlioz's arrival, are among the first written by *any* composer of the music. (Wagner was already, of course, the “double” author of *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot*.) But he more prominently underlines the action of Friedrich August II, King of Saxony from 1836 to 1854, to whom he returns in the following paragraph: “we must honor the enlightened king who, by according [Wagner] his active and total protection, has in effect saved a young artist of rare talents.”

Wagner himself, aware of the possible servitude to which such a position might condemn him, and awake to the psychological distance between campestrial Dresden and cosmopolitan Paris, had at first been fearful of accepting it. But three months after doing so he would write proudly to his friend Samuel Lehrs, in Paris, that “I now have tenure for life with a handsome salary [of 1,500 thalers, or 5,550 francs per annum] and the prospect that it will continue to increase, and I control a sphere of influence such as has been granted to few men.”<sup>10</sup> In the same letter (of 7 April 1843) Wagner speaks of King Friedrich August as “an honest man

with none of the usual airs and graces, but totally sincere in his approach to everything,” and as taking in his new Kapellmeister “a genuine and good-natured delight.”

Thus, when he likened Friedrich August’s promotion of Wagner to Louis XIV’s promotion of the celebrated seaman Jean Bart (1650–1702) – whose disarmingly simple manners had so charmed the King and his court at Versailles that he was able to use without offense the now celebrated phrase, “Sire, vous avez bien fait” – Berlioz’s judgment was sound. In fact Berlioz enjoyed likening *himself* to Jean Bart: he did so, for example, when he invited the duc d’Orléans to his concert of 25 November 1838,<sup>11</sup> and he did so again, in 1853, when he imagined what he would have said to Napoléon had the Emperor required a command performance of the *Requiem* – which is, he told Franz Liszt on 23 February, what “Jean Bart replied to Louis XIV: ‘Sire, vous avez raison.’” Berlioz’s leitmotivic use of the saying is a sign of his awareness, I think, that a cantata in honor of Jean Bart was commissioned in 1845, for the inauguration of the statue in the Atlantic city of Dunkerque that to this day speaks of Jean Bart as its “glorious son.” More broadly, it is a sign of his sincere respect for enlightened aristocratic patronage.

It may seem odd that Berlioz’s writerly account of his encounter with Wagner is nowhere prefigured in his private correspondence immediately contemporary with the visit to Dresden. But he was busy with rehearsals in Leipzig and even found it necessary to take the morning train to Dresden (on 2 February 1843), to make concert arrangements there, and to return to Leipzig on the same afternoon – “Puissance des chemins de fer!” he exclaimed to his father on 14 March, impressed as he was by the rail line that, since only 1839, spanned those now diminished seventy miles. He was also under surveillance by his traveling companion, Marie Récio, with whom relations were mercurial and public appearances awkward. Correspondence of the period is in any event somewhat cautious and restrained.

Eleven years later Berlioz flirted seriously with an invitation to become Kapellmeister in “Wagner’s” Dresden, in the spring of 1854, when he gave four concerts there and planned a revival of *Benvenuto Cellini*. The opera was not performed, however, and Berlioz did not become master of the chapel. The senior Kapellmeister was still in office, and Berlioz – whose high regard for Reissiger stands in stark contrast to Wagner’s carping estimation of the talent of his superior officer – presumably wished neither to encroach upon Reissiger’s position nor to accept one of subordinate status. Furthermore, Dresden was still a relatively undeveloped backwater, despite Berlioz’s assertions of the excellence of its musical establishment. Did a sufficiently generous offer not materialize due to the accidental death of the king? Like Berlioz’s earlier patron, the duc

d'Orléans, Friedrich August II, too, was killed in a fall from a carriage, on 9 August 1854. For Berlioz, this was “a fatality worthy of the ancients.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no indication that the composer pursued the matter with Johann, Friedrich August's brother, who now became King of Saxony. Marie, Berlioz's wife since 19 October 1854, and her mother, the Frenchified Spaniard whose company Berlioz would later come to appreciate, were probably little inclined to expatriate. And Berlioz's election to the Académie des Beaux-Arts two years later made the question of any such emigration academic, for members of the Institute had to reside in France. It seems nonetheless clear that Berlioz, in the eighteen-fifties, was temperamentally more suited to become a Saxon court musician than had been Wagner, in the eighteen-forties. How odd that Wagner, in the eighteen-sixties, should become the God-sent “child of Heaven” to the twenty-year-old King of Bavaria.<sup>13</sup>

### Artistic rapports

To trace the impact of Berlioz on Wagner (aware that there are no certainties in matters of “influence”) it would seem appropriate to start with the scores the German composer was drafting when he first encountered the Frenchman's music in Paris in the winter of 1839 – the overture on Goethe's *Faust* (completed on 12 January 1840) and the operas *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer*. Of these much-written-about works let me set down here only some suggestions I have not seen elsewhere. The overture to *Rienzi* begins quite remarkably with a single note from the trumpet, the fifth of the triad on D that is the tonic of the work as a whole. The only prior instances of this procedure that I am aware of occur in Weber's *Oberon* Overture (1826), and in Berlioz's own *Waverley* Overture (1828), the latter having been published in Paris in the autumn of 1839, and probably come to Wagner's notice when he was working on *Rienzi*. The decorative turns with which the strings punctuate the presentation by wind and brass of the *Rienzi* Overture's principal D-Major theme (bars 50–65) might furthermore have been lifted from the passage in the first movement of *Harold en Italie* (given contemporaneously in Paris, on 6 February 1840) in which Berlioz's orchestra for the first time takes up the soloist's *idée fixe* (from bars 73 to 84).

It is for employing such *idées fixes* (tranquilly in *Harold*, obsessively in the *Fantastique*) that Berlioz was already celebrated in 1839, and many have proposed that herein lie the origins of the emblem of Wagner's larger aesthetic experiment, the leitmotif. But the French composer was even more satisfied, I think, by the deployment, at moments of dramatic intensity, of a combination of two earlier, vital tunes, which he troubled to label

as a *réunion*. In the finale of the *Fantastique*, for example, we see the explicit notation “Dies Irae et Ronde du Sabbat *ensemble*”; in the finale of the second tableau of *Benvenuto Cellini*, we hear three separately announced ideas openly and artfully combined in the following delightful episode;<sup>14</sup> and in the second movement of *Roméo et Juliette* (at bar 226), we see the principal melody of the *Fête chez Capulet* combined with an earlier conspicuous melody of leisurely pace into an unabashed “*réunion des deux thèmes, du Larghetto et de l’Allegro*.”

For Act V of *Rienzi*, Wagner sketched a similar *réunion des thèmes* that consisted of the melody of *Rienzi’s Prayer*, at the opening of the first scene (used in the overture), and a version of the opening melody of the subsequent duet between the title character and his sister, Irene. Wagner abandoned the sketch, as John Deathridge has shown, because he could not bring these tunes into harmonious unity.<sup>15</sup> He did manage an effective superimposition in Act III of *Der fliegende Holländer*, when the Norwegian sailors attempt to drown in sound the Dutchman’s motley crew. By transforming an exercise in academic counterpoint into a moment of dramatic expression, was Wagner paying homage to Berlioz? The Frenchman was famously antipathetic to schoolmasterish rules yet filled his scores with fugue and fugato. Wagner, too, later wrestled overtly with the question of musical law and liberty in what became *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

For many observers, Berlioz’s most obvious role as a model for Wagner was as a student of novel and expressive instrumental sonorities and (in Berlioz’s words) as a “player of the orchestra.” The one hundred musicians of Berlioz’s *Roméo et Juliette* orchestra of 1839, with its eight harps, off-stage choirs, and other spatial effects, could not have failed to impress Wagner, whose previous experience was with orchestral ensembles of classical proportion. The expansion of the orchestra that we witness in *Der fliegende Holländer* was, for Eduard Hanslick, an imitation of “the gaudiest achievements of Meyerbeer and Berlioz.”<sup>16</sup> But for Richard Strauss, revising the *Traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes*, Berlioz’s orchestration was “full of ingenious visions [. . .] whose realization by Richard Wagner is obvious to every connoisseur.”

Interrogating Berlioz’s later musical influence upon Wagner is to be recommended as edifying and non-addictive. Seeking Berlioz’s literary influence upon Wagner should be equally productive. The latter we may sense in as early a piece as Wagner’s first fictional essay, *Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven*, which initially appeared in French as *Une Visite à Beethoven*. In November and December of 1840, readers of Maurice Schlesinger’s *Revue et Gazette musicale* would have immediately recognized the explicitly Berliozian resonance of Wagner’s subtitle – *Épisode de la vie d’un musicien allemand* – echoing that of Berlioz’s first symphony, *Épisode de la vie d’un artiste*.



## Social calls

Wagner later saw Berlioz on visits to Paris in 1849, 1850, and 1853, and Berlioz, after Dresden, heard much about Wagner during his visits to Weimar in 1852 and 1854. They exchanged few letters, but their communications with Franz Liszt made it inevitable that the one always knew what the other was up to. Wagner and Liszt spoke of Berlioz on more than two dozen occasions in the decade after 1851, and Liszt did not hesitate to quote from Berlioz's letters in his correspondence with his German colleague.<sup>17</sup>

It was in London, in the spring of 1855, when Berlioz was engaged as conductor to the New Philharmonic Society, and Wagner to the Old, that they had their closest meeting of minds. After Wagner's last concert, on 25 June 1855, Berlioz and Marie went to see him with five other friends. All returned to Wagner's rooms, conversed, drank champagne punch, and departed, after effusive embraces all around, at three o'clock in the morning. How did the *maestri* converse? One witness, whose observations ring true, tells us that "Berlioz was reserved, self-possessed, and dignified," and that his "clear, transparent delivery was as the rhythmic cadence of a fountain," while "Wagner was boisterous, effusive, and his words leaped forth as the rushing of a mountain torrent."<sup>18</sup> Wagner's gift for self-dramatization was clearly manifest in person, and Berlioz found him full of enthusiasm, warmth, and heartfelt emotion. Indeed, the Frenchman was deeply moved even by Wagner's passionate outbursts (*ses violences*),<sup>19</sup> while his own gift for self-dramatization was usually more apparent in writing. Wagner tended to take his vantage point at the top of the mountain; Berlioz, at the edge of the grave.

What did they talk about on that Monday evening in London? Women? In the presence of Marie and Mme Praeger, this is unlikely. Birds? Like Flaubert and Courbet, Berlioz had a pet parrot at one time or another, and so, too, did Wagner. (Later, in 1878, Wagner chose "Berlioz" as the name of a pet rooster.<sup>20</sup>) Critics? Berlioz pilloried the leading Parisian critic of the eighteen-twenties and thirties, F.-J. Fétis, in his *méologue*, *Le Retour à la vie*; Wagner lampooned the leading Viennese critic of the eighteen-sixties, Eduard Hanslick, in a (not-final) version of the libretto of *Die Meistersinger*. Both composers did so under the rubric of comic relief, but both critics reacted with whatever is the opposite of good humor.

Did they talk about Jews? Among others, Dieter Borchmeyer has argued that Wagner's anti-Jewish sentiments were more French than German in origin, having been stirred up during his first, celebratedly miserable sojourn in Paris, and by the sometimes open hostility expressed by such friends of Berlioz as Vigny and Balzac.<sup>21</sup> But Berlioz would

presumably hear nothing of Wagner's animadversions *contra* Meyerbeer, with whom the French composer long remained on perfectly cordial terms.

Conducting? This is a point of critical importance, for the two men's approaches set the stage for much future interpretive debate (Berlioz conducted from score, Wagner from memory). The young pianist-conductor Karl Klindworth, among the guests, would have lent an ear to such a discussion, but in the competitive circumstances that prevailed in London in 1855, the subject was probably too hot to handle. Violinists? Wagner's host and concertmaster, Prosper Sainton, was among the company; perhaps they talked of *tremolo*. Oboe players? This is not as silly as it sounds, for Wagner's former oboist in Dresden, Rudolf Hiebendahl, was at precisely that moment applying legal pressure to obtain repayment of a loan he had made to the composer some ten years earlier.<sup>22</sup> Berlioz could not have forgotten this fellow, for it was he who had spoiled the *Scène aux champs* by adding trills and grace-notes to the off-stage solo that opens the third movement of the *Fantastique* when Berlioz gave the work in Dresden in 1843. (Warned against executing such melodic niceties, Hiebendahl refrained from doing so at the rehearsals, but let loose again at the concert, knowing that in the presence of the king, Berlioz would not punish such perfidy in public.<sup>23</sup>)

Did they talk about the piano? Berlioz seems always to have had one – he had purchased a spinet in his student days in the eighteen-twenties, and in 1851 took possession of a rosewood grand that was a gift from Pierre Érard. Mme Érard bestowed a similar gift upon Wagner, in 1858. In fact neither man composed at the instrument: Berlioz, who did not play fluently, sometimes plunked out a few notes; Wagner, who did, used the piano primarily to test what he had composed at his desk.<sup>24</sup>

Did they talk about books? Berlioz was an avid reader of *literature*, while Wagner preferred history and philosophy. To understand the sources of Wagner's inspiration we must read Feuerbach and Schopenhauer; to plumb the wellsprings of Berlioz's imagination, we must plunge into Chateaubriand, Hugo, and Vigny, to say nothing of Virgil and Molière, which he knew by heart.

We can be fairly sure that they talked about Beethoven – hoping individually to gain by the comparison – and we can be sure that they talked about Liszt, that great mid-century friend and advocate of both. A reading of Berlioz's letter to Liszt of 25 June, and of Wagner's letter to Liszt of 5 July, suggests that the two had finally come to understand one another. Berlioz says that “on his word of honor” (as though in some way hoping to reassure Liszt), “I believe that [Wagner] loves you every bit as much as I do, myself.” Wagner, reporting ten days later, admits that he had

discovered a Berlioz quite different from the one he had earlier imagined – a veritable *Leidensgefährte*, a companion in misfortune.

### Late reflections

In the ensuing years, as Wagner developed from an extraordinary composer of romantic opera into the unparalleled creator of music drama, and from a wandering fugitive into the eventual “savior” of the Bavarian monarch, relations with Berlioz inevitably cooled. The Frenchman’s later years were clouded by ill health and by the ill fortunes of *Les Troyens*, which ought to have crowned his success. And yet when Berlioz died, on 8 March 1869, Wagner (who appears to have received the news on the 11th) felt compelled to memorialize the occasion. On 14 March Cosima noted in her diary that the obituaries they had read were embarrassed, or confused (*verlegen*). On 7 April (by which time she may have been reading the *Mémoires* – an advance copy seems to have been given to the couple by their French friend, the writer Édouard Schuré), she wrote that Wagner “is quite unable *now* to write about Berlioz. He would have liked to do it, and the impact of such an essay would perhaps have been good, but nobody should expect it of him.”<sup>25</sup>

Cosima’s emphasis on the word *jetzt* suggests that Wagner had recently begun but failed to realize a substantial necrology. Of this we have only what appears to be the prologue – undated, but presumably written in early April 1869. It is a tortured piece of writing in the original German, and it is equally convoluted in William Ashton Ellis’s translation. I offer a paraphrase of the first, full-to-bursting sentence:

Even if, during his lifetime, a person has been discussed in generally negative terms, it is still our sacred duty, after his death, to speak about him in a positive manner. And yet, to ensure that posterity not be misled, we must also assume the distressing obligation of exposing as false some of the flattering images of the man, which he, himself, had done much to encourage.<sup>26</sup>

This is followed by a straightforward thought: were the true worth of an artist easy to assess, the making of a proper judgment would be unproblematical. But the making of a proper judgment is especially difficult when the *impact* of an artist is dubious, or suspicious (*zweifelhaft*) – even when certain qualities of his work are beyond question (*unzweifelhaft*).

Wagner underlines the tendency of posterity to inflate previous appraisals, and urges those who wish to behold what is beautiful and significant in purely human terms to make judgments without the

constraints of *any* particular historical period. “We choose Hector Berlioz,” he writes, “to try to gain from his example the kind of disinterested judgment that transcends time and circumstance.”

Here ends the fragment. Was this in fact to be an obituary? Or, as one might gather from the “we choose” phraseology, was it to be a treatise on the philosophy of criticism? In either case, it is a prolegomenon to something obviously conflicted and bittersweet. Wagner had always found “uneasiness,” “chaos,” “confusion,” and “mistakes” in the work of Berlioz, and yet now – as in 1852, when he told Liszt, “Believe me, I *love* Berlioz, even though he distrustfully and obstinately refuses to come near me: he does not *know* me, but I know *him*” (I give the original in the epigraph of this chapter)<sup>27</sup> – even now, in 1869, he was clearly drawn to the French composer. In May of that year he read Berlioz’s *Mémoires* with considerable sympathy, and told his companion that the book had “strengthened his resolve never again to have anything to do with Paris.”<sup>28</sup> Six months later Wagner was writing his treatise on conducting – the first of any importance since Berlioz’s *L’Art du chef d’orchestre* of 1855. Is the French musician’s conspicuous absence from *Über das Dirigieren* (1869) a paradoxical sign of his presence in Wagner’s imagination? Be this as it may, for years thereafter, Berlioz was a topic of conversation between Richard and Cosima, whose diaries are filled with fascinating *aperçus* – complimentary, critical, contradictory – regarding both the man and his music.

That music, Wagner knew well. It was presumably during his years in Dresden, when he amassed a considerable library, that Wagner began purchasing Berlioz’s published scores. By the end of his life, he possessed an impressive collection of first editions, as we know from the current Berlioz holdings in the Wagner museum at Wahnfried, which include the *Symphonie fantastique*, *Harold en Italie*, the *Requiem*, *Roméo et Juliette* (in both full score and in Theodor Ritter’s piano reduction), the *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, *La Damnation de Faust*, the *Te Deum*, and the overtures *Le Roi Lear*, *Benvenuto Cellini* (in both full score and in Fumagalli’s piano arrangement), and *Le Carnaval romain*. Wagner also possessed the Witzendorf edition of Liszt’s arrangement of the *Symphonie fantastique*, the first edition of the *Mémoires* (as we have seen), and the *Instrumentationslehre* as translated by Alfred Dörfel.

The precise contents of Berlioz’s library have never come to light. The only works by Wagner that we may be certain were in his possession are *Lohengrin* (which I mention in the introduction to this volume, and which Berlioz mentions in his letter to Wagner of 10 September 1855) and *Tristan* (with which we began this inquiry). In Paris in 1860 Wagner offered the latter score to Berlioz as a tribute to his colleague and rival whose work he had attempted to transcend –

Does the “confession of love” motif at the beginning *Tristan* (A<sup>2</sup>) evolve from what Berlioz called *Roméo seul* (A<sup>1</sup>) at the opening of the second movement of the dramatic symphony? Does the “magic casket” motif of Wagner’s opera (B<sup>2</sup>) derive from the second half (B<sup>1</sup>) of the love theme from Berlioz’s *Scène d’amour*? Does Isolde’s “Mild und leise” (C<sup>2</sup>) arise from the extended melody (C<sup>1</sup>) between Berlioz’s *Roméo seul* and *Grande Fête chez Capulet*?

**Andante malinconico e sostenuto**

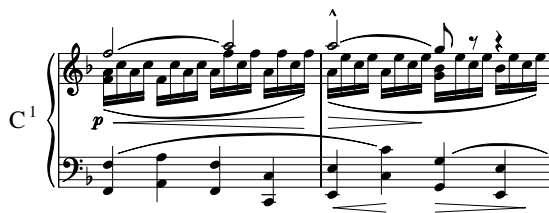
A<sup>1</sup> 

**Adagio (langsam und schmachtend)**


A<sup>2</sup> 

B<sup>1</sup> 

B<sup>2</sup> 

C<sup>1</sup> 

ISOLDE

C<sup>2</sup> 

Mild und lei - se wie er lä -

– and in the hope of winning both the French composer’s private affection and public approval of a radically new musical style. But Berlioz’s approval (his influential column, that is, in the influential *Journal des débats*) could never be purchased, not even by the elegant gift of the handsome new score of *Tristan*. While he reacted in many favorable ways to parts of *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin* (whose overture he considered a *chef-d’œuvre*), Berlioz could not find it in his heart – because he could not find it in his *ear* – to lavish praise upon *Tristan*, whose prelude, soon to become the most intensely scrutinized hundred bars in the entire musical canon, he failed to grasp.

What Berlioz wrote in reaction to the prelude – “I have read and reread this curious page; I have listened to it with scrupulous attention and with a sincere desire to discover its meaning; but alas, I must admit that I do not yet have the slightest idea of what the author was attempting to do” – has caused him to become known as one of Wagner’s detractors. But if we read and reread this sentence, we see that it is not mere disparagement, for the crucial words *pas encore* (“not yet”) suggest that Berlioz understood the possibility that the deficiency was not Wagner’s, but *his*. It is well to remember that the dissonances at the opening of the finale of the Ninth Symphony – hardly a work that the French composer abhorred – caused Berlioz to use a quite similar formula: “I have long sought the reason for this idea, but I am compelled to admit that it remains to me inexplicable.”<sup>29</sup>

The remainder of the article on Wagner deals with the so-called “music of the future”; here, too, Berlioz’s objections, read coolly, are directed not so much at Wagner as at the “religion” of *la musique de l’avenir*, to whose prophets he would say *non credo*. Like Rossini, whose music Berlioz respected but whose proselytes he disdained, Wagner was for Berlioz a man to be reckoned with, the Wagnerians, men to be spurned.

Of the many aspects of this multi-dimensional relationship – almost all of the stories you might wish to tell can be told along with the story of Berlioz and Wagner – let me reiterate one that brings both men together. This concerns the phenomenon that so impressed Berlioz on his initial encounter with *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* – Wagner’s two-fold authorship of the text and the music. The encounter surely added fuel to the fire that eventually led Berlioz, too, to compose his own librettos. In this way Berlioz was able to give his music “the first and final say,” as Katherine Kolb has persuasively written, “while simultaneously declaring the text so crucial that the composer alone could be relied on to do it justice.”<sup>30</sup>

Would Richard Wagner have put it this way? In the eternal debate over

the primacy of the one or the other, he tended, at least in theory, to exclaim *prima le parole, dopo la musica*. He diagnosed Berlioz's problem as advocating the opposite, as we see in his letter to Liszt of 8 September 1852, with its analysis of the weakness of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* couched in explicit sexual imagery that a "new" musicologist might wish to pursue:

If ever a *musician* needed a *poet*, it is Berlioz, and it is his misfortune that he always adapts his poet according to his own musical whim, arranging now Shakespeare, now Goethe, to suit his own purpose. He needs a poet to fill him through and through, a poet who is driven by ecstasy to violate him, and who is to him what man is to woman.<sup>31</sup>

It is true that the libretto of *Benvenuto Cellini*, like those of the dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette* and the dramatic legend *La Damnation de Faust*, fails to rise to Goethean or Shakespearean heights. (*Les Troyens* and *Béatrice et Bénédict* were not yet written.) What is striking is Wagner's "solution" to Berlioz's "difficulty": that he take over Wagner's *own* prose outline of the story of *Wieland der Schmied*, the three-act mythical-legendary-Germanic-heroic opera sketched in the winter of 1849–1850 and abandoned in favor of the Nibelungs. We may find this ludicrously self-centered, for Berlioz, who contemplated setting many tales, was unlikely to warm to such a subject.<sup>32</sup>

But Wagner was perfectly serious. More droll, Wagner suggests that the French libretto of *Wieland* be prepared by, of all persons, Henri Blaze. Now, it is not clear whether Wagner refers to Berlioz's predecessor at the *Journal des débats*, the critic known as Castil-Blaze, or to his son, Henri Blaze de Bury. For Berlioz, both were incarnations of all that was wrong with French musical life – the former because of his arrangements of Mozart and Weber, which Berlioz called *dérangements* and *castilblazades*; the latter because of his "De l'école fantastique de M. Berlioz," a misguided essay that itemized Berlioz's "faults" in an insidious way that misinformed an entire generation.<sup>33</sup> Wagner may have liked Berlioz, he may have admired and felt sympathy for him, but he did not *know* him, contrary to what he explicitly claimed to Liszt, for no one who knew him could possibly have suggested that he traffic with a Blaze.

Wagner's diagnosis of the converse, however, was wise: "How unfortunate for me that you do not understand German," he wrote to Berlioz on 6 September 1855, recognizing that on that account he would always remain a stranger to the French composer. Throughout his lifetime Wagner was consumed with the question of "Was ist deutsch." And because he saw his own music as "merely an illustration" of the poem and the underlying poetic concept – the *poetische Entwürfe* – he assumed that

Berlioz would always be estranged from his music as well. Berlioz replied sympathetically – with humor, without linguistic chauvinism, without philosophical baggage:

In *true* music, there are accents that require their particular words, and there are words that require their particular accents. To separate the one from the other, to give equivalents that are merely approximate, is to have a puppy suckled by a goat and vice-versa.<sup>34</sup>

## Afterword

Near the end of the love scene in Act II, Tristan and Isolde entreat the love-night (*Liebesnacht*) to bring about their love-death (*Liebestod*) – the desired fruit of their love-passion (*Liebeslust* – the last word of the scene). Because German loves *Liebes*-compounds, let us choose *Liebesangst* to represent Wagner's feelings about Berlioz. The gift of *Tristan* was no doubt a display of affection. But it is also possible to see it as a demonstration of anxiety, which he expressed candidly to Liszt, and which resulted in part from what he called "his horrible French."<sup>35</sup> The psychological state in which Wagner encountered Berlioz was manifest in his larger encounter with the French nation, which now he would now adopt, now he would defeat. How curious that, unlike Berlioz's later reception (warm abroad, mixed in France, everywhere free from ideological excess), Wagner's afterlife – from the time of Nietzsche to the time of the Holocaust and beyond – should become an incarnation of *Liebesangst* itself.