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Music History 352

Dr. McKnight

Research Paper Draft

It has been said that Hector Berlioz was one of the most unappreciated and misunderstood composers of the nineteenth century. He presented something of a paradox to the nineteenth century listener, in that he was a quintessentially Romantic composer, yet his music was so original and so different from most popular music of the day that many lacked the patience or the courage to recognize it as a true art form. This was especially true in Paris, the city he called home for his entire adult life. Unfortunately for him, Paris was one of the only places where Berlioz' music did not become wildly popular. He was successful there only with productions of other composers' works.

Berlioz was one of the first to advance the idea that expression is the main point of music, and that all aspects of a piece should combine to serve the composer's expressive purpose. His contemporary and good friend Franz Liszt applauded Berlioz' "erupting crater of genius." (Barzun, 236-7) Although he was markedly different from his contemporaries in musical style, he was very similar in his possession of Romantic ideals, such as passion, individualism, imagination, and a reverence for Nature. William Blake accurately described the Romantic aesthetic with the words, "The road of Excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Although Berlioz' music reflects his predisposition for extremes, "a discussion of Berlioz' style is hampered by the extreme degree to which his

work resists categorization.” (Rushton, 11)

Berlioz’ music was intimately connected to the events of his life and his Romantic ideals, including his incredibly volatile emotions. He was born in the small and closely-knit town of La Cote-Saint-Andre on December 11, 1803, the firstborn child of a wealthy doctor named Louis-Joseph Berlioz. His father was well-known throughout France’s southeastern province of Dauphine as a medical innovator and philanthropist. He also took on the responsibility of educating his five children, during which time Hector’s favorite subjects were classical literature and music. Louis-Joseph had always wished that his son would also choose a career in the medical profession. When Hector was 17, his father sent him to the Ecole de Medecine, despite his intense desire to enter a music conservatory.

In the following two years of medical instruction at the prestigious Paris institution, Hector made his disdain for medicine clear:

“Take part in horrible operations-- instead of giving myself body and soul to music, sublime art whose grandeur I was beginning to perceive! Forsake the highest heaven for the wretchedest regions of earth, the immortal spirits of poetry and love and their divinely inspired strains for dirty hospital screams of patients, the groans and rattling breath of the dying! No, no! It seemed to me the reversal of the whole natural order of my existence.” (Holoman, 385)

To describe music as the “highest heaven” and medicine as “the wretchedest regions of the earth,” is a definite sign of his Romantic tendency towards excess. Indeed, his volatile emotions can be witnessed first-hand in one letter to a friend, sent in the summer of 1828:

“How alone I feel. My muscles are palsied as in those about to die. ...Space, absence, forgetfulness, pain, and rage assailed me. Despite all my efforts, life escapes me, I only catch shreds of it. ...Yet my blood flows through my veins as before; my heart beats as if full of joy. Come to think of it, I am in excellent form. Let us cheer up, by gad, cheer up.”

(Barzun, 70-1)

If modern psychologists read this letter, Berlioz would surely be diagnosed with bipolar disorder. It seems that nowadays, the average person would only reveal such “chaotic confessions” to their psychiatrist. Yet ranging from “life escapes me” to “I am in excellent form” in only a few short pages was not unusual during the height of Romanticism. Biographer Jacques Barzun comments that Berlioz shared a common 19th century “belief that friendship is graced by frankness.” (71)

The lively musical scene of early 19th century Paris only strengthened Berlioz’ desire to study music. He attended every opera performance he could, admiring the works of Gluck, whose scores he copied out by hand to study. After he finally dropped out of the Ecole in January of 1824, his parents dramatically reduced his allowance, sometimes withholding it altogether. For the next two years, he was forced to pursue any means of income he could find. He became a private music instructor, and a music critic, and often had to borrow from friends to make ends meet.

Following his acceptance into the Paris Conservatoire in 1826, a series of artistic discoveries had a powerful impact on Berlioz. He was introduced to Shakespeare, through an English-language performance of Hamlet in which a beautiful English actress

named Harriet Smithson played the part of Ophelia. Despite having no knowledge of the English language at the time, the performance incited his love of Shakespeare and his deep infatuation with Smithson. The former lasted his entire life, while the latter remained unrequited for several years. He became obsessed with Smithson, attending her every performance in an attempt to get her attention.

During this time, Berlioz discovered Goethe's *Faust*, and heard works of Beethoven for the first time, both of which he recognized as products of genius. Almost immediately, he began work on *Huit scenes de Faust* (Eight Scenes from Faust), which he published in 1829. It was a sophisticated set of pieces with an unusual orchestration ranging from six solo voices with orchestra to one solo tenor with guitar accompaniment. Despite its "remarkable character", Berlioz condemned it as "crude and badly written" and burned as many copies as he could find. (Holoman, 387) Even so, a lot of the music from Eight Scenes resurfaced twenty years later when he decided to compose a large-scale work on Faust.

His obsession with Harriet Smithson resulted in his *Symphonie fantastique*, published in 1830, with which he conveyed his phalanx of emotions relating to her. This landmark masterpiece was more expressive and emotional than most existing pieces with the same theme. This is because he chose to convey these feelings orchestrally, without using libretto. The *Symphonie Fantastique* was the first piece to use an unprecedented technique Berlioz himself invented, one he termed *idée fixe* ("fixed idea"). An *idée fixe* is a particular melody used to illustrate a certain character in a piece of music. *La Damnation de Faust* (1846) also benefits from this technique, in the portrayal of Faust, Mephistopheles, and Marguerite.

Unfortunately, he had so idolized Smithson in his mind that his marriage to her in 1833 proved to be an anticlimax. “For Berlioz, there was no clear distinction between the real Harriet Smithson and the idealized embodiment of Shakespeare’s heroines, so that ... a relationship that had begun on an ideal level could only spoil in the glare of everyday reality, and the wholly Romantic conjunction of the artist with the ideal woman came to a bitter end.” (Holoman, 386-7)

Berlioz’ monumental undertaking of composing an entire opera based on Goethe’s Faust began in August of 1845, when Berlioz was in Bonn, attending a celebration honoring Beethoven. This was the beginning of a hugely successful tour of Eastern Europe, with concerts of Berlioz’ music in Vienna, Prague, Budapest, and Breslau, among others. When he returned home, Berlioz realized how musically stagnant Paris had become. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, “Here, we have nothing but shabby scores, sprinkled with shabby melodies, accompanied by shabby orchestras, sung by shabby singers, and listened to by a shabby public, which fortunately never listens to them twice and forgets them at once.” (Barzun, 237)

The story of Faust dates back to the early days of Christianity, so it naturally has multiple versions. In most versions, it is Faust’s greed that ultimately causes his damnation. In Goethe’s version, Faust has a sudden attack of conscience while on his deathbed, and his last minute philanthropy gains him entrance into heaven. In contrast to these versions of the story, Berlioz depicts Faust as the hapless victim of Mephistopheles’ treacherous deception.

There is practically no repetition in the music of *La Damnation de Faust*. Berlioz has evolved the concept of the *idée fixe* into two different but equally valid methods:

varied but recognizable musical motifs, or similar orchestral arrangements. In either case, the characters are accompanied appropriately and recognizably. The music begins with a slow melancholic melody in the violins, then a similar countermelody in the cellos is added. When the dejected Faust begins singing the melody stated earlier in the violins, the whole string section backs him up. The story begins with a depressed Faust wandering around the plains of Hungary, commenting on the natural beauty around him in an attempt to cheer himself up. After awhile, he hears peasants working in the fields, gaily singing songs and laughing. These sounds intensify Faust's utter solitude; he says, "My wretchedness grudges them their delights." (33)

Whenever Faust interjects to comment on this, the fast chipper orchestral accompaniment changes to one of slow depression, echoing Faust's mood.

Later, right as he is about to commit suicide, his faith suddenly returns: the heavenly music of a church choir drifts into his ears, reminding him of the pious days of his youth. Suddenly a short bombastic orchestral flourish signals the entrance of Mephistopheles. Several things happen to the music whenever this demonic character enters the scene. Berlioz orchestrates almost every entrance of Mephistopheles with three loud staccato brass chords, pierced by a quickly ascending flute line, and ending with a cymbal crash. The music becomes more agitated and volatile, usually with violin and viola tremolo in the background while the characters are singing. This is interspersed with sudden brassy punctuation. It also seems that Mephistopheles' lines are enunciated rather sharply, as if to infuse his character with more pomposity and sarcasm (although this last observation may be a result of interpretation, rather than Berlioz' grand design).

Mephistopheles loudly declares that Faust has been "marvelously charmed" by

“the pious pealing of those silver bells.” (39) After Mephistopheles tells Faust that he can make Faust’s every dream come true, Faust demands a display of Mephistopheles’ power. They take flight on the wings of a fast airy violin line, reminiscent of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Flight of the Bumblebee*. They arrive in a tavern, where drunkards are having a grand old time laughing, singing songs, and telling stories. Mephistopheles and a drunk named Brander trade ironically humorous stories, to the giggly delight of their drunken companions. Faust is disgusted with this, and asks to leave. Mephistopheles then takes him to a meadow on the banks of the Elbe. After causing Faust to fall asleep, Mephistopheles conjures up some spirits to help him cast a love spell on Faust. The unfortunate Faust is instantly smitten when he sees a vision of the lovely Marguerite. When he wakes up, Faust asks where this beautiful woman can be found.

Mephistopheles then takes him to Marguerite’s room, and Faust examines it with wonder. Even though she is not there, the music is sweet and gentle, and Faust sings with exquisite rapture. Suddenly Mephistopheles rushes in to the sound of his trademark entrance motif, warning of Marguerite’s pending arrival, and tells Faust to hide behind the curtains. Marguerite enters with light woodwind and high string melodies. After exclaiming about the handsome man she dreamt about last night, she sings the ballad of the King of Thule. This story of undying love is accompanied by a richer orchestration than when she first entered, yet still retains a sweet passionate quality.

Meanwhile, Mephistopheles is elsewhere summoning the will o’ the wisps to help him “bewitch a young girl and lead her to us,” by making her fall in love with Faust. (63) This is the first instance in which Mephistopheles is not at first accompanied by his entrance motif, probably because he is already on the scene when the music starts.

However, we do hear an introduction with a long-winded, evil-sounding melody with brass and woodwinds in unison. This gives way to a high-speed flute interlude as the ethereal will o' the wisps enter the scene and flit about doing their satanic master's bidding. Given this light orchestration and their initially soft repetition of Mephistopheles' words, it is almost surprising to hear the will o' the wisps build to a vocal frenzy. That is, until one remembers that these "spirits of fickle flame" are not only vaporous and indistinct, they are also the demonic legions of Satan. The duality of his depiction of these sinister wraiths yet again shows Berlioz' skill in orchestration. He knew that to be unequivocally malevolent, demons need not be as tangibly horrific as the monster Cerberus, the three-headed gate-keeping dog of Hades in ancient Greek mythology.

Marguerite finally catches sight of Faust behind the curtain; they passionately proclaim their love for each other. The extent of Mephistopheles' devious plan to effectively damn his "cooing turtle-doves" becomes clear when he bursts in the next morning, after it is too late to preserve Marguerite's virginity. Claiming to be "a friend," Mephistopheles warns them that the neighbors have gathered outside, apparently "roused by our songs," and are "jeering at Marguerite and calling her mother." (71) In this, the only scene with all three characters together, including a chorus of neighbors, the music is alive with tension and controversy. In the next scene, Marguerite is alone, and does not know what to do with herself—with Faust gone, she exclaims "peace has fled from my soul forever!" (79)

The next scene, the "Invocation to Nature", echoes Faust's contemplation of Nature during the first scene. He says, "Nature, vast, unfathomable, proud, you alone

give pause to my unending ennui.” (83) Faust’s claim seems somewhat shallow compared to Marguerite’s nine-minute proclamation of undying love and despair over Faust’s absence. Either Faust no longer shares the same feelings for Marguerite, or he is attempting to forget “the happiness [his soul] cannot seize.” (83) From Mephistopheles, who enters without his usual fanfare, we learn that the correct answer is the former, and that Marguerite is to be put to death for matricide. She had been using small amounts of poison to put her mother to sleep whenever Faust came over for an intimate liaison, and one night she used too much and her mother died. When Faust implored him to save Marguerite, Mephistopheles replied that he needed “merely a signature on this old parchment,” and that he would “save Marguerite at once if you swear and seal your oath to serve me tomorrow.” (85) Faust signs and they ride off on two black horses.

The “Ride to the Abyss” is one of the first scenes from Faust that Berlioz set to music. It is also one of the most famous, because of several things. In his work *The Berlioz Style*, Brian Primmer comments on its chaotic key changes: “In the *Course a l’Abime*, every degree save one of the chromatic scale is involved as a tonal center, however transiently.” (76) Another highly original aspect of this movement is its clever musical onomatopoeia. The violin’s repeated rhythm depicts galloping horses. Sharp woodwind jabs represent “huge night birds... uttering terrible shrieks.” The orchestra slows to a stop when Mephistopheles reins his horse, saying, “Are you afraid? Turn back, then.” (89) Faust’s courage returns and the horses redouble their pace, as does the orchestra. Tension mounts as an increasingly horrified Faust describes the Hellish visions he sees, such as “skeletons dancing,” the “earth writhing,” and “raining blood.” (91) As they fall into the chasm of Hell, the music stops abruptly with Faust’s anguished

cry of “Horror!” and Mephistopheles’ triumphant cry, “I am victorious!” (91)

One might wonder how Berlioz makes “Pandemonium (Chorus in an Infernal Tongue)” immensely triumphant, while still depicting Faust’s downfall with adequate desolation. The movement begins with a deafening brass and choral chord in the tonic of B major, giving way to a crashing F major chord, which is a tritone away from B. Indeed, Berlioz’ widespread use of the tritone in this movement (as well as throughout all of Mephistopheles’ scenes), reflects his knowledge of the tritone’s reputation since medieval times as “Diabolus in Musica.” In *The Berlioz Style*, Primmer also comments on Berlioz’ use of the tritone: “In his enhanced musical language the tritone, whether treated as a melodic interval or as a harmonic-cum-tonal relationship, is the point at which the soul of Man meets the Spirit of Darkness.” (78) The final scene depicts Marguerite’s ascension into Heaven, complete with a celestial chorus, and an idyllic harp accompaniment.

Berlioz’ ascension to the pantheon of great Romantic composers was well deserved, albeit much too late for Berlioz himself to have witnessed it. Despite the condemnation he received from many of his peers, his music was, according to Primmer, “in essence a re-creation of tried and honoured principles and concepts, a revolution and not a rebellion.” (79) To understand this, one must actively listen to and reflect on the extreme emotionality of Berlioz’ music, instead of reacting the way his contemporaries did, which was to write it off as chaotic non-music or as being original for the sake of being original.

Works Cited

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Hector Berlioz - *La Damnation de Faust (Legende dramatique en quatre parties)*

(The Damnation of Faust: Dramatic legend in 4 parts)

Words by Hector Berlioz, Almere Gandonniere (parts of Scenes 1,4,6, & 7) and Gerard de Nerval

Performed by Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus, Sir Georg Solti, conductor

DISC ONE

Part One: Plains of Hungary

1. I: Introduction

2. II: *Ronde des Paysans* (Peasants' Round Dance)

3. III:

4. *Marche Hongroise* (Hungarian March)

Part Two: North Germany

5. IV:

6. *Chant de la fete de Paques* (Easter Hymn)

7. V:

8. VI:

9. *Choeur de buveurs* (Chorus of Drinkers)

10. *Chanson de Brander* (Brander's Song)

11. *Fugue sur le theme de la chanson de Brander* (Fugue on the Theme of Brander's Song)

12. *Chanson de Mephistopheles* (Mephistopheles' Song)

13. VII: *Air de Mephistopheles* (Mephistopheles' Air)

14. *Choeur de gnomes et de sylphes* (Chorus of Gnomes and Sylphs)

15. *Ballet des sylphes* (Dance of the Sylphs)

16. VIII: *Choeur de soldats* (Soldiers' Chorus)

17. *Chanson d'etudiants* (Students' Song)

18. *Choeur des soldats et chanson des etudiants* (Soldiers' Chorus and Students' Song)

DISC TWO

Part Three: Margeurite's Room

1. *Tambours et trompettes sonnant la retraite* (Drums and Trumpets Sounding the Retreat)

2. *Air de Faust* (Faust's Aria)

3. X:

4. XI:

5. *Chanson gothique de le Roi de Thule* (Ballad of the King of Thule)

6. XII: *Evocation* (Evocation)

7. *Menuet des follets* (Minuet of the Will o' the Wisps)

8. *Serenade de Mephistopheles et choeur de follets* (Mephistopheles' Serenade and Chorus of the Will o' the Wisps)

9. XIII: *Duo* (Duet)

10. XIV: *Trio et choeur* (Trio and Chorus)

Part Four:

11. XV: *Romance de Marguerite* (Marguerite's Romance)

12. XVI: *Invocation a la nature* (Invocation to Nature)

13. XVII: *Recitatif et chasse* (Recitative and Hunt)

14. XVIII: *La course a l'abime* (The Ride to the Abyss)

15. XIX: *Pandaemonium (choeur en langue infernale)* (Pandemonium (Chorus in an Infernal Tongue))

16. *Epilogue sur la terre* (Epilogue on Earth)

17. XX: *Dans le ciel* (In Heaven)

Apotheose de Marguerite (Marguerite's Apotheosis)