

Berlioz Today

by Aaron Copland

Berlioz is the archetype of artist who needs periodic reappraisal by each epoch. His own period couldn't possibly have seen him as we do. To his own time Berlioz was an intransigent radical; to us he seems, at times, almost quaint. Wystan Auden once wrote:

"Whoever wants to know the nineteenth century must know Berlioz." True enough, he was an embodiment of his time, and because of that I can't think of another composer of the past century I should have more wanted to meet. And yet, enmeshed in his personality are stylistic throwbacks to an earlier time; these tend to temper and equivocate the impression he makes of the typical nineteenth-century artist.

His biographer, Jacques Barzun, claims that one rarely finds a discussion of Berlioz "which does not very quickly lose itself in biographical detail." Berlioz is himself partly responsible for this because he wrote so engagingly about his life. Moreover, there is the fabulous life itself: the tireless activity as composer, critic, and conductor; the success story of the country doctor's son who arrives unknown in the big city (Paris) to study music and ends up, after several tries, with the Prix de Rome; the distracted and distracting love affairs; the indebtedness due to the hiring of large orchestras to introduce his works; the fights, the friends (Chopin, Liszt, De Vigny, Hugo), the triumphal trips abroad, the articles in the *Journal du Débat*, the *Mémoires*, and the bitter experiences of his last years. No wonder that in the midst of all this the music itself is sometimes lost sight of.

Admirers and detractors alike recognize that we are living in a period of Berlioz revival. Formerly his reputation rested upon a few works that remained in the orchestral repertoire: principally the *Symphonic Fantastique* and some of the overtures. Then came repeated hearings of *Harold in Italy*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Damnation of Faust*. Recordings have made *l'Enfance du Christ* and *The Trojans* familiar; even the *Nuits d'Eté* are now sung. Perhaps before long we may hope to hear unknown works like the *Song of the Railroads* (1846) or *Sara the Bather* (1834).

What explains this recent concern with the Berlioz oeuvre? My own theory is that something about his music strikes us as curiously right for our own time. There is something about the quality of emotion in his music the feeling of romanticism classically controlled that reflects one aspect of present-day sensibility. This is allied with another startling quality: his ability to appear at one and the same time both remote in time and then suddenly amazingly contemporary. Berlioz possessed a Stendhalian capacity for projecting himself into the future, as if he had premonitions of the path music was to take. By comparison, Wagner, in spite of all the hoopla surrounding his "music of the future" was really occupied with the task of creating the music of his own period. And yet, by the irony of musical history, Berlioz must have seemed old-fashioned to Wagner by the 1860's.

By the end of the century, however, it was clear that the French composer had left a strong imprint on the composers who followed after him. A study of Harold in Italy will uncover reminders of the work of at least a dozen late-nineteenth-century composers Strauss, Mahler, Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Grieg, Smetana, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saens, Franck, Fauré. (Nor should we forget the impact he had on his own contemporaries, Liszt and Wagner.) How original it was in 1834 to give the role of protagonist to a solo instrument in this case a viola and create, not a concerto for the instrument, but a kind of obbligato role for which I can think of no precedent. The line from Harold to Don Quixote as Strauss drew him is unmistakable. The second movement of Harold in Italy has striking similarities to the monastic cell music in Boris Godunoff, with all of Moussorgsky's power of suggestibility. Indeed, the history of nineteenth century Russian music is unthinkable without Berlioz. Stravinsky says that he was brought up on his music, that it was played in the St. Petersburg of his student years as much as it has ever been played anywhere. Even the Berlioz songs, now comparatively neglected, were models for Massenet and Fauré to emulate. Nor is it fanciful to imagine a suggestion of the later Schönberg in the eight-note chromatic theme that introduces the "Evocation" scene from the Damnation of Faust.

When I was a student, Berlioz was spoken of as if he were a kind of Beethoven *manqué*. This attempted analogy missed the point: Beethoven's nature was profoundly dramatic, of course, but the essence of Berlioz is that of the theatrical personality. I once tried to define this difference in relation to Mahler who, by the way, bears a distinct resemblance to Berlioz in more than one respect by saying that "the difference between Beethoven and Mahler is the difference between watching a great man walk down the street and watching a great actor act the part of a great man walking down the street" Berlioz himself touched on this difference in a letter to Wagner when he wrote: "I can only paint the moon when I see her image reflected at the bottom of a well." Robert Schumann must have had a similar idea when he said: "Berlioz, although he often . . . conducts himself as madly as an Indian fakir, is quite as sincere as Haydn, when, with his modest air, he offers us a cherry blossom." This inborn theatricality is a matter of temperament, not a matter of insincerity. It is allied with a love for the grand gesture, the naive-heroic, the theatric-religious. (In recent times Honegger and Messiaen have continued this tradition in French music.) With Berlioz we seem to be watching the artist watching himself create rather than the creator in the act, pure and simple. This is different in kind from the picturesqueness of Beethoven's Storm in the Pastoral Symphony. Berlioz was undoubtedly influenced by Beethoven's evocation of nature, but his special genius led to the introduction of what amounted to a new genre the theatric-symphonic, and there was nothing tentative about the introduction.

The fact that Berlioz was French rather than German makes much of the difference. Debussy said that Berlioz had no luck, that he was beyond the musical intelligence of his contemporaries and beyond the technical capacities of the performing musicians of his time. But think of the colossal bad luck to have been born in a century when music itself belonged, so to speak, to the Germans. There was something inherently tragic in his situation the solitariness and the uniqueness of his appearance in France. Even the French themselves, as Robert Collet makes clear, had considerable trouble in fitting Berlioz into their ideas of what a French composer should be. In a sense he belonged everywhere and nowhere, which may or may not

explain the universality of his appeal. In spite of Berlioz's passionate regard for the music of Beethoven and Weber and Gluck, it is the non-German concept of his music that gives it much of its originality.

This can perhaps be most clearly observed in his writing for orchestra. Even his earliest critics admitted his brilliance as orchestrator. But they could hardly have guessed that a century later we would continue to be impressed by Berlioz's virtuoso handling of an orchestra. It is no exaggeration to say that Berlioz invented the modern orchestra. Up to his time most composers wrote for the orchestra as if it were an enlarged string quintet; none before him had envisaged the blending of orchestral instruments in such a way as to produce new combinations of sonorities. In Bach and Mozart a flute or a bassoon always sounds like a flute or a bassoon; with Berlioz they are given, along with their own special quality, a certain ambiguity of timbre that introduces an element of orchestral magic as a contemporary composer would understand it. The brilliance of his orchestration comes partly by way of his instinctual writing for the instruments in their most grateful registers and partly by way of his blending of instruments rather than merely keeping them out of each other's way. Add to this an incredible daring in forcing instrumentalists to play better than they knew they could play. He paid the price of his daring, no doubt, in hearing his music inadequately performed. But imagine the excitement of hearing in one's inner ear sonorities that had never before been set down on paper. It is the sheen and sparkle, the subtle calculation of these masterly scores that convince me that Berlioz was more, much more, than the starry-eyed romantic of the history books.

It is easy to point to specific examples of Berlioz's orchestral boldness. The use of the double-basses in fourpart chordal pizzicatti at the beginning of the March to the Scaffold; the writing for four tympany, also in chordal style, at the conclusion of the movement that precedes the March; the use of English horn and piccolo clarinet to typify pastoral and devilish sentiments respectively; the gossamer texture of Queen Mab with its impressionist harp and high antique cymbals; the subtle mixtures of low flutes with string tone at the beginning of the "Love Scene" from Romeo—all these and numerous other examples demonstrate Berlioz's uncanny instinct for the sound stuff of music.

Apart from his orchestral know-how there is hardly a phase of his music that has not been subjected to criticism. His harmonic sense is said to be faulty that's the reproach most frequently heard his structure too dependent on extramusical connotations, his melodic line disappointingly old-fashioned. These oft-repeated strictures are now due for revision. Any clumsiness in the handling of harmonic progressions should be viewed in the light of our extended notions of right and wrong in harmonic procedures. The Berlioz harmony admittedly is sometimes stiff and plain, but is it so awkward as to disturb one's over-all enjoyment? That always has seemed an exaggerated claim to me. His formal sense is unconventional refreshingly so, I would say, for even when he lacks the inevitability of a Beethoven, one senses that he is finding his own solutions arrived at from his own premises. More often than not these are unexpected and surprising. The reproach concerning his melodic writing has some basis in fact, especially for the present-day listener. Berlioz depends upon the long-breathed line and the unconventional phrase length, to sustain interest, rather than the striking interval or pregnant motive. His loveliest melodies give off a certain

daguerreotype charm, redolent of another day. This must have been true even at the time he penned them. Looked at from this angle, they lend his music a quite special ambiance, as if they came from a country not to be found on any map.

Let us concede, for the sake of argument, that the weaknesses are there. The fact remains that, whenever a composer is adjudged worthy to stand with the masters, a remarkable willingness to overlook what was formerly considered to be serious weaknesses is apparent. The weaknesses remain, but public opinion tacitly agrees to accept them for the sake of the good qualities and I consider that public opinion does right. My prognostication is that we shall, in future, be hearing less and less of Berlioz's weaknesses and more and more of his strengths.

For I repeat that there is something strangely right about Berlioz for our time. The French historian Paul Landormy put my meaning well when he wrote: "His art has an objective character by comparison with the subjectivity (interiority) of a Beethoven or a Wagner. All the creatures that he created in his imagination detach themselves from him, take on independent life, even if they are only an image of himself. The Germans, on the contrary, have a tendency to fuse the entire universe with their interior life. Berlioz is essentially a Latin artist." It is the objective handling of romantic elements that makes Berlioz an especially sympathetic figure in our own time. That and our clear perception of his musical audacity. For he is clearly one of the boldest creators that ever practiced the art of musical composition.

An aura of something larger than life-size hangs about his name. After hearing a Berlioz concert Heinrich Heine wrote: "Here is a wing-beat that reveals no ordinary songbird, it is a colossal nightingale, a lark as big as an eagle, such as must have existed in the primeval world.

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