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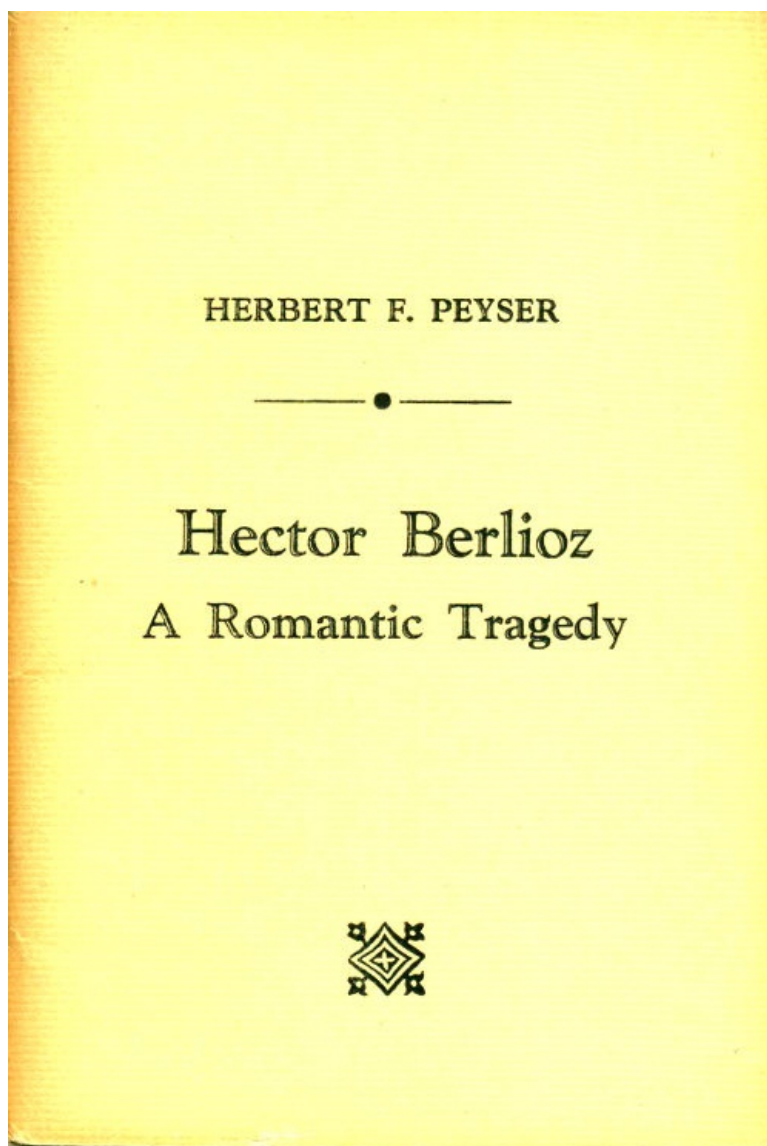
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HECTOR BERLIOZ: A ROMANTIC TRAGEDY ***



HERBERT F. PEYSER

Hector Berlioz

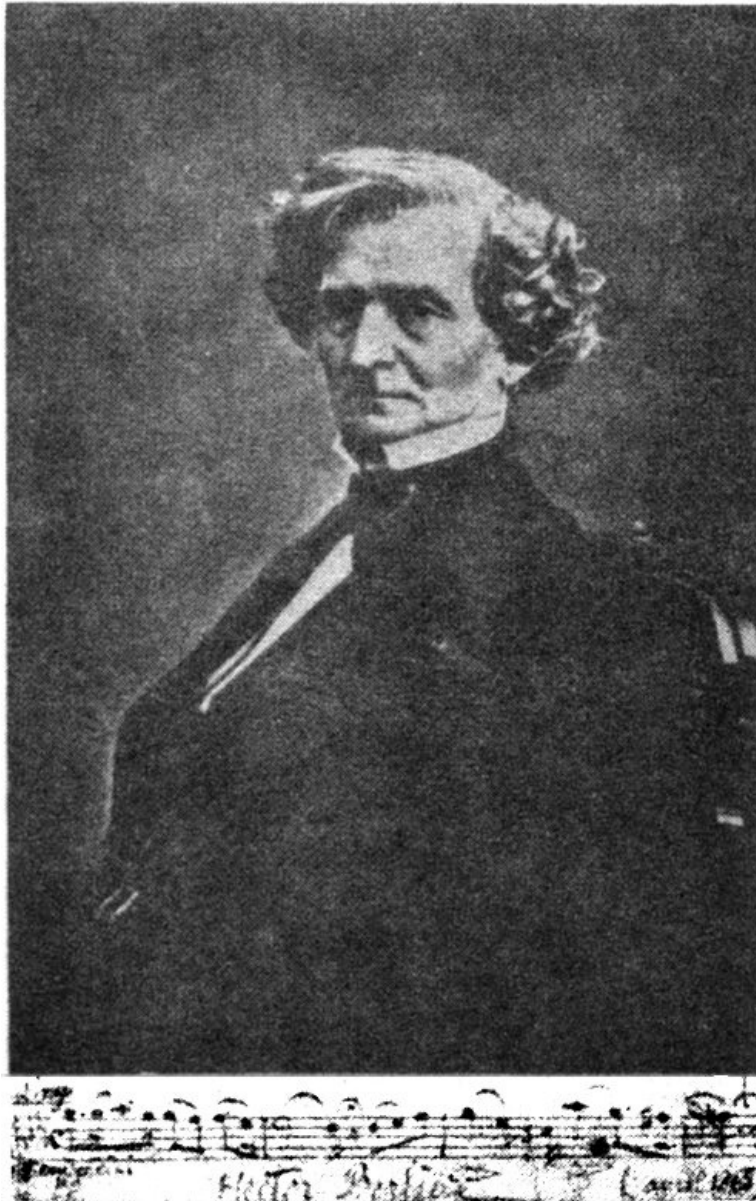
A Romantic Tragedy



Written for and dedicated to
the
RADIO MEMBERS
of
THE PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY
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of NEW YORK

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1865—Berlioz—Theme from the beginning of the Fantastique Symphony

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FOREWORD

A thumbnail sketch like the present is, of course, the last place in the world to recount even an infinitesimal part of a life so vivid and crowded with bitter conflict and tragic experience as that of Hector Berlioz; and the person who attempts it is beaten in advance. Moreover, such an effort seems almost gratuitous. For Berlioz has told his own story better than anyone else could possibly do it. When Ernest Newman was asked at one time to write a new biography of the epoch-making composer he informed the publisher who suggested it that "no Life by any other hands will ever be able to bear comparison as a piece of literature with Berlioz' Autobiography. All others are for the most part a watering down into the author's inferior style of the sparkling prose of Berlioz himself". How much more futile is it to attempt on the minuscule scale of the following tiny, if rambling, pamphlet to touch upon even a thousandth of those achievements and unremitting conflicts which entered into the texture of this master's agitated and inharmonious life! Actually, it aims to do no more than contribute a mite toward a larger interest in the writings and the great mass of insufficiently discovered compositions of a Romanticist whose labors are still surprisingly unrecognized art works of the future.

H. F. P.

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HECTOR BERLIOZ *A Romantic Tragedy*

By
HERBERT F. PEYSER

"No doubt I deserve to go to Hell", said Berlioz once to a friend who had reproached him for his treatment of Henrietta Smithson, his first wife; "but what would you have? I am in Hell already!"

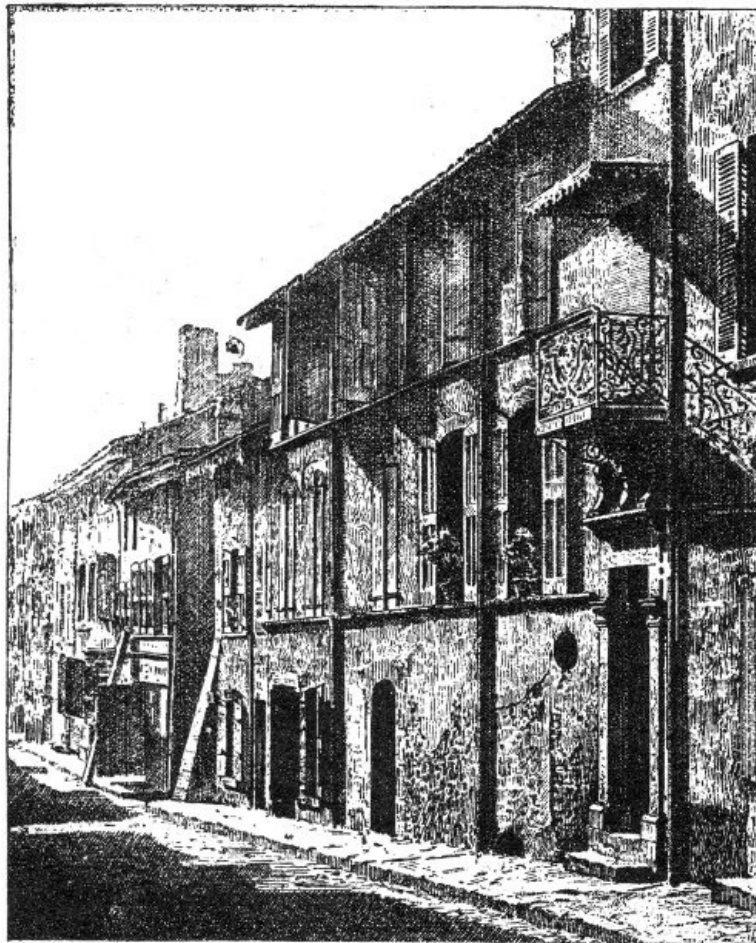
It was not an exaggeration or a figure of speech. Berlioz was in hell the greater part of his life. Of all the great composers he was perhaps the most consistently wretched. Misery and frustration pursued him from his youth to his grave. Time and again his existence seemed like the fulfillment of a curse. Actually, his mother had called one down upon him at the very beginning of his career and for the rest of his days it appeared to work itself out implacably. One might even believe the malediction had retained its power beyond the tomb. For the posthumous glory of Berlioz is by no means unchallenged. Almost alone among the masters he does not command anything like universal admiration, let alone affection. He has his redoubtable champions and they include many of the greatest musicians, living and dead. But where Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner need no defense Berlioz incontestably does. Rightly or wrongly he continues to be a problem, with all that this condition implies. Yet without him music could not conceivably be just what it is. And perhaps the strangest aspect of the paradox is that only a limited portion of his output enjoys anything like what might be called frequent hearing. The greater part of his greatest works remains to all intents, undiscovered—nay, unsuspected—by the multitude.

The little mountain town, La Côte-Saint-André, where Louis-Hector Berlioz was born on December 11, 1803, had briefly been called La Côte-Bonne-Eau during the Revolution and the Reign of Terror when "saints", for a while, went out of fashion. It was not far from Grenoble on one side or from Lyon on another. The Berlioz family originated in Savoie and can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Hector's father, Louis Berlioz, a doctor and a property owner, had at one time been mayor of La Côte-Saint-André. In 1802 he had married Marie-Antoinette-Joséphine Marmion, a good-looking woman, religious to the point of bigotry. Hector was the oldest of six children, two of whom died at an early age. The surviving daughters, Nanci and Adèle, were followed as late as 1820 by a son, Prosper, a "problem child" in the truest sense of the term, vague and unmanageable up to the time of a belated adolescence, then developing into a mathematical genius and dying in his twentieth year before people had ceased to marvel at his talents.

Hector's father supervised his early education, though it was probably as a concession to his wife that he placed the youngster in the local Catholic Seminary. The boy did not stay there long even if his mother harbored ambitions of making a saint of him. For a time he went uncomplainingly to mass, communion, confession and the rest. In his Memoirs Hector tells us details of his weekly "confessions" when he would say to the "director" of his conscience "My father, I have done nothing" and that worthy would reply "Go on, my child, as you have begun". And so he did—for several years, at least.

Yet his mother's religiosity was to have the effect of turning Hector's thoughts away from the church and toward the great figures of classical mythology. He "felt his heart throb and his voice quiver and break" when he construed the fourth book of Virgil's "Aeneid" to his father; and when the good man tactfully cut the lesson short Hector was "intensely grateful to him for taking no notice of my emotion and rushed away to vent my Virgilian grief in solitude". Mythology was not the only love with which his father filled him; under the paternal guidance he developed an interest in geography and stories of travel helped fire his imagination.

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Birthplace—La Côte-Saint-André

From an early age Hector had shown a sensitiveness to musical impressions and, besides learning to sing at sight, acquired some proficiency in playing the flute and the flageolet—though “I was twelve before the magic of music was revealed to me”. Presently he added to his musical accomplishments the playing of the guitar. The piano he never, apparently, undertook to master. But in later years he made a virtue of necessity and insisted he was glad to compose “silently and freely” without having to depend on the keyboard. With harmony it was rather different and after an unsuccessful start with Rameau’s treatise on the subject, even in a simplified form, he had recourse to a text book by Catel in order to pick up some elementary principles. These he presently put to use in a “six part potpourri on a collection of Italian airs” and in the composition of a couple of quintets for flute and strings. The first was played by some local amateurs and aroused the enthusiasm of all the hearers except Hector’s father. Dr. Berlioz preferred as much of the later quintet as his son was able to play him on the flute, but the piece being much more difficult, the amateur executants who tried it quickly suffered shipwreck. The composer eventually burned both scores yet salvaged a theme his father had liked and then used it in his overture, “Les Francs-Juges.” 7

Simultaneously with these hit or miss musical studies the boy’s emotional life was heightened at about this time by an incipient love affair, if one can call it so. Hector’s relatives, the Marmions, had a country house near Grenoble in the village of Meylan, where he spent his vacations. Not far away, in a white cottage, surrounded by vineyards and gardens there lived with her mother and sister a tall and exceedingly pretty girl of eighteen, Estelle Duboeuf. At a family garden party, to which Hector and his relations had been invited, Estelle picked him for 8 her partner in some game. Poor Hector was conquered in the twinkling of an eye. When a few minutes later he caught sight of Estelle dancing with his uncle Marmion—who had been a soldier in Napoleon’s armies and cut a superb figure in his gaudy uniform and clanking spurs—the boy flew into a jealous rage, only to have the whole party laugh at him! But Estelle—his “Stella montis”, his “Star of the Mountain”—remained enshrined in his memory for life. Their ways were to separate and they lost track of each other for years. A haggard old man, wracked and buffeted by numberless woes and disappointments, he found her again and sought solace (vainly, as it proved) in an attempt to recapture the shadow of a childhood fancy. His reward was a polite note signed Estelle Fornier—her married name—and a conventional “affectionate greetings”, into which he chose to read meanings that the old lady never remotely intended!

* * *

Hector’s parents determined he should follow in his father’s footsteps and become a physician. The idea revolted him and he struggled against it much as Schumann combated his mother’s wish to make a jurist of a youth with the soul of a poet. Nevertheless, he made as if to comply with the parental will—though one can guess with how many unspoken reservations! And so in the autumn of 1821, he set off for Paris to study medicine. But what fascinated him there were the theatres, the opera houses, the concert halls—things which up to that time he had never enjoyed the opportunity of visiting—and not the loathsome hospitals, anatomical amphitheatres, dissecting rooms and other nauseating horrors. He had felt all along that he was never intended to spend his life “at the bedside of sick people, in hospitals and dissecting chambers”. His father had made the cardinal mistake of “using

his love of music as a lever for removing his ‘childish aversion’ to embark on the study of medicine” and, as a reward for working earnestly at osteology had given his refractory son nothing less to the purpose than “a splendid flute, with all the new keys”! 9

In Paris Hector lost no time visiting the Opéra, the Théâtre Italien, the Théâtre Feydeau, the Ambigu-Comique. He heard Salieri’s “Danaïdes”, Boieldieu’s “Voitures Versées”, Dalayrac’s “Nina”. Above all, he heard Gluck’s “Iphigénie en Tauride”, and this masterpiece definitely settled the question. His life would be dedicated to music and medicine could go hang! Berlioz the scarlet Romanticist was born at the moment he solemnly made this resolve. It was farewell, henceforth, to the “human charnel house, littered with fragments of limbs, ghastly faces and cloven heads ... where swarms of sparrows fought for scraps and rats in the corners gnawed human vertebrae.” He had, to be sure, grown somewhat hardened after his first appalling impression and had even gotten so far as to “cast a shoulder blade to a great rat which was staring at me with famished eyes”! But the physical reactions he experienced to the music he loved attracted him in the same degree as the horrid displays of the hospital laboratories revolted him. In the theatre listening to Gluck and Spontini “his knees would tremble convulsively, his teeth chatter, he suffered with dizzy spells till he could not stand unsupported, he was bathed in sweat, his scalp contracted, tears choked him, he lost all sensation in fingers and toes, he was seized with chills and hot flashes....” If this was not actually a type of celestial intoxication it was certainly a romantic imagination conveyed through the empurpled diction of the hour!

Down at his home in the Dauphiné Dr. Berlioz gradually got wind of what was happening and endeavored to reason with his son. The latter was frequenting the library of the Conservatoire, voraciously devouring the scores of Gluck, and leaving to those who had a taste for that sort of thing the sanguinary details of the anatomical chamber. And not only did he study the music of Gluck, Méhul and others but he addressed himself to the first two symphonies of Beethoven, at that time as good as unknown in Paris. In the Conservatoire library he met a certain Hyacinthe Christophe Geron, a pupil of Lesueur, who counseled Hector to study with his affable old master, at one time a great favorite. Lesueur received Hector amiably at the first visit, examined a few compositions of the young man, pronounced them faulty but urged him to undertake some preparatory studies under Geron, a task he willingly accepted. 10

In a short time Geron indoctrinated him so thoroughly in Lesueur’s harmonic system that the latter cordially took him as a pupil. Not that Hector accepted his mentor’s teaching without many unspoken questions, but he quickly decided that the most diplomatic thing to do was to curb whatever impatience he felt and listen in silence. He had already written a choral work, “Le Passage de la Mer Rouge” and a Mass, and though they were youthful attempts and obviously unripe he found it possible to dispense with conventional rules. And now he felt moved to attempt an opera! The obliging Geron supplied him with a libretto and the fruit of this collaboration was called “Estelle et Némorin,” Estelle Duboeuf doubtless floating before his mind’s eye. Berlioz admits that the music was “feeble” and called the entire work “wishy-washy”. As for the Mass, composed by request for the feast day of the choir children of the Church of Saint Roch, portions of it met the approval of Lesueur. When it came to paying the costs of its performance Hector was in a quandary about raising the necessary 1,200 francs. Finally he borrowed the sum from a friend, Augustin de Pons—a step he was presently to regret though Pons had lent him the money with the best of intentions. The Mass itself was praised and some years later was repeated at the Church of St. Eustache. By this time, however, the composer had become dissatisfied with the work and then burned it together with several juvenile effusions. Meanwhile he had a stormy first meeting with Cherubini, head of the Conservatoire; and he failed to pass a preliminary examination for that august school. 11

Hearing of this misfortune, Dr. Berlioz, usually slow to wrath, lost his temper and resolved to stop his son’s allowance. If anything Lesueur aggravated the situation by attempting to intercede on his pupil’s behalf. Hector was summoned home and ordered to renounce his ideas of a musical career and take up some other occupation. In spite of the chilling reception the young black sheep encountered there he was astonished and delighted to learn a few days later that the good doctor had once more reconsidered. “After several sleepless nights I have made up my mind”, he gravely told his son. “You shall go to Paris and study music; but only for a time. If after further trials you fail you will, I am sure, acknowledge that I have done what was right, and you will choose some other career. You know what I think of second-rate poets; second-rate artists are no better and it would be a deep sorrow and profound humiliation to me to see you numbered among these useless members of society”. And he swore the youth to secrecy. But the news leaked out and before Hector could take his place in the stage-coach his mother, blazing with anger, confronted him “with flashing eyes and exciting gestures”: “Your father”, she exclaimed, “has been weak enough to allow you to return to Paris and to encourage your mad, wicked plans; but I will not have this guilt on my soul and, once and for all, I forbid your departure ... I beseech you not to persist in your folly! See, I, your mother kneel to you and beg you humbly to renounce it”. And when the appalled Hector begged her to rise she defied him, wildly: “No; I will kneel! So, wretched boy, you refuse? You can stand unmoved with your mother kneeling at your feet? Well, then, go! Go and wallow in the filth of Paris, sully your name and kill your father and me with sorrow and shame! I will not re-enter this house till you have left it. You are my son no longer! I curse you!” Hector had to leave, as he says, “without bidding her good-bye, without another word or a look, and with her curse on my head!” 12

* * *

Back in Paris his first object was to repay Pons part of the money he owed him for the performance of the Saint Roch mass. He earned a few francs by giving occasional lessons in singing and by teaching flute and guitar. His monthly allowance amounted only to 120 francs, so the repayment was a slow and painful business. Most unhappily Pons, wishing to spare Hector this continuous drain on his purse, resolved to “help” his friend by writing Dr. Berlioz and asking him to settle the remainder of the debt. Pons got his money—but poor Hector lost his allowance!

Somehow he managed to scrape along. He had a tiny room, five flights up, in the Cité, at the corner of the Quai des Orfèvres and the Rue de Harley; he gave up dining in restaurants and confined his diet to dry bread and salt,

with now and then raisins or dates. When the weather was favorable he took this meal on the Pont Neuf, beside the statue of Henri IV, watching the passersby or gazing at the muddy waters of the Seine. He worked tirelessly at his music. Cherubini, now apparently mollified, put the youth into Reicha's class for counterpoint and fugue at the Conservatoire, even while he continued with Lesueur. Hector struck up a life-long friendship with young Humbert Ferrand, who wrote him an opera book, "Les Franc-Juges"—"The Judges of the Secret Court"—which he enthusiastically set to music but of which only the overture remains. It is a fine thing of its type, bearing melodically, instrumentally and harmonically, the unmistakable imprint of Berlioz even to the reminders of Gluck. One of its most striking themes survives from the boyish quintet of Hector's and anticipates in a fashion the "idée fixe" of the "Symphonie Fantastique", not very far ahead.

Working on his opera young Berlioz had somewhat neglected his flute and guitar pupils and once more needed money. Even a franc a lesson would not help greatly when it became a question of winter clothes and firewood. Far from capitulating and returning, beaten, to Dauphiné, he first toyed with the idea of seeking a position as first or second flute in some orchestra "in New York, Mexico, Sydney or Calcutta, of becoming a sailor, filibuster, buccaneer or savage in China" or attempting any other wild scheme since "it is futile and dangerous to thwart my will when I am resolved on anything". In the end he tried a safer, less exciting method. Aided by a streak of luck and an exceptionally good musical memory, he obtained an engagement as a chorus singer at the Théâtre des Nouveautés, where basses were wanted but where a passable baritone could also be of use. By singing as a trial piece a recitative from Sacchini's "Oedipe" he prevailed over a weaver, a blacksmith, an actor and a choir member from St. Eustache. The job paid him fifty francs a month. Hector had not only to sing all manner of rubbish but "the colossal manager", a Mr. St. Léger, sometimes obliged him to be "the rear leg of an artificial camel"! Even so, it was luck of a sort. At the same time, two new pupils applied for lessons and he met Antoine Charbonnel, a young man from La Côte-Saint-André, whose father had often scandalized Mme. Berlioz because, being a tireless woman chaser, he flew in the face of her family's ancient motto, "respectability above everything". Charbonnel, a budding pharmacist, found it advisable to share economics with Hector and the pair set up bachelor quarters in two little rooms in the Rue de la Harpe. Charbonnel cooked and Hector marketed, grossly violating the hygienic codes of his friend by carrying the day's provisions unwrapped under his arm.

* * *

Hector calls the "Francs-Juges" overture his "first grand instrumental work". It was soon followed by another overture, "Waverly". He was, he tells us, so ignorant of the mechanism of certain instruments at that period, that he had written the trombone solo in the earlier score in the key of D flat, uncertain whether this choice of tonality was a wise one or not. On submitting the passage to a trombone player at the Opéra he was delighted to learn that it was the best possible key for the purpose and that the solo in question could not fail to produce a powerful effect. Greatly elated he walked home as in a dream and was recalled to himself by suddenly spraining his ankle. From that moment he could never hear the piece without experiencing a sharp pain in his foot. "Perhaps", he muses in his Memoirs, "it gives others a pain in their heads"! Curiously enough, neither Reicha nor Lesueur, taught him anything about instrumentation. Thanks to a friend at the Opéra he obtained free tickets and by close listening at such performances and study of such scores as were given he "perceived the subtle connection ... between musical expression and the special art of instrumentation, which no one had actually pointed out to me. It was by studying the methods of ... Beethoven, Weber and Spontini; by an impartial examination of the regular forms of instrumentation, and of unusual forms and combinations; partly by listening to artists and getting them to make experiments for me on their instruments, and partly by instinct, that I acquired what knowledge I possess" and was later to disseminate in his great treatise on instrumentation, subsequently modernized by Richard Strauss.

* * *

Hector was officially admitted to the Conservatoire when, the next examination period having come around, he succeeded at last in passing the test. He was less fortunate with an orchestral *scena* on the death of Orpheus which the students were required to compose, though Berlioz ascribed his failure to the incompetence of a mediocre pianist obliged to play the reduction of the original score. He had obtained a brief leave from his duties at the Théâtre des Nouveautés when he came down with a dangerous attack of quinsy sore throat. Alone one night and on the point of strangling he suddenly sat down before his shaving mirror, seized a pen knife and, in a paroxysm of agony, lanced the obstruction which was suffocating him. By some miracle he was on his feet again in a few days and had the satisfaction of hearing from his suddenly repentant father that his allowance was to be restored. Having no further need of continuing his chorister chores he was now free to devote his evenings to opera performances.

These evenings, he declares, were "solemn" occasions. They could be tumultuous ones, as well; for Hector was violent when matters outraged him and as often as not became an irrepressible claqueur. More than once he helped precipitate riots in the theatre. When at a performance of "Iphigénie en Tauride," for instance, cymbals were introduced into a ballet passage where Gluck has only strings and when trombones were omitted from a passage in Orestes' third act recitative Hector would suddenly shout with all his might: "There are no cymbals there; who has dared to correct Gluck?" Then, in an Orestes passage: "Not a sign of a trombone; it is intolerable!" Again, during a performance of Dalayrac's "Nina" Berlioz missed a violin solo scheduled to be played by the violinist, Baillot. Just as the cue for the expected solo was reached a furious voice was heard to exclaim: "So far good, but where is the violin solo?" "Very true", cried someone else, "it looks as if they were going to leave it out. Baillot, Baillot, the violin solo." The pit took fire, the entire house rose and loudly demanded that the program should be carried out according to schedule. Before long people dashed into the orchestra, overturning chairs and music desks, smashing the kettledrums. Meanwhile, Hector who had sown the wind tried to control the whirlwind with sarcastic protests: "Gentlemen, don't smash the instruments! What vandalism! Don't you see you are destroying Father Chenie's beautiful double-bass, with its infernal tone?" But the mob was beyond control and broke not only instruments but innumerable seats and music stands as well!

It was 1827 and he was beginning to harbor more far-darting ambitions. In June he planned to try for the Prix de Rome, though he really laid small value on the “honor” the winning of it conferred. How often was it no more than a means to an end!

Three times Berlioz competed (four if we count the preliminary test of 1826, in which he failed), but not till 1830 did he carry off the honor. In 1827 he had written for the purpose “*La Mort d’Orphée*”, in 1828 he gained the second prize, in 1829 (when no prize was finally given) he turned out a “*Cléopâtre*”—which, had it been less audacious, might have won him the award—while in 1830 his cantata, “*Sardanapale*”, finally achieved the ultimate distinction. But this honor, so highly regarded among the rank and file of Frenchmen, was for Hector soon to turn to something like Dead Sea fruit.

On Sept. 11, 1827, Kemble’s company from London inaugurated a Shakespearian season at the Odéon Theatre. “*Hamlet*” was the first offering, with the famous English actor in the title role. The Ophelia was Henrietta Smithson, tall, lithe and Irish. All literary and artistic Paris was on hand. From the moment the daughter of Polonius stepped on the stage Hector was lost! No thunderbolt could more completely have devastated him. When the performance ended he rushed home, avoiding all acquaintances to whom he might have had to talk. Then he went out again and walked all night along the Seine, determined to wear himself out to obtain the temporary solace of sleep. It was useless. Next evening the visitors were giving “*Romeo and Juliet*”. Hector dashed to the Odéon early in the day and bought himself a ticket, to be sure no unforeseen hitch might prevent him obtaining his usual admission. As he knew no word of English, he procured a translation and strove for a few hours to recreate in his mind a picture of Henrietta Smithson before again looking upon her in the flesh. If possible the effect of the previous evening was intensified. 17

He would now wander aimlessly through suburbs and countryside, sometimes even sleeping in open fields; or he would set to music Irish lyrics by Thomas Moore; or steep himself in more Shakespeare, dabble in Byron and Walter Scott, set about discovering Goethe and acquainting himself with “*Faust*!” He moved from the quarters of his friend Charbonnel and installed himself in a room in the Rue Richelieu directly opposite the house where Henrietta lived. He had never so much as exchanged a word with the actress who, for her part, never yet dreamed that such a person as Hector Berlioz existed—let alone that he loved her wildly. Nonetheless, Hector made a point of avoiding further Shakespeare performances—or so at least, he claims in his *Memoirs*. “More experiences of the kind would have killed me!” But the inspiration of this *Juliet* and *Ophelia*, further enhanced by the romantic literature with which he was suffusing himself and the grandeur of those Beethoven works he was beginning to discover, were stimulating his creative fancy. He wrote overtures based on “*Waverly*”, “*King Lear*”, “*The Corsair*”; he wrote (in 1829) “*Eight Scenes from Faust*” and a “*Ballade of the King of Thule, in Gothic Style*” (things which were later to form the basis of “*La Damnation de Faust*”); he composed a set of “*Nine Irish Songs*”; above all, he wrote (and then revised) a work which was to become, in some respects, his most widely known and famous, the “*Symphonie Fantastique*”—a kind of symphonic phantasmagoria, with Henrietta as its chief motivation and himself as its chief actor.

It was not till December, 1827, that the actress first had a fleeting glimpse of her worshipper. This happened quite by chance at a rehearsal for a benefit performance at the Opéra-Comique where Hector was to offer an overture of his and where some of the English actors were to perform a couple of Shakespearian scenes. By this time he had begun to write her letters, to which she never replied, for they frightened her and she presently ordered her maid not to accept any more from the postman. When Berlioz at a rehearsal caught sight of Henrietta talking to her colleagues backstage he uttered a loud cry and rushed from the theatre, wildly wringing his hands. Thinking she had to do with a madman the actress begged her associates to watch him closely, for “she did not like the look of his eyes”. The mop of red hair that surmounted his head like an umbrella, his gaunt visage, fiery appearance and generally hysterical demeanor must have given her reason for alarm and she probably breathed more freely when she left Paris for Holland. 18

Everyone who has interested himself even slightly in Berlioz is doubtless familiar with the lurid fiction the composer invented to form the “plot” of the “*Fantastic Symphony*”. In this “*Episode in the Life of an Artist*” a high-strung youth is represented as seeking release from the torments of disappointed love by means of an overdose of opium. Instead of killing him the drug afflicts him with a succession of perturbing, not to say terrifying, grotesque or macabre visions. Through each of them there moves the image of the Beloved, musically-represented by a recurrent string of notes—a sort of representative theme, or “*idée fixe*”. The youth is a plaything of passions, reveries, jealousies, frenzies at the outset; then he sees his idol, apparently indifferent to him, the central figure at a brilliant ball; amorous thoughts mingle in his mind with dark presentiments as he wanders over the countryside, rendered more melancholy by the pipings on rustic instruments of two love-sick shepherds, till thunderclaps interrupt their mournful dialogue. Then he dreams he has murdered his beloved and is marched to the scaffold; after which his disembodied spirit becomes the sport of a noisome rout of demons, witches, succubi and other infernal things, among whom the cherished one, now a devilish harridan, pursues him, while the *Dies Irae* resounds blasphemously in his ears. 19

Doubtless much of the astounding score incorporates musical ideas originally conceived for other projected works. One way or another, the “*Fantastique*” is a formidable, if overdimensioned monument of its period, and a landmark of history. With all its flamboyant and parodistic monstrosities this fresco of psychopathic experience remains the first great and influential specimen of program music created in France; and it is no less amazing to reflect that the epochal score came into being when its composer was but 27 and only at the time he was adjudged worthy of the Prix de Rome.

Berlioz subsequently sent tickets for a performance of the symphony to Henrietta Smithson. She appears to have

been about the only person in the hall unaware at that time that she was the heroine of the piece. More or less vaguely she had been hearing of the infatuation of her harassed admirer. Her reaction, lightly expressed, had been “There could be nothing more impossible!” It was not in Hector’s nature to accept such a rejection as final. Still, she had unwittingly wounded him! For a while he decided that, with all her beauty and her gifts, she was no different from the average run of females. If she could think of repudiating his love the “Fantastique” was *his* derisive answer! This musical caricature of the actress, he intended as a gesture of vengeance.

The new symphony, however, helped gain him a friend and defender, who was to remain one of his most valiant supporters for life—Franz Liszt. Liszt had met Hector shortly before and, transported by the symphony, he made a piano arrangement of it, which propagandized the work as, at the time, nothing else could have done.

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Scarcely liberated (as he thought) from Henrietta, Berlioz succumbed to another woman. This young person, decidedly no better than she should have been, was a friend of Ferdinand Hiller and a piano pupil of Kalkbrenner and Herz. Camille Moke set her nets for Hector and captured him without the slightest trouble. She came into his life at the worst possible moment! With the consent of her mother, briefly blinded by the young man’s success in winning the Roman Prize, Camille became engaged to her admirer, who was just about to set out for that sojourn in Rome which was the chief reward of a lucky contestant. He seems not to have foreseen trouble, though his sister, Nanci, was beset by premonitions; and Ferdinand Hiller sent to Berlioz, in Rome, the ironic message that his betrothed “was bearing the separation with fortitude”. Shocked but still only half convinced, Hector took to bed and waited vainly for Camille’s expected letters to Italy. Time passed and nothing came. Whatever interest he might have found in the Eternal City, where he had been warmly received by his fellow students at the Villa Medici and by its director, Horace Vernet, he was unable to pay any attention to his work or his agreeable surroundings. Little really mattered—neither the monuments of Rome, the French Academy, his meeting with the well-graced youth, Felix Mendelssohn, his future prospects. Vernet, noticing Hector’s worry, began to entertain serious misgivings. Summoning the newcomer he warned him against any rash step. Finally, on Good Friday the tormented lover impulsively left Rome, resolved to return to Paris and find out for himself what lay behind Camille’s silence. In roundabout ways he got as far as Nice. On the journey he bought a pistol and some poison determined to learn the truth and if worst came to worst to shoot Camille and then make an end of himself. He was not obliged to go to these spectacular extremes. For at long last he received a letter—not, indeed, from his presumable fiancée, but from her mother. That lady informed Hector that her daughter was on the point of marrying Mr. Pleyel, the famous piano manufacturer; and she requested her “son-in-law” not to kill himself! 20

Of course he would kill himself—and the Mokes as well! But as he looked at the lovely Côte d’Azur landscape unrolled before him from the heights of the Grande Corniche he suddenly experienced a revulsion of feeling. For the time being he would go on living! He dispatched a letter to Horace Vernet saying he was returning to Rome and pledging his honor to remain in Italy. Then he settled down for three weeks in Nice and wrote his “King Lear” Overture.

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Hector became more or less resigned to Rome, now that the Moke affair was definitely at an end; but was never completely at home there. He enjoyed the company of Mendelssohn, for the two were well matched, intellectually, if not well balanced by temperament. However, Felix adored Gluck as much as Hector and the two youths delighted in singing and playing “Armide” together. They agreed whole-heartedly in their worship of Mozart, Beethoven and Weber but disagreed on Bach, whom the German idolized but to whom Berlioz remained cold. When the pair went over Hector’s prize-crowned “Sardanapale” and the Frenchman frankly expressed his dislike for a certain number in it, Mendelssohn told his friend he was happy to see that he really displayed such good taste! Hector made the usual excursions, saw the regulation sights, visited the mountains of the Abruzzi, wandered about the Campagna, renewed his Virgilian recollections, sang, strummed his guitar, heard the operas and the generally trivial and ill performed church music and mingled with the painters at the Café Greco. In short, he went more or less through the customary tourist routine.

Also, he composed. He made changes in the score of the “Fantastique” adding, for one thing, a coda to the Ball Scene; he wrote overtures to “The Corsair”, based on Byron, and “Rob Roy” based on Scott, not to mention an ambitious pendant to the “Fantastique”, “Le Retour à la Vie”, to which he subsequently gave the alternative title of “Lélio”. But by 1832 he decided he had endured as much of Rome as he could stomach. After a compromise with Horace Vernet he cut short his stay at the Villa Medici by six months promising to spend a year in Germany—an ambition he had always cherished. 22

In November, 1832, Berlioz was back in Paris, and in that very house where Henrietta Smithson had lodged on her first visit. In fact, she had moved out only a day earlier and settled in an apartment on the Rue de Rivoli. Small wonder that Hector discerned the working of destiny once more!

This time Henrietta had come to Paris with her own theatrical company. Incredible as it may seem, she and Hector had not yet actually met. The Irish actress divined his passion fully when, at a performance under the conductor Habeneck (at which not only the “Fantastique” but also the monodrama, “Lélio”, were performed) she heard from the actor who spoke the text the words: “Ah, could I but find this Juliet, this Ophelia, whom my heart is ever seeking.... Could I but sleep my last sad sleep in her beloved arms”! Instead of going to Germany at New Year’s, 1833, Berlioz determined to remain, for the moment, in Paris. His love for Henrietta had been newly awakened; and she was now willing to be formally introduced to him.

“From that day I had not a moment’s rest. Terrible fears were succeeded by delirious hopes. What I went through ... cannot be described. Her mother and sister formally opposed our union. My own parents would not hear of it.

Discontent and anger on the part of both families, and all the scenes to which such opposition gives birth in these cases”.

Portents of trouble followed thick and fast. Henrietta Smithson’s theatrical venture failed disastrously. Financially she was utterly ruined, the more so as she had contracted immense debts. Next, she fell and broke her leg. [23] She was bed-ridden and she remained an invalid. Hector organized a benefit concert for her. Among the first to offer their services were Liszt and Chopin. Enough was realized to settle “Harriet’s” most pressing obligations. And then, despite his parents’ objections and the venomous hostility of Henrietta’s hunchbacked sister, Hector married her in the autumn of 1833—first, however, staging a spectacular suicide act to frighten her into wedlock. She was, he assured his friend Humbert Ferrand, “aussi vierge qu’il soit possible de l’être”.

To keep the domestic pot boiling he found it advisable about this period to take up musical journalism. Although Berlioz had been contributing on and off to certain publications his present connection with *L’Europe littéraire* is, to all intents, the official beginning of that critical activity of his which was to span almost the remainder of his life. As subsequent music reviewer on the influential *Journal des Débats* he spent no end of time and effort in commenting on compositions and performances, good, bad and indifferent, which he might infinitely better have dedicated to creative work. The labor revolted him but he found himself as helpless as a galley slave. Enforced attendance at innumerable concerts and operas he came to loathe to such an extent that, late in his career when he was finally able to shake off the journalistic fetters, he enjoyed walking up and down in front of a theatre or concert hall just for the pleasure of reflecting that he did *not* have to go in! And yet, of all celebrated composers, Berlioz was by all odds the most brilliantly gifted litterateur, whose writings even today preserve most of their individuality, polished style, barbed irony and scintillant humor. Aside from his countless feuilletons and other articles, his *Memoirs*, *Soirées de l’Orchestre*, *A Travers Chants* and much else are literary masterpieces of their kind, which even today retain their freshness and sparkle. Undoubtedly his important journalistic affiliations had the effect of involving him in numberless intrigues and difficulties inseparable from posts of influence, [24] besides sapping his energies that should have been employed otherwise. Yet he knew how to draw profit from the means of publicity and power which his connections placed in his hands and he did not hesitate to promote, as best possible, his personal interests.

* * *

When their marriage was solemnized at the British Embassy (with Liszt as best man) Hector had exactly two hundred francs and Harriet—a mountain of debts! For their honeymoon they could travel no further than the suburb of Vincennes. The wedding trip, according to the groom, was “a masterpiece of love”. All the same, he soon had chances to notice that his bride was not in the least musical; likewise, that she harbored a streak of jealousy. Not even the birth of their son, Louis, on August 15, 1834, at their home on the hill of Montmartre helped smooth this unhappy state of affairs, which was to deepen as time went on. Harriet grew violently opposed to her husband’s traveling, though Berlioz claims that “a mad and for some time an absolutely groundless jealousy was at the bottom of it”.

Was it “absolutely groundless”? The composer’s intimate associate, Ernest Legouvé, has let us into many secrets about the rift in the lute in his book “*Soixante Ans de Souvenirs*”. The blond Irishwoman, some years older than her husband, was gradually losing her looks, her failures as an actress had for some time increasingly embittered her and she presently took to drink. The more the sentiments of the formerly so ardent Hector “changed to a correct and calm good fellowship”, says Legouvé, “the more his wife became imperious in her exigencies and indulged in violent recriminations that were unfortunately justified. Berlioz, whose position as critic and as composer producing his own works made the theatre his real world, found there occasions for lapses that would have proved too much for stronger heads than his; moreover, his reputation as a misunderstood great artist endowed him with a halo that easily tempted his female interpreters to become his consolers. Madame Berlioz searched his feuilletons for hints of his infidelities. And not only there: fragments of intercepted letters, drawers indiscreetly opened, brought her revelations just sufficient to make her beside herself without more than half-illuminating her. Her jealousy was always outdistanced by the facts. Berlioz’s heart went so fast that she could not keep pace with it; when, after so much research, she lighted upon some object of his passion, *that* particular passion was no more; and then, it being easy for him to prove his innocence at the moment, the poor woman was as abashed as a dog which after having followed a track for half an hour, arrives at the lair only to find the quarry already gone”. Yet the jealous instincts of the once lovely Ophelia and Juliet were, in fact, only too sound and, if her shrewishness increased by leaps and bounds, she had no little cause for it.



Berlioz's first wife



Berlioz's second wife

Hector's friends seemed, perhaps, a little less devoted to him since his marriage, and since his miseries were a trifle less spectacular than they had been during his bachelor days. But these comrades included not a few personages illustrious in their respective spheres. Among them were the musical chroniclers Janin and d'Ortigue; the essayists and novelists Legouv  , Eug  ne Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Sainte-Beuve, Victor Hugo; among

the creative and performing musicians, Liszt of course and Chopin, who though personally the antithesis of Berlioz, never wavered in his faithfulness to the man. And further, flashing like a comet across the firmament of Hector, there was the “demon fiddler”, Paganini.

In 1834 Berlioz composed the “descriptive” symphony “Harold in Italy”, in which Byron’s Childe Harold, the central figure of the work was represented by a viola solo. Whether Hector’s account of the genesis of the composition is wholly authentic or not, the tale he relates in his Memoirs runs somewhat as follows: Having heard the “Symphonie Fantastique” one day Paganini came to see the composer and told him that he owned a wonderful Stradivari viola which he would love to play in public, though he had no music for it which he considered suitable. Would Hector write him such a work? He had no confidence in anyone else. The only thing the violinist insisted upon was that “he must be playing the whole time”. The work should not be an ordinary concerto, but rather something along the lines of the “Fantastique”. After many doubts and hesitations the composer produced a series of scenes for orchestra, the pictorial background of which was shaped out of Hector’s recollections of his Italian wanderings; while the viola strain, representing Byron’s dreamer, was added to the rest of the orchestral texture “with which it contrasts both in movement and character, without hindering the development”. 27

Paganini did not hear the symphony till some time after it had been first performed, for he had been south, vainly seeking relief from that cancer of the larynx which had robbed him of his voice and was shortly to prove fatal. At the close of the work he ordered his son to tell the composer “he had never in his life been so impressed at a concert” and were he to follow his inclination, he would “go down on his knees to thank him”. And then, in full view of the audience, the great violinist did just that and kissed Hector’s hand! Next day he received a letter in Paganini’s writing which ran: “Beethoven is dead and Berlioz alone can revive him. I have heard your divine compositions, so worthy of your genius, and beg you to accept, in token of my homage, twenty thousand francs....”

Almost on the heels of this windfall Berlioz had the additional luck of being commissioned by the government to compose a Requiem, for an official ceremony. The work is one of his most monumental—one might say apocalyptic—even if the quality of its musical inspiration may be open to question. One thing however, is certain—nothing he ever wrote is so overwhelming in point of sheer sonority as the appalling Tuba Mirum, with its five orchestras, its sixteen kettle drums and its phalanxes of trombones. At the climax of this fresco of the Last Judgment one of the participating singers succumbed in public to a shrieking frenzy of nervous prostration! 28

* * *

There was talk in governmental circles of “purchasing” the Requiem, of a grand decoration, of a professorship at the Conservatoire, of a generous pension from the Beaux Arts ministry. Nothing came of all these plans. As far as the Conservatoire post was concerned Berlioz was rejected as teacher of harmony at that institution on the ground that he could not play piano—which was as true as it was irrelevant. But a far greater and more fateful disappointment lay ahead. Early in 1838 his mother—who had cursed him—died at La Côte-Saint-André. Her curse did not perish with her; in fact, it smote him soon afterwards when his lyric drama, “Benvenuto Cellini”, failed grievously at the Opéra, where after long and torturing efforts he at length managed to have it performed. Not even today can it be said to have gained anything like a permanent foothold on the stage.

As time went on Hector tried to master his inhospitable fate in the operatic theatre by various compromises and subterfuges. He sought to create a “dramatic symphony”, based on “Romeo and Juliet”, and neither outright drama nor outright symphony—which accounts for its infrequent performance, despite the extraordinary beauty of some of its music. He wrote a “concert opera” which is, in effect, a cantata masquerading as an opera and vice-versa. “La Damnation de Faust”, one of the three most essential capturings in music of Goethe’s “Faust” drama, was at its first hearing in 1846 possibly the most distressful defeats he ever suffered at the hands of his countrymen. Not until decades after his death did he enjoy a kind of posthumous revenge when Raoul Gunsbourg, in Monte Carlo, fashioned a stage production which is now one of the mainstays of the Paris Opéra. A destiny in some respects even more deplorable was that of his music drama, “Les Troyens”, which he was never to hear in its completeness. The one theatre work of Berlioz to enjoy something like an uncontested triumph at its launching was his two-act opera comique, “Béatrice et Bénédict”, for which Shakespeare provided the original incentive. As for “Roméo et Juliette”, its high points are found in two movements—the rapturous love scene, which includes the most enamoring melodic ideas Berlioz ever conceived, and the unparagoned Queen Mab scherzo, embodying the composer’s instrumental fancy at its most subtle and ravishing—even if Parisian criticism of the time could see no more in it than “a little noise like that of an ill-greased syringe”! 29

That long scheduled visit to Germany continued to be deferred. Meantime Berlioz had been appointed assistant librarian at the Paris Conservatoire, a small distinction, to be sure; but offering at any rate a few additional francs. A more ponderable achievement was the composition for band of a three movement “Symphonie funèbre et triomphale”, planned for performance in the open air in memory of those fallen in the Revolution of 1830. The “Funeral and Triumphal Symphony” was one of the first compositions of Berlioz which Wagner heard when he arrived in Paris in 1840. Wagner was struck by the nobility of the work, ranked it among the loftiest achievements of its composer and retained an undissembled admiration for it all his days. Berlioz had reason to believe that, after this official labor, he might be called to step into the shoes of Cherubini at the Conservatoire when that worthy went to his reward in 1842. But the choice fell upon Georges Onslow and Hector, realizing that if he was ever to obtain in Paris the distinction to which he felt himself entitled, he would have to enhance his French reputation by properly publicized successes abroad. So he began by giving several concerts in Brussels, the second of which was destined to be important—less so for musical reasons than because of domestic entanglements it initiated. 30

Knowing Harriet’s jealousy Hector seems to have been strangely incautious about keeping secret the identity of his “traveling companion”. It did not take his alternately maudlin and aciduous Irish wife many days to find out from the papers that a certain Marie Recio was the snake in the grass. The Recio was a second rate singer, whose

real name was Marie Genevieve Martin. Hector had met her in 1841. We are told that she rekindled in his heart those romantic emotions the now slatternly and alcoholic Harriet could no longer feed. Marie's mother encouraged the liaison because she realized the power Berlioz had come to be in the journalistic field. He had been so imprudent as to impose her on one operatic management and the game had turned out badly. Before long poor Hector found himself as luckless in his second love affair as he had been in his first.

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The various tours which Hector undertook in Germany brought him artistic honors and material successes of which in France he never dreamed. Among average audiences he discovered a seriousness and a degree of taste such as were limited to a few circles at home. He refashioned old musical friendships and cultivated new ones. Mendelssohn met him in Leipzig and the pair continued the old artistic discussions and arguments as they had years before in Rome. Felix "was charming, fascinating, ceaselessly obliging and determined to be a guarantee for his French colleague's success". The two exchanged batons to symbolize their professional amity. Felix praised some of Hector's songs but avoided saying a word about his symphonies, overtures or the Requiem (actually, he detested them!) Berlioz saw Robert and Clara Schumann, the former appeared "wholly electrified by the Offertory of my Requiem". The Schumanns were hospitality itself, even if Clara sometimes found the Frenchman 31 "cold, indifferent, morose" and "not the kind of artist I like". Robert, however, "feels a sympathy for him which I cannot explain". Mendelssohn privately confessed that he felt like washing his hands after he had been through a Berlioz score. In Dresden there was Richard Wagner, whose "Rienzi" and "Flying Dutchman" Hector listened to with interest and who turned himself inside out to assist the extraordinary visitor in training orchestra and chorus for his concert in that city. One thing astonished Berlioz and grew to be something of a fly in the German ointment: that worship of Bach with which he was surrounded! "People do not believe that this divinity can ever be subjected to question", he sighed. "Heresy on the subject is forbidden; Bach is Bach, just as God is God!"

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On these travels, which went on intermittently for years, Hector visited not only Germany but also Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, Russia. He went to Russia in 1847 and later. There he was greeted like a conqueror and more than any other nation that country proved, materially, a gold mine to him. A pity that the harsh climate of places like St. Petersburg was, in the end, to try him so sorely! For whenever he went there he was literally overwhelmed with honors, decorations, costly gifts. In short, whenever neglect or disappointment became unbearable he could turn to Russia for at least temporary alleviation.

In Vienna (1845) he found much to delight him. To be sure he was often painfully struck by many things, such as the lamentable "ignorance prevailing with respect to the works of Gluck". He was in the habit of asking musicians if they knew "Alceste" or "Iphigenia" and invariably he received the answer: "They are never performed in Vienna; we do not know them". Whereupon his mental reaction would be: "But, you wretched creatures, whether they are performed or not, you ought to know them by heart!" On the other hand, he heard numbers of 32 remarkable artists and admits he "would have to write a book to do justice to each and to catalogue all the musical wealth of Vienna in detail". He received, naturally, the usual silver baton "inscribed with the titles of his works". Also, a little present of a hundred ducats from the Emperor after one of his concerts in the Redouten Saal; and, from the same exalted source, the message, conveyed by the Imperial master of ceremonies: "Tell Berlioz that I was greatly amused"!

Meanwhile the composer had been working by fits and starts on "The Damnation of Faust". He wrote page after page of it at the most unbelievable times of day and night and in the unlikeliest places—on the Boulevard Poissonnière, on a stone of the Boulevard du Temple, in the park at Enghien (when in a somnambulistic trance he had boarded a suburban train and it had simply deposited him there); at Lille, at Rouen, in Passau, in Prague, in Silesia; while walking, while eating, while traveling. When he left Vienna for Budapest he prepared to perform at his first Hungarian concert the Rakoczy March of which he had made what, in effect, has long been the standardized and most overpowering orchestration of all. This national melody invariably drove Magyar listeners into frenzies of patriotic enthusiasm (for that matter few audiences even now can hear it unstirred). And on the program piloted by Berlioz it led to such a wild demonstration that, as he directed it, the composer's hair stood on end and he was seized for a few moments with a kind of nightmare terror. He thereupon introduced the march into the score of "The Damnation" and placed the opening scene of the Faust action in Hungary so as to motivate the presence in the score of the volcanic page.

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It is hard to grasp today that the first performance of the "Damnation of Faust" at the Paris Opéra Comique (December 6, 1846) was the most heart-breaking fiasco of Berlioz' life. It was not a question of violent opposition (if only it had been!) but of abysmal, devastating indifference. Only a scattering of friends occupied the first 33 rows of the Salle Favart, with further back a handful of cynical faces. Otherwise an inhuman emptiness sat enthroned in the gaping theatre (the comic journal, Charivari, sniggered that if the Song of the Rat went unnoticed it was because there was not so much as a cat in the house!). From the outset Berlioz knew himself ruined, materially and spiritually. It was less the few remaining francs saved on his travels which mattered than the irreparable hurt done the morale of the afflicted man. "Nothing in my artistic career wounded me more deeply than this unexpected indifference", he was to write in his Memoirs—lapsing, for once, into pitiful understatement! Not till 1877 was "The Damnation of Faust" revived in Paris, by which time the composer had been dead eight years.

Although Berlioz recouped some of his financial losses from the "Faust" misadventure when he went to Russia the following year he was the plaything of destiny once again when, late in 1847, he accepted an invitation from Louis Antoine Jullien to go to London and conduct opera at the Drury Lane Theatre, of which Jullien was then the

manager. This spectacular French adventurer and charlatan, who speculated ruinously, went to jail for debt and died in a lunatic asylum, failed shortly after Berlioz suffered himself to be inveigled into what he thought would be a six years' engagement; and the composer, after giving a few concerts of his own music, found himself back in Paris by July, 1848. But England saw him again in 1851-52, when the New Philharmonic Society of London secured him as conductor, and in 1855 when he occupied the same post—not to mention a visit two years earlier when he was lured across the Channel to witness a Covent Garden representation of his first opera, "Benvenuto Cellini". This turned out almost as distressingly as had, in Paris, "The Damnation of Faust".

It is one of the real misfortunes of musical history that Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner never became to each other the kinsmen and spiritual brothers they should have been. Some unhappy flaw in their respective natures always thwarted a consummation which, one feels, fate should have preordained. Or some barrier sprang up between them precisely at the moment they should best have complemented each other. They had, in the larger sense, the same ideals, the same luminous visions, the same majestic aims, the same reluctance to palter and to compromise. They were both tortured by nerves and exacerbated by futile suspicions and jealousies. Yet each had the true measure of the other's importance, whether admitted or not. Prejudices and preconceptions, sometimes artificially fostered, if not fed by envy or rankling disappointment had a way of cropping up to blind them as soon as they gave promise of seeing eye to eye. Wagner was the stronger of the two, not only as to creative power but in toughness of fibre. But if they were not equally matched, the differences and asperities of the one fitted perfectly into the natural flaws and crudities of the other, as Wagner himself once took occasion to point out. 34

Berlioz appears to have recognized in Wagner, much as he may have resented it, a force of the future which sooner or later must challenge him. All the same, it is wrong to imagine that Wagner underrated his French rival, however he discerned the weaknesses of his work. His appreciation of the artist Berlioz was broader and more fundamental than the appreciation of Berlioz for him, which was so often soured by jealousy and blinded by bias. Wagner was incontestably sincere when he wrote: "We must honor Berlioz as the true renewer of modern music". Too few people are familiar with that extraordinary episode at Bayreuth, long after the Frenchman's death when the ageing Wagner flew into a towering rage on hearing the still youthful Felix Mottl criticise some detail of a Berlioz work. "When a master like Berlioz writes something you are too shallow to grasp your duty is to accept it without question or murmur!" he had screamed at his astonished disciple.



Taken in the last year of his life (1869)

Only once did the pair draw close enough to justify the belief that they might have developed, under more hospitable circumstances, a lasting friendship. This was in 1855, when the two men, in the depths of discouragement, met in London whither Wagner had come to conduct the Old Philharmonic. The improved relations were only temporary. The creator of "Tristan" appreciated that the jealous Marie Recio stood in the way 36

of any lasting rapprochement. And he confided to Liszt that “a malicious wife can ruin a brilliant man ... and bring out the worst aspects of his character; indeed, I have sometimes to wonder if God would not have done better to have left women out of the scheme of creation”. In 1861, at the “Tannhäuser” fiasco at the Paris Opéra, Berlioz played a part that reflects eternal discredit on his memory, even if the shabby treatment he so often endured at the hands of his countrymen could account for his spitefulness.

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The domestic situation of Berlioz had hopelessly deteriorated. Harriet, lame, coarse, shrewish had lost the last vestiges of her once admired beauty and talent. She was in due course to suffer paralytic strokes and then to become bedridden. Her son, Louis, having grown to young manhood, became an “aspirant-marinier” at Le Havre and decided to follow the sea, inheriting an early but unfulfilled ambition of his father. A true sailor he had a wife in every port and Hector, who was aware of the wanderer’s inclinations, sometimes longed to meet those grandchildren of his he knew lived scattered through the hemispheres. Now and then Louis would return briefly to Paris and look in on his wretched mother at her little house on the hill of Montmartre. Occasionally he would seek out his father at his domicile near the Place Pigalle—though only when Marie Recio was out! The moment he heard her footsteps in the hall he would flee. He could not pardon his father and he said so unmistakably. So did others! To all reproaches the unhappy composer had only one helpless answer: “What would you? I love her.” 37

Yet if that far-off adoration of his Ophelia and Juliet had, apparently, long since turned to ashes something like retribution was to overtake him. For years he had been paying her routine visits, understanding her solitude even as she divined his misery. But early in March, 1854, he was called to her bedside and found her dying. At that, he was not even granted the wretched solace of receiving her last breath! Harriet expired a few moments after he had left the house on some trivial errand. The blow was far more terrible than Hector had thought possible. In a flash he recognized that he really loved the wife more than he did the mistress; and in prodigious rebellion he cursed “that stupid God, atrocious in his infinite indifference”. To his son he wrote: “You will never know what your mother and I suffered because of each other and it was these sufferings which brought us so close together. It was as impossible for me to live with her as without her!” He was to see her once again! Ten years later they exhumed her and, in Hector’s presence, placed her ghastly remains in a new coffin and reinterred them in the Montmartre Cemetery.

In October, 1854, Berlioz legalized the situation of Marie Recio by marrying her.

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More wanderings lay ahead of him. He could have gone to New York, had he so chosen, and conducted concerts there. Rightly or wrongly he declined the offer. But in 1855 he harvested rich honors at a Berlioz Festival which his untiring champion, Liszt, staged in Weimar. A work which greatly stirred the audience at the Weimar Court Theatre was the newly composed “L’Enfance du Christ”. This exquisite “legend”, as simple, transparent and unpretentious as most of his other works are huge in scale and demanding, is a delicate little trilogy divided into sections respectively called “Herod’s Dream”, “The Flight to Egypt” and “The Arrival in Sais”. It looked, for a while, like a turn in Hector’s fortunes. Almost wherever the oratorio was performed it met with a favor to which the composer was quite unaccustomed. In Paris there actually were ovations and the press spoke of a “masterpiece”! 38

Berlioz was aware that Wagner, slowly but surely, was elaborating his gigantic “Nibelungen” project and he, too, became gradually filled with a scheme for a mythological opera. His old love for Virgil’s gods and heroes, dating back to the days of his boyhood and his Latin readings in his father’s library, reasserted itself. He dreamed of a vast fresco in which the siege of Troy, Aeneas, Hector, Priam, Cassandra, Dido and the rest of the splendid personages of the Mediterranean world should be combined in the action of a great lyric tragedy carried out “in the Shakespearian manner.” But though the idea fired him it also terrified him as he thought of the giant efforts it involved and the disappointments it was sure to entail. He confided his ambitions and his fears to Liszt’s friend, the Princess Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein. It was she who spurred him to the task and overrode his doubts and scruples.

“You must create this opera, this lyric poem or whatever you choose to call it”, the Princess insisted, and as he continued to plead the troubles it meant, she silenced him with a pretended severity: “Listen! If you shun the sufferings which this labor may and, indeed, ought to cause you—if you are so weak as to be afraid of it, if you refuse to dare everything for the sake of Dido and Cassandra, then stay away from me, I never want to see you again!”

It was a liberating word and Berlioz returned to Paris for the heart-breaking business of writing poem and music. He had foreseen its pains and obstacles only too clearly, but he wrestled furiously with them and kept the oath he had given. Sombre and lonely he composed, revised, expanded, cut down, suppressed and altered in a thousand different ways. The epic seemed to be taking all sorts of impractical forms and the composer realized that even all the conventional devices of dramaturgy might not avail to fit it for the theatre. Two years of intensive work brought the end of the score in 1858. Meanwhile Berlioz had terminated his Memoirs, which he kept at the Conservatoire out of fear that his second wife, in the course of her often indiscreet searchings, might light upon some secrets he preferred to hide. In the end he confided the manuscript to Liszt, to thwart Marie’s curiosity if he were to die. For Hector had been much haunted by thoughts of death as the time went by. Years of disappointment were more and more taking toll of his nervous system. He was tortured by what the doctors called “intestinal neuralgia”, against which medicine appeared to be unavailing. 39

“Les Troyens” was, in many ways, the supreme blow of his life and more than anything else his child of sorrow. In the year of its completion he tried in vain to have it sung at the Opéra. Three years later that institution accepted

it but did not give it. Finally, Léon Carvalho, manager of the Théâtre Lyrique, mounted it on November 4, 1863. The composer had found it necessary to divide his six and a half hour opera into two parts—"La Prise de Troie" and "Les Troyens à Carthage"—to make a performance possible at all. At that there were cuts, changes, revisions without end, and to this day versions and "editions" have been found indispensable if the work is to be made a practical stage piece. The first presentation did not include the "Prise de Troie" half, and this portion of the work, of which Cassandra, the composer's beloved "heroic virgin" is the central figure, Berlioz was never to witness. In spite of innumerable difficulties and the unfinished state of the representation the piece was moderately successful at first, the reviews in the main favorable, the box office fair and Hector himself delighted with as much of his creation as he heard. But the worries and tribulations the opera involved (for any change he wanted Hector had to pay out of his own pocket) brought a nervous breakdown and he managed to attend no more than four performances. As soon as his back was turned the management cut and slashed the score without compunction. By the end of a month audiences had fallen off to such an extent that, before Christmas, "Les Troyens" disappeared from the repertoire. This new blow promised to break the unhappy composer's spirit altogether. "My career is finished" he told someone who hoped for an early resumption of the work. "I have neither hopes, illusions nor great ideas left", he reflected bitterly; "my contempt for the stupidity and dishonesty of people has reached its peak...." And when he was told that audiences were beginning to flock to hear some work of his he would reply: "Yes, they are coming; but I am going!" 40

On June 14, 1862, Marie Recio died suddenly of a heart attack. The blow struck Hector much less violently than did the passing of his first wife. Possibly the circumstance that he was engaged on a new work at the time somewhat blunted the edge of his grief. This latest creation—his last, as it proved—was the two act opera comique, "Béatrice et Bénédict", a lyric version of "Much Ado About Nothing"—given for the first time at the newly built casino in Baden-Baden. "Béatrice et Bénédict" proved to be a repetition of the "Enfance du Christ" surprise—a brilliant success from the first. Berlioz was happy, but also cynical. "People are now discovering that I have melody, that I can be jubilant and even humorous!" he wrote. Another triumph of the new work at Weimar, in 1863, further demonstrated that the piece had been born under a lucky star. Like Verdi, thirty years later, Berlioz was disposed to conclude his creative career with a comedy inspired by his idolized Shakespeare. "I have written the final note with which I shall ever soil a scrap of music paper. No more of that! Othello's occupation's gone; I should like to have nothing more to do—nothing, absolutely nothing!" Actually, he had much more to do—conducting, writing, traveling, suffering. Yet so far as making music was concerned he was finished. 41

After Marie Recio's death Hector lived with his mother-in-law, whom he esteemed and who, in turn, loved him. Love of a different kind still lured him on. He met a young girl, by name Amélie and felt a fresh upsurge of romantic passion. But in six months she, too, was dead. Meanwhile Berlioz and his son had drawn much closer together, spiritually. Yet Louis was generally far from France and the pair, though they corresponded, saw but little of each other. One evening a number of Hector's closest musical friends, angered by the persistent neglect of the composer by his own countrymen, staged a little private glorification in his honor. They waited for the guest of the occasion and when time passed and he did not come a messenger was sent to fetch him. Berlioz lay on the floor of his room, writhing in an agony of grief. He had just received word that Louis was dead in Havana!

He was inspired by a sudden wish to renew one of the ties of his boyhood. And the thoughts of the eternal adolescent turned to Estelle Duboeuf, his "Stella Montis" of long ago. She was now a widowed old lady, patrician and proper, who had had a number of children, all of whom she had carefully reared and some of whom she had lost. She lived in Lyon and to that city Hector presently turned his steps. Estelle Fournier, amazed by the unexpected visit and the importunities of her ageing and weather-beaten guest, received him in kindly fashion, alluded tactfully to his agitated life but, with gentle firmness, discouraged his pleas for a somewhat closer friendship. Nevertheless, Berlioz was carried away by the mere joy of the meeting; and he chose to place an extravagant interpretation on a few commonplace phrases of hers and the words "affectionate sentiments" with which she had concluded a brief message. He continued from afar to worship this mirage and to build it up into elaborate fictions. He corresponded further with the decorous old lady, imagined vain things and confided to the Princess Wittgenstein "this kind of suffering is indispensable to me." 42

Meanwhile, he was off again on travels. In 1866 he conducted "La Damnation de Faust" in Vienna and in 1867 led half a dozen concerts in St. Petersburg where he made the acquaintance of Balakireff, Tchaikovsky and other Russian musicians, till, unable to endure the rigors of that climate, he returned to France, longing passionately for the sunshine and warmth of the Riviera. Walking on the beach at Monaco he suffered a bad fall the consequence, it appears, of a slight stroke, which recurred a few days later. He rallied, however, though once back in Paris he found it necessary to spend long and dreary days in bed. He had made his will, leaving his books and scores to the Conservatoire and distributing his meager "fortune" to his nieces, besides settling a sum of 1800 francs on Estelle Fournier (which she is said to have declined) and providing a tiny income for his mother-in-law. Of his various crowns, laurel wreaths and other "trophies" he made superb bonfire! "I feel that I am going to die" he wrote his Russian friend, Vladimir Stasoff. "I believe in nothing any more ... I am exorbitantly bored. Farewell! Writing causes me no end of trouble."

Gradually his faculties refused to function; little by little his brain became clouded, his tongue thickened, he made no attempt to talk and appeared to want nothing. On March 8, 1869, the long-embattled and sore-tried fighter, who had never attained inner or outer harmony, found peace. A final touch of irony was provided by the fact that his graveside valedictory was spoken, in the name of the Conservatoire, by a certain Elwart, to whom Berlioz had once said: "If *you* are to make a speech at my funeral I prefer not to die!"

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