

Berlioz, Hector : The Mémoires of Hector Berlioz

Begun in London in 1848, Berlioz's *Mémoires* could have been published in the aftermath of the [*Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*](#), whose first impression was made at the end of 1843, and of the [*Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*](#), which appeared in July 1844, as what might have been seen as "provisional" memoirs. The composer's decision to broaden the narration of his life, parts of which he had already committed to print, to include an account of the later years of his career, and to have the book published only after his death, made of the *Mémoires* his (literary) last will and testament, appearing as they did after *Les Soirées de l'orchestre* (1852), *Les Grottesques de la musique* (1859), and *À travers chants* (1862). Unlike those books, compendia of tales and anecdotes, manifestos and adorations, most of which were earlier published in newspapers and magazines, Berlioz's ultimate volume is rather a *mosaic* of episodes of the life of the artist peppered with delightful tangents and parentheses, imaginary conversations, sagas of travels in France and abroad, biographical sketches, and bountiful quotations and paraphrases that reveal a prodigious memory, a polished literary style, a delightful sense of humor, and a simply extraordinary general culture.

The purpose of the *Mémoires* was two-fold. Firstly, Berlioz wished to correct accounts of his life that he found "riddled with errors and inexactitudes." He was thinking in particular of the "Berlioz" article in the first edition of François-Joseph Fétis's *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, but he was also thinking of the many articles that portrayed him as an extravagant and ill-educated musician whose "programs" asked more of music than music was capable of giving. Secondly, Berlioz wished to articulate with precision the difficulties that aspiring composers faced during his lifetime, and, acting as a kind of mentor, to offer members of a new generation "some useful advice" as they confronted the challenges of making a career in music.

Well aware of the perils of the world of art, where composers' intentions were easily compromised by conductors and virtuoso performers, but also fearful of the world of books, where familial concerns could cause a text to be modified before its posthumous publication, Berlioz determined himself to have the *Mémoires* printed, and at his own expense. In July 1865, the print shop of Augustin Vallée produced twelve hundred copies of the *Mémoires d'Hector Berlioz, Membre de l'Institut de France, correspondant de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts de Berlin, de celle de Sainte-Cécile de Rome, Officier de la Légion d'honneur, Chevalier de plusieurs ordres étrangers, etc., etc.*, with the imprint "Paris, Chez tous les libraires, 1865." The inside title-page was more succinct: *Mémoires d'Hector Berlioz de 1803 à 1865 et ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie et en Angleterre écrits par lui-même*. The cover demonstrates Berlioz's pride in his status as a member of the Institut de

France; the shorter half-title, with the reassuring expression “written by himself” emphasizing the role of the composer as author, may have been suggested to him by the *Mémoires de Benvenuto Cellini, écrits par lui-même*, produced in 1844 by Jules Labitte, publisher in that very year of Berlioz’s *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*.

In the issue of the [Journal des débats of March 23, 1870](#), the firm of Michel Lévy, chosen by Berlioz’s heirs to put the book on sale, advertised the *Mémoires d’Hector Berlioz, Membre de l’Institut, comprenant ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie et en Angleterre, 1803-1865, avec un beau portrait de l’auteur*. The publishers simply added new title pages to the stock of books Berlioz had had printed, and underlined the importance of the handsome photograph of Berlioz that was taken between August 1864 and April 1865 by François-Marie-Louis-Alexandre Godinet de Villecholle, known as Franck. Beneath the photograph, in Berlioz’s hand, we find a quotation from the opening of the *Symphonie fantastique*, the melody initially conceived for the words of Némorin’s song in Book I of Florian’s pastoral novel *Estelle et Némorin*: “Je vais donc quitter pour jamais / Mon doux pays, ma douce amie”—the melody, as Berlioz explains in chapter IV, that captures “the unbearable suffering of a youthful heart tortured by hopeless love,” the melody that was the musical reflection of his own lovelorn grief as experienced in his youth and old age. Berlioz’s encounters with Estelle Fornier (née Dubeuf), first when he was not yet twelve years old, later on the eve of his sixty-first birthday, along with the quotations from *Macbeth* (“Life is but a walking shadow”) in French at the front of the volume, in English at the back, act as bookends for the *Mémoires*, and lend to them a kind of circular form.

A better analogy to the form of the volume, however, with its voyages of artistic encounter and execution in Germany, England, Russia, and France, is that of a rondo: the excursions become the episodes, the homecomings, the refrains. En route, we hear the applause of the German public, we see the opulence of the Russian Imperial Court, we feel the response to the composer in France—here enthusiastic, there lukewarm, elsewhere frankly cold. We observe the difficulty of producing concerts in Paris when one is both the composer and the conductor, both the impresario and the publicist, and also the music critic, as was Berlioz, known for his conspicuously forceful opinions. We understand why Berlioz appreciated the musical landscape in Germany, where each of the various kings and princes had his own musical establishment outfitted with professional players and singers and offered to composers numerous opportunities for performance—in contradistinction to the situation in France, where the provinces were little equipped for large-scale performance, and where the doors of the capital’s concert halls and theaters, controlled by those whom Berlioz usually viewed as brainless, were extremely difficult to open.

We come to understand why Berlioz early on appreciated the protection and patronage of artistically educated or financially secure persons in positions of authority, and why throughout his lifetime he maintained the antipathy to republicanism that he announced in the preface of the *Mémoires*: “As I write, Republicanism is steamrolling its way across the European continent. The art of music, which for a long time has everywhere been gasping for life, is at this hour

quite dead. It is about to be buried, or rather thrown upon the dung-heap.” Thrilled by the coup d’état of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, and despite what he called the man’s “harmonophobia,” Berlioz supported the Emperor to the final days of his life.

As we read the book, we meet the musicians and administrators whose portraits by Berlioz have endowed them with immortality: Cherubini, with his Italian accent, who chased Berlioz from the library at the Conservatoire (“I weel not allow you to return!”); Fétis, the “young, eighty-year-old theorist” who dared to modify the Beethoven symphonies; Guhr, the Kapellmeister at Frankfurt, whose French was permeated with profanity; Roqueplan and Duponchel, the directors of the Opéra, whose self-satisfied ignorance was as great as was the barbarism of their behavior. The cast of characters is wonderfully long and diverse.

Berlioz was a creature and a creator of contrast and nonconformity. We find these attributes on the last page of the *Mémoires*: “Which element can lift up mankind to the most sublime heights?,” he asks poetically; “Is it Love, or is it Music? The answer is not clear. It nonetheless seems to me that we ought to say this: Love cannot give an idea of Music, while Music can indeed give an idea of Love. But why separate the one from the other? They are the two wings of the soul.” “Seeing what certain people mean by Love, and what they seek from Art,” he then observes, taking us from poetry to prose, “I am inevitably reminded of *pigs*—who, with their ignominious snouts, rummage around in the dirt beneath the most beautiful flowers and at the feet of the great oaks, hoping there to find the truffles of which they are so fond.”

Do Berlioz’s *Mémoires* recount “the truth”? In fact this oft-posed question is naïve. The book is filled with assertions that are absolutely accurate, statements that are slightly inexact, remembered quotations that are somewhat off the mark, and conversations that are invented out of whole cloth. It is filled both with observations that reveal a man of profound intelligence, and with opinions that reveal an artist now open-minded, now wickedly prejudiced, always prepared for madness and mirth. Indeed, it is the combination of his remarkable wisdom and his ready wit that has led to the continuing vitality of his most frequently read and most often translated book, the *Mémoires d’Hector Berlioz*.

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19/01/2021

For further reading:

Mémoires d’Hector Berlioz de 1803 à 1865, et ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie et en Angleterre, écrits par lui-même, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Peter Bloom, Paris, Vrin, 2019.

The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, translated and edited by David Cairns, New-York, Knopf, [1969] 2002.

Memoiren, translated by Hans Scholz and edited by Gunther Braam, Göttingen, Hainholz, 2007.

To quote this article: Peter BLOOM, "Berlioz, Hector : The Mémoires of Hector Berlioz", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dicterco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 28/01/2021, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2026>.