

## Hector Berlioz, Musical Travels in Germany and Italy (1844)

Published in two volumes by Jules Labitte in 1844—volume I for Germany, volume II for Italy—this collection constitutes Berlioz’s first literary publication of any length. It appeared immediately after the [\*Grand traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes\*](#) (Schoenberger, 1843). The title “Musical Voyage in Germany” comes from the title of the chronicles of his concerts in northern Europe that Berlioz sent to the *Journal des débats*. The book would never be re-issued, though volume I was partly translated into German in 1843. Berlioz nevertheless reused, with modifications, its contents in three of the four works by him to have stood the test of time: [\*Les Soirées de l’orchestre\*](#) (1852), [\*À travers chants\*](#) (1862), and the [\*Memoirs\*](#) (1870).

What the composer produced in 1844 was in fact no more than a reorganised and touched-up selection of those of his articles published in the press since 1830 that he wanted to save from oblivion. Hence the mosaic quality of this collection which paints in its fashion the portrait of a Romantic under Louis-Philippe. Berlioz does not respect biographical chronology, according to which volume II would come first, but translated his daily experiences into literary form, following his poetic and fantastical bent.

The *Voyage musical* proceeds in the kaleidoscopic manner of the *Symphonie fantastique*, whose programme it indeed continues in certain respects. Equally, the book is to Berlioz’s literary output what the *Messe solennelle* or the *Eight Scenes from Faust* are to his musical oeuvre: a first opus motivated by the double desire to attract the attention of Paris and proclaim an aesthetic truth.

Berlioz draws, most often, on the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* and the *Journal des débats*, borrowing also from, among others, *Le Correspondant* (1830), *L’Europe littéraire*, *Le Rénovateur*, and *L’Italie pittoresque*. The book steers clear of the risk of disorder posed by the variety of its genres (travel narratives, studies, novellas, potpourris) thanks to its unified style and vivacious tone. The narrative mode, then very much in vogue, underlies the bulk of the work. It proceeds by way of open letters addressed to correspondents real or fictive, contemporary or bygone, as well as by a series of brief accounts of fantastic and picturesque episodes. The “studies”, of a Hoffmann-esque flavour, offer considerations on Beethoven’s symphonies, trios, and sonatas, *Der Freischütz*, and the two *Alcestes*. The “potpourris” and “novellas” appear at key moments within the whole: transitions, introductions, epilogues. They are diverse in orientation: meditative (“On Music in General”, vol. I, pp. 239–66), romantic (“Death by Enthusiasm”, II,

309–40), or almost opportunistic (“Tribulations of a Music Critic”, I, 407–20) or even critical (the cluttered triptych “Musical Astronomy”, II, 341–368) in their topicality.

These voyages were directly written for the artistic readership of Paris, with which they dialogue and for which they purport to (re-)establish the way things really happened, notably concerning the failure of *Benevenuto Cellini*. French musical institutions from the Conservatoire to the Opéra and the Prix de Rome are certainly at the heart of the matter, but ever more so is the personality of Berlioz himself. His narratorial privilege gives him the chance to explain the complex place that he demands for himself in a society which he cannot do without, but whose extreme mediocrity he excoriates. This debut publication, in which Berlioz throws down his gauntlet, appeared at a key moment in his career at which he was struggling to prevail on numerous fronts. A form of self-promotion carried out with verve and humour, the work also confirms Berlioz’s aesthetic.

Alban RAMAUT

09/03/2018

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Alban Ramaut, "Hector Berlioz, Musical Travels in Germany and Italy (1844)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 01/03/2023, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/1999>.