

Hector Berlioz, *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (1844/1854)

Among Berlioz's writings, the *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* is the only work with a plainly theoretical purpose, and the only one to receive an opus number (op. 10) like a musical composition. Deriving from a series of sixteen articles published under the title "[De l'instrumentation](#)" in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* (Nov. 1841 - July 1842), this treatise, dated 1844, was first released in late 1843 by the publisher Schonenberger. The revised edition (Lemoine, 1855) includes a new chapter on orchestral conducting, also published separately by Schonenberger the next year under the title [Le chef d'orchestre. théorie de son art, extrait du Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes par Hector Berlioz](#). The work reflects Berlioz's ongoing interest in orchestral sonority (no mere colouration, in his view, but integral to the musical idea) and in the organological developments of the time; over the course of its three versions, certain instruments disappeared (such as the lute and basset horn) while others were introduced (Sax instruments, melodium, octobass, etc.).

The treatise has a technical aspect of specifying the use of each instrument (the title page promises "a precise table of the ranges, an overview of the mechanics, and a study of the timbres and expressive characters of various instruments"), but also a poetic aspect of clarifying the "appropriateness", "necessity", and "suitability" of use with reference to each instrument's expressive power. It indeed rests on an extended metaphor of the orchestra as a theatre with instruments for characters, by turns epic (the trombone), heroic (clarinet), poetic and religious (harp), dreamy and melancholic (English horn), and so on. Sixty-six large examples in full score, taken from Gluck (17), Beethoven (17), Berlioz himself (11), Meyerbeer (8), Mozart (4), Weber (3), Spontini (2), Rossini (2), Méhul (1), and Halévy (1), enrich these chapters devoted successively to string instruments, wind instruments (among which Berlioz includes the human voice), and finally percussion.

The "modernity" announced in the title obtains in Berlioz's innovative use of the very term *orchestration* (though he still tends to approach each instrument in isolation), his revolutionary definition of a musical instrument ("Any sound-producing body used by the Composer"), and his vision of an ideal orchestra with massive forces. On the other hand, even while affirming the new importance of timbre as an element of composition, his Introduction takes an antimodern turn in condemning the "exaggeration" supposedly characteristic of modern orchestration.

Though not the first of its kind ([Georges Kastner](#) had already written one), and soon rivalled by the work of François-Auguste Gevaert, Berlioz's orchestration treatise had a rich posterity. In France, it was read and re-read by numerous composers, from Saint-Saëns (who maintained that "it was [Berlioz] who trained my whole

generation”) to Ravel (who kept a copy at hand in Montfort-l’Amaury). Widor took it upon himself to expand on it in his [*Technique de l’orchestre moderne, faisant suite au Traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration de H. Berlioz*](#), before Koechlin’s [*Traité d’orchestration*](#) became the new essential reference. Abroad, German and Italian and later English and Spanish translations appeared during the author’s lifetime, and Richard Strauss wrote a series of *Commentaries and Additions* to incorporate the lessons of Wagner’s orchestra into Berlioz’s book. Though it was Gevaert’s more pedagogical work that Tchaikovsky translated into Russian at the request of Anton Rubinstein, the composers of the Mighty Handful (the “Russian Five”) read Berlioz in the original and took away many lessons, some of which turn up in Rimsky-Korsakov’s own *Principles of Orchestration*.

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Further Reading

Hugh Macdonald, *Berlioz’s Orchestration Treatise. A Translation and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Béatrice Didier, Emmanuel Reibel (ed.), *Berlioz, poète et théoricien de l’orchestre. Regards sur le Grand Traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes*, Paris, Champion, 2019.

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