

## Berlioz, Hector : *A travers chants* (1862)

Published in 1862, *A travers chants* is the final panel of the ‘trilogy’ begun by *Les Soirées de l’orchestre* (1852) and continued by *Les Grottesques de la musique* (1859). In this last book, Berlioz continued selecting pieces from his feuilletons, adding part of his *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*; but otherwise he proceeded differently from the earlier volumes. In *Soirées*, we hear the voices of fictional musicians during performances of inferior operas, whereas *Grottesques* gives pride of place to fragments, tales, and antics designed to satirize Parisian musical life. *A travers chants* pays more attention to the ‘sacred monsters’, most of them German, whom Berlioz revered. Although the book is subtitled ‘Etudes musicales, adorations, boutades et critiques’, ‘adorations’ have pride of place. Fragmentary texts have virtually disappeared, allowing space for extended essays on Berlioz’s favoured repertoires. The result is three large groupings: the first devoted to Beethoven (all 9 symphonies, trios, sonates and *Fidelio*), the second centred on Gluck, the third treating other masters, from Weber to Wagner by way of Reber and Heller.

Thus Berlioz, as his life drew to a close, showed his concern to offer a sanctuary to masterpieces which he identified as his own inheritance. To achieve this, he laid a foundation-stone by canonizing Beethoven’s symphonies; by representing himself as the prophet of this revelatory music, he produced something akin to a secular theophany. More generally, Berlioz persistently argued for *Werktreue*, the integrity of the score, in opposition to unscrupulous conductors, self-loving singers, and mercenary theatre-directors.

*A travers chants* was published shortly after the scandal of the Paris *Tannhäuser*. Although Berlioz agreed with Wagner on the mysteries of listening, and in a shared reverence for Gluck, Beethoven, and Weber, he opposed his proclamation of ‘music of the future’, and responded to it in a particularly interesting chapter (“Concerts by Richard Wagner. Music of the Future”). Since *A travers chants* opens with a deeply theoretical attempt at a definition of music, the whole book appears to constitute a kind of riposte against Wagnerian theories, where Berlioz expounds his own artistic ideals using examples from the music of his own time.

1,500 copies of this book were printed when it was first published. In 1864 *A travers chants* was translated into German. It was republished eight times in France between 1872 to 1927. The articles on Beethoven were isolated, and republished by Corrêa in 1941 (*Beethoven*), although Berlioz had never thought of such a monograph.

Emmanuel REIBEL  
31/01/2020

To quote this article : Emmanuel Reibel, “Berlioz, Hector : A travers chants (1862)”, Dictionary of Writings by Composers, Dicteco <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2021>, ed. E. Reibel, last edited : 31/01/2020