

Berlioz, Hector (1803-1869): Summary of Writings

Berlioz was a prolific author of correspondence, musical reviews, books, musical prefaces, paratexts, and librettos (*Lélio ou le retour à la vie*, *L'Enfance du Christ*, *La Damnation de Faust*, *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, *Les Troyens*). The [*Grand Traité d'orchestration et d'instrumentation modernes*](#) (and its appendix on the art of conducting) is considered to be his most important theoretical contribution and one of the very first of its kind. But he was more of a columnist than a theoretician: most of his writings are articles for the press, aside from his numerous letters (more than four thousand have been found), his *Correspondance générale* published by Flammarion in eight volumes, and his posthumously published [*Mémoires*](#). Between 1823 and 1863, he wrote about nine hundred columns which represented his main source of a stable income. Indeed, he was neither a virtuoso nor a teacher; commissions were scarce, and his music never was lucrative.

Berlioz's first articles date to 1823 and were sporadically published in [*Le Corsaire*](#), [*Le Correspondant*](#), the [*Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*](#), the [*Revue européenne*](#), [*L'Europe littéraire*](#) and [*Le Rénovateur*](#). In 1834, Berlioz mainly became a full-time critic for the [*Journal des débats*](#) and the [*Revue et gazette musicale*](#). His articles were incredibly varied: reviews of concerts or operas, open letters, literary fantasies, biographical articles (Marcello, Méhul, Paganini), and even obituaries (Cherubini, Spontini, Chopin, and so forth). From his first article defending Spontini's *The Vestal Virgin*, to the last dedicated to Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, Berlioz painted the musical life of his time: the Concerts du Conservatoire, Opéra and Opéra-Comique, but also concerts organized by musical newspapers or by the Prince de la Moskowa (early music), concerts of Dietsch devoted to religious music, as well as the performances of great musicians (the pianists Thalberg, Heller, Hallé, Doehler, and Alkan, the violinist Bohrer, the cellists Batta and Franchomme, the clarinetist Cavallini, etc.). His feuilletons mentioned contemporary composers (Liszt, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Halévy, Verdi, Gounod, etc.) and praised composers of the past (Gluck, Beethoven, Spontini, etc.), as well as a host of now largely-forgotten musicians: Ruolz, Mainzer, Clapisson, Monpou, Kastner, Balfe, Flotow, Bazin, Boisselot, Mermet etc. Beyond the abundant musical life of Paris, his columns also addressed new publications, instrumental methods, and varied questions related to teaching, tuning, instrumentation, and even outdoor music.

Beyond a source of income, Berlioz perceived journalistic writing as a polemical "arm" for "defending beauty" (*Mémoires*, XXI). He signed his first articles in *Le Corsaire* and *Le Correspondant* during the a period of tense conflict of the warring dilettanti, pleading in favor of the French lyrical tradition. This taste for controversy did not weaken when he became a regular reviewer for *Débats*. There, he led many crusades against fugues in religious music, *vocalises* in the dramatic style,

commercially minded theatre directors, narcissistic singers, unscrupulous conductors, disrespectful instrumentalists, audiences deaf to masterpieces, and so forth.

Berlioz's motivations also concerned with publicity. He ironically spoke of the constraints of a profession which often condemned him to write "nothing about nothing", going so far as to speak of "slavery" in a letter of 1861 to his son. His correspondence sometimes revealed discrepancies between his true opinions and the judgements he published in the press. Nevertheless, he was quite conscious of the power of his position as a musical writer: he conceived his articles as a real "war machine" meant to conquer the Opera (CG2:336) or as a space to defend his conception of music. The publication of books reworking his earlier articles followed a similar media strategy, aimed at promoting his musical work ([*Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*](#), [*Les Soirées de l'orchestre*](#), [*Les Grotesques de la musique*](#), [*À travers chants*](#)).

Berlioz was a fervent reader of French and foreign romantic literature, and it enabled him to have a sharp and personal that holds up against other writers of his time. As a master in the art of satire, he was a worthy contemporary of Cham or Daumier. His quill thrives in flaying the "grotesque figures of music", and his biting irony was based on several techniques ranging from spiritual anecdote to caricatures and defiant comments. Through his truculence, his puns and his contrasts, Berlioz's style has an almost Shakespearean dimension. It is related to a taste for a hybrid language, full of foreign terms and mixed with quotations in the language of Virgil or Shakespeare, sometimes cultivating an unusual or invented vocabulary, and a language mixing oratory art, epic expressions, and poetic images. His confident taste for incongruity, digression and hyperbole is proportionate to the violence of his musical emotions.

Berlioz's consummate talent for storytelling also shows through in his correspondence, in his literary short stories, and in his [*Mémoires*](#), in which he delights in staging his romantic life. Even in non-fictional texts, he often displayed narrative structures that transform everything—be it a letter, a musical feuilleton, the very description of music—into a micro-narrative. These narratives were often animated by dramatization, but also by short sketches that give way to a conversational style and keep the reader on the edge of his seat. This literary taste and talent led Berlioz to intertwine his music with texts and words of which he was also the author: programmes (*Symphonie fantastique*), narratives (*Le Retour à la vie*), prefaces (*Roméo et Juliette*), librettos (*La Damnation de Faust*, *Les Troyens*, *Benvenuto Cellini*) offer throughout his work, different and groundbreaking forms of interplay between words and sounds. By linking *melos* and *logos*, in such an intimate way, assisting his composition process with several writing forms, and by finally making his *Traité d'orchestration* his opus 10, Berlioz showed there was no gap separating musical and literary works: both must be taken as a whole.

Emmanuel REIBEL

25/05/2020

Trans. K. Oakley / C. Murray

Further reading

Alban Ramaut, « [Investir les journaux à l'ère industrielle. Fatalité ou opportunisme ? L'exemple de Berlioz \(1830-1838\)](https://revuemusicaleoicrm.org/rmo-vol7-n1/investir-les-journaux) », *Revue musicale OICRM*, vol. 7, no 1, 2020, mis en ligne le 1er avril 2020, <https://revuemusicaleoicrm.org/rmo-vol7-n1/investir-les-journaux>.

To quote this article: Emmanuel Reibel, "Berlioz, Hector (1803-1869): Summary of Writings", *Dictionary of Composer's Writings*, Dicterco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 22/01/2024, <https://dicterco.huma-num.fr/person/1998>.