

Widor, Charles-Marie: Technique de l'orchestre moderne faisant suite au Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration de H. Berlioz (1904)

Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937) published his orchestration treatise at the age of sixty, one year before he took over the composition class of Théodore Dubois at the Paris Conservatory and also one year before Richard Strauss published [his own revision](#) of Berlioz's *Traité d'orchestration et d'instrumentation modernes* in Germany. Widor also conceived his manual as follow-up to the Berlioz's treatise, intending to rectify its "imprecisions" and make up for its "gaps" inevitably created by changes to instruments. Although the introduction sacralizes the model of Berlioz, the new work is not, as it claims, a mere "appendix". It is evidence of Widor's assimilation of other orchestration treatises, including those of [Kastner](#) and [Gevaert](#) (both cited in the text); it also reflects the evolution of instruments and their use at the beginning of the twentieth century through many orchestral excerpts that update the original reference for students of composition.

From Berlioz to Widor, several passages were removed: those on early instruments (*viole d'amour*, serpent, Russian bassoon, basset horn, mandolin) and on voices (a voluntary choice by Widor); other instruments left out are more surprising (like the guitar, and especially, the piano). Berlioz's range of instruments is also expanded to include the baritone oboe, the bass trumpet, and the contrabass trombone, as well as several percussion instruments (tambourine, castanets, keyboard glockenspiel, celesta, and xylophone). Widor's approach is essentially technical. He spends much time on woodwind trills and tremolos (with complete lists of what is possible), on breathing and articulation for brass instruments, on the mechanism and dynamics of timpani, and on double, triple, and quadruple stops in string instruments (including an exhaustive list of dominant seventh and ninth chords with their resolutions). Abundant musical examples illustrate Widor's text, displaying his vast knowledge of the symphony. Without forgetting earlier music (from Bach to Berlioz, passing by Gluck, Beethoven, and Weber), Widor focuses on French music after Berlioz (Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Lalo, Dubois, Massenet, and to a lesser extent Busser, Lenepveu, and Paladilhe), without forgetting to cite his own music along the way (*Second Symphony*, *Ouverture espagnole*, *Choral et Variations*, *Les Pêcheurs de Saint-Jean*). German music is also quite present (Wagner is omnipresent, Schumann and Brahms appear here and there) and Russian music is also sometimes used as a model. Widor generally finishes each section of the manual by recommending a repertoire to study to further understanding of the subject, and his recommendations also include music by Scandinavian and American composers.

As would be expected from the man who played Saint-Sulpice's Cavallé-Coll for some sixty-four years, the chapter on the organ is almost a stand-alone essay, one that attacks the "unfortunate organist who informed [Berlioz] so wrongly" (p. 178)! Whereas his predecessor had underlined a certain antipathy between the "emperor" (the organ) and the "pope" (the orchestra), Widor sets out to prove the contrary and shows how modern concert halls can no longer do without an organ. His point of view is both historical and polemical, attacking the defects of pneumatic and electric organs and scorning overly sentimental organists. Widor seeks to reconcile his two models, Bach and Berlioz, "two brains at antipodes" which, according to him, "pursue the same ideal" (p. 178). In doing so, he tirelessly praises the musical virtues of his instrument, "the most powerful means for expressing that which is great, unchanging, eternal" (p. 188).

Widor closes his treatise by encouraging the study of numerous contemporary composers and offering four pieces of practical advice that he develops briefly: "Write your orchestra in a way that each group can be heard separately"; "Write so that each musician can understand their role in the orchestra"; "Associate the idea of contrasting sounds with that of changing keys"; and "keep your foregrounded instruments in the register of their best sound". Six extended, full-page orchestral excerpts illustrate the blending of flute, violas, and harp (in the fourth act of Reyer's *Sigurd*), the "full sound of the strings supported by the horns and the harp" (Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*), "combined patterns in the strings creating the effect of a continuous trill" (in Glazunov's *Sixth Symphony*), "brilliant" sound (in Blockx's *Princesse d'auberge*), "full, bold sound" (in Edgar Tinel's *Sainte Godelive*), and an "effect of violent and dramatic contrast" (in the second act of Giordano's *Siberia*).

First published in France in 1904, the treatise went through four editions before 1914, as well as a fifth revised and expanded edition of 1925. It was reprinted in France in 1979 and was translated early into German (1904) and English (1906), versions which were also regularly reissued.

Emmanuel REIBEL

08/04/2020

Trans. Chris Murray

To quote this article: Emmanuel Reibel, "Widor, Charles-Marie: Technique de l'orchestre moderne faisant suite au Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration de H. Berlioz (1904)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 16/12/2023, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2305>.