Review: New Letters of Berlioz
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Reviews

New Letters of Berlioz

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The long-awaited second volume of the Berlioz Correspondance générale has now appeared, and, with volume 3 scheduled for distribution this fall, we will soon be in possession of half of the projected six-volume edition. Scholars will of course be mining these volumes for years to come, already at the 1975 Colloque International Hector Berlioz in Paris, volume 1 was being quoted, interpreted, and occasionally questioned in paper after paper. But the letters of this great composer and writer deserve a wider audience as well, for they make captivating and enlightening reading. In spite of an occasional dull business letter, fascinating items are the rule here, and they make this an essential collection, one to be placed on the shelf next to the letters of Mozart or Mendelssohn.

The editorial responsibility for the Correspondance générale is being shared by eight scholars, under the general editorship of Pierre Citron. Each volume is officially assigned to a different editor or team of editors, and the work is then revised by both Citron and the secretary of the edition, Thérèse Husson. The general features of the Correspondance générale have been discussed in reviews of volume 1, but certain facts merit repeating here. Berlioz destroyed the correspondence in his possession in 1867, so the letters that survive are mainly those written by the composer himself, often preserved by the recipient and his or her heirs, although a number of individual letters have turned up on the auction market, and others have found their way into libraries and private collections. The
Correspondance générale consolidates the letters previously published in over a dozen sources, most of them out of print, and adds a large number of new letters and documents, including letters between friends, relatives, and other contemporaries of the composer. The whole is presented in a scholarly manner, with annotations, helpful event-by-event chronologies of Berlioz's life, and the usual indexes.

The second volume of the series was entrusted to Frédéric Robert, who shares with the reader his extensive knowledge of French patriotic and military music, notably in commentaries on the Grande messe des morts and the Symphonie funèbre et triomphale. No doubt we have the editor-in-chief to thank for the identification of Berlioz's wide-ranging literary allusions. The editors also deserve praise for preserving Berlioz's abbreviations (and punctuation?) more consistently than in volume 1.

The physical characteristics of the new volume are cause for more mixed emotions. On the one hand, the publishers have belatedly agreed to produce the series in hardcover, an obvious necessity for any major scholarly edition. (Volume 1, after a preliminary issue in paperback, is now being distributed in hardcover at no increase in price.) On the other hand, the pages of these volumes are glued together rather than sewn. Unless French publishers have discovered a magic adhesive unknown to their American counterparts, one can expect random leaves of this new edition to begin to drop loose within fifteen years, a sad prospect indeed.

The contents of the volume, similarly, provide both pleasant and occasionally unpleasant surprises. The pleasant are by far in the majority, beginning with the inclusion of an even larger percentage of new letters than had been offered in volume 1. Of 485 letters in volume 2—not counting third-party letters in the footnotes and lost letters whose existence has been deduced—between 200 and 275 are new, depending on whether one wishes to describe as "new" certain letters previously published in obscure and ephemeral sources, such as auction catalogues and periodical articles.

The character of the letters in volume 2 is noticeably different from that in the first volume. The struggling student has become a recognized young composer, going from triumph to triumph with the Mélodie (later renamed Lélio), Harold en Italie, the Requiem, Roméo et Juliette, and the Symphonie funèbre, not to speak of his success as critic and conductor. Only the failure of Benvenuto Cellini at the Opéra mars the ascending curve of the composer's success during these years.

The two most fascinating parts of volume 2 concern, as Citron pointed out in his report at the Colloque Berlioz, episodes in Berlioz's personal, rather than musical, life. His stormy courtship of Harriet Smithson against the furious opposition of both families, involving what seem to be serious threats of suicide from the thirty-year-old composer, has never before been presented in such full detail. Particularly ironic is Berlioz's violent reaction to his father's warning that the marriage would only make the actress miserable and eventually drive the composer to leave her for another; that is precisely what did happen eight years later, toward the end of the present volume. The second episode revealed by new letters also involves the composer's family. In his review of Roméo et Juliette, Jules Janin sketched the early biography of Berlioz, emphasizing the poverty into which Berlioz was thrown when his father discontinued his allowance. Hector's father, uncle, and sister Nanci all became enraged at Janin's public attack on the family name (which was nonetheless based on solid fact, as Berlioz pare knew very well). The self-righteous and at times hypocritical letters of the family communicate the oppressiveness of respectable provincial life with a vividness worthy of Balzac.

Of the letters concerning musical matters, perhaps the most interesting is the one Berlioz wrote to Ludwig Rellstab on 31 March 1838 (letter 549, pp. 432–34). The Berlin poet and critic had asked him for information about his works, and Berlioz included in his grateful reply some autobiographical paragraphs as an addendum to the official biography published by d'Ortigue in late 1832.

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4The plays mentioned on p. 96 and 639, fns., are by Racine.
I compose without instrument, for I do not play piano at all. My opinions on harmony, melody, rhythm and orchestration are, I believe, the same as everybody’s, aside from the “prejudices.” These prejudices are so deeply rooted here in France, especially in our Paris Conservatoire, that a man who refuses to share them passes for an extravagant innovator. I have the most lively sympathy for Gluck and Beethoven, first of all, and for Weber next. I admire Mozart profoundly, but he moves me less than the three that I have just named, except in The Magic Flute, which seems to me to be his masterpiece.

The modern Italian school, beginning with Rossini, is odious to me, except in the comic genre; as for what is called opera seria, aside from the more or less brilliant effects of the music taken as such, I can find nothing in it but an insolent parody of dramatic propriety and of artistic expression and poetry. I believe there is much to be done in the area of rhythm and orchestration; contrary to the impression that people try to spread here, I am not imbued with exaggerated ideas on the expressive power of instrumental music; I only believe it is able to render certain feelings and certain poetic ideas of which nobody anywhere in the world has ever wished to deprive the domain of music, but which have often been the pretext for ambitious and ridiculous works.

The editors fail to remark that this letter was one of those seen by Jacques Barzun in the Preussische Staatsbibliothek in 1934; sometime after the War it came into the possession of the late Mme de Chambure. Dare we hope that more Berlioz letters and other missing items from Berlin will show up in her estate or in other private collections?

Perusing the rest of the musical letters in volume 2, one is left with the strong impression that for several years Berlioz was more at the center of things than we sometimes imagine. Far from exciting general consternation, most of his works found a degree of acceptance with audiences, certain critics, literary people, and even some government officials—at times because of the very innovations they contain. The congratulatory letters that Berlioz received after first performances of the Requiem, Roméo, and the Symphonie funèbre give new evidence of this sympathetic response.

The letters are equally graphic, though, in portraying the sharp resistance that Berlioz encountered from the musical establishment everywhere he turned. In 1838, for example, Berlioz sought appointment as director of the Théâtre-Italien. His detailed and well-reasoned proposals, reproduced here for the first time, were overwhelmingly rejected, yet three years later the theater was re-established along the very lines that Berlioz had suggested—but without Berlioz at the helm.

He had of course met with antagonism from the very beginning of his career. The depth of this hostility, however, became fully apparent only when Benvenuto Cellini was sabotaged not so much by the tenor Duprez as by the administration of the Opéra (assisted by critics, cabals and the usual accessories to assassination in musical Paris). If Berlioz still had illusions, they must have been dispelled by the hurdles put in his way when he tried to write a second opera, La Nonne sanglante. It is perhaps to Berlioz’s increasing disenchantment that one must look for the explanation of what Boschot called the années mystérieuses, the last years of volume 2 (1841–42), during which the composer wrote little music and few letters. His hopes of establishing himself securely as teacher at the Conservatoire, as conductor at the Opéra, or as a well-paid opera composer were dashed one by one, and it took him some time to accept the unpleasant fact that long concert tours in foreign countries were his only path to financial and artistic stability. His liaison with Marie Recio, which began in the fall of 1841, was perhaps a further symptom of his growing desire to break with the frustrated dreams of the 1830s—in both public and personal life.

It is precisely these transitional years of the early 1840s that present the first disappointment in volume 2. The editors, to their credit,
have been able to increase from seven [!] to thirty-five the number of published letters between January 1841 and September 1842, yet that is far too small a number to tell us all we would like to know about these crucial years. (By contrast, the volume offers some eighty letters each for the years 1838 and 1839.) It appears that Berlioz simply wrote few letters during this transitional period, perhaps for deeply-rooted emotional reasons. (Auguste Morel, in a little-known letter of 1843 to Lecourt, attributed Berlioz's recent neglect of friends and career to the "subjugating" influence of Marie Recio.)

There are other disappointments in volume 2, harder to quantify, perhaps, but no less real. In many small ways one senses that the new volume was less carefully assembled than the first. Typographical errors in the text will cause few problems for the attentive reader (one exception: the reference at the end of p. 662 is to chapter LI), but a few foreign names should be corrected (p. 5: Albi Rosenthal; p. 466: Edwin Franko Goldman; p. 491: Koch; p. 504: Breitkopf; and the Sibley Music Library, passim, is located at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, N.Y.). The chronologies for each year are not always as useful to the reader as those of volume 1; they appear to have been drawn up in part after the analogous tables in Boschot. More significantly, a number of Berlioz's correspondents go completely unidentified. Citron did not hesitate to propose possible identities for obscure figures in volume 1, and the editors could have done so more consistently for volume 2. They do not, for example, identify LeRoy, yet he is regularly listed in the almanacs of the period as "employé" of the Conservatoire Library, when Berlioz makes a request of him he is thus acting in his capacity as LeRoy's immediate superior as Conservateur-adjoint and Sous-bibliothécaire. Certainly the faithful Rocquemont deserves more than the simple designation "copiste," and one would like to have some information on Lecourt, the Marseilles lawyer who frequently corresponded with the composer. (A few more biographical matters: footnotes on pp. 513 and 526 regarding the unidentified friend Flayol should refer to p. 391, fn. 1; the Chevalier mentioned in a note on p. 225 is probably the leading Fourierist Jules Lechevalier; and both references to Félicien David in the index are mistaken: he was not a Jew, as is claimed on p. 553, and the "David" whom Berlioz mentions on p. 720 is, of course, the sculptor David d'Angers, membre de l'Institut.)

References to Berlioz's music in volume 2 are occasionally misleading, especially when the editor refers anachronistically to final versions of works which had not reached that state of revision during the years in question. The editors have provided lists of the works performed by Berlioz at certain concerts, but these lists are often taken over from Boschot and should be used with caution. Among other musical corrections, the Funeral March is not the penultimate number of Roméo (p. 562); Mme Dorus-Gras, a soprano, cannot have sung Ascanio's aria (p. 607)—perhaps mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz sang it as Boschot claims, or, more likely, Dorus-Gras sang Teresa's cavatine (see p. 611); and the unidentified "Romance avec orchestre" scheduled for 25 November 1838 (p. 471) is obviously Le jeune Père breton.* One further point of musical interest: the decision by Berlioz to use eight horns in certain scenes of Le Freischütz (p. 688) is an unauthorized "improvement"—Weber's score calls for only four.

At times the editors appear to have interpreted individual letters without sufficient reference to others in the volume. When Berlioz promises to send Ferrand some scores as soon as

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*Letter from Morel to Lecourt, extract in Catalogue de la librairie Simon Kra 19 (June 1929): 18, item 7649.

*On Rocquemont (the correct spelling, although Berlioz regularly dropped the "c") see the chapter "Copyists" in D. Kern Holoman's Autograph Musical Documents of Hector Berlioz c. 1818–1840 (Ph.d. diss., 1974), pp. 123–34.

*The performance was postponed to 16 December 1838, with a change of singer (Rosine Stoltz); see Ian Kemp, ed., Songs for Solo Voice and Orchestra, New Berlioz Edition 13 (Kassel, London: Bärenreiter, 1975), x.
they are printed [p. 89] he can hardly be referring to _La Chasse de Lützow_, as the editors suggest, for he did not arrange Weber’s chorus until a few months later [p. 113] and does not refer to a possible publication until the next year (pp. 183–84). Presumably he intends to send Ferrand the same works that he promised DuBoys two months earlier [p. 59]. Another letter to Ferrand (p. 462) was taken over from _Lettres intimes_ along with what must have been an editorial date of “septembre 1838.” On the basis of its reference to _Cellini_ and “le ballet,” it can in fact be limited to 20 February, 8 March, or 17 March 1839—the only days on which _Cellini_ (or rather its first act) was on a double bill with a ballet.

In a footnote on p. 165 the editors hesitantly cite a statement from Adolphe Jullien’s biography of Berlioz, but Jullien himself was simply drawing on a well-known letter of the composer that is reprinted on pp. 184–85 of the present edition.\(^\text{10}\) Letter 473 (pp. 299–300) refers to an opera in more than two acts and thus presumably was directed to Scribe in October 1841, rather than to Barbier, librettist of the two-act _Cellini_. (It is difficult to speak with complete assurance, though, because the editors have—here as elsewhere—retranslated into French the English catalogue entry that is the sole source for the letter.) There is a contradiction between footnotes on pp. 716 and 718; two other footnotes (pp. 390 and 393) each mention a receipt for 1000 francs as if there were two, but a glance at Tiersot’s collection of correspondence shows that there is only one document involved here, quoted from different sources. Finally, a letter of Harriet Smithson-Berlioz, originally published by Tiersot, is dated 1833 on p. 57 and 1834 on p. 301. The earlier date appears to be correct, since she refers to her broken leg, the result of an accident on 1 April 1833. The summary of the letter is inaccurate at the first citation and incomplete at the second, and the reader must finally turn to Tiersot for enlightenment.\(^\text{11}\)

But these questions of annotation are irrelevant if the letters themselves are incomplete or missing entirely. Such a problem did not arise in volume 1, which drew mainly from a small number of collections of letters to friends and relatives. Beginning with volume 2, however, Berlioz is an active public figure, dispatching letters in all directions, and consequently one must look in all directions to find them. The new volume contains summarized versions of letters in some private and public collections, presumably because their curators did not respond to requests for the full texts. Yet public libraries have a clear responsibility to make their holdings widely available; were the editors not persistent enough in pursuit of their quarry?\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{10}\)The 1834 date comes from the auction catalogue which is the only source for the letter. Tiersot, in reprinting the text, retained the 1834 date and merely pointed out that it is “inexacte” [Hector Berlioz, _Les Années romantiques: 1819–1842_, ed. Julien Tiersot [Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1904], p. 259]. This misled Barzun to compound the error by suggesting 1835 (_Nouvelles Lettres_, pp. 20–21).

In regard to another letter of Smithson’s, 11 July 1836 to Bloqué, the present editors claim that it was already published in the _Revue et gazette musicale_ in 1838. They have mistaken one of Barzun’s footnotes which in fact referred to an article of Heine touching on Smithson’s acting career.\(^\text{12}\)

In addition to the collections about to be discussed, the editors could have consulted the facsimile of letter 396 (p. 180), which, as they themselves state, is published in Binental’s _Chopin_. (The facsimile reveals that Berlioz spelled three words differently: _villaggiatura_, _spero_ and _sarranno_. At least at the time of publication [c. 1930], the letter was part of Binental’s personal collection.) The editors mention that letter 603 [p. 491] was published in the _Allgemeine Musikzeitung_ of 1898 but do not give the text.

Several other omissions may at first baffle the reader. The editors supposedly distinguish with an asterisk letters of which they were able to consult either the original or a reproduction. A number of letters lack this asterisk, yet they are published for the first time; certainly the autographs must have been consulted in some form! [letters 577, 609, 751bis, 763, 764, and 767.] Some letters transcribed from the originals by other scholars—letters 503, 542, 567, 727, and 766—presumably deserve asterisks as well. The editors also quote two “third-party” letters without indicating the source: Liszt’s letter to Ferdinand Denis [p. 457] is drawn from Otto Haas Catalogue 7 [by way of Barzun, _Nouvelles lettres_, pp. 28–29] and the letter of Félix Marmion [p. 396] is presumably in the Reboul Collection.

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The Berlioz letters in the New York Public Library, for example, were originally surveyed by Jacques Barzun, who published full texts of a few and brief summaries of the rest in his *Nouvelles Lettres*. Somehow the current editors were not able to consult the original letters and relied instead on Barzun’s book [and some supplementary transcriptions Barzun made but never published]. Two of the New York letters thus appear only in Barzun’s summary, retranslated into French. (Perhaps the full texts can be included in the supplement projected for volume 6.) Additionally, the New York Public Library has an unpublished, undated letter of Harriet Smithson-Berlioz which can clearly be assigned to 1836 and is thus of interest to readers of volume 2. It is given below in the original English, with all its awkward turns of phrase. Harriet’s French was amusingly ungrammatical (see p. 564) but considerably less stilted.

The editors encountered a similar short circuit with the Columbia University Library, which has acquired from private owners two letters that Barzun had mentioned briefly. These, too, appear in summary only in volume 2. No. 719 is little more enlightening than its summary, but no. 733 in its full text (printed below) gives further evidence of Berlioz’s unflagging efforts on behalf of the works of his idol, Spontini.

One important source of Berlioziana, although known for some time, was until recently inaccessible to inquiring scholars, and it is to this collection that the remainder of the present article will be devoted. This is the private collection of Kapten Rudolf Nydahl, now administered by the Stiftelsen Musikkulturens främjande, Stockholm, which includes ten Berlioz letters—largely unpublished—and some additional papers.

The Nydahl Collection offers the full text, for example, of a letter that was previously known only from a partial citation in an auction catalogue. [The recipient’s name, Molinent, can now be corrected as well.] There is also a snippet of another letter, otherwise lost, containing merely the closing phrases, signature and address: “Repondez moi un mot je vous prie. Tout a vous. H. Berlioz rue neuve S’ Marc N° 1.” For what it is worth, this fragment, at once prize and victim of some collector of autograph signatures, can be dated by its address to the years 1832–34.

The greatest treasure in the Nydahl Collection for the period of volume 2 is the second of two short musical manuscripts. The first, a signed but undated album leaf of the opening twenty-one bars of the *Villanelle* from *Les Nuits d’été* (arranged on two treble staves), offers some curious but unimportant musical variants. The second is the lost autograph of the *Chansonette de M‘ Léon de Wailly*, “Au levant là-bas est une île.” The musical text is identical to that published [from a copy] in D. Kern Holoman’s dissertation. The poem, here published for the first time in its entirety, suggests that Berlioz conceived the music [later incorporated into Act I of *Cellini* as the ironic “De profundis” chorus] as a gentle fisherman’s love song.

I am grateful to Lesley A. Wright and M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet for first drawing my attention to the holdings of the Nydahl Collection, and to Erling Lomnäs (Assistant Curator) and other members of the staff of the Stiftelsen for permitting me to consult the Berlioz documents on microfilm.

In a recent letter, Hugh Macdonald has graciously in-formed me that the letter to Ferrand, cited below, was men-tioned in the *Revue de musicologie* 8 [1924], 79, and that the letter to Féti was quoted in the Heyer sale catalogue and in Julien Tierot’s *La Damnation de Faust de Berlioz* (Paris: Paul Mellotte, c.1924), p. 64. Macdonald agrees with David Cairns that the pages for the Weimar *Cellini* are forged [see note 16], and they both have some doubts about the authen-ticity of the *Villanelle* album leaf.

The Stiftelsen has provided the following descriptions of the three Berlioz musical manuscripts in the collection:

*Chansonette*: fol. 1 (= p. 1), 23.1 × 32.8 cm.; fol. 2 [= pp. 2–3] 23.4–23.6 × 33.7 cm.; ink light brown to dark brown.

*Villanelle*: 25.0 × 33.0–33.1 cm.; ink light brown.

*Cellini* pages: 30.5 × 26.4 cm.; ink yellowish/light brown to dark brown.

13For an overview of the Nydahl Collection, a rather ne-glected source considering its riches, see Gunnar Holst’s brief catalogue, *Svenskt Musikhistoriskt Arkiv Bulletin* 8 (1972). The catalogue is highly condensed and even incomplete—it lists, for example, only two instead of ten letters for Berlioz—and a direct inquiry to the Stiftelsen [Torstenssngatan 15; 114 56 Stockholm] is usually both necessary and rewarding.

Au levant là bas est une île,
Je la découvris l'autre jour.
Elle a bien, elle a bien trente pas de tour, ah,
Trente pas de tour.
Quand la mer est bleue et tranquille
On l'entrevoit à l'horizon.
J'y veux bâtir une maison
Toute en nacre, en plumes de cygnes,
De martins pêcheurs et de Paons,
De coraux, de coraux aux festons grimpans, ah,
Aux festons grimpans.
Au lieu de myrthes et de vignes,
Nacre et corail, voilà nos fleurs,
A nous autres maîtres pêcheurs.

Mon amour, je veux t'y conduire,
Et lorsque la nuit ma pierre [sic]
À la fenêtre se mettra, tra là là là là,
Tra là là là là,
Les marins sur l'eau, voyant luire
Ses grands yeux et son teint vermeil,
Diront: Tiens, voilà le soleil.

The remaining items date from later periods in Berlioz's life, and they are given below, with the exception of three which I have sent directly to Professor Citron for inclusion in volume 3. These are letters of 2 February 1843 to Mendelssohn, 20 November 1844 to the Ministre de l'Instruction Publique, and 26 November 1850 to an unknown composer.16 The only mundane item in the collection is a business letter to an unnamed soprano, no doubt Mme Miolan-Carvalho, who had—as Berlioz says—sung the Clari duet recently at the Conservatoire (with Mlle Boulard).

The other four letters all offer fascinating glimpses into Berlioz's life and works. To his friend and colleague Joseph d'Ortigue he vents his exasperation at the mediocre concerts that he is forever expected to publicize in his articles. [He exaggerates for effect. Sauzay and Del-sarte did perform much old music, but they were only 45 and 43 years old respectively—hardly "vieillards"!] To Humbert Ferrand he gives a composition lesson which is as precious as it is rare in the letters, touching on tonal motion, on prosody, even on matters of style.

To Stéphane de la Madelaine he defends his opposition to Armand Chevère's tonic sol-fa method and numerical musical notation (which must have seemed barbarisms to a professional musician brought up on fixed-do and the traditions of French solfège), to the intolerance of the music reformers who had adopted Chevère's system (Berlioz compares them to the Jacobins), and to Stéphane's own ideas on singing. Stéphane had enthusiastically proposed to the Académie des Beaux-Arts a new tool for teaching style and interpretation: heavily annotated editions of music in which the master had set down the inflexion, character, and dynamic level of each note. Berlioz, for whom adherence to the composer's score—no more, no less—was a religion, choked at the thought of a system which, as Pougin put it, encouraged students to make changes in the composer's text "in the form of cadenzas, glissandos, etc., relying on their taste and wisdom." Stéphane must have infuriated Berlioz even further by submitting to the Académie, of which Berlioz was then a member, a stéphenhized version of Agathe's aria from Der Freischiitz, the very opera for which Berlioz had done battle all his life against the arrangers and adapters. The Académie, says Pougin,17 responded to Stéphane's envoi with "un rapport

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15The text given in the manuscript has been arranged in stanzas. (The original stanzas, without Berlioz's additions, clearly had six lines, rhymed a b b a c c.) I have capitalized the beginnings of lines and standardized punctuation but preserved the spelling of the autograph.

16One other item in the collection, a three-page list of cuts and changes in Benvenuto Cellini (those of the Weimar version of 1852), should be mentioned, although David Cairns has informed me that, in his best judgment, it is an unusually clever forging. If the Cellini list proves to be authentic after all, it will only confirm our impression that Berlioz was never in favor of scrapping the final allegro section of the Sextet, although he did approve the cut under pressure from Liszt. [See Berlioz's two letters to Liszt, 2 July and 3 or 4 [sic] July 1852, published by La Mara [pseudonym for Marie Lip-sius] in Brie ren hervorragender Zeitgenossen an Franz Liszt, vol. 1 [Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1895], pp. 233–38. In the second letter, Berlioz speaks of some "petites feuilles de musique" which he is enclosing. The sheets in the Nydahl Collection are ostensibly the final three of these "small sheets of music." They are numbered 5, 6, and 7 and contain the changes for the latter part of the opera, from the Prayer of Teresa and Ascanio through the final scene.) Hugh MacDonald has compared the Paris and Weimar versions in "The Original 'Benvenuto Cellini,'” Musical Times 107 (1966), 1042–45.

très-élogieux, trop élogieux peut-être.”

But it is F.-J. Fétis who gets the most touching letter. One need only recall Berlioz’s attack on Fétis in Lélio or Fétis’s vindictive review of the Symphonie fantastique in 1835 to see how matters had changed. Berlioz in July 1860 was a beaten man. His beloved sister Adèle had just died and he was in great pain from his intestinal neuralgia. In two years he would give up his activity as a composer, in three, his work as a music critic. The brash young man was heading for a bitter, isolated and premature old age. In this state of mind he must have realized that Fétis, though a pedant and a high-handed “improver” of Mozart and Beethoven, need not have become a personal enemy. In fact Fétis had tried to help the young composer, and it was Berlioz who attacked first in 1832. This letter, then, is in some way an apology, part of the general reconciliation with the past which would be Berlioz’s obsession during the last years of his life. It is not least for human documents such as this and for their insight into the emotional life of a great creative artist that generations of readers have loved and will continue to love the letters of Hector Berlioz.


19 Listed, with an incomplete summary, in Barzun, Nouvelles Lettres, p. 302. Barzun interpreted the calligraphic flourish at the end of “Friday Mar.” as an “8”. The letter, however, clearly dates from 1836 (compare Letter 465, Correspondance générale 2:289), and 8 March 1836 was not Friday but Tuesday.


21 Act V of Nicholas Rowe’s The Tragedy of Jane Shore Written in Imitation of Shakespeare’s Style (1714), a Restoration “she-tragedy” combining historical grandeur with a pathetic tale which “hath never failed of melting gentle eyes” [Prologue, verse 4].

22 A poor quarter of London traditionally associated with the destitute Jane Shore.

23 Édouard Monnais, a friend of Berlioz, served briefly as Director of the Paris Opéra (1839–40) and then became the government’s commissaire to the opera houses and the Conservatoire.

24 On the tenor-baritone Massol, see Correspondance générale 2:661.

25 In Spontini’s La Vestale and Gluck’s Iphigénie en Tauride, respectively. Berlioz apparently hoped to perform excerpts from the two works on his “festival” concert at the Opéra, 1 November 1840. There had been much public pressure in 1839 for a full revival of La Vestale at the Opéra, to no avail. Berlioz, too, did not succeed in performing anything from Vestale, but he did begin the concert with Act I of Iphigénie (and Massol did sing Thoas).

26 The tenor Marié (1814–1844) made his Opéra debut in 1840, but his full, unmanageable voice soon brought him into disfavor. Even at his best, he was clearly the wrong singer for the works in question.

27 Presumably Charles Béchem, who contributed music articles to the Dictionnaire de la conversation et de la lecture, 2d edn. An almanac of 1837 lists under “Compositeurs” one Béchem, rue Pavée 4 [Marais], perhaps the same person [Planque, Agenda musical [Paris: E. Duverger] 3 [1837], 137].
HARRIET SMITHSON-BERLIOZ TO ÉDOUARD SAINTE-BARBE, [?] March [1836], 2 pp. plus address (New York Public Library)19

Dear Sir,

—I am seized with such a violent cold that I fell unable to rise from my bed. I am really ill—Nothing but crosses, every kind of Cross except the indispensable one for our Tragedy,21 perhaps you will condescend to speak about it today & also to banish the blooming cocoa tree & clear blue waters of the Lake from Shoreditch.22

I am quite unhappy that we are deprived of the honour of waiting upon you & M. de Custine this Eve. also of attending the rehearsal, but a little timely care will enable me to repeat twice tomorrow at any time you please and every one concerned being in full possession of the business of the scene perhaps this arrangement will only prove annoying to you.

ever grateful & sincere sert

H. Berlioz

May I entreat of you dear Sir to present our respectful excuses to M. de Custine & M. le comte de Castel-lane.

Friday Mar. [day left blank]

[Address:] Monsieur
Monsieur S' Barbe

BERLIOZ TO ÉDOUARD MONNAIS, Letter 733, [late October 1840 (?)], 1 p. plus address (Columbia University Library)

Mon cher Monnais,23

Massol will be singing Licinius as well as Thoas;25 you misunderstood his answer. So go see Marié to arrange the matter. Massol knows the role already, which is a great advantage. Please inform Béchem (rue Montholon N° 20) of the change to be made on the poster. We should try not to hurt Marié in any case. It was a misunderstanding.

Yours,

H. Berlioz

[Address:] Monsieur Ed. Monnais
9 rue neuve S' Georges
Mon cher Monsieur Molinent,

J’ai été bien contrarié de ne m’être pas trouvé chez moi quand vous avez pris la peine d’y venir et surtout que vous n’ayez pas laissé votre adresse [sic]. Enfin j’ai su par Masson que vous habitez toujours Brunoy [Seine-et-Oise] et je vous prie, si ce n’est pas une corvée trop rude pour vous, d’assister à ma répétition générale samedi soir avec Madame Molinent. Je crois pouvoir ce soir là vous remettre deux places pour la représentation.31 Malgré toutes les intrigues et cabales qui s’agitent autour de moi la chose s’annonce assez bien. C’est la grande affaire de ma vie qui va se décider, je serais bienheureux de vous compter parmi ceux qui m’aideront à la mener à bien.

Mille compliments et amitiés

H. Berlioz

My dear Monsieur Molinent,

I am quite annoyed that I was not at home when you went to the bother of coming by and especially that you did not leave your address. I finally learned from Masson that you are still living in Brunoy [Seine-et-Oise] and I would like to ask you to attend my dress rehearsal Saturday evening with Mme Molinent, if it is not too great a burden for you. I think I will be able to give you at that time two seats for the [first] performance. In spite of the plots and cabals at work all around me, the prospects are good. The great opportunity of my life hangs in the balance; I would be fortunate to count you among those who will be helping me to make it a success.

A thousand regards and greetings,

H. Berlioz

Madame,

J’ai une précieuse faveur à vous demander. Je donne un concert spirituel à l’opéra comique le samedi 7 avril, et je vous serais extrêmement obligé si vous vouliez bien, dans ce concert, chanter avec M’tie Bouard le Duo de Clari “Cantando un di”32 qui vous a valu un si beau succès au Conservatoire. Je viens d’arriver d’Allemagne et je repars demain pour Bruxelles sans quoi je fusse allé vous demander ce service pour le quel je vous prie de recevoir d’avance mes sincères remercimens.

J’ai l’honneur d’être, Madame, votre dévoué serviteur

H. Berlioz

10 mars 1855
19 rue de Boursault

P.S.
Si ce n’était abuser de votre complaisance je vous demanderais aussi de vouloir bien accepter la partie de soprano dans le Trio de la Création de Haydn.

Madame,

I have an important favor to ask of you. I am giving a Concert Spirituel at the Opéra-Comique Saturday, 7 April, and I would be much obliged if you and Mlle Bouard would sing the Clari duet, “Cantando un di,”32 which brought you such acclaim at the Conservatoire. I just arrived from Germany and tomorrow I leave again for Brussels—otherwise I would have come myself to ask of you this service, for which I beg you in advance to accept my sincere thanks.

I have the honor of being, Madame,

Your devoted servant

H. Berlioz

10 March 1855
19 rue de Boursault

P.S. Without wanting to take advantage of your good nature, I wonder if you would also accept the soprano part in the trio from Haydn’s Creation.

28Extract published in Otto Haas Catalogue No. 7 and reprinted in Barzun, Nouvelles Lettres, pp. 26–27, from which we borrow some details of translation.
29The name, unclearly written, could possibly be Molineuf, Molinat or Molinet.
30Perhaps the novelist Michel Masson [see the note in Correspondance générale 2:30].
31The dress rehearsal of Benvenuto Cellini was held Saturday, 1 September. The premiere, scheduled for 3 September, finally took place on 10 September.
32This Baroque duet with continuo, one of the Duetti et terzetti da Camera of Giovanni Clari (1677–1754), was performed at the Concerts du Conservatoire on 14 January by Mme Miolan and Mlle Bouard (or Boulart).
Mon cher d’Ortigue,

fais la réclame qu’on te demande j’en serais d’autant plus aise que cela me dispenserait de parler de ce concert pour lequel Mlle Bertin a déjà écrit à M de Sacy qui m’a écrit pour me le recommander. Je vais prévenir M de Sacy qu’à l’avenir comme il est inutile que ma tâche soit faite deux fois quand quelqu’un me préviendra, comme l’a fait deux fois de suite Janin pour l’Etoile du Nord, je la tiendrai pour accomplie.35

Ne faudra-t-il pas illuminer Paris parceque M Sauzay qui est un garçon de talent et d’esprit, mais qui a quatrevingt dix sept ans, a donné un roquet de concert dans lequel il a fait entendre trois ou quatre jolies petites bamboches pour un violon avec accompagnement de piano pour deux doigts et d’un quatorf! faudra-t-il tirer le canon des Invalides (ce serait une allusion peut-être) à cause de l’apparition de M Delsarte qui a voulu chanter avec une voix de botte trouée des rogatons de récitatifs mesurés sur de vieux vers! que diable y a-t-il donc là dedans de si extraordinaire? Cette coterie de vieillards crachotant des vieillotteries finit par m’exaspérer à la fin, et si tu veux m’être très agréable tu feras la réclame à condition que tu ne la signeras pas et me donneras ainsi le prétexte de me taire.

Mille amitiés
Ton dévoué
H. Berlioz

[Address:] Monsieur D’ortigue
Cour d’orléans
Rue St Lazare

My dear d’Ortigue,

Do write the announcement that they asked you to. I will be particularly pleased, since that will free me from having to talk about the concert—for which Mlle Bertin already wrote to M. de Sacy, who wrote to me about it. I shall tell M de Sacy that in the future, since there is no point in having my job done twice, I will assume that, when someone tells me (as Janin did twice in a row for L’Etoile du nord), it has been done.35

Are we supposed to light up all of Paris because M Sauzay, who is a bright, talented boy but who is 97 years old, gave a dog of a concert in which he performed three or four pretty little playthings for violin with two-finger piano accompaniment and string quartet? Should we set off the cannon at the Invalides (an allusion, perhaps) to celebrate the appearance of M Delsarte, who chose to sing—with a voice like a boot full of holes—some scraps of measured recitatives based on old verses? What in God’s name is so extraordinary in that? This collection of old men sputtering out these antiquated things will be the death of me, and if you want to do me a great favor, write the announcement but don’t sign it. That way you will give me an excuse not to say anything myself.

A thousand greetings,
Your devoted
H. Berlioz

[Address:] Monsieur d’Ortigue
Cours d’Orléans
rue St Lazare

33Louise Bertin was the composer of Esmeralda (1836) and daughter of Armand Bertin, owner of the Journal des débats.
34Silvestre de Sacy, one of the leading journalists of the Débats.
35This sentence is not completely clear. Did Jules Janin at first promise to review this important Meyerbeer premiere and then back out? Berlioz ended up writing an entire feuilleton on the work (in the Débats, 24 February 1854).
36Eugene Sauzay, one of France’s leading violinists, had in fact a strong preference for the “antiquated” chamber works of Haydn, Boccherini and Mozart (Brigitte François-Sappey, “La Vie musicale à Paris à travers les Mémoires d’Eugène Sauzay [1809–1901],” Revue de musicologie 60 [1974], 159–210).
37François Delsarte (1811–71), after failing as an opera singer, established an idiosyncratic career as teacher of vocal interpretation, inventor, and occasional performer (and editor) of early vocal music. Delsarte’s life and career are discussed in Mina Curtiss’s authoritative biography of his nephew, Georges Bizet (Bizet and his World [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958], pp. 3–14).

Delsarte and Sauzay gave a joint concert on 14 May 1854, featuring early vocal music (Lully, Rameau, Gluck and chansons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), an instrumental serenade by Sauzay, and a Sauzay setting, composed in the style of the period, of a poem of the late sixteenth-century poet and critic Malherbe. (Revue et gazette musicale 7, no. 21 [21 March 1854], 165.)
Mon cher Humbert

Je vous renvoie votre complainte avant d’y avoir ajouté un accompagnement, pour vous faire remarquer que votre modulation de la en si la rend à peu près inexecutable. Non que le passage de la en si ne soit bien ménagé, mais parce qu’il est impossible, dès le second couplet, de recommencer en la sans une insupportable dureté. D’ailleurs une complainte ne doit pas aborder des modulations aussi ambitieuses. On peut certainement faire des chansons commençant dans un ton et finissant dans un autre, à condition que ces deux tons soient dans une étroite relation de parenté. Ainsi j’ai commencé la Ronde des paysans dans [La Damnation de] Faust, en mi mineur et je l’ai finie en sol. mais le retour en mi après l’accorde [sic] sol, est très doux et très facile. J’ai marqué le changement que je propose à votre air; il faut rester en la d’un bout à l’autre, en modulant seulement en la mineur pendant les 5 mesures qui précèdent le point d’orgue. Le retour en la majeur produit ainsi sans dureté l’effet que vous avez cherché en modulant en si.

Si cela vous va je vous ferai votre accompagnement; et même si cela ne vous va pas.


Au reste il est probable que si vous corrigez les fautes pour le premier couplet il y en aura d’autres au second et aux suivants, parceque le rythme des vers, sans aucun doute, ne sera pas le même qu’au premier. Mais c’est par conscience que je vous fais cette critique.

Adieu renvoyez moi vite votre chanson et votre décision au sujet de la modulation.

Mille amitiés

H. Berlioz

Peut être aussi voulez vous garder partout cette forme dont la monotony convient à la complainte. En ce cas il faut subir les fautes de prosodie.
Mon cher Stéphen
Vous m’accusez et vos accusations sont d’autant plus dures qu’elles sont moins méritées. Non, je ne suis pas de la troisième catégorie de vos amis, de ceux qui vous détestent; non je n’ai pas oublié une amitié de trente ans; non je ne vous ai pas attaqué. J’ai combattu votre doctrine que je crois pernicieuse pour l’art, et encore l’ai-je fait seulement parce qu’on m’accusait de l’avoir approuvée comme membre de l’Institut.39 Vous n’êtes pas exposé depuis longtemps à la controverse, voilà pourquoi la contradiction vous paraît si difficile à supporter. Mais, soyez de bonne foi, y a-t-il quelque justice à répondre à la critique d’une opinion d’art par des accusations comme les vôtres! soyez bien certain que plus tard vous ne le penserez pas.

Vou citez un journal, la Réforme musicale. Ce journal assure que l’invitation à la Valse a fait au concert de Pasdeloup une fort vilaine figure; quand ce morceau a été redemandé, au contraire, par plus de quatre mille auditeurs et répété au milieu des plus vives acclamations.41 Vous ignorez le fait, je n’en doute pas; mais pourquoi accueillir si aisément les assertions d’un journal qui m’attaque parce que je n’ai pas pu, ainsi que beaucoup d’autres, reconnaître l’utilité et l’excellence de la méthode Chevé?42 “Loue moi ou je te diffame. Fraternité ou la mort!” Certes, ce n’est pas à vous qu’il conviendra jamais de donner par votre exemple de l’autorité à des usages renouvelés de ’93.43 Tout cela n’est que le résultat d’une irritation passagère. Laissez moi le croire et ne vous acharnez plus trop contre ma névralgie, car ce ne sera bientôt plus qu’un fantôme, la voilà qui s’en va.

Adieu, avec ou sans névralgie, je n’en reste pas moins, je le dis parce que je le sais, votre ami dévoué.

Hector Berlioz
1 December 1861
4 Rue de Calais

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39Institut de France, Académie des Beaux-Arts, to which Berlioz was elected in 1856.
40Berlioz first wrote “question.”
41Berlioz’s orchestral version of the piano piece by Weber was in fact so well received at the concert in question (3 November 1861) that Pasdeloup included it again on his concert of 29 December.
42Berlioz had reported on the École Galin-Paris-Chevé in his feuilleton of 19 February 1861 in the Journal des débats.
43An allusion to the French Revolutionary motto “Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou la mort,” first proposed by the Club des Cordeliers on 30 June 1793 and quickly put into literal practice by Robespierre during the Reign of Terror.
Mon cher Monsieur Fétis

Je viens de lire dans votre nouvelle Biographie [universelle] des musiciens la notice qui me concerne.44 Laissez moi vous remercier pour la bienveillance manifeste qui vous animait en l’écrivant. J’y suis extrêmement sensible et je regrette de ne pouvoir aller à Bruxelles vous serrer la main. Cela, d’ailleurs, est si bien écrit, et j’aime tant le bon style, que j’ai lu vos six colonnes avec un plaisir où la satisfaction de mon amour propre n’entrait vraiment pour rien. Vous n’avez commis qu’une erreur de fait insignifiante, et une autre encore d’opinion en m’attribuant moins d’estime pour La Damnation de Faust que pour mes autres ouvrages. Cette partition est au contraire une de celles que je préfère, et si je l’ai plus rarement fait entendre à Paris que les autres, ce n’est point pour une raison d’art mais pour une raison d’économie. Les études des choeurs pour cet ouvrage sont trop longues et coûtent trop cher. De plus je ne trouvais pas à Paris le Ténor qu’il faut absolument pour le rôle de Faust. Les exécutions de la Damnation de Faust à Dresde, à Weimar, à Berlin, à Petersbourg, à Moscou et à Londres ont toujours été pour moi de véritables événements heureux, bien que dans ces villes je n’aie pas non plus trouvé le ténor.

... Une autre observation me reste à vous faire: Le morceau dont vous parlez sous le titre de Concert des Sylphes, n’a point été écrit sur un programme; il faisait partie des quelques scènes du Faust de Goethe que j’écrivis (fort mal) il y a trente cinq ans.45 Comme le public d’alors n’était pas encore très familier avec le poème allemand, il est possible (je ne m’en souviens pas) que j’aie donné quelques indications sur le sujet de ce morceau, comme on le fait souvent pour des fragments de certains opéras que le public ne connaissait pas. En ce cas je n’aurais donc pas fait ma musique pour un programme, mais un programme pour ma musique.

Je voudrais bien trouver une occasion de causer avec vous sur l’art que nous aimons et respectons tant tous les deux. Je ne vois que des gens qui aiment ou haïssent selon que le vent de leurs passions, de leurs préjugés ou de leurs intérêts souffle dans un sens ou dans un autre. Je suis malade, fort triste, et les vives lueurs de votre esprit dissiperaient sans doute les nuages qui assombissent le mien. Mais quoi? on ne fait presque rien de ce qu’on veut, et la plupart du temps pour des motifs différents de ceux que le monde suppose. En tout cas, permettez moi de solliciter un peu de votre amitié; quant à votre estime je l’ai toujours eue, je crois; vous savez que j’aime la musique d’un amour noble.47

Votre tout dévoué

Hector Berlioz

22 Juillet 1860

4 rue de Calais, Paris.

My dear Monsieur Fétis,

I just read the article about me in your new Biographie [universelle] des musiciens.44 Let me thank you for the manifest spirit of goodwill in which you wrote it. I deeply appreciate that, and I am sorry I cannot come to Brussels to shake your hand. What’s more, the article is so well written, and I like good writing style so much, that I read your six columns with a pleasure which was quite independent of my feeling of personal gratification. You have made but one insignificant error of fact and another of opinion when you said I hold The Damnation of Faust in less esteem than my other works. The score is, on the contrary, one of my favorites, and, if I have performed it more rarely in Paris than the others, it is rather for reasons of economy than of art. Training the choruses for this work takes too long and costs too much. In addition, I did not find in Paris the tenor that is absolutely essential for the role of Faust. The performances of The Damnation of Faust in Dresden, Weimar, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Moscow and London have always been truly happy experiences for me, although in these cities, too, I did not find the tenor.

As for the second point I wanted to make, the piece which you speak of as Concert des sylphes was not written on a program. It was part of some scenes from Goethe’s Faust that I wrote (quite badly) thirty-five years ago.45 Since the public was not at the time very familiar with the German poem, it is possible (I can’t remember) that I gave some words of explanation on the subject of this piece, as is commonly done for fragments of operas that the public does not know. In that case I did not write my music for a program,46 but a program for my music.

I would very much like to find an opportunity to chat with you about the art which we both so love and respect. I see nothing but people who love or hate according to the direction that the wind of their passions, prejudices or interests happens to be blowing. I am sick, very sad, and the lively gleam of your mind would no doubt disperse the clouds that are darkening mine. But, then, one never does what one wants, and most of the time for different reasons than the world supposes. In any case, permit me to solicit a bit of your friendship, as for your esteem, I have always had it, I believe. You know that I love music with a love that is noble.47

Your devoted
Hector Berlioz

22 July 1860

4 rue de Calais, Paris.

[Footnotes on page 85.]