

Hector Berlioz, *Requiem*

From the Apocalypse to Paradise

No man is a prophet in his country.

Berlioz was admired in Germany, celebrated in Russia, famous everywhere in Europe, but not in France. In his homeland, his music was received generally with indifference, or with incomprehension. Such was the fate of this genuine French musician, born before his time. Berlioz refused the label of romantic; the word seemed to him alien, almost insulting. In his time, the expression was somewhat suspicious. But the significance of the word changed, and today, from our point of view, Berlioz has a true profile of the romantic genius.

Berlioz' *Chroniques* and *Mémoires* (1848-1865) give the best portrait of the musician and the society of his time. If the extent of his writings is somewhat pervasive, it is possible to follow a shorter way: in the collection of Romain Rolland's essays, *Musicians of Today* (1908), there is an enlightening study concerning the composer's "irresistibly powerful" music, his personality, and the musical establishment dominating the Parisian scene in the middle of the 19th century. In a few pages, Rolland brings to life this flamboyant artist, whose imagination and sensibility find intense expression in sounds never heard before.

Berlioz belonged indeed to his time, impassioned by the idealism of the French Revolution. As a young man, Berlioz wanted to capture the interest of the common people, and to inspire the taste for the good music. But the revolutionary dreams faded out, and with them his illusions. The composer was denigrated or ignored by critics and audiences.

Being an imaginative artist, sometimes quirky, writing critics with a ferocious pen, unable to compose a melody to please the public, Berlioz had nothing to seduce Paris' audiences of the 1830s. Bourgeois society at the time of the Monarchie de Juillet was infatuated by the latest Italian opera and sentimental ballads, seeking fashionable pleasures in the parlors of middle class audiences. Berlioz's music was alien to them:

His rare melodies are deprived of meter and rhythm; and his harmony, a bizarre assemblage of sounds, not easily blended, does not always merit this name...What Monsieur Berlioz writes does not belong to the art which I customarily regard as music.

(F.-J. Fétis, 1837)

Some years later, a critic describes the faults of his music, such as perceived by his contemporaries:

M. Berlioz matches instruments that howl when they meet; he thunders, he rages without lightning and without storm...M. Berlioz is bizarre and ill-ordered, because he lacks

inspiration and knowledge; he is violent, because he has no good reasons to offer; he wishes to stun us, because he does not know how to charm us... Without melodic ideas and without experience in the art of writing he plunges into the extraordinary, into the gigantic, into the incommensurable chaos of a sonority that enervates, tires the listener without satisfying him... There is nothing in these strange compositions but noise, disorder, a sickly and sterile exaltation.

(P. Scudo, *Critique et littérature musicales*, Paris, 1852).

These indignant comments reveal a lot about the musical taste of the time; both as regards the limits of tolerance for the new sounds and new ideas, and the composer's boldness in following roads less travelled.

To us, today, Berlioz's critics sound like an old song; we've seen it all before.

But there is a bit of truth in these criticisms. Berlioz was the authentic romantic figure, a genial artist with a flamboyant imagination, free and independent. His emotional drive is embodied in his music. According to his *Mémoires*, he built the "Babylonian, Ninivite" compositions, in "enormous style", his impulsive temperament seeking "the immense orchestral effects, [in order to create] the music à la Michelangelo !!" In other words, he is telling the same thing as his critics, well aware of the effect he wanted to produce, exalted by his own music, and wishing to be recognized by posterity, if not by his contemporaries.

He was right. France, at the time of the Monarchie de Juillet wasn't prepared to listen to the music of this deeply emotional artist, who is driven by the irrational forces, who wrote lucid and ferocious criticisms against the mediocrity of taste, the lack of thought of the Parisian middle-class society. There was one exception, and important one: the *Grande Messe des Morts*, or *Requiem* (1837), which was an immediate success. In his *Mémoires*, Berlioz relates every step, from the initial project and successive stages of composition, to bureaucratic intrigues, describing the first performance and the enthusiastic reception at the Chapelle Saint-Louis des Invalides. His account was often commented upon and quoted as a piece of anthology. It is worth noting the composer's words qualifying his *Requiem* as "a musical cataclysm".

Sounds never heard, indeed. His secret? The new art of the orchestra. Berlioz needed an instrument able to fill huge acoustic and musical spaces, to produce a very wide range of timbres and myriad shades of sound. Beethoven's orchestra, which he admired, wasn't large enough; he amplified it, introducing new instruments (saxophones, percussions) in order to have at his disposal a variety of rich sound material. His *Orchestration Treatise* (*Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* - 1844), the Bible of the modern era orchestra, requires the highest technical and musical mastery of instruments.

His *Requiem* is famous for its new instrumental matches, creating a most mysterious and dramatic impact. A few examples: the melting of flutes and trombones (*Hostias*); the association of violin harmonics with those of the harp (*Hosanna*); and

finally, eight pairs of timpani tuned to different pitches (*Tuba mirum*). Moreover, he introduces the strategies of the opera, adapting them for the orchestra, in particular stereophonic and echo effects, as well as instruments off stage. Four groups of brass bands placed around the main orchestra, and the chorus of 120 voices are used to create the frightening effect of *Tuba mirum*. The impression is powerful; the apocalyptic terror contrasting with the transparency of the vocal texture in the *Quid sum miser*, and the luminous polyphony of the *Querens me*. Relating the Berlin concert in 1843, Berlioz describes the mighty fanfare of the *Dies irae* :

The choir supported the instrumental assault without batting an eyelid; the quadruple fanfare exploded at the four corners of the theatre trembling under the timpani roll, under the tremolo of fifty furious bows; the hundred and twenty voices, in the midst of this cataclysm of sinister harmonies, noises of the otherworld, shouting their terrible prediction :

<i>Judex ergo cum sedebit</i>	<i>When the judge takes his seat,</i>
<i>Quidquid latet apparebit !</i>	<i>All that is hidden shall appear !</i>

From the Last Judgement to the promise of the Paradise, Berlioz meditates on the mystery of death. Beyond the apocalyptic scenes which raise terrific sounds, the *Requiem* is a contemplative work. There are some liturgical texts inspiring a music of transcendental beauty.

At the opening, the *Introit-Requiem*, followed by the *Kyrie*, is dominated by meditative, melancholic spirit, emphasized by the chant of lamentation. The descending chromatic game amplifies the *Kyrie* litany, darkened by the whisper of mourning voices.

The sequence *Dies irae* consists of five parts. Completely different from the usual terrifying “Day of Wrath”, it opens in a desolate mood. The impression of the awe-inspired fright, coming from the bare voices, rising in tension, and announcing a fanfare heralding the *Tuba mirum*. The four brass ensembles play in counterpoint, imitation and response to each other, from the four sides of the world, like the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. At the climax, magnificent forces of trombones, trumpets, tubas with eight pairs of timpani, achieve an effect never heard before in musical history. After the reprise of the *Tuba mirum*, even with greater power, the coda returns back to a calm, a moment of pure beauty, vanishing into the silence.

The next stanza, *Quid sum miser*, develops a short variation on the *Dies irae* melody, a subtle transformation of timbres, due to the unusual match of the English horn, strings and solo tenor. The vocal polyphony of the *Querens me* is reminiscent of the old Renaissance tradition of the *a capella* choral. The *Rex tremendae* and the *Lacrymosa* are again volcanic eruptions of sound, an association of strident voices of winds and the beating of timpani. The theatrical declamation and spasmodic rhythm reinforce the dramatic implications of the text.

The apocalyptic atmosphere softens in the last four movements: at first, in the *Offertorium*, opening with an insistent repetition of the three notes by the chorus,

accompanied by the orchestra playing fugato variations. It is followed by the contrasting *Hostias*; from the initial chant *a capella*, sounding very much like orthodox liturgy, a harmony of high flutes set over deep voices of trombones. Mysterious sounds from the otherworld.

Finally, the *Agnus Dei*, with a slightly modified reprise of *Kyrie*, dashes towards the luminous spheres of the prayer: “Lux perpetua luceat eis”. The sounds of the funeral march resolve into a gentle timpani roll, fading out in the final cadence of *Amen*.

Berlioz, Verdi, Brahms

This Requiem closely follows the texts of the liturgy of deaths according to Roman rite, although it was the creation of a confirmed atheist: “I have no faith... God is stupid and atrocious in his infinite indifference.”(Mémoires, II). Strange coincidence: three requiems of the romantic century, masterpieces at the top of the religious music, are creations of non religious composers: Berlioz, Brahms, Verdi. However different by their conceptions, each of these works reflect universal spirituality, beyond any liturgical celebration. We would like to look for the echo of the creeds of their national culture here, but it is especially the humanist sensibility which expresses itself in these works.

Three composers represent the romantic soul in their attitude concerning death and their relationship to time. Berlioz is taken by the stream of accelerated time; Verdi lives in the human time; Brahms is beyond time.

Berlioz composed an immense apocalyptic fresco, reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement*, as he himself suggested, adding the words of his colleague Spontini: “You had not conceived such a Requiem without *the Last Judgement* of Michelangelo.” Later on, in the sublime *Hostias* and *Sanctus*, the composer provides a stunning contrast, bringing a touch of consolation of Christian hope. Nevertheless, he did not believe in it ...

The insoluble enigma of the world, the existence of evil and pain, the furious madness of the human race, its stupid ferocity which it quenches at any time and everywhere on the most harmless beings...reduced me to a state of sad and desperate resignation.

(*Mémoires*, II)

The day after the premiere, Alfred de Vigny noted: “The music was beautiful and strange, wild, convulsively throbbing and heart rending.”

Quite as Berlioz, Verdi was not religious. His *Requiem* (1874) is an intense and fascinating work. The text follows the frame of Roman liturgy, and nevertheless it is not really a religious work. The opera seems quite close; cantabile of its melodies, violent harmonic contrasts, brilliant orchestration, and the typically scenic effects: the trumpets off stage, vocal quartets, pianissimo effects of choirs. About Verdi’s Requiem, a German conductor comments: “An opera in cleric’s dress.” Profoundly moving, this work

describes life and death in an atmosphere of Shakespearean tragedy. The fury and the terror of the sections of *Dies Irae - Libera me, Rex tremendae* - are reminiscent of the storm of *Otello*. In this fusion of drama and music, death appears as the end of a fight, but also the end of hope.

As an antithesis to Berlioz and far from the usual dramatic art of the other requiems, Brahms chose a mosaic of texts from the Martin Luther's Protestant Bible. In *A German requiem* (1868), no service prayer, only the poetic moments of this book of meditation, where every word is attentively chosen for its beauty and intensity. In its core, the existential questioning about the flight of time, loss of dear ones, vanity of earthly possessions, and promise of eternity. Colors of stained glass with a flash of lighting: such is the effect of the trumpet, just before the sublime last movement, consolation for those left behind. The night of the premiere, Brahms had confided to the conductor Karl Reintaler: "Rather than a German Requiem, I would have had to title it Human Requiem." Coming from the shores of the North Sea, and from a bourgeois Protestant milieu, Brahms remained free of any religious tie. Yet, he composed a music of serenity and hope.

The music of Berlioz, quite as that of Verdi and Brahms aspire to reach the absolute, in search for the sense of life and death. The religious frame is only a pretext for the reconciliation with the finitude of man. The terrible and magnificent beauty of the Apocalyptic episodes opens towards Paradise, at the same time recognizing human pain upon facing death. The life flows towards the death.

Some decades later, we shall find the echo in the poetry of Rilke:

Death is immense.
We are his laughing mouths.
When we are in the midst of life,
He dares to weep in our midst.

Book of Images (1908)

*Der Tod ist Gross.
Wir sind die Seinen lachenden Munds.
Wenn wir uns mitten im Leben meinen,
Wagt er zu weinen
Mitten in uns.*

These few verses are reminiscent of Shakespeare's words which begin and end *Mémoires* of Berlioz: "Life's but a walking shadow..."

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Berlioz' *Grande Messe des Morts* is an atheist's mass, carried by the trend which inspires a whole generation. His work represents, in a way, a prelude to the French music to come. As the pioneer of a new art of the orchestra, he introduces the

incredible timbres, develops the spatialization of the sonority, thus announcing Debussy. Germany, which he considered as “the oracle of Delphes” in music, will honour him by the works of Liszt, Mahler, Richard Strauss. Berlioz will open the road to Moussorgski, Stravinski, Bartók. Moreover, he was a prodigious storyteller and a merciless critic, as corrosive as Boulez, a century later. Some pearls of his prose deserve to be quoted: performances, which he found "lightning"; successes "furious or horrifying ", or works which he said "*annihilantes*, pyramidal, Babylonian ".

After the *Requiem*, here is one thing left: to read *Mémoires*, celebrating his only absolute: the music.

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