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978-0-521-88404-4 - Form, Program, and Metaphor in the Music of Berlioz
Stephen Rodgers
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1 Introduction

Already Berlioz's 2003 bicentenary is well behind us. The conferences, performances, and colloquia surrounding his 200th birthday helped not so much to reignite an interest in his work, since the fires were already burning strong, in large part thanks to the work of the "new Berliozians" of the 1990s,[1] but they did bring together these scholars and others, including some newer Berliozians whose contributions rest on this sturdy foundation (and among whom I count myself). They allowed audiences to rediscover many of Berlioz's fine works and to refine their understanding of this man whose singular music has suffered from such mischaracterization and prejudice. And they provided an opportunity for those who cared deeply about Berlioz to assess what strides had been made and what work was left to be done.

The field of Berlioz studies is in good shape.[2] *The New Berlioz Edition* is now complete, as is the *Correspondance générale*.[3] New volumes have been added to the complete criticism.[4] We are blessed with a number of exemplary Berlioz biographies, ranging from Hugh Macdonald's *Berlioz* (1982) to D. Kern Holoman's *Berlioz* (1989), Peter Bloom's *The Life of Berlioz* (1998), and David Cairns's magisterial two-volume biography, *The Making of an Artist* (1989) and *Servitude and Greatness* (1999).[5] Outside English-language scholarship we have Gunther Braam and Arnold Jacobshagen's study of Berlioz's reception in Germany, *Hector Berlioz in Deutschland: Texte und Dokumente zur deutschen Berlioz-Rezeption (1829–1843)* (2002), and the indispensable *Dictionnaire Berlioz* (2003), edited by Pierre Citron and Cécile Reynaud, to name only a couple of examples.[6] We also have many important essay collections, some of which came out of the bicentenary celebrations, including *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future* (2003) and *Berlioz: Scenes from the Life and Work* (2008), both edited by Peter Bloom, as well as *Berlioz in the Age of French Romanticism* (forthcoming), edited by Frank Heidlberger.[7]

A glance at this list shows that the most impressive recent contributions to Berlioz scholarship have been largely editorial or music-historical. Music-analytical studies of Berlioz's music have figured less prominently in the overall landscape of Berlioz studies. Julian Rushton's work is a

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notable exception, as is Macdonald's *Berlioz*, the second half of which presents an elegant and insightful overview of Berlioz's music. Rushton has above all contributed enormously to our understanding of Berlioz's craft in *The Musical Language of Berlioz* (1983), the Cambridge handbook *Berlioz: Roméo et Juliette* (1994), *The Music of Berlioz* (2001), and numerous articles.[8] One reason for the relative scarcity of analytical studies of Berlioz's music is precisely that his music is so singular. It often resists explanation with methodologies honed on the (mostly Austro-Germanic) music of contemporaries like Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Chopin. It often behaves in unexpected ways, challenging our assumptions about what nineteenth-century music ought to do.

Few aspects of Berlioz's style are more challenging than his treatment of musical form. Thankfully, the days when writers routinely disparaged Berlioz's "inadequate" understanding of form are well behind us. Virtually no one today would claim, as W. H. Hadow did in 1904, that Berlioz was "imperfectly acquainted" with "all forms of purely musical design."[9] We have come a long way in a century. But a curious fact remains: Berlioz's forms are still puzzling even after we have gotten to know them well. Looking at his bizarre forms means grappling with questions that extend well beyond his world and arise whenever we encounter difficult music: What do we do with pieces whose shapes seem at once graspable and strange? How do we explain to ourselves, and therefore to others, the impact of works that are as engrossing as they are bewildering?

These are the questions that prompted me to write this book, the first devoted solely to the subject of form in Berlioz. They have formed the foundation of my inquiry into Berlioz's astonishing formal language, and in pursuing them I have come to believe with greater and greater conviction that form was one of Berlioz's most powerful expressive tools, as much as melody, harmonic progression, and orchestration. It is sometimes mistakenly believed that in his efforts to "tell stories" with music Berlioz subordinated musical design to musical evocation – a claim leveled at many programmatic composers, but no more than at Berlioz. His works, one might then conclude, are less structurally sound, less governed by a concern for balance, proportion, and pacing, because they move not according to inherent musical principles but rather in obeisance to some "extra-musical" plot. A closer examination shows this to be one of the many misconceptions that cling so persistently to Berlioz and that, once questioned and not taken as a given, turn out to be the furthest thing from the truth. Berlioz did not neglect matters of form in favor of the expression of emotion and drama; he conveyed emotion and drama

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through form. The extensive revisions he made to his scores suggest that he took great care in fashioning his works according to the emotional effect he wanted them to produce, the ideas and images he wanted them to convey, and the techniques he knew he could rely on to do that.

Form and program

But how exactly are those effects produced and those ideas and images expressed? The notion that the form of a programmatic piece should somehow reflect its poetic content is hardly new, and emanates from the writings of composers such as Liszt, Wagner, Mahler, and Strauss. But the ways that form and program relate in Berlioz's music deserve scrutiny. His programmatic symphonies (or at least the aesthetic they seemed to embody) were a touchstone for later composers and the centerpiece in many of the debates about "descriptive" music that began around the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the next (witness Liszt's famous 1855 essay "Berlioz and his Harold Symphony"[10] and Wagner's 1857 open letter "On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems,"[11] which judges Berlioz's program music harshly next to Liszt's achievements). Yet in part for this reason, our understanding of Berlioz's aesthetic tends to be colored by others' ideas more than by his own – in particular by ideas about the polarity between program music and "absolute" music, to which Berlioz would not have subscribed.[12] Even today, the question of how to relate Berlioz's music with the stories and events that seem to have inspired it is typically approached from one of two interpretive positions, rooted in these ideas – what Walter Werbeck has called, in the context of Strauss studies, a "heteronomy aesthetic" (which he traces to Liszt) and an "autonomy aesthetic" (which he traces to Hanslick).[13] In the first case, it is argued that the program determines the flow of the composition; we need the program, therefore, to understand the music. In the second case, it is argued that music operates (or at least in the hands of an able composer *should* operate) according to "pure" musical principles and that the program is therefore ancillary; we do not need the program to understand the music because the two are only superficially related and the music should speak well enough for itself.

Neither of these positions does justice to the subtle and complex mingling of music with literature, art, drama, and personal experience that is a hallmark of Berlioz's style. This book offers a more nuanced approach to understanding how form and program interact in Berlioz's music, one

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drawn from Berlioz's own ideas about musical representation and also from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writings that shaped those ideas. Berlioz's pieces, I argue, are neither literal retellings of their programs, as the heteronomy aesthetic might have it, nor only incidentally related to them, as the autonomy aesthetic would claim. They are *metaphors* for the poetic and dramatic sentiments expressed in those programs. Berlioz used the term "metaphor" with great care in his critical writings. I place it at the center of this study because it can help us to understand how, more often than not with Berlioz, the shape of a piece reflects the general shape of the emotional experience he means to capture, not the details of a given story or scene. The relationship between music and program is best construed as "intimate" yet "indirect," to borrow terms from Berlioz's essay "On Imitation in Music" (*De l'Imitation musicale*), his most thoroughgoing exploration of the powers and limits of musical expressivity.

The precise nature of that intimate yet indirect relationship will be explored in more detail in the coming chapters. For now I need only stress that the driving force behind this manner of inquiry is a belief in the necessity of an approach to Berlioz's music that is technical but also humanistic, attentive to the formal designs of his pieces but also to the expressive meanings of those designs. Structure and expression are not at odds in Berlioz. One does not fade into the background as the other comes into focus. They are rather like resonant frequencies, powerful on their own but redoubled in strength when working in tandem. Considering how they interact allows us to validate our gut sense that the way a piece moves through time is appropriate to the feelings and ideas that piece expresses. How, this book asks, do Berlioz's musical forms behave like the characters in his programs? How do they evoke images or feelings like the feelings experienced by those characters, or, for that matter, by us, when we ponder the story that hovers behind the music? How do the forms of his compositions represent the non-musical events suggested by their programs without relating those events in slavish step-by-step fashion? Why do some of Berlioz's forms feel right for a given programmatic scenario, even if that "rightness" seems to have nothing to do with any direct correspondence between a musical and a programmatic narrative? To ask these questions is of course not to deny that Berlioz's music can be directly representational – one need only think of the slice of the guillotine in the *Marche au supplice* from the *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) and the pizzicato tumbling head that follows. But it is to suggest that for Berlioz, representation is more often broader in scope. The way he presents and

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develops thematic material, the overall dramatic arc of his music, the ebb and flow of his forms – these are just as bound up with his urge toward musical representation and just as central to his music's evocative power.

Strophic variation

In addressing the questions above, I focus on one formal technique that Berlioz turned to again and again in his programmatic music: strophic variation, a process in which a theme or a series of differentiated themes is presented and varied many times over. In recent years this and related formal phenomena have been explored extensively by theorists and musicologists, most notably in James Hepokoski's and Warren Darcy's work on "rotational form" and Robert Morgan's work on "circular form."[14] Their work will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, as well as theme-and-variations form, developing variation, and the terms "rotational form" and "circular form" and their relationship to the *Formenlehre* category of strophic variation.

Berliozians have long recognized the centrality of strophic variation to his musical language. Rushton, for example, refers to "strophic elaboration" as "one of Berlioz's lifelong preoccupations."[15] Berlioz's preoccupation with this formal technique stems in part from his love of strophic song forms and of incorporating those forms into instrumental music (which is why this book, though it deals primarily with Berlioz's instrumental music, also touches on his vocal output). But it also grows out of a fascination with poetic ideas (what Berlioz and others called *idées poétiques* or *pensées poétiques*)[16] such as obsession, meditation, and mania – in short, with programs about fixations, which lent themselves to being conveyed in musical forms that return again and again to the same thematic material. The *idée fixe* of the *Symphonie fantastique*, which haunts the symphony's hero and returns repeatedly throughout the first movement and the entire symphony, comes naturally to mind. But so do the incantations of Mephistopheles's spirits in *La Damnation de Faust* (1845–6), the meditative tune sung over and over by marching pilgrims in the slow movement of *Harold en Italie* (1834), and the repeated professions of love in Berlioz's instrumental setting of the balcony scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the celebrated *Scène d'amour* from his symphony *Roméo et Juliette* (1839). Each of these pieces arouses sensations comparable to the sensations experienced by their "fixated" characters. Each of these forms cycles unremittingly through similar thematic

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material just as their characters return unremittingly to similar thoughts – and these are by no means the only pieces by Berlioz to do that.

Obviously not every one of Berlioz's pieces with a program about fixation features techniques of strophic variation; nor does every one of his varied strophic forms conjure up these themes. But that need not deter us from exploring the rich and abundant connections between these forms and the poetic ideas they evoke. I am less interested in correlations that obtain in each and every circumstance than in compelling associations that can help us to understand why this formal convention appealed to Berlioz and how he tapped into its expressive potential.

To utter the word "convention" with respect to Berlioz may come as a surprise. Few musicians so instinctively recoiled at the thought of composers who shoehorned their pieces into established, conventional models. And few have matched Berlioz's enthusiasm for Beethoven's effort to dispense with standard musical forms, which, for Berlioz, was directly proportional to Beethoven's desire to extend music's poetic capabilities. But convention does influence Berlioz's musical activities. His musical tastes can appear at times almost conservative compared to many of his contemporaries' (he remained a champion of Gluck his entire life, for example, even as Gluck's music fell out of favor).[17] And his music shows a keen awareness of the styles and techniques of composers who came before him, for all that it is idiosyncratically "Berliozian."

It would of course be a mistake to downplay Berlioz's innovativeness. Because he believed that the most potent music was the most free, unbridled, and unbeholden to rigid patterns, he did indeed take risks with formal design, seemingly treating every new piece as a new experiment driven by the same question: What musical procedures can I employ to express *this* sentiment, to capture *this* scene, *this* program? But those risks were controlled, not haphazard. However bold and new they seemed, each was founded upon a solid grasp of what experiments had and had not worked in the past and also upon an intimate knowledge of a vast repertoire of expressive music by the likes of Beethoven, Spontini, Weber, Gluck, and others. Daring as Berlioz's sense of form was, it did not operate in a vacuum, without any models to go by. And much as his forms may confound us, they do so as if by design.

Berlioz's music is often poised between clarity and irrationality, and the most productive way to understand its disarming effect is neither to neaten it up and thereby explain away what makes it seem irrational, nor to argue that it follows only its own rules and dispenses with convention altogether. Shoehorning must be avoided at all costs with Berlioz. But so

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must denying that his pieces interact in any way with the forms with which he was familiar. These two attitudes have guided many discussions of Berlioz's formal language. Writers applaud Berlioz for shedding the shackles of formalism, arguing that he is at his best when he discards tried-and-true models and lets white-hot inspiration or the dramatic force of a program guide him.[18] Or in an effort to demonstrate that his pieces are "unified," they impose upon them patterns that do not suit them.[19] To grasp the peculiar force and drama of Berlioz's music, we must consider how he worked within formal conventions but bent them, and often combined them, in accordance with his expressive and programmatic ends.

What this means, practically speaking, is treating strophic variation more as a way of thinking than as a strict form that a piece is either "in" or "not in." Much as Berlioz's varied strophic forms may be driven by an impulse that is simple and fundamental – satisfying a basic human need for repetition and change, renewal and transformation – the forms themselves are often anything but simple. In Berlioz's longer forms, more complex processes are at work than the mere repetition and variation of a single theme, as in a straightforward strophic song. However, even in these complex forms strophic variation still acts as a kind of guiding principle that can be felt even when other formal conventions are present and even when not every part of a piece can be neatly accommodated to a varied-repetitive formal model. In adopting this flexible approach to form, attentive to conventions being evoked, revoked, and mixed in all manner of ways, I take my lead from Hepokoski, Morgan, and Darcy. In their analyses, rotational form or circular form is not so much a model as a process that often works with and against other formal processes – what Darcy calls, in reference to rotational form, "an overriding structural principle, an *Urprinzip*" that determines the course of a movement organized according to a more familiar form like sonata form or rondo form – or according to no readily nameable form at all.[20]

Strophic variation is admittedly only one structural principle among many that Berlioz drew upon, and I certainly do not mean to propose it as the key to understanding how Berlioz's peculiar forms work. Still, I believe it is more central to his thinking about thematic development and musical representation than many have recognized. For this reason it is an ideal focal point from which to explore how musical forms and programmatic scenarios are woven together. This book is best viewed as a case study, not a survey – an effort to understand how Berlioz's forms and programs interact by looking at one of the forms that mattered most to him. This specificity allows for the kind of close and detailed analysis that

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would be impracticable in a broader overview and that is necessary if we are to appreciate how subtle Berlioz's sense of form was and move beyond many of the misconceptions of decades past. And my hope is that it will make it possible to say more, not less, about how Berlioz's advanced sense of musical design and musical expressivity correspond – a topic that could hardly be more important to the appreciation of Berlioz's music.

The time is ripe for an investigation of the relationship between program and form in Berlioz, not only because his forms have received comparatively little scrutiny, but also because the past decade has seen a redoubled interest in form, both large and small scale, and in how form relates to expression, drama, and narrative.[21] Berlioz, as is commonly noted, did not spawn a school of followers, and there is hardly agreement about the scope of his legacy and achievement. But the formal techniques outlined in this book potentially had an impact on composers after Berlioz – certainly on Mahler, who admired Berlioz, and whose similarly circular, episodic, and often song-based instrumental music is in many ways strikingly Berliozian in conception.[22] Although my aim is not to trace the links between Berlioz's varied-repetitive formal procedures and those of later composers, my work nonetheless helps to situate him in the context of a broader interest in strophic instrumental forms and in incorporating lyrical structures into symphonic music.

Berlioz's treatment of formal process as a metaphor for dramatic and psychological process also of course connects him with a host of other nineteenth-century composers. Again, to explore how exactly his understanding of the program–form interaction relates to Liszt's, Wagner's, Mahler's, and Strauss's, not to mention to their ideas about his music, would require another book. These composers are hardly absent from the coming pages, but since my principal aim is to outline an approach to analyzing Berlioz's program music that is as consistent as possible with his own ideas, those ideas form the core of this book. Nevertheless, I hope that by outlining a concept of musical metaphor – even one drawn primarily from Berlioz's own writings and tailored to his own music – this book can stimulate a more thorough and careful discussion about how it is that music can be indissociable from the human actions and emotions it conveys, and at times even seem a perfect rendering of them, without sacrificing its own self-sufficient logic. In this sense, Berlioz, singular though he may be, has a lot to teach us about how we hear any music that draws its inspiration from the world of ideas and feelings. And understanding him better can help us to understand those who followed him in

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the quest to expand music's expressive potential, whether they are truly "followers" or not.

The rest of the book is divided into two main parts. The first part (chapters 2–3) is largely methodological. It sets out the types of form and metaphorical interaction that are the backbone of this study, in preparation for the second part (chapters 4–6), which analyzes three of Berlioz's large-scale forms with these concepts in mind: *Le Carnaval romain* (1843–4) (chapter 4), the first movement of the *Symphonie fantastique* (chapter 5), and the *Scène d'amour* from *Roméo et Juliette* (chapter 6). That said, chapter 2 – "Preliminary examples and recent theories" – does not shy away from musical analysis in favor of theoretical exposition. This chapter works through a number of straightforward forms by Berlioz, including the *Dies irae* from the *Symphonie fantastique*, a theme from the *Roi Lear* overture (1831), and movements from *La Damnation de Faust* and *Harold en Italie*, and uses them to introduce topics that will be taken up more extensively in later chapters.

I adopt this approach for many reasons. I think that it is important to look at musical examples as early as possible, and also that some ideas have enough of an intuitive appeal that they can initially be taken on faith and broached even casually in the context of short analyses and later enriched with more thorough discussion. I envision the reading of this book as something akin to surveying a landscape, first spotting from afar the outlines of objects that seem familiar, then zooming in and noting their finer features. The reader should thus bear in mind that any pressing questions arising in the first couple of chapters will be addressed in more detail further on.

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2 | Preliminary examples and recent theories

Simple cycles

One of the best-known passages in Berlioz's output is the *Dies irae* from the last movement of the *Symphonie fantastique*. It is a harrowing stretch of measures, as stark and severe as anything in nineteenth-century music (see Ex. 2.1). Funeral bells cut short the witches' sabbath tune, which has barely even begun, and draw us deeper into the nightmare of the symphony's protagonist. Then the familiar *Dies irae* tune enters, ominously and in dotted half notes, punctuated by the bells at irregular intervals. The theme completed, it begins again, twice as fast, in dotted quarter notes, and then once more, feverishly and faster still, in alternating quarters and eighths. (The numbers 1, 2, and 3 in Ex. 2.1 indicate where each statement of the theme begins.)

This is a varied strophic form par excellence and only one of the most recognizable among countless in Berlioz's music. Granted, it is very short – part of a movement, not a movement as a whole. Yet for that reason it makes for a good starting point. It is a miniature example of the type of large-scale form that will be addressed in later chapters. Looking at it can give us a sense of what Berlioz's varied strophic forms look like and how they are related to the poetic and dramatic sentiments that are his very *raison d'être*. Below I focus on theories of circular and rotational form and comments by Berlioz scholars about his penchant for strophic variation. For the moment I am more interested in proceeding empirically toward a general understanding of these concepts.

How do we characterize what happens in this passage? In the simplest terms we can say this: Berlioz repeats and varies a clear-cut theme successively. Here is the most basic definition of the formal design that lies at the heart of this book – one in which a thematic unit is stated and then restated many times over with some alteration. In this case the thematic unit is of course a single phrase. But that need not be so. Berlioz's varied-repetitive forms come in all shapes and sizes; the unit of repetition might be a single phrase, a multi-phrase theme, or even – at the largest level – a complex of different themes. (I define these units by their melodic

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