

Selected letters of Berlioz

Hugh Macdonald, ed., Roger Nichols, trans.

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Hector Berlioz probably wrote nearly as much prose as music during his life. He worked professionally as a music critic for almost thirty years, wrote a volume of *Memoirs* and was a prolific writer of letters, roughly 3,500 of which survive. Despite his own disclaimer that 'there's too much violence in me... that gives something unsteady and lurching to the motion of my prose, like the walk of a drunkard' (30 August 1864), he writes with fluency, wit and poetry; indeed his writing can be appreciated for its stylistic merits alone. It also provides an invaluable social document on musical life in nineteenth-century France and Europe.

As joint editor of the complete French edition of the Berlioz correspondence, published in an excellent scholarly edition by Flammarion, Hugh Macdonald is well placed to make an informed selection of the letters, and this English volume draws upon some as yet unpublished letters which are to appear in the forthcoming last volume of the French edition.

The 481 letters selected for this English-language edition have been skilfully and judiciously chosen so that a number of different strands emerge. First, letters have been chosen that reflect the political and social background of the time. This is marked for instance by such letters as Berlioz' marvellous note to his father after the outbreak of the 1830 revolution. Immured in the Institut writing a cantata for the Prix de Rome competition—Berlioz' fifth attempt at the prize which this year he won—while 'bullets and cannon balls... aimed directly at us, form a battery in the Louvre raking the Pont des Arts and reaching the doors of the Institut', Berlioz writes to his father: 'As soon as I'd written the last note, you can imagine that my first impulse was to follow where mortal anxiety led me, through the last of the cannon balls, the screams, the dead, the wounded etc. Luckily I found everything as I had hoped.' (2 August 1830) This excitement is strongly contrasted with his depressed ruminations from London on the immediate effect of the 1848 uprising on artists trying to maintain a livelihood: 'Art [in Paris] is now buried; it was merely moribund before, now it is dead and it smells like a corpse.' (16 March 1848)

There is good coverage of Berlioz' personal life, with its hopes, difficulties and disappointments: for instance, his family's misunderstanding of his artistic mission, and his tragic relationship with the Irish actress Harriet Smithson. Through browbeating and even emotional blackmail, Berlioz overcame her reluctance—well-founded as it turns out—to marry him. After the marriage she was never again to act, chiefly because she never mastered the French language. The letters reveal, vividly and painfully, her lonely life in the cold little house in the countryside of Montmartre outside the city gates, while Berlioz was busy trying to earn money in Paris, at this stage primarily as a journalist reviewing everything from the most banal opéra-comique to the *concerts de conservatoire*. All too soon, Harriet became paranoid and alcoholic; what a tragedy for someone who, in her heyday, had played alongside the greatest of English actors, to spend the final years of her life in this way.

Berlioz' musical career is traced through its triumphs and vicissitudes: his unending battle with musical authorities, the promised jobs and performances that never come to fruition. This is contrasted with his great successes in Vienna, Germany, Prague and Russia, yet Berlioz seemed incapable of moving. For instance, when offered a job in Prague he is forced to admit a 'curious discovery': 'My heart is so closely wedded to Paris... that at the mere thought of being excluded from it I literally felt my heart fail me and realised the torment of being excluded.' (13 March 1846) And so he stays in Paris even though the life he leads is 'an unending whirlwind, with never a moment's peace for calm contemplation; always on the run or working at top speed; always vibrating, always buzzing; always having to suppress attacks of boiling indignation; every morning, after a few hours of more or less restless sleep, to go back into [the] cold, disordered world, hissing like a red-hot iron plunged into water; and... always stumbling over snakes and toads.' (31 March 1851) This quote, although hardly reflective of a happy environment, at least reflects some of the sense of excitement that Berlioz felt Paris generated.

Later in his life that sense of excitement is dissipated and one feels at times merely his frustration and anger at the city that seemed incapable of understanding or supporting him: 'I feel my abilities to be greater than ever, but material obstacles present me from giving them rein. At this moment I am truly ill from this lack of fulfilment of my love for art. But then! In France? Nothing, absolutely nothing! Indifference and idiocy, base industrialism, the savagery of the governing classes, ignorance, the brutality of the rich, the vulgar preoccupations of everyone...snakes, hedgehogs, toads, geese, guinea-fowl, crows, bugs and vermin of every kind: that is the delightful population of Paris, our Paradise on earth.' (27 August, 1854) Towards the end of his life Berlioz received numerous invitations and offers of jobs outside Paris but, although he accepted short-term engagements, his deep-seated chauvinism chained him, sick in body and heart, to the site of his discontents.

Berlioz' letters also contain fascinating information on his music. All his major compositions are mentioned, with the letters providing insight into both inception and reception of works. The whole tragedy of *The Trojans* is poignantly conveyed by letters initially full of elation, hope and excitement during composition, changing gradually to bitterness, depression and hopelessness during performance negotiations.

One of the most painful aspects of the letters as a whole is the sense of Berlioz' failing spirit during the

last years. Although this was clearly accentuated by his ill health, the lack of an immediate supportive cultural milieu finally seems to take its toll.

This edition of Berlioz letters is deceptive. It reads as a coherent narrative, simultaneously exploring all the strands mentioned above in a seamless fashion, as though the reader were being presented with the complete correspondence. Yet this is a mere fraction of Berlioz' output. Only someone with Macdonald's familiarity and in-depth knowledge of the material could make such an expert selection of letters. The editorial notes are brief but informative and do not contain any superfluous information. Short editorial paragraphs provide necessary biographical linking material in places, but in a very neutral fashion so that the flow of Berlioz' exuberant prose is never really intruded upon. It is also a relief to have footnotes rather than endnotes.

The translations read very easily and have been very free in their use of colloquialisms. This is at times a little jarring but on the whole is infinitely preferable to a more literal and stilted translation.

This edition of Berlioz' letters serves many readers. It can be read as a documentary on nineteenth-century musical culture, it can be read as ancillary material to Berlioz research, or it can be read purely for its intrinsic merit as a literary text. I highly recommend it to all readers.

Kerry Murphy

C A L L F O R C O N T R I B U T I O N S

The editors of *Context* would like to invite contributions in the form of articles, composer interviews, reviews and letters.

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