
From the Writings of Berlioz

The decay of absolutism on the European continent spelled the end of artistic patronage on the part of the aristocracy and the church. The broad middle-class public now replaced the traditional élite: it attended concerts and the opera, it purchased printed music, it was swayed by the opinions of newspaper reviewers. Italian opera composers never noticed the difference: they had been addressing the broadest public for two hundred years and continued to do so in the nineteenth century. Brilliant virtuosos and agreeable “salon” composers knew how to keep in fashion, and they thrived. But the young Romantic composers, who sought to express their innermost feelings through their art, found themselves ignored by the public and the press. It is no wonder, then, that so many of them, from Weber (see p. 294) to Wolf (1860–1903), decided to take up arms against the prevailing situation and entered the battlefield as newspaper critics and authors of pamphlets and books, each according to his temperament and his individual experience of life. Among the great composers of the nineteenth century, Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner stand out as energetic, crusading writers, bent on elevating the public’s taste and reforming the musical life of Europe. Our opening selection first appeared in Berlioz’s *Musical Travels in Germany and Italy* (1844). Though it purports to give a definition of music and its constituent parts in the objective style of an encyclopedia entry, it soon reveals itself as something quite different—a Romantic’s glorification of the power of music. In his documentation of the effects of music on susceptible people (including himself), Berlioz slips easily into a style reminiscent of medical books, reminding us that his father was a doctor and that he himself had, for a time, been an unwilling medical student. His contempt for all the durable old legends about ancient music and his claim on behalf of the equal if not superior powers of modern music show that Berlioz (like many French Romantics) was heir to the melioristic views of the Enlightenment, which in many other ways he (and they) despised.

Music

Music, the art of moving intelligent human beings, endowed with special, well-trained organs, by means of combinations of sounds. To define music thus is to admit that we do not consider it, as the saying goes, *fit for everyone*. Whatever its conditions, whatever

means it may have employed in the past, whether simple or compound, gentle or vigorous, it has always been apparent to the impartial observer that, a great number of individuals being incapable of feeling and understanding its power, *they were not fit for music* and, consequently, *music was not fit for them*.

Music is both a sentiment and a science; it requires of its practitioner, whether he be a performer or a composer, natural inspiration and skills that can only be acquired through prolonged studies and profound thought. The union of knowledge and inspiration constitutes art. Lacking these conditions, therefore, a musician can only be an incomplete artist, if indeed he deserves the title of artist.

What we call *music* is a new art, in the sense that it most probably bears very little resemblance to what the ancient civilized peoples meant by that term.

What the art of sounds was then we know but very imperfectly. Some isolated facts, told possibly in an exaggerated manner of the kind we witness daily; the bloated or totally absurd ideas of certain philosophers—sometimes, too, false interpretations of their writings; these would tend to attribute to ancient music an immense power and a moral influence so great as to oblige legislators, in the interest of the people, to fix its course and regulate its use. Disregarding for the moment the reasons why the truth in this regard may have been altered, and admitting that the music of the Greeks may indeed have produced extraordinary impressions on certain individuals, this fact would still not in the least constitute a proof that their musical art had reached a high degree of perfection.

Simply by glancing around it would be easy to cite incontrovertible facts in favor of the power of our own music—facts whose worth would at least equal that of the doubtful anecdotes of ancient historians. How often, at performances of the masterpieces of our great composers, have we seen listeners overcome by the most violent spasms, crying and laughing at the same time, and manifesting all the symptoms of delirium and fever! A young musician from Provence, overcome by the impassioned feelings aroused in him by Spontini's [opera] *La Vestale*, could not bear the thought of returning to our prosaic world after leaving the poetic heaven that had just been revealed to him; he forewarned his friends by letter of his intention, and after hearing once more the masterpiece that was the object of his ecstatic admiration, thinking rightly that he had attained the maximum share of happiness allotted to man on earth, one evening, at the entrance to the [Paris] opera house, he blew out his brains.

The famous singer Mme. Malibran, upon hearing for the first time, at the Conservatoire, Beethoven's C-minor symphony, was seized by such strong convulsions that she had to be helped out of the concert room. Dozens of times we have seen serious men finding themselves obliged to leave in order to hide the violence of their emotions from the public gaze. As for the feelings which the present author personally derives from music, he affirms that nothing in the world could convey an exact notion of them to one who has never experienced the like. Leaving aside the moral influences which this art has developed in him, and to cite only the impressions received and the effects experienced at the very moment of the performance of works he admires, here is what he can say in all candor: Upon hearing certain pieces of music, my vital forces seem at first to double in strength; I feel a delicious pleasure in which the reasoning faculty has no share; the habit of analysis arises spontaneously later and brings forth admiration; emotion, increasing proportionately with the energy or loftiness of the composer's inspiration, soon produces a strange commotion in my circulation; my arteries throb violently; tears, which ordinarily signal the end of the paroxysm, often only indicate an

advancing condition that is far from having reached its peak. In such cases, there are spasmodic muscular contractions, a trembling of all the limbs, a *total numbness of feet and hands*, a partial paralysis of the optical and auditory nerves; I cannot see, I barely hear; vertigo ... a half-swoon ... One may well imagine that feelings heightened to such a degree represent a rare occurrence and that, besides, they are counterbalanced by a vigorous contrast, namely, that of the *negative musical effect* which produces the opposite of admiration and pleasure. There is no music more apt to arouse me in this sense than that whose principal fault seems to me to be platitude conjoined with falseness of expression. Then I blush as if in shame; a genuine sense of indignation invades me; anyone seeing me might suppose I had just suffered an insult of the kind that can never be forgiven; to dispel the impression, there is a general upsurge, my entire organism makes efforts at excretion analogous to the effort of vomiting when the stomach wants to reject a nauseating liquid. It is disgust and hatred carried to their extreme limits; such music exasperates me, and I vomit it from all my pores.

Doubtless the habit of disguising or mastering my sentiments rarely permits them to appear in their true light; and if on occasion, from the days of my youth, I have chanced to give them full rein, it is because I lacked the time to reflect: I was taken unawares.

Modern music, therefore, as to power, has no cause to envy the music of the ancients.

Hector Berlioz, *À travers Chants* (Paris, 1862), 1–4, 5–7. Trans. P. W.

Sharp satire and wit, mingled with considerable bitterness, characterize much of Berlioz's writing. In the following extract (from his *Memoirs*), however, the crass indifference of the billiard player serves only as a comic foil to the exaltation of Berlioz and one other person.

That evening I had dragged to the [Paris] opera one of my friends, a perfect stranger to all the arts but billiards, whom I wished nevertheless to convert forcibly to music. The sorrows of Antigone and her father [in the opera *Oedipus* by Sacchini] were not such as to move him very deeply. And so, after the first act, despairing of my friend, I left him and moved up to a seat in front of him, in order not to be upset by his coolness. As if to make his impassiveness even more glaring, fate had seated to his right a spectator who was as impressionable as he himself was indifferent. I soon grew aware of this. [The singer] Dérivis had just delivered himself with fine effect of the famous recitative:

My son! Ah, no! my son no more!
Go! My hatred is too vehement!

Absorbed though I was by this lovely scene, so natural and full of antique feeling, I could not help overhearing the dialogue that had begun behind me, between my young friend, who was peeling an orange, and the stranger beside him, who was visibly shaken:

“Good Heavens, sir, calm down.”

“No! It is too much! It's overwhelming! Crushing!”

“But, sir, you really mustn't let it *affect* you so. You will make yourself sick.”

“No, let me be.—Oh!”

“Come, come, sir, cheer up! *After all, it's only a show!* May I offer you a slice of my orange?”

“Ah! Sublime!”
“It’s imported from Malta.”
“A heavenly work of art!”
“Please accept it.”
“Ah, sir, what a piece of music!”
“Yes, it’s pretty.”

During this dissonant conversation the opera had progressed through the reconciliation scene to the lovely trio “*O joyful moment!*”; the penetrating sweetness of that simple melody had now seized me too; and I began to weep, covering my face with my hands, like a man overcome with grief. No sooner had the trio ended than two muscular arms lifted me off my chair, clasping my chest so tightly that I thought my bones would break; it was the stranger: unable to contain his emotion, and noticing that, of all those around him, I was the only one who shared it, he embraced me fervently and cried out in a fitful voice: “By *God*, sir, how beautiful it is!!!” Not in the least surprised, my face crisscrossed by tears, I asked:

“Are you a musician?”
“No, but I feel music as deeply as any man.”

“Well, it is all the same; let me shake your hand. Gad, sir, you are a splendid fellow!”

Whereupon, perfectly undisturbed by the mirth of the spectators who had gathered around us and by the dumbfounded expression on the face of my orange-eating friend, we exchanged some words in an undertone; I told him my name, he told me his (it was Le Tessier—I never saw him again) and his profession. He was an engineer! A mathematician!! What the devil! Sensitivity lurks in the oddest nooks!

Mémoires de Hector Berlioz (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d. [1910?]), I, 80–82. Trans. P. W.

“Thunderclaps occasionally follow one another in the life of an artist,” writes Berlioz in Chap. 20 of his *Memoirs*, “as rapidly as during certain storms in which the clouds, replete with electric fluid, seem to toss the lightning back and forth and to breathe the hurricane. I had hardly experienced two apparitions—Shakespeare and Weber—when, at another point in the horizon, I saw the immense Beethoven rise up. The impact on me was nearly comparable to that which I had felt with Shakespeare. He opened up for me a new world in music, just as the poet had revealed to me a new universe in poetry.” In article after article, review after review, Berlioz was to champion the cause of Beethoven’s music. Beethoven, to him, stood for all that mattered and, just as important, *against* all that was trivial in music. Here, in a report sent to his paper from London in 1851, his devotion to the master appears mingled with light touches of social satire and humor.

The Beethoven Room

I must still acquaint you with *The Beethoven Quartet Society*. This has as its sole aim the performance at regular intervals, and in pretty close succession, of Beethoven’s quartets. Each evening’s program contains three of them—nothing less, nothing more. Usually they are selected from the three different manners of the author; and it is always the last, in the third manner (from the period of Beethoven’s supposedly incomprehensible compositions), which excites the greatest enthusiasm. Then you may see Englishmen follow with their eye, in little pocket scores printed in London for that

purpose, the capricious flight of the master's thoughts; which might be considered proof that several among them have some rudimentary knowledge of score reading. But I feel a certain skepticism regarding the science of these devourers, ever since I surprised one of them (I was peering over his shoulder) with his eyes fixed on page 4, while the performers were on page 6. This music lover no doubt belonged to the same school as the king of Spain whose passion it was to play the first fiddle in Boccherini's quintets and who, always falling behind the other performers, used to say to them, when the confusion grew too serious, "Keep going, I'll catch up with you!"

The meeting place of the *Beethoven Quartet Society* is known as the *Beethoven Room*. For a time I inhabited an apartment in the same house with it. The hall, seating two hundred and fifty persons at most, is for that reason often rented out for concerts intended for small audiences; there are many such. Now, since my apartment door opened on the staircase leading to the hall, I had only to keep it open in order to hear everything that was performed there. One evening I hear Beethoven's C-minor trio resounding ... I fling open my door ... Come in, come in, and welcome, proud melody! ... God! How noble and beautiful! ... Where, then, did Beethoven discover these countless phrases, each more poetically characterized than the other, all of them different, all of them original, not even sharing that family air one recognizes in the works of great masters renowned for their fecundity? And what ingenious developments! What unforeseen motions! ... How he soars, this indefatigable eagle! How he glides, poised in his harmonious heaven! ... Now he plunges down, loses himself in it, rises, descends again, disappears ... then he returns to his starting point, his eye glinting brighter, his wing beating more vigorously, disdainingly, quivering, inebriated with infinity ... Very well performed! I wonder who played the piano part so well? ... My servant informs me it was an Englishwoman. A true talent, I must say! ... Oh dear! What's this? A prima donna's grand aria? ... John! *Shut the door!* Quick, quick. Ah! Miserable woman! I hear her still. Shut the second door, the third; is there a fourth? ... At last ... I breathe again ...

Hector Berlioz, *Beethoven*, ed. J.-G. Prod'homme (Paris: Corrèa, 1941), 141–44. Trans. P. W.