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Evaluation of the Idiosyncratic Style in Berlioz's Music

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Abstract

The nine symphonies of Beethoven provoked a crisis of confidence to all composers in the nineteenth century as they wondered how they could surpass Beethoven's achievements and legacy. The "crisis" was felt virtually in two specific genres: instrumental music (the symphony in particular) and piano music. Nevertheless, at least one composer stood out and saw Beethoven's works as a form of aberration, an experiment, which became the beginning point for much further exploration – Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). He made numerous contributions to the art and craft of instrumentation, in which his writing extravagance and distinctive idiosyncratic style would pervade the rest of the century. For Berlioz, the writing of music was not strict conventions, but rather shaped "from within" by the poetic content of the music. As a result, Berlioz's music had become a question between profusion and confusion by his colleagues: big ideas but no discipline, originality but no follow-through. The purpose of this writing is to note some remarks about Berlioz's originality and idiosyncratic style, which was different than anything anyone heard before.

Keywords: Berlioz, Idiosyncratic, Styles, Originality, Extravagance

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Evaluasi Gaya Idiosinkrasi pada Musik Berlioz

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Abstrak

Kesembilan simfoni Beethoven menimbulkan krisis kepercayaan bagi semua komposer di abad ke-19 di mana mereka mempertanyakan bagaimana mereka dapat melampaui pencapaian dan warisan dari Beethoven. "Krisis" tersebut pada hakekatnya dirasakan dua dua genre spesifik: musik instrumental (khusunya simfoni) dan musik piano. Namun demikian, setidaknya satu komposer tampak menonjol dan mampu melihat karya Beethoven sebagai bentuk aberasi, sebuah eksperimen, yang menjadi titik awal untuk eksplorasi lebih jauh – Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). Dia memberikan banyak kontribusi pada seni dan keahlian instrumentasi, di mana komposisinya yang luar biasa dan gaya idiosinkrasinya yang khas dapat menyebar pada sisa abad tersebut. Bagi Berlioz, penulisan musik bukanlah konvensi yang ketat, melainkan dibentuk "dari dalam" oleh konten puitis musik tersebut. Alhasil, musik Berlioz menjadi pertanyaan antara kelimpahan dan kebingungan rekan-rekannya: ide besar tetapi tidak ada kedisiplinan, atau orisinalitas tetapi tidak ada tindak lanjut. Tujuan dari tulisan ini adalah untuk mencatat beberapa komentar mengenai orisinalitas dan gaya idiosinkrasi Berlioz, yang berbeda dari yang pernah didengar oleh siapa pun sebelumnya.

Kata Kunci: Berlioz, Idiosinkrasi, Gaya, Orisinalitas, Extravagansa

Berlioz, Musical "Romanticism," and His Stature in the Nineteenth Century

The rationality and philosophical thought of the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment gradually gave way to a new artistic movement in art loosely known as romanticism, which valued the individual and subjective over the universal, along with the emotional and spiritual over the rational. The romantic impulse explored the artist's inner emotional life for them to express emotional states freely, passionately, and wildly; therefore, romanticism was closely associated with the idealism and elevation of an individual.

Among the artists of French Romanticism with this impulse in the nineteenth century were Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) with his painting *The Massacre at Chios* (1824), Victor Hugo (1802-1885) with his great novels *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862), and Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) who pursued "gigantic and Babylonian" effects – as suggested by his teacher Jean-François Le Sueur (1760-1837) – in his music through the fantasy and extravagance

of his ideas, along with unprecedented orchestral imagination that would impact the rest of the century. As for his first composition, he already wrote a huge, massive Solemn Mass while he was just 21; although the work brought him some notice, however, it did not gain the attention from the Paris Conservatory.

Berlioz's originality, imagination, and musical extravagance resulted in the distinctive idiosyncratic style during the nineteenth century, which was perceived as profusion, but mostly confusion, by his colleagues and European society in general. The power of Berlioz's music lies in numerous contributions to the art and craft of instrumentation, in which critics have commonly acknowledged his primacy in this field.

1. Brilliant original orchestration, along with the expansion and enlargement of the orchestration.
2. A fresh approach to the grand scale of virtually every genre, including symphony, opera, various combined genres loosely termed "semi-opera" (especially *La Damnation de Faust*), art song, and sacred music.
3. His ability to blend music and narrative, especially in *Roméo and Juliette*, which Berlioz classified as a symphony because the unique characters and voices are expressed by instruments (viola represents Roméo and oboe represents Juliette). In this symphony, Berlioz believed that only instrumental music could express inexpressible elements like love.
4. Berlioz wrote no significant chamber music or piano music since nearly everything he wrote was for larger works.
5. Dramatic realism of harsh-sounding sound in terms of consonance-dissonance relationships.
6. Critics appreciated his gift for melody inventiveness (really, the lyricist after Schubert), his mastery of orchestration, his genius for the integration of musical drama (really, before Wagner), his bold originality, and the idiosyncratic style that placed him in a different league.

Yet at the same time, his extravagant idea and writing remain the most controversial of all major nineteenth-century composers, as found by musicians and other critics at that time said that his work possessed second-rate melody, awkward harmonies, strange voice leadings, and failed experiments of various kinds. Not everyone was fond of Berlioz's idea, for example, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) called Berlioz as follows:

> "A genius without talent [. . .] All these effects are used to express nothing but an insignificant mess – mere back-and-forth grunts, roars, and shouts. His orchestration is so dirty that I have to wash my hands after turning over the pages of his scores." (Klugewicz, 2002).

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) complained:

> "He was a great innovator, of course, and had the perfect imagination of each new instrument he used, as well as the knowledge of its technique; [however], the music he had to instrumentalize was often poorly constructed harmonically." (Taruskin, 2002).

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) also made similar comment as Stravinsky,

> "Berlioz is an exception, a freak. He is not a musician at all. He gives the illusion of being one while borrowing procedures from literature and painting. [. . .] Professionals are to this day appalled by his harmonic liberties and by the haphazard character of his forms. (Arnold, 2012).

For many late twentieth-century composers, Berlioz is acknowledged as the creator of the modern orchestra and the supreme innovator, whose influence was felt throughout nineteenth and twentieth-century composers (even Stravinsky, who earlier expressed the complaint). As Hugh Macdonald (an English musicologist, born in 1940) has written on the *Symphonie Fantastique*,

> "There is hardly any aspect of the symphony where Berlioz does not tread new ground, whether in the ground plan of five movements, in the unconventional patterns of each movement, in the importance of the semi-autobiographical program, in the uncanny translation into sound of mental images, the resourcefulness of the instrumentation, or in the still striking modernity of his sense of color." (MacDonald, 1983).

Whenever his music was performed on any concert platform at that time, ticket sales would be guaranteed to be slow; moreover, many of his works presented great obstacles and difficulties to performance, both in the artistic quality and quantity of players that required massive forces and great expense, even for the world-famous Paris Orchestra. For examples:

1. Berlioz required 700 to 800 members of the chorus, along with four off-stage brass bands for his *Requiem*.

2. Some 900 performers played in the premiere of *Te Deum* in 1849.
3. The writing of *Harold en Italie* as a symphony with viola obligato, in which the original creation was for a viola concerto; the interesting point is that he wrote for an instrument that was played only by a small handful of world-class soloists.
4. His supreme dramatic works, including *La Damnation of Faust, Roméo et Juliette*, and *L'Enfance du Christ* [the Childhood of Christ]; all are excellent hybrids of opera and symphony and are difficult to stage and perform.
5. The creation of his first opera, *Benvenuto Cellini*, underwent such drastic revision in 1852 when Franz Liszt received the work in Weimar, due to its immense difficulties.
6. Berlioz's most ambitious work was the operatic epic *Les Troyens* [the Trojans], composed during 1856-1858, lasting over six hours. It was unfortunate that these works lacked the combination of energy, patronage, and luck; not until Richard Wagner (1813-1883) fully and successfully commanded to bring integrated music dramas to the stage. As a result, Berlioz wrote the little comic-opera *Beatrice and Benedict*, which was lovely, lyrical, full of hope, and entirely delightful for the French society.

Berlioz's Idiosyncratic Musical Language

Berlioz was the first significant composer to write memoirs, which include his personality, his ecstatic amours, his faith in progress, and even the fantasy vulgarities of some of the pages. As the nineteenth century was the age when artists were excessive, and extravagant, while on the edge of sanity, Berlioz's personality and self-consciousness clearly reflected the spirit of the age. His works are expressed, at many times, outrageous, yet never out of control, rich and perhaps bizarre in orchestration, but never sloppy or get out of control. In his music, Berlioz realized his wildest fancies with the finest clarity of means.

Harriet Smithson (1800-1854), an earnest Irish actress, was part of the major influence on Berlioz's musical thoughts. The first encounter with Harriet was when he attended a Paris performance of Shakespeare's Hamlet in 1827, in which the role of Ophelia was played by Harriet. The production was performed in English and Berlioz hardly understood the performance, however, he desperately fell in love with her the moment he saw her. The combination of Shakespeare's powerful drama and the female beauty of Harriet made Berlioz virtually felt overloaded by love and desire. After the performance, Berlioz walked around the city in an

outburst of frustration and desire; for the next five years (until their actual meeting in 1832), the image of Harriet overclouded his life.

Berlioz eventually tried to be in contact with Harriet through several letters, however, there was no conclusive response. After several attempts, he defined an idea of conquering her love with music by writing a great symphony – the Symphonie Fantastique – in which he wrote, "the development of my internal passion is to be portrayed." (Burkholder, 549). The work was based on a clearly autobiographical program, a young musician of "morbid sensibility and ardent imagination" according to Berlioz's own words. Frustrated in love, Berlioz tried to kill himself with opium, but instead of death, the drug gave him powerful hallucinations expressed through the five movements of the symphony:

1. The first time Berlioz saw Harriet and immediately felt a transport of passion.
2. He sees her dancing at a ball.
3. He is calmed by a scene in the fields.
4. He has murdered her and then he is executed at the guillotine.
5. She appears as a grotesque hag before his corpse.

As Berlioz could not escape the image of Harriet, so is the work haunted by a specific melody, bearing the image of her, described as *idée fixe*, with a new guise in each movement from the delicate first appearance to a shrieking parody in the witch's sabbath (total of nine appearances of this fixed idea as the unity of the whole work). Edward Cone (1917-2004), an American music theorist, stated,

> "[. . .] establishing the Fantastic Symphony as a unified whole. Such conception of the work must depend less on the exact quotations of the idée fixe, which could after all be worked mechanically into almost any context, than on harmonic and tonal relationships, motivic reminiscences, and pervading melodic patterns." (Cone, 276).
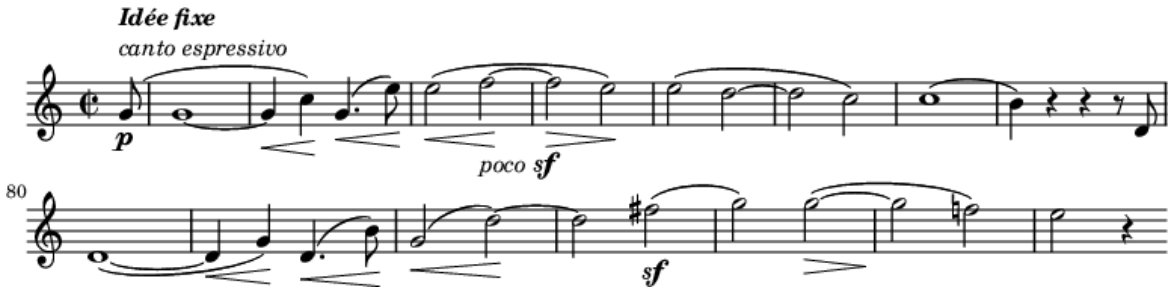


Figure 1. *Idée fixe* melody

Several commentaries can be observed from the writing of the Symphonie Fantastique:

1. The originality and concept of sound are totally reshaped.
2. The unprecedently expressive treatment of the orchestra is never seen in previous times, not even in Beethoven's works.
3. Various moods ranging from the ethereal beauty to the grandiose scene to the thunderous march and ending in the demonic sound of the sabbath – which require such revolution in the art of orchestration.
4. Whereas earlier composers wanted instruments to sound according to its acoustical property, now the orchestra was expressed in an "unorthodox" way – to murmur, to shout, to howl – which become an important element in the twentieth-century music texturalism and experimentalism; the definition, the property, and the idiomatic capability of each instrument are well-written in Berlioz's orchestration book of 1844 that was among the first of its kind and remains among the finest.

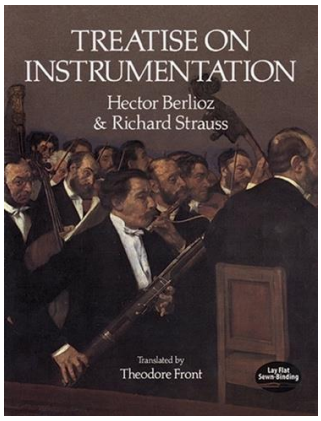


Figure 2. The book *Treatise on Instrumentation*

5. With a classical ideal and approach to romantic expression, his music expresses unprecedented emotional effects of tone colors and scoring technique.
6. The work clearly initiated the great age of program music, and equally important, he used the technique of *idée fixe* that inspired similar approaches in many composers afterward, especially Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner.

Berlioz's harmonic vocabulary appears to go against the norms of tonal music of the period from 1750 to 1850. Every musical phrase is personal that would constantly give us various unpredictable moments, a progression with unconventional tonal behavior, along with unusual configuration that deviates from tradition. We can also summarize that nothing could matter less

to him than the orthodox rules of tonality, and yet none of the liberties he takes is gratuitous since they result from his constant search for the novelty of expression and from his refusal with predictable formulas.

Berlioz tried to bring harmony to life in a way that no one before him had dared to do; his harmonic expressions could even be considered the earliest predecessor to the twentieth-century expressionism. Berlioz contributes to the edifice of harmonic color, surprisingly in the first part of the nineteenth-century – sonorous expression, fantastic imagination without bounds, and inimitable sound.

Many would criticize Berlioz's music that is lack of coherence. To properly understand and comprehend the ingenuity of Berlioz's musical structure, we must associate the works with their programs since all the music is deeply influenced by descriptive and illustrative intentions. In general, Berlioz seemed to write in the following four typical formats:

1. The processional form, meaning music that advances and recedes in accordance with the flow of the program. Examples of this type can be found in *Marche de pélerins* [pilgrims march] of his second symphony, *Harold en Italie*, or in *Convoi funèbre* in his third symphony *Roméo et Juliette* (shown below); Wagner found inspiration in this principle in Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Tristan.

Funeral March	
1-67	Instrumental statement of subject in fugal treatment
68-112	Vocal statement of subject, also in fugal treatment
113-end	Instrumental coda
Romeo at the Tomb	
1-33	Roméo rushes into the tomb, believing Juliet is dead
34-37	Roméo reaches Juliet
48-89	Invocation: prayer or calling on a higher power. Roméo takes poison; 70-89 love scene music as Juliet wakes up
90-147	Delirious joy; frantic love scene music as Roméo and Juliet have their last moments together
148-end	Anguish and death of both lovers

Figure 3. The structural analysis of the *Convoi funèbre in Roméo et Juliette*

2. The derivative of the scherzo-trio-scherzo form, in which the first part is constantly renewed and never literally repeated – a continuous development in which the contrasting sections interrupt one another. An example of this type can be found in the *Scherzo de la reine Mab* [Queen Mab's Scherzo] in *Roméo et Juliette*, as shown below:

Scherzo (1-353)	Two main themes; each is 16 bars in length; theme one anticipated at the beginning but is not fully stated until 77-93. The second theme is first introduced in 127-142
Trio (354-417)	It has its own theme, which has the anticipatory procedure and is stated in full in 361-369
Scherzo (418-727)	
Coda (728-end)	All themes are combined

Figure 4. The structural analysis of the *Scherzo de la reine Mab* in *Roméo et Juliette*

3. The derivative of rondo form with an ever-evolving refrain that appears differently as the movement plays out constantly. An example of this type can be found in the *Ronde du sabbat* [sabbath round] in the finale of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, or the *Grande Fête chez Capulet* [Great Party at Capulet] in *Roméo et Juliette*, as shown below (linked together with the previous number, Roméo Alone):

Introduction (102-128)	Anticipatory procedure
A (129-156)	Strings (except violin I) – heterophony and homorhythm; woodwinds create difficult communication through rests (hocket-like)
B (157-187)	Difficult and restless woodwind
A (187-206)	Heterophony; strings and woodwinds exchange texture
C (207-226)	Constant modulatory harmony
A (226-274)	Combined with the "Juliet" theme from m. 81; *tutti*
D (274-374)	The "Roméo" melody with the festivities theme in fugato writing
Coda (374-414)	The Roméo theme, the Juliete theme, and the festivities theme combined altogether

Figure 5. The structural analysis of the *Grande Fête chez Capulet*

4. The derivative of the multi-thematic sonata form, in which Berlioz defers the climactic movement of tension to the very end of the movement, where, after successive ways of unrelating progressions, the tonal drive is stabilized. An example can be found in the *Orgie de brigands* [Orgy of brigands] of *Harold en Italie* and in the overture *Le Carnaval Romain* [the Roman carnival], as shown below:

Allegro assai (1-18)	The second theme; anticipatory procedure
Andante sostenuto (19-78)	Slow introduction
19-36	English horn
37-52	Viola and English horn
53-74	Canon
75-77	Transition
Allegro vivace (78-446)	Elements of sonata form
Exposition T1 (78-127)	Theme I (tonic)
Exposition T2 (128-167)	Theme II (dominant)

Repeat exposition (166-275)	
168-224	Theme I (tonic)
225-261	Theme II (dominant)
262-275	Transition
Development (276-343)	
276-303	Intro of development
304-343	Development proper
Recapitulation (344-386)	Theme II (tonic)
Coda (387-446)	Themes I and II

Figure 6. The structural analysis of the overture *Le Carnaval Romain*

Through these four formats, Berlioz clearly rethought Beethoven's heritage in the realm of symphonic music. The common denominators of these archetypes are continuous development and the refusal to turn back; therefore, his music was cast in a singular and unique design, in which the final gesture – often that of the "destruction" of the main materials – is of capital importance. Berlioz formed a linear thread that moved forward in a way that is analogous to the continuous verbal expression (later in Schoenberg became the musical prose).

Things to Consider for Musical Analysis

After learning Berlioz's idiosyncratic style, the following 15 elements become important considerations for musical analysis as stated by C.B. Wilson, professor emeritus of music history at West Virginia University, whom the author is grateful to have taken his class previously:

1. Comparison to the norm.
2. Structure and form.
3. Important structural points, and how they are illuminated or supported.
4. Treatment of pitch and rhythm (melody, harmony, tonality, chord progression, and the relativity of these in the sense of scope and scale).
5. Contrasts, particularly in dynamic and texture.
6. Idiomatic considerations: range, scoring, instrumentation.
7. Intentions of the composer.
8. Impact on the listener.
9. The distinction between flexible interpretation and fixed interpretation.
10. Past and present – how the music was perceived then and now.
11. Occasional music vs. music for posterity ("great" music).

12. Idiomatic considerations: range, scoring, instrumentation, compensatory harmony, heterophony, programmatic usage.
13. Anticipatory procedure.
14. Unusual rhythmic or other features not covered by the above categories.
15. "Berliozisms" element.

Conclusion

Berlioz was a great composer nearly unknown and unloved by European professional musicians in his own day; only a few of his works, including *L'Enfance du Christ* and *Béatrice et Bénédict*, were widely acclaimed. Many critics have claimed that Berlioz could not write melodies, was incapable of writing in the imitation of the human voice, that he was a master of cheap sound effects, including Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who called him "devilishly confused musical idiom;" even his French compatriot, Debussy called him simply a monster.

Not until recently (1950) that music historian Jacques Barzun (1907-2012) wrote the monumental two-volume Berlioz and The Romantic Century that reappraised and acknowledged Berlioz as a genius. In 1969, Colin Davis, a British conductor, made a live complete performance along with a recording of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*; following was his statement after such study,

> "He was a great genius in his way, and his music consists of all kinds of conflicting ideas. He writes these wonderful melodies, and he's capable of great tenderness. At the same time, he can write a Tuba Mirum in the Requiem which blows everybody's brain out. You see, he was a clear-minded, straight-thinking, but very original, gifted man." (Davis, 1997).

Since then, many scholars, especially Peter Bloom and Hugh MacDonald (editor of the New Berlioz Edition, 2006), claimed Berlioz as a neglected genius, perhaps the greatest musical genius of them all.

Berlioz was instinctively revolutionary in impulse. His independence and the idiosyncratic style with which he expressed himself prevented his holding intimate relations with other musicians. He was intensely ambitious for recognition and sought eagerly to make his works known. He turned restlessly from one form of composition to another, tending always to adopt bizarre and extravagant projects. His creative powers were unequal to the tasks he put upon them.

Berlioz made exhaustive studies of the technical capacities of all classes of orchestral instruments. He was able to suggest many extensions in the range of their ordinary use, and he had a marvelous perception of the emotional and pictorial effects for each instrument as described in his treatise. He was ingenious in making unheard-of combinations for special purposes.

Berlioz's creations lie beyond the conventions of his own day. His constant pursuit of a personal and authentically original sound, along with the fashion of constructing musical structures by means of a process of continuous development, vigorously and resoundingly influent the next generation of composers. He was conscious of the fact that the genres written before him with the great traditions of the past had reached the point of exhaustion, hence, he set out a mission of renewal and construction of the genres. Berlioz was steeped in the classical tradition, but attentive to every technical innovation; he embraced all revolutions so long as they prescribed no system of thought. His music unites the qualities of freedom, sincerity, and elegance.

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