Chapter Three

Berlioz and Liszt in the Locker Room

Et, encore, elle, toujours elle, avec son inexplicable sourire…

—Berlioz, Lélio ou Le Retour à la vie

Locker room conversation, in the United States of America, refers to the unelevated discourse that is characteristic of men, even those of educated station, as they shower and dress, after sports, in the room where they have stored their clothes. “Locker” can mean “sleazy” in German, and that is indeed what is at issue: remarks that in French would be “des plaisanteries de bas étage.”

Nicolas Dufetel wrote not long ago that the relationship between Liszt and Wagner, so often discussed, has yet fully to be understood.¹ The same is true, I would claim, of the relationship that began precisely ten years earlier between Liszt and Berlioz, which is the subject of the current chapter. Considering the warm friendship that burgeoned between the two artists on the eve of the first performance of the Symphonie fantastique, and considering the intense affairs of the heart that then preoccupied them both, it is not surprising that these young men should almost immediately speak openly of their private lives. Nonetheless, as points of honor, honorable men keep to themselves the intimate aspects of the person of the woman they love. This would pertain even to those who enjoyed the company of courtesans, in whose worlds privacy was otherwise rare. Indeed, men could be not ashamed but proud of their associations with courtesans: women who might be externally glamorous, if internally unhappy, and who might be intelligent, if not formally schooled—except in the ways of love, of course, which made them excellent teachers of the young. Liszt spoke openly of his relationship with Marie Duplessis, for example, the model for La Dame aux camélias, the
object of the pianist’s attentions in 1847, and the first woman he truly loved, he tells us, who had breathed her last.2

If, in the obviously less dramatic world of sincere and monogamous love, marital or other, a man’s devotion to his lady did indeed incorporate protection of her intimacy, then I think it is reasonable, in historical as well as contemporary terms, to find peculiar if not patently offensive the letter that Berlioz sent to Liszt in the immediate aftermath of his marriage to Harriet Smithson, in which he announced to his younger friend that his wife had been a virgin, “tout ce qu’il y a de plus vierge.”3 This is offensive because it draws attention to defloration, in this case the defloration of a thirty-three-year-old woman, something that is usually left unmentioned, unsaid other than in expressive ellipses, or understated, as in Flaubert’s description of the wedding night of Charles and Emma Bovary—on the morrow of which Charles appears more changed by the experience than Emma herself. It is offensive, in the end, because it unwittingly reduces the history of a woman to the story of her body.4

I am led to pursue this subject—the indelicate confidence that Berlioz shared with Liszt—not only because “the erotic impulse” (the title of a recent book, by Lawrence Dreyfus)5 and the subject of music and Eros are now comfortably out of the closet, but more particularly because of the curious and revelatory concatenation of five events. (1) The first performance of Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique in conjunction with its sequel, Le Retour à la vie, on December 9, 1832. (2) The presence in the audience, on that occasion, of Harriet Smithson, which led to a first in-person encounter with Berlioz, to a stormy courtship, and to a marriage, ten months later, on October 3, 1833. (Also among the public: Berlioz’s former lover, Camille Moke, now Madame Pleyel, who would have occupied one of the ten places reserved in the concert hall for associates of her husband’s piano emporium.)6 (3) The presence in the audience, on that occasion, of Franz Liszt, which led to the renewal of his friendship with Berlioz and to Liszt’s creation of versions of both works on that day’s program—the symphony, whose arrangement was completed in 1833 and published in 1834, and the sequel, whose arrangement—Grande Fantaisie symphonique pour piano et orchestre sur deux themes du Mélologue de Monsieur Berlioz—was completed in 1834, with Berlioz’s explicit help (as we know from jottings in the autograph),7 but published only in 1981, and then with a slightly misleading title—Grande Fantaisie Symphonique über Themen aus Hector Berlioz’ ‘Lélio’—because the name “Lélio” was added to the work only in 1855.8 (4) The presence in the audience, on that occasion, of Marie d’Agoult, who had been aware of Berlioz for some time, and whose attendance at his concert might have been the catalyst for her liaison with
Liszt—rather than the meeting at the home of the Marquise de Le Vayer that took place in that same month, as the Countess recalled in Mémoires set down several decades later. The publication in the Revue de Paris, on that very day, December 9, 1832, of La Marquise, a short story by George Sand that raises issues of male and female sexuality that are highly relevant to a consideration of the relationships among Berlioz and Smithson, Liszt and Marie d’Agoult. In addition to its early feminist evocation of gender difference—here it is not a man who falls in love with an actress, but a woman who falls in love with an actor—this story gives us, as the object of that woman’s irrational love, a man whose name is Lélio, precisely the name that Berlioz later attributed to the artist-hero of the sequel to the Symphonie fantastique.

I am certain that Berlioz read this story, attributed to “Monsieur George Sand,” both because it appeared in the Revue de Paris in the same volume as the first published biography of Berlioz, by his friend Joseph d’Ortigue, who quite specifically, on two occasions, likens Berlioz’s passion for the actress Harriet Smithson to Sand’s heroine’s passion for the actor Lélio; and because d’Ortigue’s manuscript was annotated and corrected by Berlioz himself, as we know from the autograph, which has been preserved. Joseph d’Ortigue was also Liszt’s first biographer, of course, and he writes in that biography that, for Liszt, Berlioz was “une apparition.” No one has commented on the obviously religious overtones of the word, as in “apparition de la vierge Marie,” but such usage is not startling from the pen of the pious d’Ortigue, nor would it be startling if it came from Liszt himself, because the Symphonie fantastique was the most striking piece of modern music that Liszt had ever heard. D’Ortigue was aware that the malady suffered by the protagonist of Berlioz’s symphony—the “mal du siècle” or, as Chateaubriand called it in René, the “vague des passions”—was precisely the same malady from which Liszt suffered in the aftermath of his separation from Caroline de Saint-Cricq.

I need to linger on the amorous obsessions of the two artists because they may have gone beyond conventional attachment and into the realm of clinical disorder. This, in the case of Berlioz, is the argument made by Francesca Brittan, relying upon the work of the early nineteenth-century psychiatrist Dominique Esquirol, in the attempt to illuminate Berlioz’s idée fixe—that is, his anguished two-and-a-half-year pursuit of a woman who would have nothing to do with him, a woman who, given her physically revealing performance of Ophelia and her apparently perfect incarnation of the adulterous Jane Shore, was hardly seen as a saint, and a women who, I might add, was considerably older than the teenager a man like Berlioz might normally
have courted: Camille Moke, Berlioz’s fleeting fiancée during the winter of 1830–1831, for example, was eighteen years old. So, too, was the young woman with whom Berlioz imagined running off to Germany, in August 1833, in the face of Harriet’s continuing reluctance to marry. Berlioz’s uncle Félix Marmion remarked unkindly, on seeing Harriet close up, in February 1833, that she “doesn’t even look young.”14 (Would that we had Harriet’s impression of her suitor’s insensitive and intrusive relative!)

Brittan suggests that Berlioz’s idée fixe was a physiological phenomenon as well as a psychological aberration, a nervous disorder, a kind of delirious monomania.15 It is worthy of note that one of Doctor Esquirol’s case-studies is precisely that of a man compulsively attracted and delusionally attached to an actress who rebuffs his attentions. In fact Liszt was an acquaintance of the very psychiatrist invoked by Brittan: Dominique Esquirol once called upon the pianist to observe a mentally deficient patient with extraordinary musical skills.16 It is highly likely that Liszt reported Berlioz’s obsession to the doctor, for Liszt was obviously aware of Berlioz’s recurring intention, during those tumultuous months of 1833, should he be unable to marry Harriet Smithson, to suffer some “malheur définitif,” as he decorously put it in a letter to Ferdinand Hiller,17 that is to say, to do himself in. The fear of such a desperate act filters through the letters of Berlioz’s family from the spring and summer of 1833, when his sisters were convinced that their brother had lost his mind, when his father wrote to Miss Smithson to say that he would sell off all of his property (his holdings were enormous) rather than risk giving her access to the fortune Berlioz would inherit, and when Berlioz himself, asking to borrow money from a friend, said that without it he might well die.18

Marie d’Agoult was well aware of the close relations between Liszt and Berlioz in the frenetic period that led from the première of the complete Épisode de la vie d’un artiste in December 1832 to the marriage of Berlioz and Smithson in October 1833. In April, Liszt wrote to Marie: “Pauvre Berlioz!… Oh, how I sometimes find myself in total sympathy with him. He is here, right next to me. A few minutes ago he was crying, sobbing in my very arms.”19 A month or so later, Liszt wrote to Marie to tell her that he was withdrawing for a few days to the apartment of his friend Pierre Érard: “Je souffre, j’ai besoin d’être seul,” adding, “Only my mother and Berlioz are permitted to enter.”20 In early August, exasperated by his beloved’s continuing doubts about marriage, Berlioz swallowed a potentially fatal dose of opium before Smithson’s very eyes, causing her reluctantly to promise to marry. This led the composer to take an emetic, which saved his life, as Berlioz tells us in a medically informed letter: he was the son of an opium-using doctor, he
had himself been a medical student for three or four years, he certainly knew
his way around hallucinatory drugs. Liszt became immediately aware of
the incident: “A thousand things are preoccupying me,” he wrote to Marie
in early August, adding straight away: “Berlioz intervenes”—“Berlioz sur-
vient”—which I take to be a reference to his attempted suicide. That Liszt
writes so succinctly is proof that Marie, too, was aware of Berlioz’s plight.

If the private friendship between Berlioz and Liszt turned on the vicissi-
tudes of love, it turned as well, of course, on common interests in music—in
Beethoven and Weber in particular—and in books. Though Berlioz had a
classical education, while Liszt had almost none (“You don’t speak or think
too badly, for a musician,” quipped George Sand), both were voracious
readers: both read Chateaubriand, both admired Victor Hugo, both became
members of his cénacle in and around 1830, both admired Shakespeare and
read the Bard in English and in French. One may logically assume, from
the music they wrote in response to the play, that both were fanatical admir-
ers of *Hamlet*. Berlioz had fallen in love with Smithson in 1827 essentially
because of her incarnation of Ophelia, whose tragic fate, poignantly voiced
and mimed by the Anglo-Irish actress, captured the Frenchman’s imagina-
tion and cultivated his sympathy. His later song, *La Mort d’Ophélie*, which
exists in solo and choral versions with piano and with orchestra, is expressive
and tender in the extreme. As it happens, the first version of this exquisite
work (which is the subject of chapter 7) is dedicated to none other than
Marie d’Agoult.

Curiously enough, Liszt’s comment on Shakespeare’s Ophelia is the oppo-
site of sympathetic—and it is relevant to cite it here, even though it was
penned some years later, after Liszt saw *Hamlet* in Weimar, with the German
actor Bogumil Dawison in the title role. In 1856, Liszt wrote to Agnes Street:

> Dawison clearly resolves in the affirmative the question of whether Hamlet
does or does not love Ophelia. Yes, Ophelia is loved. However, Hamlet, like all
exceptional characters, urgently requires from her the very *wine* of love, and
will not be satisfied by its mere *whey*. He wants to be understood without be-
ing laboriously obliged to explain himself. Thus, it is Ophelia who corresponds
to the notion widely associated with the character of Hamlet: it is *she* whose
mission is thwarted by her inability to love Hamlet as he *absolutely needs* to be
loved, and her madness is nothing more than the *decrescendo* of a feeling whose
inconsistency does not allow her to remain in the world of Hamlet.

One need not be a feminist to find in Liszt’s view of Ophelia the sentiments
of a person who believes that exceptional men deserve exceptional women
capable of fathoming the depth of the sentiments of their consort without that consort having to make an effort to communicate it; a person who believes that if a woman fails to love a man as he desires, even if the discourse of his desire is impenetrable, then it is she who is insufficiently exceptional, impotent, and at fault. Eleanor Perényi, who writes in some detail of Liszt’s sexuality, claims that the famous pianist urged his women “to give up the old relation of slave to master.”

But Liszt’s view of Ophelia falls into that universe of the masculine discourse which Berlioz used, not when he spoke of Ophelia, but when he spoke, I think crassly, of Harriet’s sexual innocence.

The friendship of these two artists was imprinted upon the public’s imagination by the series of concerts that Berlioz gave in the mid-eighteen-thirties, in many of which Liszt was a major participant. The first of these took place on April 2, 1833: this was a benefit for Harriet Smithson, who, one month earlier, had fallen from her carriage and badly fractured her leg. Liszt performed at the concert, along with Chopin, the violist Chrétien Urhan, and the Italian tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini. He would from that moment become a collaborator, performing at Berlioz’s concerts of November 24, 1833, December 22, 1833, December 28, 1834, April 9, 1835, December 18, 1836, and later, on April 25, 1841, and May 4, 1844. Joseph d’Ortigue would see the pair as brothers: “Liszt and Berlioz, two names that march together: the instrument of the one is the piano; the instrument of the other is the orchestra.”

It was between May and August 1833 that Liszt, who had only recently restarted his virtuoso career with recitals at the Salons Dietz on January 19 and at Wauxhall on March 12, made his sterling transcription of the Fantastique: “La Symphonie fantastique sera terminée dimanche soir,” he wrote to Marie d’Agoult on Friday, August 30, 1833; “Say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys in its behalf!” He closes the letter in English—“Good bye, don’t forget me completely”—obviously remembering Berlioz’s frequent habit of saying adieu by misquoting the final words of the ghost in act 1, scene 5 of Hamlet: “Farewell, remember me.” We know he was in Berlioz’s company because the composer was surveying the pianist’s work: on the same day that Liszt wrote to Marie (August 30), Berlioz wrote to a friend: “Liszt has just arranged my symphony for the piano; it is astonishing.” When the work went to the engravers, in the spring of 1834, both Liszt and Berlioz read proof: “The symphony has been engraved; we are correcting the proofs.” In fact they read at least four sets of proofs before Maurice Schlesinger first advertised the work in the Gazette musicale de Paris on November 9, 1834.

After Berlioz’s marriage, which took place on October 3, 1833—with the little-known Robert Cooper and Bartholomew Stritch serving as witnesses
for the bride (the latter first identified in my edition of the Mémoires), Liszt and Jacques Strunz serving as witnesses for the groom (Ferdinand Hiller claimed erroneously that he and Heine were Berlioz’s témoins)—Liszt followed with especial closeness Berlioz’s preparations for the concert of November 24 of that year, another benefit for Harriet, now the composer’s lawfully wedded wife. On November 1, Liszt wrote to Marie with news of the concert and urged her to come: “Vous will try to come, won’t you? The Marquise will come along as well, because there will be no performance of the Symphonie fantastique!” (Marie’s great friend, Catherine Davidoff, Marquise de Gabriac, was obviously no fan of Berlioz’s first symphony.) The next day Liszt wrote again to Marie to advise her that the concert had had to be postponed to a later date: “vous viendrez—de grâce venez—Madame.” After that concert on the 24th, Berlioz and Liszt remained inseparable. Liszt wrote to Marie on or around December 21, 1833: “Our friend Berlioz is still on my back; it’s impossible to continue to write!”

It was presumably at this time—although we have no contemporary documentary evidence, and the autograph is not known—that Liszt set down his quite remarkable meditation on the idée fixe of the Fantastique, the complete title of which, in the first edition, is: L’idée fixe, Andante amoroso pour le piano d’après une mélodie de H. Berlioz. We know that Harriet was deeply moved by the Fantastique—a recollection of the Scène aux champs had her weeping all day long—and one can imagine Liszt playing his Andante amoroso to the loving couple as a kind of present to the actress. I also hear Liszt’s brief fantasy as a mild rebuke to the composer, whose sometimes curious or commonplace diatonic harmonizations—I am thinking in particular of the second phrase and of the conclusion of the idée fixe—become in Liszt’s hands smoothly and gently chromatic. In my view, these subtle alterations of Berlioz’s principal thematic material, which even so celebrated an admirer of Berlioz as Tchaikovsky found “feeble,” may be heard as Liszt’s way of saying, “mon cher Berlioz, you ought to have done it like this.” The Andante amoroso, in other words, would pay tribute to Berlioz for the intensity of his love and at the same time tease him, as friends do, for the banality of the harmony or for the tedium of the end of his tune.

Had they seen less of one another, we would have more correspondence between Berlioz and Liszt and know more of their discussions—of love, marriage, and music. I cannot here review the relations maintained by the two artists over the next twenty-five years, of which most of the details have been often rehearsed. (A useful catalogue may be found at hberlioz.com.) Among the items recently published in a supplement to Berlioz’s Correspondance
générale, we find one that paints those relations in a slightly new light. This is an unpublished letter from Liszt to his secretary, Gaetano Belloni, in which the great pianist, now Kapellmeister in Weimar, expresses to his man in Paris the hope that Berlioz has not misunderstood why he has not systematically undertaken the performance in Germany of the Frenchman’s major works. He has not done so because, until now (January 1852), he had neither the material means to do so nor the “moral authority” (“le crédit moral”) to impose Berlioz’s innovative works upon those whom he calls the idiots and the snobs: the “cuistres,” the “encroutés,” and the “imbéciles.”

Another item that appears in that supplement is a revelatory letter from Berlioz’s uncle and frequent visitor: Félix Marmion was a military officer who was greatly dismayed by Berlioz’s affair with Marie Recio, the singer with whom the composer began a relationship in 1840, when Harriet’s apparently unfounded yet unceasing jealousy led him finally to give that jealousy a raison d’être. Marmion tells us that Berlioz tried but failed to end his extramarital liaison dangereuse, even in the face of what he, Marmion, believed were infidelities on the part of Marie Recio as well. (Of these we have no knowledge.) “I am assured,” writes Marmion to Berlioz’s older sister, “that his friend Liszt, aware of this fatal attraction, has done everything possible to get Hector to see reason, but in vain.” Hector did of course remain with Marie, and married her, seven months after Harriet’s death, in October 1854. He was honor bound to do so, he told his son, with a kind of humility quite different from the hubris that marks the letter to Liszt of October 7, 1833—to which we now return and with which we conclude:

Mon ami, Veux-tu te trouver ce soir chez Hugo à sept heures? Tu sais qu’il doit lire son nouvel ouvrage [Marie Tudor], j’y serai.

Eh bien, avais-je raison de croire la voix secrète de mon cœur? Mon expérience a réussi; oui, à telles enseignes que j’en suis tout brisé d’efforts. Mais à ce soir.

Adieu. H. Berlioz.

[P.S.] Vierge, tout ce qu’il y a de plus vierge.

My friend, will you be going to Hugo’s this evening at 7 o’clock? You know that he intends to read his new play [Marie Tudor]. I shall be there.

Well, was I right to believe the secret voice of my heart? My experiment succeeded; yes, so much so that it has left me completely exhausted. But wait until tonight.

Adieu. H. Berlioz.

[P.S.] A virgin, as pure as the driven snow.
How are we to read this letter? Why, to describe his fatigue, does Berlioz use the poetic figure of “brisé d’efforts,” a phrase found the Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (1830) of Lamartine, whose poetry, Liszt had said in May 1832, was “all around” him. The ironic distancing implied by such quotation would support a reading of the comment, it seems to me, as machismo posturing.

Is it true that Harriet was a virgin? In different cultures and at different times, virginity has meant different things. From time immemorial women have found it necessary to feign not only sexual pleasure, alas, but also virginity—and various devices were available to help them do so. Furthermore, feigning, as acting, I hope I may be permitted to say, was of course Harriet’s profession. But dissimulation, I hasten to add, was also not unknown to Berlioz. As a critic he certainly admitted that he had had at times to say the opposite of what he believed. Furthermore, in April 1830, when he was temporarily able to exorcise his obsession with Smithson and thus prepare the score of the Symphonie fantastique, he claimed that the renunciation resulted from learning certain horrible truths about her—“d’affreuses vérités,” as he puts it—which implies that he was told, and that he accepted at the time, that she was a wanton woman. (After all, she had performed on stage with her breasts partially bared, if the lithographic evidence is to be believed, and in the portrait of Harriet that Peter Raby seems most to admire, she has what a politically incorrect lothario would call “bedroom eyes.”) In short, when it came to “truth,” Berlioz was not always forthright, and not always right. What is clear is that he now wanted Liszt, as well as his friends and family, to believe that Harriet had been chaste—as much for the sake of his own honor as for hers.

What does Berlioz mean by his “experiment”—his “expérience”? This would seem to have to do with the process of defloration, a subject, as I have said, that is usually left unmentioned. In John Cleland’s erotic classic, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, which most people know as Fanny Hill, Fanny eagerly awaits the “promised pleasure” of first intercourse, as well as “the pain of the experiment.” Berlioz may be alluding to what had been a gradual demonstration of the physical act at hand, for Harriet, unlike women of a certain social station, had no ladies in waiting, no servants, and no mother in attendance to prepare her for what was to come. Alternatively, the comment may be read as an invitation to Liszt to peer into the experiment in the manner of a voyeur. Liszt, after all, would use a similarly wry locution when referring to his own recent “experiments,” with Adèle de Laprunarède, as “höhere Stilübungen in der französischen Sprache”—“advanced exercises
in the French manner.” (I am instructed that the phrase implies a distinction between German haste and French patience and variety.)

Be this as it may, Berlioz’s choice of the word *expérience* would seem to be a manifestation of braggadocio, and his exhaustion, the result of having attempted to lead his bride through the thousand-and-one stations of passion and ecstasy.

Finally, why does he make this assertion *to Liszt*? Is it perhaps because the young virtuoso was himself what an American specialist has called a “stud”? To his friend Humbert Ferrand, Berlioz tells of Harriet’s virginity with almost legalistic solemnity: “For my part, let me say, as I would say only to my best friend, and let me swear on my honor, that I found my wife to be as pure and as virginal as it is possible to be.” Here, the tone is defensive. In the note to Liszt, who had obviously had his doubts, the tone is brash. In an article on Berlioz and Liszt, Cécile Reynaud observes that at their first meeting, Berlioz addressed Liszt in the way in which a student might address a professor. Addressing Berlioz’s harmony through his improvisation on the *idée fixe*, Liszt was Berlioz’s professor, although one might wish to add, considering the role of the *idée fixe* in the development of the symphonic poem, that Berlioz acted as Liszt’s professor as well. In the letter that has concerned us here, written *post noctem voluptatis*, Berlioz addressed Liszt man to man with words, almost out of character, that he might well have used… in the locker room.