Berlioz in Time

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In his magisterial *Berlioz and the Romantic Century*, Jacques Barzun spoke of the composer’s first voyage to Germany in 1842–1843 as a “musical mission” designed essentially to substantiate the development of dramatic music “on Shakespearean lines” and to demonstrate his own conception of a new “genre instrumental expressif”—a genre derived from the commanding models now established as classic by the composer of the Ninth Symphony.¹ Barzun’s use of the word “mission” echoes that of Léon Kreutzer, who, concluding his review of the first concert of Berlioz’s new Société Philharmonique de Paris, in 1850, offered this tribute:

If my identity were less humble and my influence more worthy, I would in the name of art address to the Société Philharmonique an expression of profound gratitude. Indeed, others more powerful than I will do so, of that I am quite sure. They will confirm that the creation of this Society marks a milestone in the history of music. They will observe that, as from this day, the battle for progress has been won, that the emancipation of music has arrived, that the spirit of independence has overtaken the reliance upon, and the shackling by, everything that is routine. They will render homage to Monsieur Berlioz and to all of those who have assisted him in accomplishing his important mission.²
Kreutzer and Barzun employ the crucial word to indicate something not religious but rather philosophical, something that relates to the promulgation of not a “faith” but a new aesthetic ideal. One might even wish to call it a “mission civilisatrice” of a musical sort: this would perhaps amuse Berlioz, but I fear it would have the opposite effect upon those of a later day who are aware of the role of that expression in the expansion of French colonialism.

For the voyage to Germany, however, Barzun could have used the word in its more parochial sense of a trip designed for a specific practical purpose. That is the significance of the document I published for the first time in French, some years ago, and which I publish here for the first time in English. Because Berlioz was in fact compensated by the administration to undertake the voyage, not in the form of a supplementary encouragement, as payments to artists were styled, but in the form of the maintaining of his salary at the Conservatoire, where, since February 9, 1839, he had been associate librarian, and where his annual compensation would come to a mere fifteen hundred francs.

Berlioz seems to have written to the Minister of the Interior toward the middle of the month of November 1842 to request a several-month leave of absence during which he would continue to enjoy his regular monthly salary. The man in charge, Charles-Marie Tanneguy Duchâtel, had been Interior Minister from May 12, 1839, to May 1, 1840. He had resumed his post on October 29, 1840, and he would remain in office until the demise of the July Monarchy in the winter of 1848. Berlioz no doubt suggested to him that, on this trip, he would be able to gather information that might be useful to those in the administration who dealt regularly with the fine arts. That, at any rate, is what we conclude from the text of the letter, dated November 28, 1842, which Duchâtel sent to the director of the Conservatoire, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, the newly appointed successor to the eighty-one-year-old Luigi Cherubini, who had resigned on February 4, 1842, and had died, not quite six weeks later, on March 15, 1842:

Monsieur le Directeur,

I have the honor to inform you that I have accorded to Monsieur Berlioz, associate librarian at the Conservatoire, a leave of three months to commence on the first of December of this year. Because Monsieur Berlioz has been charged with procuring information that will be useful to the administration, I have decided that there shall be no interruption in the payment of his salary.

Yours truly…

It needs to be mentioned that Berlioz himself had hoped to assume both Cherubini’s chair at the Académie des Beaux-Arts and, more important,
Cherubini’s post as director of the Conservatoire. The internecine tensions that led to Auber’s selection are not known, but for Berlioz, Auber had operated a kind of shady “sleight of hand”: “You have heard of the ‘escamotage’ of the directorship of the Conservatoire by Auber,” he wrote to his friend and mentor Gaspare Spontini, on March 19, 1842; “I thus have nothing more to report to you on that subject.”4 Be this as it may, this request to take a leave of absence with pay would be the first of many that Berlioz would make during his tenure at the library. As far as I can tell, these requests were always granted, a favor, considering Berlioz’s subsequent stature in the musical world, that speaks well of the artistic understanding of the French administration and in particular of Count Duchâtel, to whom Berlioz would later lament (in a long and emotional letter of February 26, 1844) that he did “not have the time to compose,” and thus that he was doing “practically nothing in the area in which [he] was most capable.”5 We have always assumed that the lack of time Berlioz mentions was due to his obligations as a journalist. But in the library, too, he did have potentially time-consuming duties, as Dominique Hausfater has pointed out: in principle, Berlioz was entrusted with keeping the library catalogue up to date, with maintaining an inventory of the collection and a register of acquisitions and administrative actions, and with supervising the library staff, including the clerks and the copyists. He was not charged with keeping track of circulation, of course, because this was not a lending library: books and scores remained on the premises except in extraordinary circumstances, when permission to borrow could be granted, not by the associate librarian, but only by the librarian-in-chief.6

Although Duchâtel’s experience was primarily in journalism and the law, he was a worldly fellow (his father had been a Napoleonic administrator and his mother, it was rumored, had been a Napoleonic mistress), and was apparently interested in developments in both the sciences and the arts. As Minister of the Interior he was responsible for supporting several missions to England and to the United States to study the new systems of electric telegraphy that were crucial to France’s expanding colonial empire, in particular those of the celebrated American inventor Samuel Morse, who would eventually be awarded the Légion d’honneur by the Emperor Napoléon III. Duchâtel’s interest in the fine arts led to his election to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, on November 21, 1846, as what was known as a “membre libre,” of whom there were ten. This allowed him to attend the sessions and participate in the deliberations of the Academy as an honorary member, but not to vote for or against a “regular” candidate—as Berlioz was and would be in 1839, 1842, 1851, 1853, 1854, and 1856. As a private citizen, Duchâtel
amassed a large collection of paintings and saw to it in his will that some of his *chefs-d’œuvres* be given to the Louvre with the proviso that they be displayed in a room specifically reserved for that purpose.7

Berlioz did have connections to the Ministry of the Interior in the persons of his old friend Stéphen de La Madeleine, for example, who worked there as a “rédacteur-expéditionnaire,”8 a drafter and transmitter of documents, and of course Armand Bertin, editor of the *Journal des débats*, who seems to have intervened in Berlioz’s behalf, at the Ministry, at the time of the composer’s proposed festival for the international industrial exhibition of August 1844. Other friends and acquaintances at the Ministry included Alfred de Musset, librarian, and Baron Taylor, who in October 1838 had been named inspector-general of the various fine-arts organizations which depended for funding upon that branch of the administration.9

We do not know if Count Duchâtel found useful or reacted to any of the observations in the long report that Berlioz would submit to him at the end of 1843, although he did thank the composer for his diligence. On February 14, 1844, in a letter the draft of which has been preserved, the Minister acknowledged receipt in the following terms:

> Monsieur Berlioz,
>
> I have received the report you have made to me on musical institutions in Germany, and on the schools and operatic theaters of that country. I should like to thank you for the enlightened enthusiasm that you have brought to this assignment, and I am especially pleased to have given you this occasion to employ in a way so beneficial to the arts your profound knowledge in this area.
>
> Yours truly, etc….10

Berlioz’s official report to the Minister remained hidden in an archival dossier for well over a century. But another report saw the light relatively soon after the composer’s return to France in early June 1843. This was the series of ten articles, or “letters,” for the *Journal des débats* (published in 1843 on August 3, 20, and 28; September 3, 12, and 23; October 8 and 21; and November 8; and, in 1844, on January 9), in which Berlioz recounted in minute detail the travels in Germany that he would subsequently publish in book form, in July 1844, as the *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*. The publisher was Jules Labitte; the counter-chronological order of the two small volumes (the Italian travels had occurred a dozen years earlier) was characteristic of a man to whom linear logic, when concocting stories, was less important than it was when contriving scores. These ten letters, admittedly self-promotional
but no less brilliantly descriptive, found a third home in the central portion of the Mémoires, after chapter 51.

In my edition of the Mémoires, for ease of reference, I number those letters as subchapters; in Berlioz’s edition, ease of reference, as we shall see in chapter 13, was not a primary concern. In my edition, I also take account of some of the principal differences between the texts as they appear in the book of 1844 and in the Mémoires of 1865. A more detailed study of the three versions of these texts would more closely demonstrate the author’s habits of mind as he revised his prose from the newspaper articles to the mid-career volumes to the composer-in-retirement’s autobiographical memoir. We now have thoroughly annotated editions of Berlioz’s correspondence, books, and criticism. I have not believed that an annotated version of the mid-career publication is necessary—we are speaking about very minor differences indeed—because Berlioz himself, after incorporating the travelogue into the Mémoires, never again thought about the Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie of 1844. Indeed, when preparing the manuscript of the Mémoires, he actually removed small-format printed pages from a copy of the Voyage musical en Allemagne (martyrizing books in this way was more common than you might imagine),11 glued them to the larger sheets used for the autograph text, made corrections and modifications in the margins, and sent the lot, printed and manuscript, to the printers.

The text of the report to the Minister of the Interior, dated December 23, 1843, is thus in no way a draft of what appeared in the Voyage musical en Allemagne. It is rather a condensation of the first nine letters that Berlioz published in the Journal des débats, a condensation for official purposes that leaves out the charming conversations and ironic asides that make Berlioz the writer… Berlioz the writer. It is a condensation set down in haste, Berlioz confesses, and one that lacks not local color but some literary finesse. The twenty-three-page manuscript itself, begun in Berlioz’s chiseled and calligraphic hand (see figure 8.1, below), carries a number of revisions and corrections that in more formal circumstances would have constrained the writer to make a new, fair copy for transmission to the administration. (Because the document was discovered in the national archives, we may be certain that it is the copy that was actually sent to the Ministry.) It opens with reference to the trip he has just made to Germany (“le voyage que je viens de faire”), which would suggest a date of mid-June 1843, since the composer had returned to Paris at the beginning of that month. And yet the date that appears below Berlioz’s signature is that of December 28, 1843 (see figure 8.2).
Figure 8.1. First page of Berlioz's Report to the Minister of the Interior (AnF F²¹ 1282)

Figure 8.2. Last page of Berlioz's Report to the Minister of the Interior (AnF F²¹ 1282)
It may be that the document was not prepared in one fell swoop, that the composer began his draft shortly after returning to Paris, set it aside, then returned to it, in haste, at the end of the year. Haste is suggested in particular by what seems to be the beginning of the end—“Voilà, Monsieur le Ministre, la somme des observations qu’il m’a été, grâce à vous, permis de faire dans ce rapide voyage dans le nord de l’Allemagne” (“Here, then, Monsieur le Ministre, you have the sum total of the observations that, thanks to you, I was able to make during my hurried travels in the northern part of Germany”)—which is followed, surprisingly, and almost as an afterthought, by three further pages of specific comments. The telegraphic style of the latter (difficulty rendered in translation), the many corrections and crossings-out, and even the signature of “H. Berlioz” rather than “Hector Berlioz,” which, on formal occasions the composer usually prefers, suggest to me that Berlioz was writing to a man with whom he felt he had at least something of a personal relationship.

What emerges from this report is Berlioz’s critical but fundamentally positive attitude toward musical conditions in France. This will stand in vivid contrast to the situation that Berlioz observed four and a half years later, on May 26, 1848, when he wrote from London to his friend Louis-Joseph Duc, the architect of the Column of the Bastille, that “you have to have the tricolored flag over your eyes not to see that now, in France, music is dead.” The composer is of course referring to the February Revolution that brought to an end the régime of Louis-Philippe, and that indirectly caused him, in March, to change the title of the newly published *Apothése* from the *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, arranged by Berlioz for voice, chorus, and piano: Thomas Frederick Beale, Berlioz’s London publisher, fearing mention of anything at all that smacked of revolution, refused to print “Composé pour l’inauguration de la colonne de la Bastille,” and “Dédié à M. Duc, architecte de la colonne de la Bastille,” and rather insisted upon “À mon ami Duc,” and “Chant héroïque extrait du final de la *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*.”

Here, in 1843, Berlioz notes that whatever musical conditions may prevail elsewhere, in France, and in particular in Paris, one can do better: “on peut à Paris faire mieux.” In his report, he does point to the advantages offered by the various court orchestras spread throughout the German lands, many of which were of excellent quality, and to the rewards of having chapel masters who were at once performers, composers, and conductors. Indeed, the existence of many small states in the territories of the Holy Roman and Hapsburg Empires was responsible, in large measure, for the region’s famous
musical productivity: numerous courts led to numerous demands for musical services and to numerous creative opportunities for singers, players, and composers. German disunity, Berlioz sensed, was good for music.\textsuperscript{13} The technical remarks he includes in the report (these are more copious in the newspaper accounts) reveal the expertise in instrumentation and orchestration he had lately demonstrated in his treatise on the subject, which he published as a series of sixteen articles for the Revue et Gazette musicale between November 1841 and July 1842, and which he had drafted in book form immediately before leaving for Germany. Indeed, only five days before submitting his report to Count Duchâtel, Berlioz sent two copies of the freshly printed Traité d’instrumentation to Giacomo Meyerbeer and to the Berlin Academy, as we know from his letter to Meyerbeer of December 23, 1843, which tells us, incidentally, that he now felt that the first printing of the treatise (of which he had sent earlier copies to Stephen Heller and Gaspare Spontini) was ready to be put on the market.\textsuperscript{14}

One area in which the Germans were clearly superior to the French, Berlioz is at pains to emphasize, was in the constitution of military bands and orchestras: these employed musicians who were well trained and instruments that in France were generally neglected, especially the tuba, which Berlioz, who did not always embrace the newest wind and brass, now found superior to the ophicleide. He also found the repertory of the German military ensembles less trivial than that of their French counterparts, and thus able to educate a certain public by music of a value unparalleled in France.

Berlioz attributes the German people’s broad understanding of melody and harmony to the development of public and private choral singing that dated back to the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation. He is struck by the musical interest manifest by even those of the lower classes, to whose musical tastes, normally, Berlioz was indifferent. However, after the death of Guillaume-Louis Boquillon-Wilhem, the founder of the Orphéon movement in France and attached, after 1835, to the administration of the city of Paris as a supervisor of music education, Berlioz did attempt, as we saw in chapter 5, to obtain Wilhem’s post of inspector of the singing schools of the capital. This is one of the many posts that, for “political” reasons, Berlioz failed to obtain.

It is a small irony that, in his report, Berlioz singles out for praise the composer Carl Friedrich Zelter and the singing academy of Berlin, for it was that same Zelter who, on June 21, 1829, had written, of the Huit Scènes de Faust which Berlioz sent to Goethe in April of that year (the copy now lies in the archives of the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin), that “certain persons can express
themselves only by snoring or coughing, by spitting or squawking; Monsieur Berlioz seems to belong to their number.”¹⁵ Berlioz never became aware of Zelter’s comments, although he does seem to have been disappointed that Goethe failed to respond to what had been a thoughtful offering. Speaking of Weimar, where Berlioz was moved by the surroundings that breathed the spirit of Goethe and Schiller, and where, on January 25, 1843, he gave a concert that featured the *Symphonie fantastique* and songs with piano and with orchestra, he used in his report to the Minister of the Interior some Zelterian language of his own, saying with brutal honesty that the quality of the chorus there was “execrable” and “impossible to enjoy.”

Berlioz makes special mention of the system of artists’ pensions that was available in the German-speaking lands, a system better organized and more generous than what was available in France, where there was support for certain players and singers employed by the royal theaters and by the Conservatoire, but not for composers. (The reason he does so here is that the Department of the Fine Arts in the eighteen-thirties and forties—whose archives overflow with letters from musicians asking for first pensions or augmentations of earlier ones—functioned under the aegis of the Ministry of the Interior.) And he underlines the security of employment enjoyed by the chapel masters, thanks to the patronage of their employers, noting that those composers need not compose in order to live, they rather need to live in order to compose. (He will emphasize this point in his report from Dresden, on Richard Wagner, as we will see in chapter 9.) That Berlioz excuses himself for not having reported on the conservatories in Germany is a sign that the Minister (who had lately approved the nomination of Auber as director of the Conservatoire in Paris) had explicitly asked him to do so. Berlioz seems likewise to have been asked to seek out singers who might potentially be valuable additions to the vocal stable at the Opéra, in Paris, which every administration since time immemorial had burnished as a beacon of French artistic excellence to be seen from around the world.

Berlioz’s manuscript is formatted in accordance with ministerial decorum: the space between the salutation and the text is large, and one side of the page—usually the left, sometimes the right—is blank (as in figures 8.1 and 8.2). My translation here, as elsewhere in this book, is in no way literal: I have attempted to set down Berlioz’s points in the English he might have written had he been a native speaker living in the twenty-first century. I have included the first names of persons whom Berlioz identifies only by their surnames and have corrected without comment Berlioz’s sometimes phonetic
spelling in order that interested readers, should they so desire, might look elsewhere for further details.

[Paris, December 28, 1843]
À son excellence Monsieur le Ministre de l’Intérieur
Monsieur le Ministre,
You kindly entrusted me with examining the musical institutions of Germany during the excursion that I have just made to that country, which is justly celebrated by dint of the many men of genius whom it has produced.

I should admit at the outset, Monsieur le Ministre, that Germany’s celebrity in this regard, and the currently deplorable state of some of our own institutions devoted to the development of the art of music, had engendered in me certain prejudicial notions in favor of our neighbors across the Rhine, notions that, after my experience on the ground and much reflection, have proven not fully justified.

Germany is the classic land of music; Germany is far superior to France in terms of its musical institutions and in terms of the musical sensibilities of its various peoples: these truths are as unquestionable as they are unquestioned. But it is especially, indeed I should say solely, by the wide dissemination of knowledge about the art of sounds in the country as a whole, and not by the quality but by the prodigious quantity of musicians who inhabit it, that Germany has acquired its superiority. In Paris, one can do better than in any other place in the world, of this I am certain, once we determine how and when we might wisely employ the resources that are buried here in our capital.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what we neither know nor desire. Alas, for all of France, we have only the capital of Paris, as opposed to other foreign countries, where, as in Germany, for example, because of the many political subdivisions of the nation, they have a large number of capitals, of greater or lesser importance, each one of which becomes a kind of center of artistic activity. There is no lesser prince, no grand duke, and no king who does not have his own “chapel,” or musical establishment, for the word “chapel,” in Germany, quite precisely means musical establishment. These chapels, consisting of a more or less great number of singers and instrumentalists, are all placed under the direction of a highly capable musician, almost always a composer of a certain renown. The chapel master is charged with directing the rehearsals and the performances of the main works in the repertory. Consequently, he must possess both the knowledge of a composer and the ability of a conductor. During some twenty-two years, [Gaspare] Spontini stood at the head of the King of Prussia’s chapel, which is now under the direction of [Giacomo] Meyerbeer. The chapel at Hanover is under the direction of [Heinrich] Marschner. [Gaetano] Donizetti is chapel master at Vienna, [Carl Gottlieb] Reissiger and [Richard] Wagner direct the chapel at Dresden. [Felix]
Mendelssohn, who was for many years chapel master at the Gewandhaus, in Leipzig, that grand and magnificent singing academy to which he joined an excellent orchestra, has now been succeeded by [Ferdinand] Hiller. Even the smallest chapels are sometimes directed by eminent composers. For example, the chapel of the prince of Hechingen-Hohenzollern now performs under the direction of [Thomas] Täglichsbeck, whose symphonies have often been successfully performed in Paris by the orchestra at the Conservatoire. And our compatriot [André-Hippolyte] Chélard is charged with the direction of the chapel at Weimar.

Each of these chapel masters is served by a concert master whose responsibilities are to conduct the small-scale operas, to conduct the ballets, and to lead the first violin section when the chapel master himself is conducting the ensemble. The concert master also very usefully serves as the liaison between the conductor and the players, transmitting to the latter the orders and explanations given by the former, demonstrating to the players the desired approach to certain passages, and making certain that all material needs are in place. We have no such analogous situation in Paris. When the associate conductor at the Opéra is not conducting, he neither sits in the violin section of the orchestra nor assists the principal conductor in any way.


The orchestras are for the most part fully staffed, but, except for those of the several large capital cities, they consist of a small number of players and are lacking players of certain instruments that are often required by the modern masters, such as the English horn, the ophicleide, and the harp.

The orchestra of the grand opera in Berlin is simply magnificent, and more richly endowed with string instruments (twenty-eight violins) than even that of the Opéra de Paris. In Berlin, on occasions of particular importance, most of the winds are doubled. A happy result of such doubling of the flutes, oboes, and clarinets is that the mass of the brass instruments becomes thereby softened; the equilibrium of the diverse groups of the orchestra becomes reestablished.

But that is a brilliant exception to the rule. The other orchestras, in Dresden, Leipzig, Weimar, Hanover, Brunswick, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Darmstadt, and even Hamburg, are all of them similar, more or less, in terms of their numbers and make-up. They are comprised of about eight first violins, eight second violins, four violas, four cellos, four double basses, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, and one
timpanist. This is the size of the Mozartian orchestra; these are the forces, that is, that were usually employed by that great master. The violinists and cellists are, generally speaking, technically proficient and excellent musicians. The violas, as in France, are often second-rate violinists; very few of them actually know how to play the viola. The double basses are talented, but not as talented as the Germans believe they are when they suggest that three of their bassists can outperform six of ours. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, six ordinary French double bass players produce an effect that is superior to that of three German double bass players, even when two of those three are the instrumental virtuosos [August] Schmidt and [August] Müller.

The partisans of the “economic” system that consists in measuring the power of an orchestra by measuring the power of the sound produced by certain instrumentalists, and in basing the composition of the ensemble on that calculation, are strangely mistaken in doing so. They forget that the projection of the sound of an orchestra is determined less by the force of any particular player than it is by the relative brilliance of the sonority, the number of unisons, and the number of points of sonic departure. They forget that twenty ordinary violins are always more powerful than a single violin, even one so enormous as to produce a sound equal to that of twenty violins of its kind.

The wind instruments of the German opera theater orchestras are adequate, especially as regards the oboes and clarinets. Less satisfactory are the flutes, the horns, and the trombones. Most of the bassoonists play out of tune, the reason being that the instruments they have at their disposal are of poor quality. Nowhere in Germany does anyone play the flute or the horn as well as they are played in Paris. Nowhere did I encounter a group of wind players in the theater orchestras comparable to those of the Opéra or Théâtre-Italien in Paris.

However, the German military bands are incontestably and immensely superior to ours. Even those of the smaller towns, such as Darmstadt, for example, carry the day against most of our own. In fact, we have no idea of the glorious results the Prince of Prussia has achieved, in this genre, in Berlin.

All of the Prussian regiments have an orchestra composed of a greater or lesser number of wind instruments, and all are under the supervision of a single inspector, Monsieur [Wilhelm Friedrich] Wieprecht, who is responsible for their formation, maintenance, and proper performance. This inspector sees to it that the musicians are furnished with high-quality instruments, that they are seated in their units only after achieving a certain level of expertise, and that they are educated in music and in the technique of their instruments on strictly rational grounds. He also sees to it that the bands, even the smallest ensembles, are harmoniously constituted: that the upper voices are proportionate to the lower voices, and that the middle voices can be heard. Furthermore, he supervises and conducts the rehearsals of the larger ensembles, when, for
certain formal ceremonies, the bands of several different regiments are brought
together.

It was in these circumstances that I saw Wieprecht conducting the united
bands from seven different regiments that formed together a mass of some
three hundred twenty men. Their intonation was irreproachable, their ensemble,
perfect, their effect, tremendous.

The military bands from the northern part of Germany are possessed of
several instruments that our bands have not yet decided to use. These include
the tuba—the king of the low brass instruments in terms of its power, tim-
bre, and range; the cylinder or valved trumpet (the Ventil-Trompeten), and the
small cylinder cornet. The ophicleide is no longer in use. And both because of
the extraordinary difficulty of playing this instrument in tune, and because of
the superior timbre of the tuba that has replaced it, we should no doubt regard
this evolution as a step in the right direction.

One of the further and important responsibilities of the inspector is select-
ing the repertory that the bands are to perform. Wieprecht almost always
makes judicious choices, and thus manages to avoid the miserably insipid
rhapsodies that in France poison our military orchestras and reduce them to
the level of the outfits that play in the cabarets on the outskirts of town. This
is a more serious failing than you might think, because it significantly dimin-
ishes the development of our countrymen’s musical understanding by accus-
toming them to everything that is trivial and vile.

Indeed, if the German people possess elevated musical taste and under-
standing of melodic and harmonic style, the reason surely lies in the lasting
influence of Martin Luther, who introduced polyphonic choral singing into
the divine service, with the voices of all the congregants participating, and
who himself composed many of those dignified and imposing chorales. The
desire to sing and to sing well in the church chorale led to the development of
musical education in the schools, and thus to the extraordinarily wide diffu-
sion of musical sensibilities that I spoke of at the outset of this report. A large
number of the men and women, come to the temple from all classes of society,
hold in their hands hymnals that contain all the words of the religious ser-
vice, the canticles, and the several-voiced chorales. Each congregant reads and
sings in the register that suits him or her the best. The effect of these immense
choirs, formed effortlessly by the uniting of several thousand singers in the
great churches, is of exceptional majesty. This procedure and its ramifications
are due solely to the great leader of the reformation [Martin Luther].

The enjoyment of choral singing on the part of so many Germans has
led them to create an almost unimaginable number of singing schools and
choral societies, to which they have given the name “Liedertafeln.” The lat-
ter consist exclusively of men. They meet, usually in the evening, and, while
seated around long tables, they sing four-part choruses typically composed of
very short stanzas. Women are admitted to these meetings as listeners only. Sometimes five or six wind instruments, horns or bugles, support the voices, but usually the Lieder are sung without accompaniment. These institutions are present even in the most obscure villages of the country.

Amateur singing academies can exist only in the cities. They are composed of a very large number of persons of both sexes, rather good sight-readers, and possessed of well-cultivated voices capable of adequately performing the works composed by masters of the elevated style. Some professional singers are admitted to these academies, but the members are overwhelmingly amateurs belonging to the wealthier classes of society. Before the rehearsals, each member is required to study at home the part that he or she has been assigned, punctually to attend the rehearsals conducted by the chapel master, and every year to pay a small fee designed to cover the cost of the meetings. In other words, rather than being paid, these choristers pay to sing. This explains why it is so easy to compose choruses for the festivals that take place every year in the various German cities. The neighboring towns send to the musical metropolises the singers from their singing academies and the most gifted members of their Liedertafeln. Because the festival programs are selected well in advance, the different groups of singers have more than adequate time to study the parts of the works that comprise them. In this way, when they join together to form a chorus of six hundred or eight hundred or even a thousand voices, they are in need of only two further combined rehearsals in order to perform with all necessary proficiency.

The singing academies of Leipzig and Berlin are the most remarkable ensembles that I encountered. The latter in particular, comprised of almost all of the elite amateur men and women of Berlin’s upper classes, was at one time directed by the celebrated [Karl Friedrich] Zelter, who had brought the group to a level of perfection that the current director, Monsieur [Karl Friedrich] Rungenhagen, has been able to maintain to this day.

However, one would be sadly mistaken to conclude, from what I have just said, that the theater choruses perform at the same high level. For here the situation is reversed: the singers do not pay but are rather paid to sing, which, as concerns the choruses, leads the directors to economize as much as possible. With the exception of the theater at Berlin, which employs a chorus of sixty for regular performances and twice that many for special occasions, all the other German theaters that I visited employ a rather small number of performers. The choruses never number more than forty-five, and rarely reach even that figure. Some of these small choirs are adequate and even rather good; others are very weak indeed: the chorus at Weimar is execrable and impossible to listen to!

At Brunswick, I had to remove from my program a Sanctus [from the Requiem] that had been performed without difficulty in both Paris and
Dresden, because the women of the chorus claimed it was beyond their capabilities. At Darmstadt, in similar circumstances, a chorus, or, more accurately, a song for double men’s chorus, even though rehearsed for some eight days, produced at the concert a vocal disaster that caused me much regret and the conductor much embarrassment.

The problem is that these very small choirs would require, for success, singers far more experienced than the soldiers and workers often employed by the German theater directors. The fewer the voices, the more apparent the problems of intonation and ensemble. And the good voices of certain choristers, blended into a mass of singers whose ability is hardly superior to their own, become themselves highly unpleasant when the ensemble is small, in which case they sound isolated and separated from the group.

The voices of German choral singers are generally fresher and better modulated than those of French choral singers. They are not all good sight-readers, however, far from it—with the exception, again, of those in Berlin, even though the number of good readers in the chorus at the Opéra in Paris is far greater than the number at the theater in Berlin. Still, the quality of the voices of the French singers is inferior.

A system of pensions for artists has been established at all of the German courts, and this is what leads to the assiduity and ardor of those who serve in the musical establishments. Both instrumentalists and singers find that their salaries cover the necessities of their existence, and enjoy a knowledge of a secure future that, for our musicians, is totally lacking. The composer-chapel master is free to imagine and produce his works without fear of financial distress. He does not compose in order to live: the sovereign upon whom he depends allows him rather to live in order to compose. It is thanks to the advantages he was offered by the Court of Saxony that [Carl Maria von] Weber was able to compose Der Freischütz, Oberon, and Euryanthe. The Prince of Esterhazy was the veritable progenitor of Haydn and his innumerable symphonies. Most of the German chapel masters continue to enjoy conditions such as these. And if they do not produce masterpieces, as did their predecessors, it is only because they are lacking in genius or in imagination.

Here, then, Monsieur le Ministre, you have the sum total of the observations that, thanks to you, I was able to make during my hurried travels in the northern part of Germany. I’m afraid that I found no time to report upon even a single conservatory, having gone neither to Prague nor to Vienna. (The conservatory in Berlin is not yet fully organized.) Be that as it may, I would find it difficult to believe, by comparison, that the establishments of this nature that are to be found in the capitals of Austria and Bohemia could hold a candle to our conservatory in Paris—even though our conservatory has yet to reach the level to which it could and should strive to attain.
I must say that I found no particularly outstanding singers among the principal artists of the German opera companies, with the exception of three basses, [Joseph] Reichel, currently in Darmstadt, and [Louis] Bötticher and [August] Zschiesche, in Berlin; and two excellent baritones, [Johann Michael] Wächter, in Dresden, and [Johann Baptist] Pischek, in Frankfurt. Not one of these five actors speaks French. The only tenor who seemed to me to offer something of value is [Joseph Aloys] Tichatschek, in Dresden, although he is not a stylish singer and often sings flat.

Only two sopranos struck me as having real merit, neither of whose names have reached Paris: Mademoiselle [Elisa] Capitain, in Frankfurt, and Mademoiselle [Léopoldine] Tuczek, in Berlin. Despite the fact that her virtues are still extolled in parts of Germany, Madame [Wilhelmine Schroeder-] Devrient’s voice is now worn out, her style of singing, detestable. Mademoiselle [Pauline] Marx, currently in Berlin, studied music and singing in Paris. When I heard her five years ago, she was a young woman of brilliant promise. She has now realized some of that promise, but her voice is fading and I fear that in a few years she will no longer be able to sing.

To resume: there is in Germany an almost total absence of singer-actors of superior ability; most of the opera choruses are mediocre; the singing academies are wonderful; the military bands are magnificent; new compositions of quality are extremely rare; there is a multitude of excellent orchestras of which none is comparable, in any respect whatsoever, to the orchestra of the Conservatoire de Paris; the musical hierarchy is well-conceived and well-respected; a wide swath of the population enjoys a basic musical education; and the political and religious institutions exercise a highly favorable influence on the arts.

These are the things, Monsieur le Ministre, that I have honestly and sincerely observed in Germany. I should like to hope that Your Excellency will find useful or at least interesting the portrait that I have had to paint in haste, but in which I have attempted to represent the model objectively, with neither flattery nor disparagement.

I am, with profound respect, Monsieur le Ministre, your very humble servant,


Between December 1842 and May 1843 Berlioz had visited the cities, some more than once, of Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hechingen, Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Weimar, Leipzig, Dresden, Brunswick, Hamburg, Berlin, Magdeburg, and Hanover. “Here I am, home from my long travels throughout Germany,” he reported to his father, on June 5, 1843:
I am still exhausted, as I would have been even had my efforts been less demanding, because in five months I directed fourteen concerts and forty-three rehearsals. Fortunately, the results of my labors were simply magnificent in terms of my musical reputation, and perfectly satisfactory in terms of my financial gains, which could not under the best of circumstances have been overly great in view of the enormous expenses entailed by such a venture—one without precedent in the history of art. This musical journey created a tremendous stir in the German press and, as a result, in the French, English, and Italian presses as well. A composer traveling across Germany to mount and to direct by himself a series of concerts devoted exclusively to the performance of his own works is something that has simply never before been seen. ¹⁶

Berlioz then added a note characteristic of such communications to his family, suggesting epigrammatically an artistic, financial, and political creed:

If I had been born in Germany, if I were a Saxon, or a Prussian, I would by now have a post guaranteed for life with a salary of ten or twelve thousand francs and a pension that would, after my demise, satisfy the needs of my family… In France, I have… a liberal constitution, whose liberality does not go so far as to take care of those who might bring honor to their country, or to prevent those who might be materially useful to it from dying of starvation. ¹⁷

At this moment, in June 1843, it seems reasonable to conclude that Berlioz was still feeling the loss of his protector, the Duc d’Orléans, Louis-Philippe’s eldest son and the heir to the throne, who had been killed the year before in an accident that deprived the country of a widely admired successor. Because, as we have seen in his report to the Minister of the Interior, signed at the end of the year, Berlioz again voiced a concern for the welfare of the artist, but perhaps less cynically, by accentuating the positive aspects of what he had just observed, and by suggesting that in France, one could, conceivably, do better.

At the head of this chapter, I might have used as an epigraph the fond farewell to Germany that Berlioz appended to the final letter that constituted his Premier Voyage en Allemagne in the series of articles for the Journal des débats and in the Mémoires: “Vale, Germania, alma parens”—“Farewell, Germany, nurturing mother.” Berlioz would have seen that expression as a boy reading with his father the story of Dido and Aeneas, in book 2 of the Aeneid, where Aeneas refers to his mother, Venus, as “alma parens.” He might have said “alma mater,” which for most of us is the more familiar expression. But “parens” refers to a mother or a father: Berlioz was bidding adieu not
to some sort of metaphorical mother, as though he were in some sense suggesting that he would have wished to have been born a German (a notion parroted by some biographers, partly on the basis of the letter cited above, but one that is in my mind absurd), he was rather bidding adieu to “la terre classique de la musique,” as he put it at the opening of the report we have translated here (“the motherland of classical music,” we might wish to say today), and expressing the hope, I think, that something of what he had found on the far side of the Rhine—should his report have some influence on the powerful Minister of the Interior who commissioned it, as we learn here for the first time—might make its way back to Paris.