Berlioz in Time
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He was slender and, in the images we have, seems to have been concerned about his appearance, being well if not always stylishly dressed. But he had few of the attributes that Baudelaire famously attributed to the “dandy,” in particular that “air of frigidity that results from his unshakeable resolve never ever to be moved,” for Berlioz was nothing if not passionately demonstrative of his likes and dislikes.¹ Nor did he possess the family income enjoyed by many members of the advantaged class. But when, in a moment of sobriety during a period of woe, he wrote to his friend Humbert Ferrand, on June 12, 1833, that “my life is a novel that greatly interests me,”² he was embodying the dandy’s characteristically defensive psychological strategy as it was later described by Oscar Wilde in chapter 9 of The Picture of Dorian Gray: “To become the spectator of one’s own life […] is to escape the suffering of life.”³

In his account of himself, what we might have liked to discover is… sex. Not the undressed reality, not the inconsiderate revelation, but perhaps the confessional intimation, the confidential admission of what is being withheld. What we do discover, and in spades, is love. And humor. And truthfulness, elegance, magnanimity, modesty, brilliance, perceptiveness about himself and others, and countless further virtues that Jacques Barzun well catalogued in his great book of many years ago.⁴ But is it not curious that the Mémoires—of a man born in the same year as the creator of Carmen, of a man close to such connoisseurs of women as Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, and Alexandre Dumas père and fils, of a man on intimate terms with

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the great séducteur who was Franz Liszt—should remain almost speechless in the theaters of eroticism and lust?

Missing

That Berlioz was a man of passion there is no doubt. That he chose to portray himself absent the tones of the flesh speaks to... chastity? diffidence? discomfiture? The right word, I think, is discretion. Like his music, which can be tempestuous, asymmetrical, unpredictable, but never unpremeditated, Berlioz’s Mémoires—enthusiastic, selective, heterogeneous—always remain composed. They are a counterpoint of sound and silence. “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it,” quipped John Cage in a poem Berlioz might have liked. Yes, Berlioz does refer to “the frenzied enthusiasm of the whores” in his famous description of Paris in the immediate aftermath of the July Revolution. Yes, he does give a recipe to awaken the desires of Italian chamber maids—“a melancholy expression and white trousers”—in a comment on the life of the prize winner in Rome. And yes, as we observed in chapter 3, he does mention his wife’s virginity, to Liszt, in the immediate aftermath of his long-delayed wedding to Harriet Smithson. But of Berlioz’s indulgence with an inamorata in Nice, which put an end to an unnecessary fidelity to an unworthy fiancée, of his liaisons in London, which caused Edouard Silas to diagnose the composer with “petticoat fever,” and of his affairs with chorus girls—one whom fate had thrown into his arms when, he told Humbert Ferrand, in frustration over Harriet Smithson’s hesitancy to marry, he planned abruptly to leave Paris for Berlin; one whom he took as a mistress sometime after the first performance of the Requiem in 1837 (if my suspicion is correct about the identity of the “Mademoiselle Martin” in the chorus—Marie Geneviève Martin, the daughter of Joseph Martin, would at that time have used her father’s surname before adopting the stage names of Marie Willès and Marie Recio); one whom he pursued in Saint Petersburg, in the spring of 1847, when his love of love got the better of him—of these women, in the Mémoires, we hear little or nothing at all.

Much more of importance—to the life, to the work—is simply left out. A recent scholarly biography of Beethoven opens with “The Death of Beethoven’s Mother,” taking the event as one of far-reaching consequence. The death of Berlioz’s mother, and for that matter the death at nineteen of his younger brother, must have affected the mature composer, but the former, in the Mémoires, is mentioned only in passing; the latter is mentioned nowhere.
at all. What Berlioz does offer in the book that ensures his lasting literary reputation is a series of episodes and anecdotes, observations and assessments, that he knew would act to shape the future’s memory and knowledge of the man he was and hoped to be. This objective, usually unspoken, is one most autobiographers share. Berlioz went so far as to articulate it, at least indirectly, by seeing to it that the book was printed—precisely as he had written it—before and not after his death.

The Mémoires have been much written about. They are aptly seen—for he was a critic, an arbiter of taste, a conductor of opinion—as the composer’s ultimate effort to shape his legacy. They are frequently quoted for their delightfully ironic takes on French and European musical life in the romantic era. Their author was usually able to convey the image of what he saw along with an awareness of the lens through which he saw it. Still, certain facts need amplification, certain questions and themes need more air. Such are the goals of this chapter.

Particulars

Writing to his sister of his arduous work on Les Troyens, Berlioz explains that his musical identity is quite different from his identity as her brother: “Le moi musicien est bien différent du moi que tu connais.”

The title of this chapter attempts to put distance between the author of the Mémoires d’Hector Berlioz, his “moi écrivain,” and the subject of that book. Serving as it has for one hundred fifty years as a primary source for the particulars of his life, Berlioz’s final masterpiece is nonetheless best regarded as a work of art. Facts it contains, of course, most of them accurate. But more essential truths about the man and the musician emerge from the means he employs to spin the tales he wishes to tell. Memories (and thus mémoires) transform reality, as Berlioz knew and did not fear. He trusted his extraordinary memory because the reality he was after did not really depend on exact numbers and particular dates.

The particulars of the printing of the book, generally known for years, were not set down with the kind of precision that modern scholarship requires until the publication of my edition in 2019. As most people know it, this is the work of which we speak:

MÉMOIRES / DE / HECTOR BERLIOZ / MEMBRE DE L’INSTITUT DE FRANCE / COMPRENANT / SES VOYAGES EN ITALIE, EN ALLEMAGNE,
This is the title of the book as it was issued approximately twelve months after the composer’s death, in March 1870, at a price of twelve francs, by the firm of Michel Lévy frères, the still prominent Parisian publishers now styled Calmann-Lévy. Michel Lévy, Calmann’s younger brother, with whom Berlioz had had cordial business relations since 1852, when he brought out Les Soirées de l’orchestre, had in fact suggested to Berlioz, in 1855, when he learned of their existence, that his firm be charged with the publication of the Mémoires. Indeed, on May 10, 1855, Berlioz told Franz Liszt, at the time in possession of the manuscript, that in the event of his death, Liszt should arrange publication with Michel Lévy, “who proposed it.”

Lévy’s title emphasizes three points: first, Berlioz’s identity as a member of the Institut de France—an institution he had frequently mocked but profoundly appreciated when he finally joined its ranks in 1856; second, the importance of his travels abroad—which, representative of the always popular literary genre of the voyage or travel narrative, provide the content of at least thirty-five of the book’s seventy-nine chapters (the latter number arrived at by this editor, not by the author, who was unfussy about such things as chapter numbers); third, the portrait of the artist—the work of François-Marie-Louis-Alexandre Godinet de Villecholle, a photographer of some importance in the early era of photographic portraiture, who was known simply as Franck. Berlioz sat for this portrait at some point after August 15, 1864—as we gather from the rosette of Officier de la Légion d’honneur in his lapel, awarded to him on that date, another honor, as correspondence recently published suggests, of which he was understandably quite proud—and before the book was finally produced, in the spring of 1865.

When the book was first advertised, in Le Ménestrel of March 27, 1870, Lévy added a phrase to the title: Mémoires d’Hector Berlioz / comprenant: / ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie / et en Angleterre (1803–1865) / Souvenirs, Impressions, Anecdotes / Un beau volume grand in-8°, 12 fr. (envoi franco) / avec portrait de l’auteur. I cannot discover if “Souvenirs, Impressions, Anecdotes,” which we find nowhere else, helped early sales. In fact sales, and the impact of the book as a whole, were immediately compromised by the clouds of war. Four months after the volume became available for purchase, trickery on the part of Otto von Bismarck and overconfidence on the part of
Napoléon III led to the outbreak, in July, of a ten-month conflict that would prove disastrous for both the Emperor and for the nation of France.

The front wrapper of the book as Berlioz sent it to the printers in 1865 reads as follows:

*MÉMOIRES / D’HECTOR BERLIOZ / MEMBRE DE L’INSTITUT DE FRANCE / CORRESPONDANT / DE L’ACADÉMIE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERLIN, DE CELLE DE SAINTE-CÉCILE DE ROME / OFFICIER DE LA LÉGION D’HONNEUR / CHEVALIER DE PLUSIEURS ORDRES ÉTRANGERS, ETC., ETC. / PARIS / CHEZ TOUS LES LIBRAIRES / MDCCCLXV*

Here we find attention drawn, not to the travels, but to the tributes of which the mature composer was a frequent recipient. (He notes his honorary memberships in musical organizations in Berlin and Rome; he could also have included those in Grenoble, Hechingen, Leipzig, London, Rio de Janeiro, Rotterdam, Saint Petersburg, Stuttgart, and Vienna.) As half-title, in that 1865 publication, we find:

*MÉMOIRES / D’HECTOR BERLIOZ / DE 1803 À 1865 / ET SES VOYAGES EN ITALIE, EN ALLEMAGNE, EN RUSSIE ET EN ANGLETERRE / ÉCRITS PAR LUI-MÊME*

Apart from “d’Hector”—which is correct (the *h* of Hector, like the *h* of other Latinate names, *is* *muët*, and requires elision), and which differs from the “de Hector” that results uniquely from a later designer’s time-honored decision to set the preposition on a separate line—what we notice, what was removed from the publication in 1870, are the words *écrits par lui-même*—“written by himself.” Berlioz was too careful a writer to set down a silly tautology; he rather wished doubly to emphasize the fact that no other cook had spoiled the stew. The locution was conventional: the *Mémoires de Voltaire, écrits par lui-même* went through dozens of editions in the mid-nineteenth century; Alexandre Dumas, in 1849–1850, edited the *Mémoires de Talma, écrits par lui-même*; and Jules Michelet, in 1854, published the *Mémoires de Luther, écrits par lui-même*. What may have sparked Berlioz’s use of the expression was the publication, in 1844, of the *Mémoires de Benvenuto Cellini, écrits par lui-même*, which appeared from Jules Labitte, the publishers in that very year of Berlioz’s *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie*. In 1903, when J. M. Dent brought out Katharine Boult’s abridged English translation of the *Mémoires*, they, too, used the title of *The Life of Hector Berlioz, as written by himself*. The curious absence of “écrits par lui-même” on the outer wrapper
of Berlioz’s 1865 book led me to adopt as the title of my own edition the wording of Berlioz’s half-title cited above. For this editorial decision, I was debunked by the distinguished German Berliozian Klaus Kohrs.¹⁴

Berlioz’s 1865 “edition” is technically the first printing of the volume that Berlioz himself had produced, privately, by a nearby print shop. In fact, as we learn from slight differences among the three copies of the 1865 book now preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, there were several tirages (impressions) of the original text, something that was perfectly normal, since first impressions served as proofs. (The same process may be observed in the case of the Grand Traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes: the first impressions were made in 1843, the definitive impressions in 1844. To which year should we assign the treatise?) It may be that what we call the half-title (found on p. [3] of the pristine copy in the Macnutt Collection, at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) was originally set down for the outer wrapper and only later removed to an inner page. The title page of that copy, on p. [5], has a text that is identical to that of the outer wrapper but with the date marked as “1865,” not “MDCCCLXV.” Here, as at the heads of certain chapters, Berlioz hesitated between using Roman and Arabic numerals. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay on Self-Reliance, of 1841 (seven years before Berlioz began to set down the Mémoires), wrote famously that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” The composer would agree: consistency, foolish or other, was clearly less important to Berlioz than it is to the prose mavens of the present.

This first printing, of some twelve hundred copies, was set in type by compositors at the Imprimerie Valée in the rue Bréda—a short walk from Berlioz’s domicile in the rue de Calais—at a cost, he told his son Louis on July 18, 1865, of forty-eight hundred francs.¹⁵ It was the author’s intention, we know, to keep all twelve hundred volumes in his office in the library at the Conservatoire until his death. In fact, he was unable to resist sending copies to various members of his family and friends, first among them Estelle Fornier, who, Berlioz tells us, was his first and last love. Others who appear to have received the first printing include Estelle’s daughter-in-law, Suzanne Fornier, whom Berlioz came to know and admire; the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, Berlioz’s confidante during the years around Les Troyens; Humbert Ferrand, Berlioz’s oldest and dearest friend; the Grand-Duchess Yelena Pavlovna, who persuaded Berlioz to make his second and final voyage to Russia; Ernest Reyer, Berlioz’s colleague and successor at the Journal des débats; and a number of others whom I identify in my edition.¹⁶
It had been his earlier plan, we are entitled to presume, that the Mémoires be published posthumously under the supervision of his son: as early as May 10, 1858, Berlioz explained to his sister Adèle that, for safekeeping, he was about to send the autograph of the book to her husband, Marc Suat, and that he anticipated bequeathing it to his son, Louis, with the request that Louis publish all “three volumes” as is (“tels qu’ils sont”), with no modification whatsoever.\textsuperscript{17} Nine years later, in a hospital in Havana, which Caribbean port of call, as a marine captain, he had come to know well, Louis Berlioz died of the yellow fever, shortly before his thirty-third birthday, on June 5, 1867. In the wake of the tragedy, which nearly broke his will to live, Berlioz wrote out a last will and testament urging his heirs and executors to bring out the Mémoires—now printed and stockpiled in his office—“by selling the rights to only the first [extant] edition, or by selling the rights to the work in their entirety, to a bookseller in Paris: Monsieur Michel Lévy, or Monsieur Hachette, or someone else.”\textsuperscript{18}

It is curious that Berlioz mentions Louis Hachette, who founded his publishing house in 1846 and who was, by the eighteen-sixties, one of the major publishers of the capital; perhaps he did so because, as one who liked to take the train, Berlioz was aware of Hachette’s celebrity as the founder of a highly successful chain of railroad-station bookstores. It was nonetheless with Michel Lévy frères that, on January 31, 1870, the representatives of Berlioz’s family—Édouard Alexandre, the executor of the composer’s estate, and Maurice-Edmond Masson, the notary acting in behalf of the heirs—signed the contract that gave to those publishers the rights in their entirety to the Mémoires. In fact, the contract, for six thousand francs, gave to Michel Lévy frères the rights to all of Berlioz’s published writings (“tous les volumes et feuilletons publiés par Hector Berlioz”), demonstrating the publishers’ long-term plan to enjoy the benefits of Berlioz’s literary œuvres complètes, including Les Soirées de l’orchestre, Lévy’s first transaction with Berlioz, of 1852. In 1870, however, Michel Lévy frères contented themselves with issuing only the Mémoires: this they did by taking possession of the copies of the book that Berlioz had stored away, by removing Berlioz’s title page and replacing it with one of their own, and by putting the volume on sale in March, a full year after the composer’s death—a delay that, for Ernest Reyer, was unconscionable.\textsuperscript{19} Oddly enough, Lévy included at the back of the book the same printed errata that Berlioz had had inserted in the summer of 1865. Only in 1878, when they reset the text in two volumes, did Michel Lévy frères incorporate into the main text the errata noted by Berlioz himself. Calmann-Lévy continued to advertise the one-volume publication from time to time,
but the two-volume set became the standard edition. In the Berlioz dossiers of the publisher’s archives, which I visited in 1994, we find the print runs of those two volumes as follows: March 1878 (1,500); May 1881 (1,000); March 1887 (1,000); September 1896 (1,000); February 1904 (1,000); March 1919 (500); June 1921 (1,000); June 1926 (750); November 1930 (1,000). A note tells us that the book went out of print after 1938. (The original two-volume edition is available online.) The first modern edition, in one volume, was published in Paris by Flammarion in 1991, with learned editorial commentary and notes by Pierre Citron. I am guilty of presenting the first “critical” edition—based on all extant manuscript and printed sources, showing variants, and freighted with copious annotations and a lengthy introduction—which was published in Paris, by J. Vrin, in 2019.

In his last will and testament, Berlioz stipulated that a German translation be negotiated with the Leipzig publishers Gustav Heinze, who in 1863–1864 had brought out Richard Pohl’s long-delayed translations of Berlioz’s *Les Soirées de l’orchestre*, *Les Grotesques de la musique*, and *À travers chants* in a four-volume *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Heinze furthermore brought out Alfred Dörffel’s translation of the *Traité d’instrumentation*, in 1864, and, in 1866, a piano-vocal score of Gluck’s *Orphée* that conforms to the version Berlioz prepared in 1859 for the Théâtre-Lyrique.) In keeping with his lifelong desire to publish what he wrote *as he wrote it*, Berlioz insists that the translation of the *Mémoires* not be undertaken by Pohl, whose volumes “fourmillent de contre-sens”—“crawl with absurdities”—as Berlioz, who did not speak German, seems to have learned shortly after their publication. As early as 1855, Pohl had told Berlioz that he would be happy to translate the *Mémoires*, but apart from publishing excerpts in translation, he never completed the task. Fearful of Pohl’s limitations, Berlioz told Liszt that the *Mémoires* were saturated with words, allusions, and locutions that would be utterly unintelligible to his German friend, and asked that Liszt explain them to the would-be translator. In the will, Berlioz rather urges that the translation be undertaken by the sister of the man who had been his most faithful German translator, Peter Cornelius. Now, Cornelius had two sisters, Auguste and Susanne, but in view of her subsequent publication of a series of excerpts from the *Mémoires*, Auguste Cornelius would seem to be the sister Berlioz had in mind. The first complete German translation, by Elly Ellès, was not published until 1903, when the first of ten volumes of Berlioz’s *Literarische Werke* appeared in Leipzig, from Breitkopf und Härtel, in a series completed in 1912. A second translation, by Hans Scholz, was published in 1914, in Munich, by C. H. Beck. Of the latter, my colleague Gunther Braam
issued a modern edition, in 2007, with comprehensive notes and commentary that are elsewhere unavailable.\textsuperscript{23}

The prepublication story of the Mémoires, the composition and recomposition of texts old and new, is equally complex and, for those who feed on such facts, fascinating. Dating the pieces of the puzzle is no easy matter: some chapters are dated with precision; others were written and revised at moments we cannot specify. Only for chapters 2, 4–31, 54, 57, and [62], in whole or in part, do we have autograph manuscripts. The number in square brackets represents my editorial numbering of the final part of the book, which includes the Post-Scriptum [60], the Postface [61], and the Voyage en Dauphiné [62]. For ease of reference, I have also numbered (in editorial brackets) the separate letters that comprise Berlioz’s voyages musicaux: in today’s world, Berlioz’s charming habit of numbering some sections and only naming others is, to me, disconcerting, although I recognize that others more diplomatic than I think that we ought to allow the original text to stand untouched. In the Traité d’orchestration, Berlioz numbered the first six chapters and left the numbering of the next sixty or so to us. When he published excerpts from the Mémoires in Le Monde illustré, Berlioz included under “chapter 55” bits from four different chapters of the actual book. One wonders if this casual attitude is an overblown reaction to the maniacal orderliness of his nemesis, Cherubini, who, in a surprising portrait of the old man by Berlioz’s young friend Ferdinand Hiller, is said to have numbered even his handkerchiefs!\textsuperscript{24}

For many chapters of the Mémoires, we have versions printed in the daily, weekly, and monthly press. These sources, in addition to the publication of the Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie, in 1844, invite the gathering of significant variants. On January 24, 1854, Berlioz told Liszt that he had not sent him the autograph manuscript of the Mémoires because he “did not yet have a copy of this voluminous manuscript.”\textsuperscript{25} That copy, if it was actually made, would, with the variants we have, help to provide better answers to the questions of precisely What was written When.

When reusing previously published material, Berlioz’s usual procedure—with the important exception of the Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie—was to copy the text into the autograph manuscript of the Mémoires, and to revise as he carried out what was otherwise a mechanical process. This may be seen in a striking way in chapter 24, where, in the autograph, we find the text of the anecdote first published in the Journal des débats of October 7, 1846: “Le Droit de jouer en fa dans une symphonie en re” (“The Right to Play in F in a Symphony in D”). Readers familiar with Berlioz’s books will
recognize this as the title of the first regular chapter of *Les Grotesques de la musique*. Berlioz originally intended to include the anecdote in the *Mémoires*; he changed his mind in late 1858 or early 1859 when assembling materials for *Les Grotesques*, which appeared in March 1859. We cannot be certain, because we do not possess autographs for all chapters of the *Mémoires*, but it is reasonable to assume that other chapters of *Les Grotesques* were likewise selected from texts at first designed for inclusion in what became Berlioz’s ultimate book.

Recopying is always inexact; the “scribal errors” that mesmerize musicologists are not limited to the *lapsus memoriae* of medieval monks. When reusing material from his *voyages musicaux*, however, Berlioz tried to minimize the problem by pasting pages from the earlier publication onto the larger pages of the manuscript, as I mentioned in chapter 8, and by making marginal corrections by hand. It is almost tautological to say that the small changes we observe among the versions of the chapters of the *Mémoires* give evidence of Berlioz’s lifelong concern for the melody and pace of his prose.

**Secrets**

We know that Berlioz wished to cast a veil of secrecy over the existence of his *Mémoires*. The day before he sent the text to Liszt, May 21, 1855, he told his friend to acknowledge receipt of only the *package*, not the *manuscript*: “I will know what that means.”²⁶ Three years later, in May 1858, he told his sister Adèle, with whom his second wife was in occasional contact, that in her letters she should *never* speak of the *Mémoires*—“*ne me parle jamais de cela dans tes lettres.*”²⁷ And yet excerpts from the book had already begun to appear in *Le Monde illustré*: the first of thirty-five selections came out on February 13, 1858, the last, on September 10, 1859. The existence of Berlioz’s *Mémoires* was thus known to all with an interest in music.

Earlier, excerpts from what in the *Mémoires* became the *Voyage en Russie* were published in the monthly *Magasin des demoiselles*, from November 25, 1855, to April 25, 1856, although the latter articles, which I shall mention below, were not identified as constituting parts of the author’s autobiography. Years earlier, however, when *Les Soirées de l’orchestre* went on sale, in late November 1852, the publishers did include an explanatory note at the foot of the first page of *Le Premier Opéra*, the tale recounted in the first soirée. Here we learn that that story was originally published in the *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie* (of 1844), that that book was out of print, and that
the author had refused to permit a second edition because “all of the autobiographical material of this voyage” would be “used and completed by him in another, more important book” upon which he was “currently at work.” It would not have taken a rocket scientist to discern that the “more important book” was an autobiography. Furthermore, when Berlioz’s even earlier communication to John Ella of May 15, 1852, regarding the mysterious composition of La Fuite en Égypte, was published in The Musical Union, on May 18, 1852, and reprinted in Le Ménestrel on May 30, 1852, the editor announced that that boutade (explaining Berlioz’s proclamation of La Fuite as a product of a renaissance composer) was “a page torn from his previous life, a page borrowed from his future Mémoires.” In the end, this “page” appeared, not in Mémoires but, like “Le Droit de jouer en fa,” in Les Grotesques de la musique. Still, already in the spring of 1852, the secret existence of the Mémoires was not really a secret at all.

In chapter 51 [5], the fifth letter of the first Voyage musical en Allemagne that bisects the Mémoires, Berlioz speaks in detail of the concert he gave in Dresden on February 10, 1843. After praising the accomplished singing of Joseph Tichatschek, the great tenor who would create the roles of Rienzi and Tannhäuser, Berlioz tells of the difficulties he had in finding a proper singer for “Entre l’amour et le devoir,” Teresa’s cavatina from the premier tableau of Benvenuto Cellini: Maschinka Schubert came to the rescue and performed admirably. In the original version of this chapter, which appeared in the Journal des débats on September 12, 1843, we read—between the comment on Tichatschek and the comment on Cellini—another sentence: “Mademoiselle Recio, who happened to be in Dresden at the time, very graciously also consented to sing two romances with orchestra [Le Jeune Pâtre breton and La Belle voyageuse], for which the public gallantly paid her tribute.” This sentence also appears in Berlioz’s 1844 book, the Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie. By the time of the Mémoires, when the woman who “happened to be in Dresden” had become his second wife, Berlioz preferred entirely to exclude what had earlier been a playful deception.

The secrecy mentioned above is usually seen as designed to prevent Marie from learning of the existence of the book. In my view, this secrecy—which we also find in the letters that encompass the gestation of Les Troyens, and which is a natural product of any artist’s fear that the creative fire might be extinguished by the light of day—was designed rather more to prevent Marie from becoming exaggeratedly desirous of reading it. The female protagonists whose stories structure so much of the text—Estelle Dubeuf, who inspired the tales of his youth and old age; Harriet Smithson, who inflamed
his passion for Shakespeare—left little place for Berlioz’s second wife. Marie was practical: she became Berlioz’s “homme d’affaires,” or business manager, at a time when it was important that he have one; yet, like Minna Wagner, Marie was criticized, with stereotypical misogyny, for being a hindrance to the “master.”

Marie was also musically educated: the Dresden audience’s “galant” applause rewarded singing that was perhaps unexceptional but certainly not unprofessional. I have elsewhere defended Marie Recio against the negative press she has had for generations.

She was present at the creation of Les Nuits d’été, as we have seen in chapter 6, and, at the beginning of her promising career as Marie Willès, she may well have acted as the composer’s muse. Still, her faithful companionship, which surely included her love of travel and adventure, never elicited from Berlioz the poetic prose in which he composed the tales of love and adventure that make up the Mémoires. Marie would have resented, not the book’s emotional account of Estelle in her teens and Harriet in her twenties, but the absence of any such page devoted to her. How I would love to discover Les Mémoires de Marie Recio, écrits par elle-même!

Politics

Milan Kundera, in Le Rideau, a collection of essays, writes that there are now so many writers at work that literature itself is committing a kind of suicide. Only literature that is essential should be published. He goes on:

But there are not only authors, hundreds, thousands of authors, there are also scholars, armies of scholars, who, guided by some opposite principle, accumulate everything they can possibly find in order to present the Totality, their supreme goal. The Totality, that is, an additional mountain of drafts, of crossed-out paragraphs, of chapters rejected by the author but published by the scholars in editions called “critical” under the perfidious name of “variants”—which means, if words still have meaning, that everything written by the author would be valuable and would be equally approved by him.

Here Kundera, almost always right, is magnificently wrong. Few scholars take the list of readings for das Ding an sich. And if space is not an issue—it is in this book but not in every book—then why not show what we can of the compositional process?

In chapter 51 of the Mémoires, in Berlioz’s account of his encounter in Dresden with Richard Wagner, the Frenchman admires the German
composer, who was ten years his junior, but reserves his keenest accolade for
the King of Saxony, who has munificently ensured the existence of a deserv-
ing artist of “précieuses facultés.” In the original version of this text, the fol-
lowing sentence occurs after those two words: “Richard Wagner, above and
beyond his dual literary and musical talents, is also a gifted conductor. I saw
him direct his operas with uncommon energy and precision.”

For Berlioz, in 1843, Wagner was not yet Wagner. But in the eighteen-fifties and -sixties,
when Berlioz was revisiting and revising the Mémoires, Wagner’s star was ris-
ing in ways that neither man could have predicted: Berlioz’s deletion of that
sentence—Milan Kundera’s vilification of variants to the contrary notwithstanding—suggests in a small way the heat of competition; it suggests the
politics of art.

At the end of chapter 8, Berlioz interrupts the narrative of his youth in
order to express revulsion over the consequences of the 1848 revolution in
Paris, which include the suicide of his once wealthy and lately ruined friend,
Augustin de Pons, the man who, in July 1825, had lent him twenty-five
hundred francs to cover the cost of the performance of the Messe solennelle.
That sad turn of events leads Berlioz to lament: “Oh! malheureux! pauvres
abandonnés artistes! République de crocheteurs et de chiffonniers!”—“Oh,
unhappy, wretched, abandoned artists! [Damn this] republic of pickpock-
ets and scandalmongers!” Presumably because of their potentially inflamma-
tory nature, Berlioz or his editor removed these words, and other comments
regarding Paris in the aftermath of the June days, before the text appeared,
on November 6, 1858, in Le Monde illustré. In fact the aftermath of the June
days fills the pages of Berlioz’s writings from 1848, especially the Voyage musi-
cal en France—which he might have included in the Mémoires but eventually
transferred to Les Grotesques de la musique—and two lesser-known tirades
on the droit des pauvres, “that tax on pleasure for the benefit of the poor”
against which Berlioz railed for decades, and on the impoverished state of the
art of music in France.

The Mémoires might, in other words, have been an
even more politically charged book.

But politics was not the point. Indeed, it is pleasant to mention one
moment in the Mémoires in which, my overemphasis on Berlioz’s antirepub-
licanism notwithstanding, the composer sets down what is a non-negative
remark about the 1848 government, on the page he devoted to Pierre-Jules
Hetzel, the celebrated publisher of Balzac, Hugo, and George Sand, who
served in the ministry of foreign affairs during the Cavaignac administration
(June–December 1848). On the eve of the composer’s departure for Russia,
in late March 1847, Hetzel mentioned the cost of such a trip to Berlioz and
offered him a gift, or a loan, of a thousand francs, hoping in return to receive from Berlioz a piece for his new *Revue comique à l’usage des gens sérieux*. Introducing this anecdote in chapter 54 of the *Mémoires*, Berlioz notes in passing, and without a sneer, that Hetzel played a “very honorable role in the republican government.” The Cavaignac government (whose foreign minister was Alphonse de Lamartine) is remembered for its violent suppression, in June 1848, of the revolt of the workers and the radical republicans. Berlioz would have had no patience for the extremists who staged that revolt, but he seems also to have had little regard for Cavaignac, the moderate republican, who was the candidate favored to win the presidential elections scheduled for December of that year. When Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was elected to the presidency, on December 10, 1848, Berlioz wrote delightedly to his sister, employing one of his most original (and untranslatable) neologisms: “Paris est en fête, il est ravi d’être dénationalisé, désencanaillé, désencavaignaqué”—“All Paris is celebrating, simply thrilled to be denationalized, de-gangsterized, and de-Cavaignacked”!

In the excerpts of the *Mémoires* that appeared in *Le Monde illustré*, we find a number of “political” suppressions, such as that of the final lines of chapter 24, where Berlioz sarcastically explains the delights of living in France: “Comme l’esprit y pétille! Comme on y danse sur la phrase! Comme on *y blague* royalement et républicainement!... Cette dernière manière est la moins divertissante...” (“How sparkling our ingenuity! How brilliant our way with words! How *royally* we poke fun, and how *republicanly* we do so, although the latter manner is hardly amusing”). The last sentence, its invented adverb seething with contempt, occurs only in the *Mémoires*.

Suggesting the opposite tendency—approval of the July Revolution—is the richly textured description, in chapter 29, of *Les Trois Glorieuses*:

I shall never forget the physiognomy of Paris during those much celebrated days: the fanatical bravery of the teenagers, the enthusiasm of the adults, the frenzied excitement of the whores, the grim resignation of the Swiss and the Royal Guard, the curious pride of the factory workers in being, as they said, the masters of Paris yet stealing nothing; and the preposterous bragadocio of some of the young men who, having manifested genuine courage, managed—by dint of exaggerated recitation and exaggerated ornamentation engarlanding the truth—to make that courage seem ludicrous.

Was Berlioz thrilled by the events of that summer? We have earlier noted his later reference to the “little heroes of July.” And in his distant recollections of his friendship with Berlioz, Ferdinand Hiller emphasized Berlioz’s explicit
avoidance of expressing platitudes about freedom. In *Le Monde illustré*, the text of the paragraph quoted above is more sober: the passage from “fanatical bravery” to “stealing nothing” and the remark about the whores have been removed.

The publication in the *Magasin des demoiselles* in 1855–1856 of what in the *Mémoires* became the *Voyage en Russie* (chapters 55, 56, and [57], the last-mentioned numbered by me because Berlioz neglected to do so) is a story in itself, for it raises questions of genre—what is this travelogue doing in a fashion magazine otherwise concerned with young women’s conduct and personal hygiene?—as well as of politics: we are in the midst of the Crimean War, France, in a struggle against Russia, is allied with England for the first time in a thousand years, but of the “enemy” Berlioz has only good things to say. His introductory letter to the editor of the *Magasin des demoiselles*, which appeared in the issue of November 25, 1855, has provoked little attention:

To the Editor:

Monsieur,

You have asked me for an article about the trip I made to Russia eight years ago, and you suppose that such a narration, different from the subjects you usually treat, might interest your gentle readers. May God will that it be so! As for myself, I find it difficult to believe. If we are highly preoccupied by the Russians at this hour, interest in “harmony” has absolutely nothing to do with that preoccupation. Indeed, it may even be inappropriate for a Frenchman to speak of the Russians without malice. And yet, far from wanting to speak ill of the Russians—something, you must admit, that would at this moment be crudely platitudinous—I must in fact express to them my gratitude for the cordial and heartwarming reception which they offered me during my sojourn.

But you wish to have my piece… Thus, if I offend the patriotism of your youthful subscribers, if I fail to interest them and rather bore them to death, if my recitation is neither tasteful nor graceful nor in the least bit appealing, you shall be the truly guilty party—and I shall do my best to pardon you.

To whom is this letter addressed? The *de facto* editors of the *Magasin des demoiselles* were quite appropriately two women: Joséphine Desrez and Caroline Genevay. But by French law, the *de jure* editors had to have been their husbands, Eugène-Louis Desrez, the director of the *Journal des connaissances utiles*, and Antoine-Joseph Genevay, the journalist, critic, and early feminist who had earlier edited a *Journal de femmes*. Berlioz knew Genevay as a fellow member of the Association des Artistes-Musiciens. Given the
composer’s gentle sarcasm, it is presumably Genevay who is the “Monsieur” of Berlioz’s salutation.

By the time of the last installment of Berlioz’s Russian series, which appeared in the *Magasin des demoiselles* on April 25, 1856, the Treaty of Paris had concluded the business of a conflict that had never been popular in France, most historians agree, in part because photographic journalism had for the first time graphically demonstrated the true horrors of war. Still, instead of concluding the series in the way it appears in chapter 56 [1] of the *Mémoires*, with a remark about the King of Prussia, Friedrich-Wilhelm IV—“The King of Prussia is no longer the sole European sovereign interested in music. There are two others: the young King of Hanover [George V], and the Grand-Duke of Weimar [Carl Alexander]. In all, three!”—Berlioz rather concluded with what we might regard as a profession of faith:

There you have, Monsieur le Directeur, everything I can say of my travels in Russia. And yet, if, since my return to France, I have often reflected nostalgically upon that ardent and intelligent public, upon those splendid musical soirées, upon those grandiose performances in Saint Petersburg, and upon the gracious hospitality of the Russian people, you must believe me when I say that I am no less a patriot than you, and that I am proud to be French.  

Berlioz made no secret of his admiration for Russian cultural life. It is not surprising that Meyerbeer, when asked about potential candidates for the directorship of a not-yet-established conservatory in Saint Petersburg, wrote in 1858 to the Russian diplomat Count Vladimir Sollohub—in Paris to study the question—to recommend François-Joseph Fétis, Jacques-Fromental Halévy, and Hector Berlioz.  

**Discretion**

If Berlioz’s assertion of his patriotism did not find its way into the *Mémoires*, other differences between the serialized articles and the definitive text show the former as more circumspect than the latter—something that is of course to be expected in a book designed to appear only after its author had gone to a place eternally shielded from the reprisals and the reviews. In chapter 2, for example, we read of Doctor Berlioz’s probity and independent spirit. We also read of his attempted suicide: “A few years ago, demoralized by excruciating pain, he swallowed at once thirty-two grains of opium. ‘I assure you,’ he later
told me on recounting the story, ‘that that was not designed to make me well.’” This paragraph never appeared in *Le Monde illustré*.

In chapter 14, Berlioz mentions the very serious case of tonsillitis he suffered as a student in Paris, in 1827, when he would have liked his then roommate, Antoine Charbonnel, to bring him something to eat. Nothing doing, Charbonnel was out chasing girls, or, as Berlioz puts it, “Antoine courait les grisettes.”46 The word *grisettes* was too risqué for the editors of *Le Monde illustré*—it refers to working class women with morals of low altitude—so there we read that Charbonnel “courait les aventures.” In chapter 55, we come to Berlioz’s post-Roman career as a composer in Paris: “To finish paying off my wife’s debts, I once more set about the laborious business of arranging a benefit, and after a great deal of exhausting effort succeeded in organizing a joint theatrical and musical evening at the Théâtre-Italien.” Berlioz was forever worried about money, as becomes pointedly evident in his private correspondence. Members of his family, who had objected to his marriage to Harriet Smithson in part because she was penniless, were embarrassed by the slightest public hint that he was in financial distress. It was doubly valorous of Berlioz to excise from *Le Monde illustré* the offending phrase concerning “les dettes de ma femme.”47

When Berlioz met the violinist and conductor Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Guhr, in Frankfurt, in late 1842, he was amused by Guhr’s constant habit of swearing, “Sacré nom de Dieu!” As Guhr pronounced the words, with his particular German accent, Berlioz heard “sacré nom te Tieu,” which appeared in the *Journal des débats*, and again in chapter 51 [1] of the *Mémoires*, as “S.N.T.T.” However, when Berlioz was preparing his travel pieces for publication in book form, in 1844, he seems to have wished to intensify the joke by signing his own letter to Guhr, not with “S.N.T.T.,” but with “adieu, adieu, S.N.D.D.” This irreligious profanity was complicated by Johann Christian Lobe’s German translation of Guhr’s expletive as “S.N.Z.T.,” which, because it is repeated, cannot be a misprint. “Sackerment nochmal, zum Teufel!”48

Malice?

“The remarkable thing,” wrote David Cairns in 1968, is that Berlioz’s volume “is not more bitter.”49 Indeed, those who shaped the Berlioz renaissance of the twentieth century have tended to see the composer’s behavior, in extremely difficult circumstances, as having been admirable in the extreme. In general, as Cairns put it in 1999, “he was courteous and conscientious to
a fault.” Even lofty men have their lowlier attributes, however, and some of these become magnified on looking closely at the texts of the Mémoires.

The famous portrait of Luigi Cherubini that emerges from Berlioz’s last book is anything but complimentary. Here in particular the author succeeded in casting an enduring shadow upon the reputation of a man who, apart from his accomplishments as a composer, was of singular importance in establishing the Paris Conservatoire as the leading music school in Europe. When, in Le Monde illustré of November 6, 1858, Berlioz first published his hilarious if admittedly cruel description of being chased from the Conservatoire library by the director and his assistant, he modified the autograph manuscript, before sending it to the editor of the magazine, such that all of the words distorted in order to imitate Cherubini’s sputtering expression now appeared in unsullied French. In the posthumous publication, of course, the imitation of the Italian accent becomes the crucial comedic element. From beyond the grave Berlioz had no compunctions about lampooning one of those who, he was certain, had inhibited his early success. In fact we find in the autograph of the Mémoires that Berlioz’s original intention was to address Cherubini as “vieux maniaque, vieux fou!” and to include at the end of that discourteous outburst the following sarcastic note:

No, no, calm thy spirits, O ye respectful admirers of this Father of the Church of Music; it is the thrust of my narrative that made me set down such irreverent words. I slander myself. I never called Cherubini an old fool or lunatic, although it frankly surprises me that I did not do so, because I was at that time, as Philip of Macedon dubs them, one of those foul-mouthed fellows who calls everything by its rightful name.51

These remarks did not find their way into the 1865 printing. I hope it does not spoil the fun to point out that this celebrated contretemps was provoked by Cherubini’s true-to-life edict, which ordered the women to enter and to exit the Conservatoire in the rue Bergère, the men, in the rue du Faubourg Poissonnière. The document—dated May 1, 1822, only ten days after the great Italian composer took office as director—is preserved in the archives, along with another, dated June 21, 1822, which reiterates the point in such a way as to make it pertain in particular to our composer: “The male students at the school are expressly prohibited from entering and exiting this door [in the rue Bergère], whether for the purpose of attending classes or on the pretext of going this way to the library. The officer at this door is specifically charged with enforcing this edict with exactitude and with escorting to the security office anyone who would disobey.”52 It is thus that we learn not only
of the truth of Berlioz’s anecdote, but also the date of his crime. Cherubini’s negative appreciation of Berlioz’s bibliographical industry (he had gone to the library, you will recall, to study the scores of Gluck) may have led him, at a later date, to place the young man into the music theory course of Anton Reicha, whose teaching Cherubini found less efficacious than that of François-Joseph Fétis (as we know from a letter preserved in Fétis’s file in the archives of the Conservatoire). Of the many “what if’s” of Berlioz’s career, this one—Berlioz as a student of Fétis—is especially suggestive. For Fétis, librarian at the Conservatoire as well as professor of counterpoint and fugue, tended to promote his students with conspicuous generosity. Fétis was initially supportive of Berlioz’s incipient career. When he became chapel master to the King of Belgium and director the Brussels Conservatoire, in 1833, he might have offered to Berlioz something of the musical run of the realm—had it not been, of course, for the unpleasantness of 1832, when, in the freshly squeezed sequel to the *Symphonie fantastique*, premiered on December 9, 1832, Berlioz openly satirized the self-assured professor for having taken it upon himself to “correct” the musical language of Beethoven. This public humiliation is what led Fétis to shout, in the *Revue musicale* of December 15, 1832, that Berlioz represented a most singular phenomenon in the history of music: “an artist who has caught a fleeting glimpse of original ideas he is himself incapable of bringing to fruition, for want of knowing precisely what it is that he wishes to do; a creative fellow whose conceptions lead inevitably to abortion, not birth; a man, finally, whose impotence betrays his desires.” Berlioz did not forget the sexual allusions in Fétis’s attack when he revised the text of *Le Retour à la vie*: in 1832 he excoriated the professors as “moderates, who want to reconcile everything, who believe they are thinking rationally about the arts because they speak of them with composure”; in 1855, when the work was newly baptized *Lélia*, he spoke of those professors as “fossilized libertines, of whatever age, who insist that music divert them, caress them, never admitting that the chaste muse might in fact have in mind a more noble mission.” It is not inconceivable that the erotic electricity of the initial exchange resulted from Fétis’s prurient interest in the prodigious pianist who became Berlioz’s momentary fiancée in the autumn of 1830.

The portrait of Camille Moke, painted in chapter 28, where we meet the fiery young woman, and in chapter 34, where we learn of her betrayal, is also skewed and selective, partly because the remarkable pianist in question—who certainly earned the composer’s animosity—became one of the great virtuosos of her generation. Berlioz tells of yielding to her sexual advances by inventing a verb—“je finis par me laisser Putipharder”—that resists
literal translation. “At the end of the day I allowed myself to be Potifered” would mean that he finally ceased to “play Joseph to her Potiphar’s wife,” as David Cairns has decorously put it. In the autograph manuscript, the biblical personage is also mentioned in chapter 31, where Berlioz explains in a note his reason for wanting to profit from his Prix-de-Rome stipend in Paris: “Mademoiselle Putifar [sic] me rendait fort agréable le séjour de Paris”—“Mademoiselle Potiphar rendered my life in Paris highly satisfying.” The note (in which it suited Berlioz to use “Putifar” rather than “Potifar” because “Putefar” includes the offensive syllable pute—“whore”) was never printed. But Berlioz did fictionalize his revenge upon Camille, as Katherine Kolb shows, in such stories as *Le Suicide par enthousiasme* (1834), *Le Premier Opéra* (1837), and especially in the utopian tale of *Euphonia* (1844). He may even have urged his friends to pursue his reprisal. In 1849, in a review of her concert of April 28 of that year, *La France musicale* demoted her from “Queen of the piano” to “President of the piano”: “what glacial indifference you must have felt around you, in front of you, in back of you! Oh, the public forgets very quickly, does it not, Madame la Présidente?” This was an obvious allusion to a well-known courtesan, Apollonie Sabbatier, whose sobriquet, apparently invented by Théophile Gautier, alluded to the many suitors, admirers, and lovers over whose attentions she presided. Camille herself, now celebrated as Madame Pleyel (though separated from Pleyel since 1835), was not secretive about her incendiary nature: she signed her letters to Gautier, for example, as “your phosphorous”!

A less-celebrated personage whose portrait is darkened in the *Mémoires* is Narcisse Girard, who became Habeneck’s successor as conductor of the orchestra at the Conservatoire in October 1848. A good friend of Berlioz’s in the earlier eighteen-thirties, Girard seems to have fallen from grace for having on several occasions poorly conducted *Harold en Italie*, thus deciding the composer thereafter to conduct his works himself. In chapter 59, speaking of one of the rare occasions on which his music was performed by the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, Berlioz writes that Girard had “very clumsily and very prosaically conducted the performance” (“fort maladroûtement et fort platement dirigé l’exécution”). Yet in a letter to his sister Nanci of April 25, 1849, ten days after that very concert, Berlioz said the opposite: Girard “had done a very good job” (“s’en est bien tiré”). Berlioz himself may have given us the reason for the sour public version when he spoke revealingly to Juliette Adam about Wagner: “Wagner bitterly hates everyone who has humiliated him by rendering him a service. I know something about
that myself.” The comment in the Mémoires simply continues the downward sweep of the book’s account of the talents of maestro Girard.

Indeed, a downward sweep may be said to characterize much of Berlioz’s narration: most of the comical scenes occur in the earlier part of the book, while the original ending (at chapter LIX) was bitter indeed: “As for you, maniacs and dim-witted bulls and bulldogs, and you, my Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns, my Iagos, my little Osrics, snakes, and pests of every kind: farewell, my… friends; I despise you! And I hope not to die before having eradicated you from my memory.” When we read such vituperation, now, we smile: its intensity seems more literary than real. In its own day, however, such artifice produced little cozy amusement. Philarète Chasles’ commentary rings true: “It is quite specifically polemics—fiery, violent, acid-tipped, vengeful, militant, stark and striking; it is partiality; it is the use of the newspaper as an offensive and defensive weapon; it is epigram, satire, irony—it is all of these things that weakened and undermined Berlioz.” “Everything hurt the great artist, poor fellow, everything irritated him,” wrote another French reviewer. “At every turn, for the slightest wrong note, he called for the executioner or the hitman!” An English critic was even less sympathetic: Berlioz told his life “with such an agony of self-exaltation that it is impossible to withhold pity, akin though that be to contempt.” Nor was his private behavior regarded as eternally scintillating. Even in his thirties, Berlioz was rarely warm and fuzzy: describing Sainte-Beuve’s efforts to engage Berlioz in conversation, Marie d’Agoult wrote to Liszt, November 18, 1839, that this was “something difficult, something impossible! All you get out of him is a boar’s growl.”

Is there the hint of a scowl in the photograph that Berlioz affixed to the first edition of the Mémoires? Had he wished to present a softer image, would he not have used one of the pictures shot by Pierre Petit in 1863, where the pose, with his head resting on his hand, is the long traditional one of meditation-cum-melancholy? One of the best explanations of Berlioz’s bitterness comes from Camille Saint-Saëns: “Given his superior nature, he found it impossible to approve of so much vulgarity, rudeness, ferociousness, and egoism, which play such important roles in this world, and by which he was so often victimized.” Reviews of the Mémoires have yet to be the object of extended study—the number is limited because the book was published in time of war—but their authors would perhaps charitably accept the truth of an aphorism found in Théophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin: “Toute grande haine sert de contrepoids à un grand amour”—“all great hatred acts as a counterbalance to great love.”
In chapter 18, Berlioz comes to the “supreme drama” of his life—the encounter with Shakespeare and Smithson. The plot is set down with supreme economy: “In the role of Ophelia I saw Harriet Smithson, who, five years later, became my wife. The effect upon my heart and upon my imagination of her stupendous ability, or, I should say, her dramatic genius, is comparable only to the cataclysm to which I was exposed by the poet whom she so superbly interpreted. Of this, I can say nothing more.” These three sentences, which do not appear in the chapter as published in *Le Monde illustré* on January 1, 1859, are more rational than emotional—although it may be emotion that caused Berlioz to say “five years” rather than six, the distance between the *Hamlet* première of September 1827 and the wedding of October 1833. Only in the final addition to the book, the *Voyage en Dauphiné*, do we find a more effusive expression of affection. Indeed, it is here, in the Estelle episode, that we find the only love letters of Berlioz that have been preserved. “Mes adorations seront discrètes,” he assured the object of his attentions. But in the autograph draft of this page, before the citation from Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* that captured for Berlioz the ardency of his feelings for Madame Fornier, the composer let himself go: “I adore her! How bitter the laughter of fate! How immeasurable the caprices of this monster we call the human heart!”

This chapter reveals a side of the man’s soul that he had in many ways explicitly attempted to conceal. His usual mode was ironic. In London in 1847, for example, he took that sincere line from *The Divine Comedy*—“There is no greater sorrow than to recall happiness in times of misery”—turned it around—“There is no greater pleasure than to recall misery in times of happiness”—and set it to music, *lento et grazioso*, in G major.

Working closely with the texts and variants of the *Mémoires* leads to new appreciation of Berlioz’s playfulness, erudition, and verbal craftsmanship. The great Balzac scholar Pierre Citron, in the annotations he provided for the *Mémoires*, the *Correspondance générale*, and the *Critique musicale*, demonstrated that forging neologisms was not the least of Berlioz’s pleasures as a writer. In fact the numerous neologisms of Balzac and Berlioz and their contemporaries are merely a symptom of what has been called “a mild obsession” of the Romantic generation in France. But for Berlioz there is more. “As for my literary style, to the extent that I have one,” he wrote with a *soupçon* of false modesty, “it is that of a writer who seeks but always fails to find the word capable of rendering precisely what he feels. I am too full of violence; I have tried to calm down but I have not succeeded. This causes the flow of
my prose to be unbalanced, or *titubatious*, rather like the gait of a man who is drunk” (“cela donne aux allures de ma prose quelque chose d’inégal, de *titubant*, comme la marche d’un homme ivre”). The word I italicize forces into English something from the Latin *titubare*, “to stagger,” from which French gets the verb *tituber* and participle *titubant*—a word which Berlioz may have been one of the first to employ. All of this to say that Berlioz has in a sense contradicted himself, because in *titubant* he found the word that renders fastidiously what he felt.

Berlioz began his literary career as a polemicist, in retaliation to what he saw as others’ stupidities: the first article he published, in the August 23, 1823, issue of *Le Corsaire*, fell under the rubric of *Polémique musicale*. A polemicist, it has been said, is happiest when he has an enemy. Berlioz had many: Cherubini, Fétis, Mainzer, Scudo, and more, as one learns from reading the reviews: the *Fantastique* and *Harold en Italie* drew relatively little immediate reaction, but the two operas premiered in France, *Benvenuto Cellini* and *Les Troyens*, and the composer’s most avant-garde works, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La Damnation de Faust*, drew a great deal. Reacting to the première of *Faust*, Adolphe Adam cited Rossini’s putative witticism: “How fortunate that that fellow knows nothing of music, for, were he to write some, it would be appalling. Because he is everything you might like him to be—a poet, an idealistic dreamer, a talented man with unusual and inventive ideas—but never a musician” (“Quel bonheur que ce garçon-là ne sache pas la musique. Il en ferait de bien mauvaise. Car il est tout ce qu’on voudra, poète, rêveur idéal, homme de talent, de recherche et parfois d’invention dans certaines combinaisons, mais jamais musicien”). Rossini may never have said such a thing, but Adolphe Adam enjoyed imagining that he had. Today, yesterday’s assassins, Adam and the others, simply seem asinine. The assaults and those who emitted them, however, while serving in the Mémoires to put into relief the portrait of a man not known for his smile, were good neither for his reputation nor for his health. A part of Berlioz’s personal biography is his medical biography: “Berlioz,” his doctor said to him, prescribing distractions and baths, “you are ill more from anger than from fatigue.” He possessed a dram of it, we saw some in his comments on *Harold en Italie* (cited in chapter 2), but humor of the self-deprecatory sort was not his fort. Had he been able to muster more, he might have felt less unwell.

Berlioz felt the need for self-historicization—“Ma vie est un roman qui m’intéresse beaucoup” (we have quoted the phrase above)—and the need to set the record straight. That is why he set down Mémoires that are a compendium of his extraordinary experience and his astonishing knowledge of
music, literature, and history. They are a demonstration, unequaled by any other composer, of his sweeping intelligence and his unadulterated, unsurpassed, unforgiving wit.