"But, come, I'll set your story to a tune": Berlioz's Interpretation of Byron's *Childe Harold*

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WHENEVER a literary essay moves outside the traditional bounds of its own discipline into a marginal area, a theoretical justification is required. A comparison between Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Berlioz's *Harold en Italie* seems a risky enterprise at best. Berlioz's programmatic titles to each of his four movements cannot all be traced back to the poem with equal certainty. The first movement, "Harold in the Mountains. Scenes of melancholy, happiness and joy" might have a correlative in Canto IV, stanzas 73ff: "Once more upon the woody Apennine . . .". But our tolerance already becomes stretched if we are to grant that movements two and three, the pilgrims' march and the mountaineer's serenade, could be scenes that any Italian traveller, therefore Harold as well, might have witnessed. Finally, the Brigands' orgy, the fourth movement, clearly does not appear in the poem. The symphony, then, unlike Liszt's symphonic poem *Mazeppa*, for example, is not a musical illustration of scenes found in Byron's text. Yet the name is not at all arbitrary, as a brief look into the history of naming symphonies will clarify.

Berlioz was the first Romantic composer to establish the "program" firmly within symphonic music. Program music is distinguished from "absolute" music by the fact that a "text," in the largest meaning of that word, is assigned to the music and should be known to the audience. Beethoven, whose system Berlioz was to refine, attached loose tags to the movements of his sixth symphony, the "Pastoral," such as "Scenes in the countryside" and "The Storm." Symphonic music thereby moves from a free play of the mind to a representation, while at the same time the listener's imagination is guided by a text towards specific scenes. Beethoven cautions on the manuscript to the first violin part of his "Pas-

toral" that the music is meant to be "mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei" ("more an expression of sentiment than [tone-]painting").[1] "Tone poems" by Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss are closely related to the poems they illustrate, whereas in Berlioz the subjective expression of a sentiment caused by, or seen in relation to, an event or a work of art reaches its climax. *Harold en Italie* is thus not a translation of Byron's poem into another artistic medium, but Berlioz's reaction to it, merged with a response to his own Italian experiences and expressed in musical terms.

Hence the title of this essay: the first line (from *Don Juan* canto xvi, line 300) exemplifies a popular misconception about the relationship of music and poetry, while the second contains my argument. By entitling his symphony "Harold en Italie," Berlioz invites the speculation of literary critics just as he had done with his *Rob Roy* overture. Yet if we regard his act of composition as an interpretation rather than an illustration, the comparison between poem and symphony becomes a legitimate object of study for the literary critic, because we now have before us two creative utterances in different artistic media. I shall try to establish where and how, in musical terms, Berlioz appreciated Byron in ways that shed new light on the poem as a literary artifact. The adequate response of a thoroughly Romantic mind like Berlioz's consists in infusing much of his own experience into his aesthetic appreciation of Byron. For Berlioz to do justice to Byron, he had to come as close as he could to *feeling with* (root meaning of 'sympathy') the poet. He accomplished this by having recourse to scenes he himself experienced.

Berlioz spent fifteen months in Italy in 1831–32 as part of a residency requirement connected with his winning the *Prix de Rome* in 1830.[2] Shortly before this trip he must have become acquainted with Byron's poetry.[3] Yet the fame Byron enjoyed in France in the 1820s, described by Glyn Court as "phenomenal" (p. 229), had given Berlioz certain ideas

I am indebted to Jerome McGann, who read and responded to this essay in its early stage.

1. Translation mine. "Beethoven," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Friedrich Blume (Kassel und Basel: Bärenreiter, 1949–1951), I, 1539.

2. Hugh Macdonald, "Berlioz," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), II, 583. Hereafter cited as *Grove Dictionary.*

3. Glyn Court, "Berlioz and Byron and *Harold in Italy*," *The Music Review*, 17 (1956), 230: hereafter cited in the text.

about Byronism even in his younger years. His "cultivation of solitude," his "volcanic enthusiasm," his

> detestation of the herd, his fierce outbursts followed by gloomy meditations, the passionate intensity of his love . . . his restless wanderings and daemonic impulse; all these and other traits have a Byronic ring. (p. 229)

We can surmise that Berlioz styled his personality to a certain extent after Byron's and felt an elective affinity for this fellow-artist, occasioned by more than the coincidence of their last names' beginning with the same letter.

We know from Berlioz's *Autobiography* how much he loathed Rome and preferred roaming the countryside. In chapters 36 through 39 he describes in detail his excursions into the mountains; how he visited Benedictine monasteries, how the *pifferari*, the pipers at Subiaco, impressed him musically, and how he slept one night, as he was walking back to Rome from Naples, in a cave usually inhabited by brigands. At a social occasion in Rome he even met the Countess Guiccioli and was impressed, his biographer reports, "with her sad face and rich golden hair."[4] The spirit of the place seems to have moved Berlioz to immerse himself more deeply in Byron's poetical works:

> And I never saw St. Peter's, either, without a thrill. . . . During the fierce summer heat I used to spend whole days there, comfortably established in a confessional, with Byron as my companion. I sat enjoying the coolness and stillness . . . and there, at my leisure, I sat drinking in that burning poetry.[5]

It is hard to imagine how a confessional would have provided a comfortable reading space, and it seems even more ironical to read Byron at the very heart and center of organized religion; yet these are the circumstances

4. Jacques Barzun, *Berlioz and the Romantic Century*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1950), 1, 212: hereafter cited in the text.

5. Hector Berlioz, *Autobiography of Hector Berlioz*, trans. Rachel and Eleanor Holmes, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 1, 190: hereafter cited in the text. The original *Mémoires de Hector Berlioz* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1870) are easily accessible in a reprint by Gregg International Publishers, (1969).

in which Berlioz absorbed impressions that would provide the musical material for compositions to come much later.

The Italian impressions germinated in Berlioz's mind for a long time before they came to maturity. The occasion for *Harold en Italie* is relatively coincidental. Jacques Barzun's account (I, 242ff) of Paganini's approaching Berlioz early in 1834 with a request for a viola concerto, the soloist's disappointment when he inspected the first movement, and his abandonment of the project make for fascinating reading.[6]

Free to do with the first movement as he pleased, Berlioz continued to shape the work into a symphony of four movements, with a strong concerto element added through the solo viola, and dropping his originally intended title, *The Last Moments of Mary Stuart*. He now recollected his Italian experiences, gave appropriate headings to the movements and explained:

> I conceived the idea of writing a series of scenes for the orchestra, in which the viola should find itself mixed up, like a person more or less in action, always preserving his own individuality. The background I formed from my recollections of my wanderings in the Abruzzi, introducing the viola as a sort of melancholy dreamer, in the style of Byron's *Childe Harold*. (*Autobiography*, 280)

This technique is significantly different from the one Berlioz employed in his first symphony, the *Symphonie Fantastique*. The *Fantastique* employs a musical "idée fixe," a kind of leitmotif which appears whenever the protagonist—a young artist in the case of the *Fantastique*—enters the "scene" thinking of his beloved. Yet this theme interacts strongly with its surroundings and finally breaks down (musically depicting the breakdown of the artist) in the final movement of the *Fantastique*, the Witches' Sabbath. Not so in *Harold en Italie*. True, the brigands' orgy drowns out the Harold-theme in a similar manner, but whenever the theme appears in any of the four movements to indicate Harold's "presence," it is

6. See also *Grove Dictionary*, II, 586. For a more detailed account of the relationship between the two men, see Stuart M. Sperry, Jr. "The *Harolds* of Berlioz and Byron," *Your Musical Cue*, 4 (1968), 3–8, as well as *Autobiography*, Chap. 45.

unchanged.[7] Harold is placed within the various scenes as a witness or observer.

The introduction of the specific persona "Harold" presents a further refinement of Beethoven's method in the *Pastoral* and gives rise to my argument about the symphony as an interpretation of the poem. Alice Levine correctly asserts that, after Beethoven, composers more and more "introduced the element of self-conscious personality into musical expression."[8] But the notion of subjectivity in music can be more closely defined with the help of a literary analogy: the subject in Beethoven's *Pastoral*, in the absence of a dramatized protagonist, is of course the composer who imposes the unifying consciousness on the work of music. In Berlioz's symphony, now, we have two subjects: the exterior subject Berlioz, whose mind controls the work, and the interior subject "Harold," who is distinct from the composer and, using the viola as his means of expression, interacts with the orchestra.[9] The closest literary parallel is the familiar distinction between author and narrator. I shall explore the relationship between these two subjects in order to demonstrate how closely the designs of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Harold en Italie* are allied.

The first movement illustrates beautifully the changes a symphonic subject has to undergo in order to fit the parameters of program music. In a traditional symphony or concerto, a subject is a recognizable melodic theme which is first presented (part A), then developed (part B), and finally re-presented (part A′). Traditional symphonies and concertos often have two such themes, generally in related keys. This scheme had firmly established itself in eighteenth-century symphonies of Haydn, Mozart and their contemporaries. In the first movement of "Harold en Italie" the symphonic subject is radically different from traditional sym-

7. The musical text is available in Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique and Harold in Italy in Full Score* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1900–1910; New York: Dover, 1984): hereafter cited as Dover score in the text. The new definitive score of *Harold en Italie*, to be published as vol. 17 of Bärenreiter's Berlioz edition, is not yet available.

8. Alice Levine, "Byron and the Romantic Composer," in *Lord Byron and His Contemporaries*, ed. Charles E. Robinson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), p. 186.

9. I am adapting a differentiation made in purely musical terms by Hermann Danuser in his "Symphonisches Subjekt und Form in Berlioz' 'Harold en Italie,'" *Melos / Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 3 (1977), 206, column 1.

phonies. While the title of the movement, "Harold in the Mountains," may mislead us into assuming that there is a division between "Harold" (viola) and "the Mountains" (orchestra), the subtitle "Scenes of melancholy, happiness and joy" makes clear that the movement as a whole is a depiction of states of mind. If it is impossible, then, to assign the role of "mountains" to the orchestra, it must indeed be part of "Harold," the larger symphonic subject.[10] The "mountains" are nothing more than a convenient situation in which to place the Romantic hero. His main interest is in himself, and the mountains are only the natural surroundings within which he perceives and examines his individuality all the more clearly.

Another familiar musical convention of the time, especially in operatic music, was the remembrance motif. Berlioz introduces this operatic device into his symphony by characterizing Harold in two ways: through the viola and through his theme. The viola is acoustically and visually separated from the orchestra: the first instruction on the first page of the score is, "The player [of the solo viola] must stand in the fore-ground, near to the public and isolated from the orchestra" (Dover score, p. 151). The Harold-theme, a unique and quite paradoxical mixture of subdued melancholy and adolescent exuberance, serves as the remembrance motif: it is introduced in that fashion when the solo viola first appears.

A close inspection of the score reveals that the orchestra has already used the Harold-theme in the slow "Introduction" (entitled "Adagio"), yet it serves there only to establish the tone, not to denote the presence of the protagonist.[11] The woodwinds play the Harold-theme in a rhythmically disguised form and in g minor, underscored by an eerily chromatic movement in the celli and basses. The violins play tremoli and accentuate the chromatic movement by dissonances, thereby conveying

10. I am here indebted to Danuser's analysis, "Symphonisches Subjekt und Form," *Melos*, 3(1977), 206, column 2. He posits a larger frame of meaning for the "mountains" as "nature," while my explanation is based on a linguistic conclusion alone.

11. Discussing the larger context of Berlioz's use of instrumental personae, Edward T. Cone suggests that while "the problem of the overpersonalization of a sonata subject is avoided here . . . it is neither fruitful to speculate on the specific meaning of the theme nor possible to decide it." "A Lesson from Berlioz," *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 91–92.

mystery and unease, investing the Harold-theme with a mysterious or alien quality which on its own it does not possess.

When the solo viola appears with its theme—interior symphonic subject represented by both instrument and tune, now in G major—the harp is the only accompaniment. I am tempted to think, with Hermann Danuser, that the symphonic Romantic hero here accompanies himself in the manner of an antique rhapsode.[12] This supports the view that the setting of the scene (mountains) is of lesser importance than the self-expression of the protagonist. And indeed: in a third step viola and orchestra both present the Harold-theme in canonic imitation. Step three is thus a combination of steps one and two, as orchestra and soloist now blend together in presenting the symphonic subject "Harold."

The remaining part of the first movement, to be executed "Allegro," follows the same pattern. To put it briefly: the first few measures establish the already familiar, slightly sinister atmosphere. Then the viola presents its second theme; accompanied, but not counterpointed, by the remaining set of strings. Finally soloist and orchestra play theme and accompaniment alternately through the long *crescendo e accelerando* that brings the first movement to a close.

This analysis of the first movement shows that Berlioz—whether by instinct or as a result of acute literary analysis—presents his persona "Harold" much in the same way as Byron presents his persona "Childe Harold." It is well known that Byron employs different masks throughout the four cantos to present his central narrator. Both Byron and Berlioz, I would argue, employ a complex set of refractions and representations to delineate the way from the controlling artistic consciousness to the literary or musical representation of the protagonist. If we were still assuming that Berlioz simply "set [Byron's] story to a tune," we would have to fault him for taking inexcusable thematic and dramatic liberties as well as for naively thinking that music and poetry are plainly interchangeable artistic media. Yet Berlioz, I submit, shrewdly takes advantage of Byron's use of personae and, in "narrating" his own Harold-story, uses the viola to announce the subject of his symphony

12. Danuser, "Symphonisches Subjekt und Form," *Melos*, 3 (1977), 206, column 2. One needs to remember that Berlioz directs on the first page of the score: "The harp must be placed close to the solo viola." The visual impression that the two instruments belong together is thus guaranteed.

(just as Byron's poem is always called *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* even when it is, in selected long passages, *not* concerned with its protagonist) and employs the remembrance-motif to represent his protagonist in action. Drawing a literary parallel, one would have to say that Berlioz represents and adapts in musical terms some of the complex protagonist's facets that Peter Thorslev would later identify as the three characters in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: the Minstrel, the Childe, and Byron's own persona.[13]

A brief look at the forms the two artists employ may confirm this suggestion: both avail themselves of traditionally established forms of expression, but change the way they work to suit their specific uses without altering the name. Berlioz does not call his work a symphony, but he employs the familiar structure of four movements (a solo concerto would require three) and accordingly draws vehement criticism from contemporary arbiters of musical taste. Byron calls his work "A Romaunt," invoking medieval chivalric traditions, but makes a self-centered anti-hero the subject of his mock-epic and sets up despair, disappointment, and cultural critique as the main areas of content. The works are similar in their impetuous usurpation of established forms and thus all the more comparable. The symphony may not be an illustration of the poem in the sense of a "tone poem," but the methods of characterization are so similar that we can safely assume Berlioz to have translated Byron's way of "twice removing" Childe Harold from himself into musical terms.[14] Because Berlioz is "Harold" and Byron is "Childe Harold," but Berlioz is not Byron's Harold,[15] it is even more appropriate that Berlioz should have chosen (real or imaginary) scenes from his own Italian sojourn rather than copy Byron's. Each artist's "Harold" is a refraction of the specific artist, so that there are properly two Harolds, a Byronic and a Berliozian one.

13. Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero, Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 129–131.

14. James L. Hill suggests a possibility of comparison between *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as an introspective poem and the occurrence of introspective arias "in situations of great dramatic tension" in nineteenth-century opera. "Experiments in the Narrative of Consciousness: Byron, Wordsworth, and *Childe Harold*, Cantos 3 and 4," *ELH*, 53 (1986), 127.

15. I find myself in agreement here with Glyn Court, "Berlioz and Byron and *Harold in Italy*," *The Music Review*, 17 (1956), 233.

The second movement is inscribed "Procession of pilgrims singing the evening hymn." Berlioz here builds on the convention of scenic representation he himself established in the first movement, but I am unable to detect Byron's influence in matters of form. The symphonic subject "Harold" is characterized through the traditional remembrance technique. Musically, the most interesting fact about this movement is that the theme undergoes no development at all. "Harold" remains aloof and uninvolved, as is appropriate to his character as a lonesome wanderer. He witnesses religious ceremony, asserts his presence, but never changes from an observer to a participant. The third movement, "Serenade of an Abruzzi mountaineer to his sweetheart," follows precisely the same pattern. Harold witnesses the serenade which is presented on the *cor anglais*, asserts his presence, but remains uninvolved.

Berlioz drew the most criticism for his last movement, "Brigands' Orgy. Reminiscences of the preceding scenes." The objections were twofold, thematic as well as musical. To finish a symphony with something like a brigands' orgy "especially seems to bother certain critics, who find the very notion of brigands and orgies ridiculous and —comic opera excepted—beyond the pale of music" (Barzun, I, 253). The musical objection is, of course, founded on the fact that Berlioz here abandons all laws of formal symphonic music by simply presenting and juxtaposing musical material without even the semblance of a development of any sort.

We can meet both objections by reflecting on Berlioz's probable intentions in choosing to compose in this particular manner. First, a boisterous, not to say violent, ending is dear to his heart. The *Symphonie Fantastique* ends with a witches' sabbath in the course of which the artist-protagonist is beheaded. Brigands actually had been part of Berlioz's Italian experiences. They were not only objects of the Romantic imagination; they existed in flesh and blood (yes, blood indeed), and there is evidence that Berlioz attended the wedding of one such outlaw (Barzun, I, 253). The connection with Byron is thematic as well: the Byronic hero likes to perceive himself as the lawless outcast, not restricted by society, but following his own instincts. Jacques Barzun cautions us that "brigands" and "orgy" may seem ludicrous just because they are period vocabulary: substitute "racketeer" and "'wild party' and quaintness disappears" (Barzun, I, 254).

Musically speaking, the very absence of development is a masterstroke of characterization and interpretation on Berlioz's part. We now have two independent symphonic subjects: the orchestra represents the brigands, the viola "Harold," but the heterogeneity between the hero and his context becomes forceful to the point of basic uncommunicability.[16] "Harold" is present only in the reminiscences of the preceding scenes, while the orgy is totally alien to him. His lack of (musical) involvement in it shows how completely wrong and unfamiliar his surroundings are. The method of characterization here is identical to the preceding movements in that "Harold" is a recognizable musical entity set up against another musical entity, the scene. But Berlioz also continues to imitate Byron's use of the *persona* "Harold." Just as Byron, writing to Hobhouse, admits that with regard to "the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding"[17] and spends more time on Italian history, literature and private meditations than on his alleged hero, so Berlioz eclipses the fate of his Harold by the noisome brigands.

The reminiscences of the preceding scenes follow one another quickly in the first few measures of this movement. None of the themes can assert itself more than once, because one of the many orgy-themes immediately takes over and drowns out the reminiscences. Byron, in his dedication to Hobhouse, quotes

> Non movero mai corda
> Ove la turba di sue ciance assorda.[18]

As if to illustrate this, Berlioz has taken us from the rhapsode with his harp to the orgy material, which he presents twice. Although this is mimetically unsound—the same orgy cannot have two subsequent "runs" like a stage-show—it is a concession to the capacity of acoustical perception in his listeners. The speed of the movement is such that most allusions would be lost if one heard them only once.

Before the ecstatic finale brings the orgy to a close, Berlioz interpolates

16. I paraphrase a sentence in Danuser, "Symphonisches Subjekt und Form," *Melos*, 3 (1977), 210, column 2.

17. *Byron*, ed. Jerome McGann, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 146.

18. *Byron*, ed. McGann, p. 148. The editor provides this translation: "But the lyre has no effect where the noise of the crowd drowns it out." I have been unable to identify the source.

one last reminiscence: the pilgrims' march is heard in the distance. Yet, this is not truly a reminiscence; it is a representation of what "Harold" presumably hears in this moment. The score has significant stage directions: two solo violins entrusted with the task of playing the pilgrims' march are to be heard "from the wings" (Dover score, p. 310), positioned away from the orchestra. Harold's solo viola appears for the last time, but not with his theme. Instead, he plays falling intervals of a long and short note each in sequence, known in musical literature as "Seufzermotiv" or "sighs." One could surmise that "Harold" is too weak to assert his presence with his theme, but is capable of having qualms after hearing the pilgrims again. Be that as it may, he is not given another chance to speak. The brigands' theme quickly picks up and becomes more rhythmically accentuated until the symphony, which began in a meditative g minor, ends in a boisterous G major.

Close scrutiny of the score has revealed at least one way in which it makes sense to compare Byron's poem and Berlioz's symphony: Berlioz's creative adaptations of the symphonic form and the tone poem can be shown to interpret Byron's use of persona. Poetry and music thus can be said to employ comparable narrative techniques. A symphonic subject and a poetic subject may indeed be put side by side for comparison if one selects the correct parameters to measure them by. Berlioz's use of musical means of characterization, however, becomes apparent only if one places him within the tradition of formal symphonies and concertos to see how he adapted the forms to his purposes.

There remains one objection: if Berlioz projects himself into his "Harold" just as Byron projects himself into his "Childe Harold," then we do have two different characters that may for the sake of convenience have the same name but are certainly not identical. Detractors may further argue that the name *Harold en Italie* was not attached to the piece until after the first movement was finished; that in fact it is unlikely that the scenario of *The Last Moments of Mary Stuart* should have evoked the *same* musical sentiment as *Harold*. The situation is even further complicated by the fact that much of the melodic material for movements 2–4 dates back to a projected longer work on *Rob Roy* (after Sir Walter Scott). Is program music simply a willful attaching of catchy names to music that will lend itself to anything?

The twofold answer must contain an appreciation of that most elusive of concepts, the Romantic consciousness. First: one must have a program-ridden mind to maintain that the only valid comparison of poem and music would be one in which the music illustrates as literally as possible what the text describes. Musical symbols are necessarily polyvalent. Jacques Barzun argues correctly: "No doubt the unimaginative fail to grasp how associations *cluster*" (Barzun, I, 254). A single musical symbol can evoke a plethora of different scenes. But the more symbols come together, the clearer the impression. A composer's talent lies in the art of finding symbols at once determinate and open enough to fit the desired context. After all, the audience is only given the bare bones of the scene. There is room for infinite imaginative reference in each listener.

One of the many facets of a "Romantic consciousness" is its strong individualism. Secondly, then, to grant that the interpretive experiment attempted here has some validity, one needs to allow room for the Romantic artist's expression of self. Naturally, Berlioz would express feelings that he personally gained from, or projected on, Byron's text. One of the fundamental principles of Romanticism is, after all, individuation, a process that came to a feverish climax in Byronism itself. Any straightforward "illustration" of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* with the poem as program would have looked like cheap copy-work. What Berlioz did instead was to produce a work that can stand on its own. He acknowledges Byron and uses analogous techniques of characterization. But the sentiment, the art, the originality are his. The noticeable difference is perhaps atmospheric rather than tangible. If I had to sum it up, I would say that Byron comes down on the cynical side, Berlioz on the sentimental.

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