Back to (the music of) the future: Aesthetics of technology in Berlioz’s “Euphonia” and Damnation de Faust

Inge van Rij (New Zealand School of Music)

EXAMPLE: Opening, and extracts from Xilef’s first letter to Rotceh: Italian commerce and opera.  

CHARACTERS

XILEF, a composer, prefect of voices and stringed instruments in the city of Euphonia
SHETLAND [ROTCEH in 1844], a composer, prefect of wind instruments
MINA/ELLIMAC [in 1844], a celebrated Danish singer
MME HARPER [Mme ELLIANAC in 1844], her mother
FANNY [DESIREE] [in 1844], her maid

First Letter
Xilef to Shetland [Rotceh]

Sicily, June 7, 2344

I have just taken a swim in Etna! What a delightful time I have been having, my dear Shetland [Rotceh], gliding through the pure waters of that cool, calm lake! […] I have just taken a swim in Etna! What a delightful time I have been having, my dear Shetland [Rotceh], gliding through the pure waters of that cool, calm lake! […]

In order to divert these brutish traders a little after their deals on the Exchange, someone has had the happy thought of putting billiard tables in the center of the ground floor of the theatre; and these gentlemen play, shouting at every lucky stroke, while the tenor and the prima donna blow out their lungs on the stage. In Palermo day before yesterday they were giving Il re Murate [in 1844], a sort of hodgepodge by twenty different authors, whose plots are so inextricable that they are always changing during the performance – the ladies, annoyed at seeing the men preparing to go and smoke and play downstairs, rose up in arms and asked that the billiard tables be removed and a dance improvised in the free space, which was done. A few young men got hold of violins and trumpets and began to play waltzes in an upper corner of the dress circle, while couples whirled around on the floor without the performance being interrupted in the slightest degree. I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry when I saw this incredible opera-ballet under my very eyes. (Evenings, p. 261)

When the director wants a new score, he assembles the singers and submits to them the scenario of the piece, and comes to an understanding with them about the costumes they will wear. The costumes really come first, being the only thing which momentarily attracts the public’s attention at the première. (Evenings, p. 262)

EXAMPLE 1: Opening, and extracts from Xilef’s first letter to Rotceh: Italian commerce and opera.

EXAMPLE 2: Extract from Rotceh’s letter to Xilef: Nadira (Ellimac)

She was singing (and ornamenting with all kinds of extravagant vocalizes) the theme of my First Symphony, sublime in its accent and quality, begins Alcestis’ aria, “Inexorable deities!” (Reading: “The Song of Praise composed by Shetland [Rotceh] it the talk of the town. No one before him, in our opinion, has expressed noble enthusiasm with more magnificence. Shetland [Rotceh] is a man apart. He differs from other men not only by his genius and character, but also by the mystery in his life.”) Fanny, ask my mother to come. (Evenings, pp. 271-2)

EXAMPLE 3: Extract from Rotceh’s letter to Xilef: Aeolian harp

Immediately after getting up I went and sat in my rose garden, and without thinking about it threw wide open the double door of my Aeolian harp. In an instant, floods of harmony poured into the garden; crescendos, fortes, decrescendos, pianissimos followed each other haphazard under the fiftieth breath of the wild morning breeze. I was painfully shaken, yet not in the least tempted to escape my suffering by closing the doors of the mournful instrument. On the contrary, I found pleasure in my pain and listened motionless. Just as a gust of wind stronger than the rest drew from the harp, like a cry of passion, the chord of the dominant seventh, and carried it walking through the air, it so happened that the decrescendo formed an arpeggio containing the opening bars of the theme I had heard my unknown sing the day before – the theme of my First Symphony. Amazed at this freak of nature, I opened my eyes, which I had shut at the beginning of the Aeolian concert and – there she stood before me, beautiful, strong, imperious – a goddess! (Evenings, pp. 277-8)

EXAMPLE 4: Extract from Rotceh’s letter to Xilef: Nadira (Ellimac) and ornamentation

“You sing – too well.”
“What do you mean, ‘too well’?”
“I mean, madam, that in the Gluck Festival florid singing is not allowed. You shine especially by the lightness and grace of your ornaments; hence there is no room for it in a ceremony that is eminently in the grand, epic style.” (Evenings, pp. 278-9)

[At the Gluck festival:]
“Euphonians,” she begins, “I am not known to you. Only yesterday I was but an ordinary woman gifted with a brilliant and agile voice, and nothing more. High art had not been revealed to me. I have just heard Alcestis for the first time in my life, and with you I have admired the splendid majesty of Shetland’s Song. Now I understand, I have heard. I have come to life: I am an artist. The instinct of genius alone, Shetland’s genius, could have divined this. Allow me therefore, before crowning the god of expressiveness, to prove to you, his faithful worshippers, that I am worthy of this signal honor, and that our great Shetland was not mistaken.”

At these words, tearing the pearls and gems from her hair, she flings them to the ground, tramples them underfoot (as a symbol of recantation), places her hand over her heart, bows her head to Gluck, and in a voice sublime in its accent and quality, begins Alcestis’ aria, “Inexorable deities!” (Evenings, p. 280)
When he requested that she return, Nadira, with gestures and words of angry and beastly nature, her low nature shown up by the fear of being the subject of ridicule, turned on herself with a sharply accelerated motion which masked the doors and windows with the immense keyboard played by the conductor following the directions of the composer. (Evenings, p. 319)

The instant Xilef had pressed the spring that released the secret mechanism of the summerhouse, the steel pavilion burst with a sound of such violence that all the nearby trees and the walls of the summerhouse were thrown into confusion. Xilef, standing with his hand on a steel button in the outer wall of the summerhouse, follows them with his eyes. Very soon the strains of an irresistible waltz are heard, while groups of dancers form and whirl. Xilef, standing by the window, saw the summerhouse turn on itself with a sharply accelerated motion which masked the doors and windows with the immense keyboard played by the conductor following the directions of the composer. (Evenings, p. 291)

Xilef lost no time before calling on the inventor. After telling him the object of his visit, he asked whether it was possible to add to the summerhouse a special and powerful mechanism, the nature and effect of which he described, and the existence of which was to be kept secret by both of them. (Evenings, p. 291)

Evenings, pp. 289-90

The assortment of players whose coming together constitutes an orchestra could be regarded as its strings, tubes, chests and surfaces, made of wood or metal – machines bearing intelligence but subordinate to the action of an immense keyboard played by the conductor following the directions of the composer. (p. 319)

His [the conductor’s] feelings and emotions will then pass to them [the players], his inner flame will warm them, his electricity will charge them, his drive will propel them. He will radiate the vital spark of music. (p. 337)

Unless you are writing stopped notes for a particular effect you should at least avoid those whose tone is too weak and too unlike the rest of the horn’s range, such as d', d'', b', a and a#, which should never be used for filling in but only for the special effect of their harsh, muffled, savage sound. (p. 170)

There is another sense in which Berlioz’s craft is modern. At certain points in the book he advocates techniques and the curious passage where Berlioz subdivides the violins for a passage in constant quaver movement […] This was certainly a new concept of orchestration, manipulating the allocation of notes to create an effect unperceived by the players themselves. (pp. xxxi-xxxii)

Euphonia is governed in military fashion and subjected to a despotic regime. (Evenings, p. 283)

An ingenious mechanism, which might have been invented some five or six centuries earlier if someone had taken the trouble to design it, and which is actuated by the conductor without being visible to the public, indicates to the eye of each performer, and quite close to him, the beats of each measure. It also denotes precisely the several degrees of piano or forte. In this way the performers are immediately and instantaneously in touch with the conductor’s intention, and can respond to it as promptly as do the hammers of a piano under the hand pressing the keys. (Evenings, pp. 286-7)

Any marking of the rhythm by bodily movements during the singing is strictly forbidden to the choristers. They are also trained to silence, a silence so absolute and profound that if three thousand Euphonian choristers were assembled in the amphitheater or in any other resonant place, one could still hear the buzzing of an insect, and a blind man in their midst might think he was quite alone. (Evenings, p. 286)

There is another sense in which Berlioz’s craft is modern. At certain points in the book he advocates techniques and the curious passage where Berlioz subdivides the violins for a passage in constant quaver movement […] This was certainly a new concept of orchestration, manipulating the allocation of notes to create an effect unperceived by the players themselves. (pp. xxxi-xxxii)
M. Erard arrives; but try as he will, the piano, which is out of its mind, has no intention of minding him either. He sends for holy water and sprinkles the keyboard with it—in vain: proof that it wasn’t witchcraft, but the natural result of thirty performances of one concerto. They take the instrument and remove the keyboard, still moving up and down, and throw it into the middle of the courtyard next to the Warehouse. There M. Erard in a fury has it chopped up with an ax. You think that did it? It made matters worse: each piece danced, jumped, frisked about separately—on the paving stones, between our legs, against the wall, in all directions, until the locksmith of the Warehouse picked up this bedeviled mechanism in one armful and flung it into the fire of his forge to put an end to it. Poor M. Erard! Such a fine instrument! We were heartbroken, but what could we do? There was no other way to lose its grip. But after all, how can a piano hear a concerto thirty times in the same hall on the same day without contracting the habit of it? M. Mendelssohn won’t be able to complain that his music isn’t being played. But think of the damage” (pp. 218-9.)

Notes are “played staccato with a most incredible rapidity, such that each note produces only a dry sound that is extinguished immediately after it is played and is thus perfectly detached from the notes that both precede and follow, resembling passages of this sort as might be played at the nut of the bow on a fine double bass by a steam engine—because I can imagine no human arm, even that of some Dragonetti or Dragonettis, that would be capable of such incredible agility. (Journal des débats, 12 June 1836. Translated by Peter Bloom in Cécile Raynaud, ‘Berlioz, Liszt, and the Question of Virtuosity’, Berlioz: Past, Present, Future (ed. Bloom). N. Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003, p. 116; emphasis in original)

BERLIOZ AND THE TRAIN

EXAMPLE 18: Fear of derailment

“I’m going to return to Vienna after my third concert, which is taking place in the theatre tomorrow; […] and I will arrive just before the rehearsal, provided the carriages don’t jump the rails!” (Berlioz to Joseph D’Ortigue, Prague, 27 January 1846. Correspondance Générale vol. 3 (ed. Pierre Citron ). Paris: Flamarion, 1978, p. 310).

Berlioz on his trip to Lille in 1846: ‘The railway made an exceptional concession for its inaugurators, in that we reached Arras without being derailed once.’ (Berlioz, Les Grotesques de la musique (1859). Translated by Alastair Bruce, The Musical Madhouse, N. Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003, pp. 179-82.)

EXAMPLE 19 Composing Faust

Seeing me approach at such speed the station staff took me for a passenger who was late for a train and directed me to the ticket window saying “Hurry now, you’ve only got five minutes!” So I go. Everyone else pulls out a purse, so I too reach for my purse. They go up to the window, so I do too. They ask for Second Class, so I ask for Second Class too. The clerk slips me a piece of paper through the window with my change saying “Second Class for Enghien”. “So it’s for Enghien” “Yes, sir. Isn’t that what you want to go?” “Yes, perhaps. I seem to be going there. I’m not sure. All right, I’ll go to Enghien…” “…quarantens puellas eunam… at crus… fortunate Caeumares… dicamus: veni, vidi… vici.”

Still mumbling my gaudeamus I got into the train and it left. But as the movement of the locomotive beat out a rhythm quite different from the one that had been battering my brain a few minutes before, I could see that I was going to forget my song; I quickly wrote it down in my notebook, and after a difficult confinement I fell asleep. (Journal des débats, 6 September 1846, translated by Hugh Macdonald, “Berlioz takes the train,” in Hector Berlioz: Ein Franzose in Deutschland, eds. Matthias Brzoska, Hermann Holer, and Nicole Strohmann, Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 2005, p. 219).

BERLIOZ, LA DAMNATION DE FAUST

EXAMPLE 20: ‘Chœur des soldats et chanson des étudiants’ (p. 234, mm. 132-7)

EXAMPLE 21: Evocation, Menuet des follets, Sérénade de Méphistophélès

Scene XII : Une rue devant la maison de Marguerite.

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES :
Esprits des flambeaux inconstantes,
Accourez! j’ai besoin de vous.
Accourez ! Accourez !
Follets capricieux, vos lueurs malfaisantes
Vont charmer une enfant et l’amener à nous.
Au nom du Diable, en danse !
Et vous, marquez bien la cadence,
Mêtriers d’enfer, ou je vous étiez tous !

Menuet des Follets
(Le follets exécutent des évolutions et des danses bizarres autour de la maison de Marguerite.)

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES (Il fait les mouvements d’un homme qui joue de la vielle)
Maintenant,
Chantons à cette belle une chanson morale,
Pour la perdre plus sûrement

Sérénade de Méphistophélès

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES
Devant la maison
De celui qui t’adore [etc]

Scene XII : A street in front of Marguerite’s house

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES:
Spirits of the flickering flames
Hasten! I need you.
Hasten! Hasten!
Capricious will-o’-the-wisps, your evil glow
Is going to bewitch a child and bring her to us.
In the name of the Devil, dance!
And you, mark well the rhythm,
Fiddlers of hell, or I’ll extinguish you all!

Minuet of will-o’-the-wisps
(The will-o’-the-wisps carry out bizarre movements and dances around Marguerite’s house.)

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES (He makes the movements of a man who plays a hurdy gurdy)
Now,
Sing to this beauty a moral song,
To damn her all more surely.

Méphistophélès’ Serenade

MÉPHISTOPHÉLES
In front of the house
Of the one whom you love [etc]
21 (b) Evocation, p. 273, mm. 1-8

21 (c) Evocation, p. 278, mm. 41-3

21 (d) Serenade, p. 313, mm. 1-4

EXAMPLE 22: ‘La course à l’abîme’

22 (a) Text

**Scène XVII** Requiem et chasse

[..]

**FAUST**

Qu’est-ce que tu veux?

**MEPHISTOPHELÉS**

De toi?

Rien qu’une signature

Sur ce vieux parchemin.

Je sauve Marguerite à l’instant,

Si tu jures

Et signes ton serment

De me servir demain.

**FAUST**

Eh ! que me fait demain quand je souffre à cette heure ?

Donne.

(II signe)

Voilà mon nom.

Vers sa sombre demeure

Ô douleur insensée !

Marguerite, j’accours !

**MÉPHISTOPHELÉS**

À moi, Vortex ! Giaour !

Sur ces deux noirs chevaux, prompts comme la pensée,

Montons, et au galop…

Justice est pressée.

(II partent)

**SCÉNE XVIII** Plaines, montagnes et vallées

La course à l’abîme

(Faust et Méphistophéles galopant sur deux chevaux noirs.)

**FAUST**

Dans mon cœur retentit sa voix désespérée ;

Ô pauvre abandonnée !

**PAYANS**

(AGENSOUILLES DEVANT UNE CROIX CHAMPÊTRE)

Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis

Sancta Magdalena, ora pro nobis.

**FAUST**

Prends garde à ces enfants,

A ces femmes priant

Au pied de cette croix.

**MEPHISTOPHELÉS**

**Scène XVII** Recitative and hunt

[..]

**FAUST**

What do you require?

**MEPHISTOPHELÉS**

From you?

Nothing but a signature on this old parchment.

I’ll save Marguerite in a flash

If you swear

And sign an oath

To serve me tomorrow.

**FAUST**

Ha! What do I care about tomorrow when I’m suffering right now?

Give it to me.

(He signs.)

Here is my name.

To her gloomy abode

Oh torturous grief!

Marguerite, I’m coming!

**MEPHISTOPHELÉS**

Come to me, Vortex! Giaour!

On these two black horses, quick as thought,

Let us mount, and gallop …

Justice will not wait.

(They leave.)

**SCENE XVIII** Plains, mountains and valleys

The ride to the abyss

(Faust and Mephistopheles galloping on two black horses.)

**FAUST**

In my heart resounds her despairing voice

Oh poor abandoned one!

**PEASANTS**

(KNEELING BEFORE A WAYSIDE CROSS)

Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis.

Sancta Magdalena, ora pro nobis.

**FAUST**

Be careful of those children,

And those women praying

At the foot of that cross.
Eh, qu'importe ! en avant!

PAYSANS
Sancta Margarita – Ah!!

(Les femmes et les enfants se dispersant épouvantés.)

FAUST
Dieux !
Un monstre hideux
En hurlant
Nous poursuit !

MÉPHISTOPHELES
Tu rêves !

FAUST
Quel essaim de grands oiseaux de nuit !
Quels cris affreux !
Ils me frappent de l’aile !

MÉPHISTOPHELES (REPINANT SON CHEVAL)
Le glas des trépassés sonne déjà pour elle.
As-tu peur ? Retournons !

(Mis s'arrêtent.)

FAUST
Non, je l'entends, courons !

(Le cheval redoublent de vitesse.)

MÉPHISTOPHELES (ÉPERONNANT SON CHEVAL)
Hop! Hop!
Hop!... Hop! (etc)

Ah, who cares ?? Keep going !

PEASANTS
Sancta Margarita – Ah!!

(The women and children scatter in fear.)

FAUST
Gods!
A hideous monster
Howling
Is pursuing us!

MÉPHISTOPHELES
You’re dreaming!

FAUST
What a swarm of night birds!
What fearful shrieks!
They’re striking me with their wings!

MÉPHISTOPHELES (REINING IN HIS HORSE)
The death knell is already sounding for her.
Are you afraid? Let’s turn back.

(The horses redouble their speed.)

MÉPHISTOPHELES (SPURRING ON HIS HORSE)
Hup! Hup!
Hup!... Hup ! (etc)

22 (b) La course à l’abîme, pp. 401-402, mm. 1-9

La course à l’abîme

Fausse et démonstrée qu’un homme se suicide

22 (c) La course à l’abîme. p. 406, mm. 65-8
Now let us look at the theories said to be those of his school, the school generally called the Music of the Future. It bears this name because it is deemed to be diametrically opposed to the musical taste of the present day, and certain to find itself perfectly in harmony with the taste of a future time.

For many years now, I have been credited in Germany and elsewhere with views on this subject that are not mine. I have often received praise that I could have taken as a virtual insult; I have kept silent throughout. Now that I am called upon to explain myself categorically, can I still stay silent? Or should I utter a profession of faith that is a lie? Nobody, I should hope, entertains that expectation.

Let me speak then, in complete frankness. If the school of the future says the following: […]

“Operas should not be composed for singers; on the contrary, the singers should be trained for the operas.

“Works composed for the sole purpose of showing off the talents of virtuosi can only be works of a secondary order, usually of little value.

“Performers are merely more or less intelligent instruments whose task is to bring out the form and inner meaning of the work; their despotic rule is over.

“Beauty of sound ranks below the idea; the idea ranks below feeling and passion.

“Lengthy and rapid vocal flourishes, ornaments, and trills, and many kinds of rhythms are all incompatible with the expression of most serious, noble, and deep feelings. […]

If such be the musical code of the school of the future, then I belong to this school, I belong to it body and soul, with the deepest conviction and the most ardent fellow feeling. […]

But, if that school maintains: […]

“We must concentrate only on the idea and ignore the senses altogether. […]

“No distinction need be made between music that is read by a musician sitting quietly in front of his stand and that which has to be sung form memory, on stage, by a performer who must also attend to his acting and that of others.

“We need not concern ourselves over what is possible or impossible in performance. […]

If this is the new religion – very new indeed – I am very far from professing it; I never have joined it, I do not join it now, and never shall. I raise my hand and swear: Non credo.