

Jacques Barzun on Hector Berlioz
and
The Damnation of Faust

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Side A, band 1:

There's been a good deal of talk during the last couple of years about a Berlioz revival. In fact it was just this past summer, a month or two ago, that the magazine *High Fidelity* published a very interesting article by Mr. John Burk entitled "The Emergence of Berlioz" [July 1954, pages 26–28, 98–100]. Mr. Burk, incidentally, is the commentator of the Boston Symphony, and it is he who has written the excellent notes to this particular recording of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*. And Mr. Burk makes it clear that one of the great influences leading to this revival or this emergence of Berlioz is the existence of the long playing record.

I remember very well at the beginning of my studies of Berlioz that all one could get on records was a few pieces, very short, and of course very breakable, and entirely out of context. With regard to the *Damnation*, in fact, the concertgoers of that time and the record collectors knew only the Hungarian March, the Dance of the Sylphs, and the Minuet of the Will-o'-the-Wisps – the three orchestral excerpts that were standbys for conductors who wanted to do a little Berlioz. And of course that is what led to the extremely misleading estimate that people had of this composer. They thought of him as a person who wrote some rather showy pieces – a very few – which cropped up occasionally at the beginning or at the end of a program.

With the advent of the long playing record this has completely changed and now you meet hundreds of persons who know backwards and forwards the *Romeo and Juliet* symphony or *The Damnation of Faust*. And one may therefore speak of the revival or the emergence of Berlioz some three-quarters of a century after his death.

He needs only to be well known to be favorably known. He needs only to be known for what he can do to be very much loved. And what he can do is of course something that right now we are peculiarly inclined to like. He is a composer of dramatic music of a kind that requires no scenery and no actors, no footlights. You don't have to be in the opera house in order to follow the great drama of Faust that he composed in music.

If you want to know the principle on which he composed this work, all you have to think of is the twin influences under which he himself composed it. He was inspired early in life with the desire to write a Faust piece. And he was at the same time greatly inspired by the reading of Shakespeare, which happened to be, by the way, a discovery – a revival – in the 1820s on the continent of Europe. And Shakespeare provided him, so to speak, with the model of the dramatic construction: short scenes, some longer than others, but discontinuous and each just as intensely dramatic as it can be; each highly characteristic, as profoundly psychological as it can be made, and leading with only the briefest of transition to the next climactic moment in which another dramatic situation is disclosed.

That is why of course *The Damnation of Faust* is a drama in music and not an opera. It does not go on the operatic stage successfully because it wasn't meant to be presented that way. But this means that the listener must be closely in tune with the dramatic intention and with the dramatic purpose of the composer. He must be ready to modulate quickly, too, to understand that the character of one moment is going to be very different and contrasting from that of the next. For example, the piece begins without an overture, with a long pastoral movement in which Faust reviews his spiritual situation. And this is followed very quickly – too quickly for some people – with the scene of villagers dancing and singing (singing rather crude, vulgar words) having a good time – the contrast providing precisely what the composer wants to create his dramatic conflict inside the soul of Faust. It's because Faust does not share this joy, because Faust does not in the next piece, which is the famous Hungarian March, feel at one with the warriors, that gradually he's led to thoughts of suicide. And so it goes. But it would be a mistake to suppose that there is not continuity in the thought, in the purpose, or even in the musical themes. But that is

the business of a more extended analysis than I have time for here. Every listener will make it for himself as he grows more and more familiar with what Sir Thomas Beecham has called “a glorious bunch of tunes.”

Side A, band 2:

Those who like the music of Berlioz do so because of certain unique characteristics of his. That's of course the way one loves any particular composer; he can do something that no one else can do. And if I were asked to single out one or two of the most important things that Berlioz does in music I would say this, that the first is a constant melodic inventiveness. Berlioz thinks melodically to begin with as soon as he has a dramatic idea, as soon as he has a psychological insight. And so you find in *The Damnation of Faust* that everything from the set songs themselves to the shortest bits of *recitative* have an indefinable quality which is Berliozian, and which at the same time tells you something about the character that is singing the particular words. You find, as in the operas of Mozart, that the airs given to a single person of the drama have a family likeness. You can follow Faust, Margaret, and particularly Mephisto throughout the piece and recognize that they are dramatic creations. You also find all sorts of interesting musical connections among pieces. But of course all this comes only when one is familiar with the work by ear.

One discovers, for example, that the Dance of the Sylphs is the third variant of a melody which is first enunciated in the Mephisto aria, “Here Are Roses.” But this comes, as it were, by analysis. When one is simply listening for enjoyment, one is perhaps more struck by a second characteristic, and that is the conciseness, the terseness with which Berlioz explores an idea and deals with it. At first that may be bewildering. One would like to have more go on until one gets oriented or adjusted to the mood. But it's better to miss it on a first go and repeat than to imagine Berlioz diluting his inspiration. He tried very definitely for concision and he recast the Faust story – taking it from Goethe but altering it as Goethe himself had done and as Marlowe had done – so as to extract from it a perfectly clear and yet a not discursive story of how a man was damned for what was a profoundly immoral act, not only the betrayal of Gretchen, but also the betrayal of his own commitment to his own soul.

Side A, band 3:

Now in composing this work, Berlioz was happily able to combine two elements of artistic power which seldom come together in any work of art. I mean the inspirations of youth with the mastery of maturity. We must remember that the core of *The Damnation of Faust* was the so-called *Eight Scenes from Faust* (actually nine because two of the scenes were tied together) which Berlioz called his Opus 1 and which he published in 1828, shortly after having read *Faust* in a French translation and been absolutely electrified by the songs that he immediately set with great rapidity. He was not pleased with certain of the details and he suppressed the work and tried to destroy the extant copies, of which there are hardly more than a dozen in the world today. Twenty years later he took up the same theme – and characteristically while travelling through

Germany – composed the rest and then fashioned it in his peculiar way, which he had learned (as he said and thought) from Shakespeare, providing *recitatives* which make the narrative perfectly clear and yet which do not impair the autonomy – the independence – of each dramatic scene. Now those listeners who are familiar with Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet* symphony will recognize here the same technique at work, and one need hardly say more, except to add that ... well, to add two things: One, that no matter how often one hears the work one discovers more and more refinement of detail, more and more fine engraving of either musical or dramatic or poetic purpose; but also that the often rehearing is best done with intervals in between. That's something that Berlioz insisted on all his life – that great dramatic music should not be repeated every night of the week in every concert hall. And that's quite easily understandable. That's the way we deal with Shakespeare himself. Or that's the way we ought to deal perhaps with the Beethoven symphonies, which some people have felt have been worn out by excessive repetition, repetition which dulls the contrast, which leaves no unexpectedness, and which makes us absentminded because we know exactly what's coming and it has no freshness and no energy, no impact upon our sensibility. So repeat Berlioz indeed just as often as the taste for it requires, but do it with intervals so that you can come to this whole tremendous drama with a rested and a receptive mind.