Berlioz's "Messe des Morts" and Its Performance in Glasgow

Author(s): Fr. Niecks

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 25, No. 493 (Mar. 1, 1884), pp. 129-131

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3355996>

Accessed: 25/01/2015 08:55

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

MARCH 1, 1884.

BERLIOZ'S "MESSE DES MORTS" AND ITS PERFORMANCE IN GLASGOW

By FR. NIECKS.

BERLIOZ begins to weigh upon the artistic conscience of our time like a horrible nightmare, and unless an heroic effort is made to rouse ourselves, to break the paralysing spell, the result will be fatal, no less than death to the feeling of ideal beauty—of the true, pure, serene, noble and genuinely sublime. The prestige of the French master, a prestige by no means wholly baseless, has made cowards of a multitude that now lies prostrate—worshipping in awe rather than in love and trusting, undoubting faith—before the idol it but lately ridiculed. Small is the number of those who dare to form an opinion on the "Messe des Morts," smaller still the number of those who dare to express their opinion if they have formed an adverse one. Under these circumstances a bold and even violent declaration may not be unwelcome, and certainly cannot be unseasonable or unjustifiable; for which reason I venture to state my humble opinion without preamble, apology, and circumlocution.

The "Messe des Morts," so far from being a thing of beauty that will remain a joy for ever, is but a remarkable monstrosity that will occupy the curiosity of the musical world for a little while and then become a dead item of history. It is a *rudis indigestaque moles*, a chaotic jumble of matter, forms, and styles. Ghastly *simulacra* of plain-chant, early a *cappella* style, later imitative counterpoint, and most modern romanticism, jostle each other in grotesque confusion. Thus, whilst readily admitting that the work is rich in beautiful details—in wonderful effects of instrumental colouring, harmonic combination, and architectural disposition—I cannot help regarding it as *non bene junctarum discordia semina rerum*. I am not an indiscriminate disparager of Berlioz. It is possible to admire "Harold" and "Faust" without applauding the "Requiem." I still think, as I did some years ago, that Berlioz is an artist not perfect, but of many perfections. He shows to advantage when he deals with romantic, picturesque subjects, or subjects admitting a romantic, picturesque treatment; in short, subjects in which his eccentricity, explosive passionateness, and love of the fantastic and colossal find ample scope. But in the "Messe des Morts" the composer undertook a task for which his character and genius wholly unfitted him. The all-absorbing tendency of his nature was externality and realism; the subject, on the other hand, demanded inwardness and ideality.

My friend, Mr. Barry, allowed himself to be so far carried away by his zeal to secure for Berlioz's work a good reception as to speak slightly of the composers in the *a cappella* style.* Palestrina's compositions "passionless and arid"? Well, passionless they may be, but that they are arid cannot be seriously maintained for a moment. I will not now enter on a discussion of the question whether passionless or emotional music is preferable for liturgical purposes. Indeed, in order not to complicate my argument I will grant that the emotional element is not only admissible, but in our time even indispensable. Now, however, I ask: Does Berlioz in

the "Messe des Morts" evolve the emotions inherent in his subject? It seems to me that every unprejudiced judge must answer this question with an emphatic "No." Where, indeed, will he find in this work true devoutness, heartfelt repentance, clinging faith, spiritual exaltation? If Berlioz succeeds in impressing his hearers with anything it is terror. And how does he produce this effect? By noise, by the unloosening of the elemental forces of the toneworld. Still this frank brutality is more pleasing than the trickeries and the continual straining after the unusual and unexpected in the more subdued portions of the work. What of edification we derive from these latter is to a great extent owing to the relief they afford our tortured auditory organs. Should the music itself not be a sufficiently convincing proof of the fact that Berlioz's sympathies were mainly engaged by the *Tuba mirum spargens sonum* and other similar passages of the text, let him who doubts take up and read the master's letters and "Mémoires," where all his self-gratulating, self-glorifying talk centres in the "terrible musical cataclysms." In one word, the radical fault of Berlioz's work is its insincerity. To speak in one breath of the "Messe des Morts" and Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" is blasphemy. Beethoven's work is full of the warmest, intensest, and purest religiosity; that of Berlioz is in this respect absolutely inane—*vox, et præterea nihil*. Beethoven wrote above the *Kyrie* of his work, "From the heart it has come, to the heart it shall go." Berlioz could not have said this of any part of his work. For, without exception, every one of them is more or less the result of calculation—they are made, not born. And how could it be otherwise? Listen to what Ferdinand Hiller says concerning his friend's religious and artistic constitution: "Of his Catholic education every trace had disappeared; doubts of all sorts had possession of him, and the contempt of what he called prejudice bordered on the monstrous. . . . I had been brought up, as regards religious views, in pure deism, and also my artistic views were, so to speak, of a deistic nature. Berlioz believed neither in a God nor in Bach—neither in absolute beauty in art nor in virtue in life." ("Künstlerleben," p. 70.) Surely all the gifts that nature can bestow and science and practice develop will not enable such a man to become a creator of sacred music.

The character of Berlioz presents a strange conglomeration of qualities, some of them noble, others the very reverse of admirable. Mr. Barry, in placing unlimited confidence in the autobiographer's trustworthiness, committed a grave error. He thereby not only made his otherwise so carefully collected and pleasantly marshalled data defective, but he also helped to disseminate unfounded accusations against two honourable and universally known men. Berlioz had either no moral sense, or—and this is the more likely supposition—his mental vision and memory were vitiated by a too active imagination. At any rate, his so-called "Mémoires" are a string of fables, not to use a stronger word. "It is necessary," writes Edmond Hippeau, an enthusiastic admirer and indefatigable proclaimer of the master's genius, in his "Berlioz Intime" (which first appeared in the pages of "La Renaissance Musicale," and lately in book-form), "that we should search for the motives of Berlioz's deceptions and incessant criminations against his contemporaries, collaborators, rivals, or enemies. As in the narration of the romance—that is to say, in the study of Berlioz in love—I have still to cite and criticise texts, for I continue to reconstruct the true Berlioz—a person very different from the legendary Berlioz painted by the 'Mémoires' and by the biographers who have been taken in by this confession which is a perpetual apology." The

* I allude to Mr. C. A. Barry's interesting Introductory Notice of Berlioz's "Messe des Morts" written for a Crystal Palace programme and reprinted with an additional Musical Analysis in the programme of the eleventh Glasgow Choral Union Concert, of January 31, 1884.

two calumniated musicians above alluded to are Cherubini and Habeneck, the former of whom Berlioz accuses of having intrigued against the performance of the "Messe des Morts," and the latter of having laid down the conducting-stick and taken a pinch of snuff at the most critical moment of the performance. To the first accusation, a letter written by Berlioz to Cherubini, on March 24, 1837, and published in the second edition of the "Correspondance Inédite," gives a downright denial. It runs: "I am deeply touched by your noble abnegation, which leads you to refuse your admirable 'Requiem' for the ceremony of the Invalides. Be convinced of my heartiest gratitude." Halévy's conduct in this affair is defended by Berlioz's devoted young friend, Ernest Reyer. "Berlioz attributes to Halévy a rather pitiable [*triste*] rôle, which does not seem to us compatible with the honourable, elevated, and benevolent character of the author of 'La Juive.' Berlioz was of a very irritable and also somewhat suspicious nature. . . . Well, I will not believe with Berlioz that Halévy's calling on the director of the *Journal des Débats* had another object [than that of getting for Cherubini as a consolation the *croix de commandeur de la légion d'honneur*]." With regard to Habeneck, M. Hippeau remarks: "The letter to Ferrand [dated December 17, 1837; see 'Lettres intimes,' p. 178], which gives an account of the performance of the 'Requiem,' says not a word about the affair of the snuff-box. Only one line in it is about the conductor, and that line partakes of the general enthusiasm: 'Even Habeneck has altogether come round again' [*est tout-à-fait revenu*]. Afterwards, when the chapter of the 'Mémoires' appeared in the *Monde Illustré*, Berlioz wrote to his friend—namely, twenty years afterwards: 'You will read in the last number the narration (much weakened) of the crime attempted against me by Cavé and Habeneck at the first performance of my "Requiem." But is this not a story imagined after the event, seeing that we find no trace of it either in the letter of 1837 or in the accounts of the *Débats* and *Gazette Musicale*, where Berlioz would not have failed to mention so grave an incident?' Although the result of my own endeavours to ascertain the truth of Berlioz's statements is not conclusive, it corroborates the conclusions of M. Hippeau. No one remembered having heard at the time of such an occurrence, and even one who had been present at the performance as an executant knew nothing of it. All were of opinion that Berlioz must have drawn the story from his inner consciousness.* It would be easy to point out other discrepancies between the letters and the 'Mémoires' in the composer's account of the circumstances, especially of the pecuniary transactions, in connection with the performance of the "Requiem," but we must tarry over these matters no longer.

This historical digression is not so foreign to a criticism of the work under discussion as may at first sight appear; it is indeed a comment on my remarks about the insincerity of Berlioz. In life and in art he is for ever attitudinising and striving after effect. He does not for a moment forget that he is in presence of an audience, though the audience may be his most intimate friend. His supreme endeavour is always to make himself interesting, and to set

the world agape. To effect he sacrifices unhesitatingly truth, friendship, the sanctities of love, and all that is noble and beautiful. Could Berlioz have written the Offertory ("Domine Jesu Christe"), with its chorus throughout, except at the close, on two notes, if he had been in earnest, absorbed in his theme? To be sure, the composition is a wonderful *tour de force*, and not without charm; but the procedure savours rather of the artificial than of the artistic—at any rate, is out of keeping with the gravity of the occasion and the import of the words. Berlioz's insincerity is further exemplified by his imitations of styles which he regarded as embryonic or pedantic. How strange that one who looked down with contempt on Palestrina, and jeered and sneered at those who composed fugues, should write the "Quaerens me," the "Hosanna in excelsis," and other portions of the "Messe des Morts"! Such a sacrilegious hypocrisy did not escape the punishment it deserved—the attempted imitations resulted in miserable failures. Cherubini said truly of Berlioz, "If he does not love the fugue, it is because the fugue does not love him" ("S'il n'aime pas la fugue, c'est que la fugue ne l'aime pas"). In listening to the "Quaerens me," you think you hear a rehearsal by the singers, without the instrumentalists, of an accompanied choral work. How empty, desolate, un-beautiful this is! The voices wander hither and thither like disconsolate shades on the shores of Acheron. Perhaps some one will tell us that this is an intended effect. But then what becomes of art? Unless art can in some way idealise the real, transmute by a subtle alchemy ugliness into beauty, it has no business to meddle with the real and the ugly. However, the words in question neither demand nor naturally suggest such a treatment; they are a heartfelt prayer inspired by the consciousness of guilt and the trustfulness of firm faith, being characterised above all by warmth and sweetness. The melodic element in this and other parts of the "Messe des Morts" is often wanting in nobility, and not rarely exhibits awkwardness. Berlioz's talent is indeed rhythmic, harmonic, and chromatic, rather than melodic. To this deficiency of natural melodic flow—very conspicuous in his part-writing, most conspicuous in his counterpoint, than which nothing can be more hard, dry, and angular—may be to a great extent ascribed the ineffectiveness of the choruses.

Berlioz is now universally acknowledged as an unsurpassed master in the handling of orchestral resources. Unfortunately his love of the unexpected and the grand, as he understands it, leads him frequently into doubtful paths. The combination of three flutes and eight tenor trombones in the "Hostias," and four flutes and eight tenor trombones in the "Agnus Dei"—the flutes soaring in the higher regions and the trombones descending to the lowermost depths (the composer makes here use of the unusual "pedal-notes")—reminds one of the dangerous proximity of the sublime and the ridiculous. *Du sublime au ridicule il n'y a qu'un pas*. The most striking feature of the work is, however, the unprecedented instrumental force. With regard to it I must confess (may the shade of Berlioz forgive me!) that I cannot help thinking the effect produced by the five bands with their imposing, nay, overwhelming array of drums is far from being commensurate with the means employed. Moreover, I feel inclined to pronounce the sixteen variously tuned kettle-drums that roll forth harmonious thunder in full chords a complete failure. As to the four brass bands, what are they compared to the one trumpet of the poem?

Tuba mirum spargens sonum
Per sepulchra regionum,
Coget omnes ante thronum.

* But even if Cherubini and his friends made efforts to get his "Requiem" performed, this was by no means so shocking a proceeding as Berlioz seems to have imagined. In this case the greatest musician of the time, whom Beethoven had honoured above all his contemporaries, who held the highest musical post in France, and whose compositions had hitherto graced the most solemn occasions, would have claimed the precedence due to his genius, reputation, and position. To speak of Cherubini as of an impotent botcher intriguing against a better man is simply ridiculous. Moreover, the romanticism of Berlioz must have been to the classic a thing of evil. That Cherubini owed Berlioz no debt of love the "Mémoires" prove only too well.

No more than mere toy instruments. Here is another bark split on the rock of realism. The impression the hearer receives from the "Tuba mirum" and the other "terrible cataclysms" is unquestionably "foudroyant," but it is equally unquestionably purely physical. In short, we may accept wholly and literally the composer's own description, "*C'est d'une horrible grandeur.*"

More satisfaction give the less noisy portions—the "Lachrymosa," "Offertorium," "Hostias," "Sanctus," and "Agnus Dei." There is, however, on the whole—if we except the "Lachrymosa," and a section or passage here and there—little design in them (design in contradistinction to masses of colour, and light and shade). Were I to discuss the work in detail, I would object to the cutting up of the prose Dies Iræ into small separate sections, a procedure of course not peculiar to Berlioz, but perhaps less felicitously accomplished by him than by many of his great predecessors. Some of these sections (notably the "Quid sum miser") have too much the appearance of pigmies among giants, of miniatures beside immense wall-paintings. Nor would I leave unnoticed the composer's capricious omissions and re-arrangements of the words of the text, of which I can neither approve nor see the necessity.

With a work of the nature of the "Messe des Morts" all depends upon the execution. Unless the number of performers amounts at least to the minimum prescribed, a perfect *ensemble* has been obtained by assiduous training, and the indications of time, expression, &c., are carefully attended to down to the smallest detail, the idea of the composer cannot be realised. To this should be added that the performance ought to be held in a dimly-lighted church, and the executants placed so as to be invisible to the audience. None of these conditions obtained at the performances of the work in this country. Let us keep this in mind. Massiveness, for instance, is one of the exigencies without which much that would be imposing turns out poor and even ridiculous. I see in the score many possibilities which the Glasgow performance on January 31, 1884 (the first in Scotland, the third in Britain), did not reveal to me.* Nevertheless, considering that the chorus had only twelve practisings and but one rehearsal with the bands, and that the rehearsals of the bands did not exceed the number of two, the performance was very creditable to all concerned—to Mr. Manns, the conductor, to Mr. Allan Macbeth, the chorus director, to Mr. Charles Chille, the solo tenor, and to the chorus and the bands. With a less clever and experienced conductor disaster, however, would hardly have been avoidable. As it was, the performance passed off—barring some vacillations, one of them rather serious, and occasional imperfections of intonation on the part of the chorus—pretty smoothly. It seemed to me that Mr. Manns took the *tempo* of the "Lachrymosa" somewhat too quick. True, in the superscription the word *andante* is accompanied by the phrase *non troppo lento*; still the *tempo* is *andante*. To do justice to this composition is no easy matter. It demands from the several choral parts the *morbidezza*

and *abbandono* of a perfect Italian vocalist, and the utmost endeavour to reproduce the grand sweeps of the melodic outline. If the *tempo* is taken ever so little too quick the peculiar treatment of the chorus calls to one's mind no less profane a thing than *opéra bouffe*. The public was at a loss what to think of the "Messe des Morts"; but although not favourably impressed, it modestly abstained from expressing any opinion. Mr. Manns received at the end an enthusiastic ovation. The best thanks of the musicians and amateurs of this country are indeed due to this earnest and indefatigable worker for the bold and difficult undertaking of making us acquainted with the great French master's colossal work. Whether further repetitions of it, especially with inadequate resources, are desirable I will not decide, but incline to the belief that it would be more profitable and delectable to turn our attention to those of Berlioz's compositions the subjects of which are more suited to the character of his genius—namely, to his romantic works. If we wish to extend our acquaintance with him, let us eschew his sacred music and choose instead something secular—for instance, his opera "Benvenuto Cellini." The weaknesses, the incongruities of the "Messe des Morts" cannot be hidden by calling it a "drama of death," a phrase as meaningless as most party watchwords. Nor can Berlioz's pride in the work be regarded as a proof of its merit. What pleases him in it is what he calls its grandeur and sublimity. But Berlioz always confounds the grand and sublime with the colossal and monstrous, as he confounded also many other notions. What Heine said of Victor Hugo may be applied with equal force to Berlioz: "*Ce n'est pas un grand homme, c'est un homme énorme.*" That any of Berlioz's productions can lay claim to the appellation "standard work" may be questioned; that he left us much that in spite, partly indeed on account, of its eccentricities deserves attention must be admitted. Berlioz is not one of those noble spirits whose works purify and elevate as well as entertain us, not one of the company which comprises Palestrina, Bach, Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven; but for all that he is a tone-poet of rare genius, and capable of affording us much pleasure, harmless pleasure as long as it does not make us neglect those masters to whom our chief devotion is due. There is truth in the words—curiously like words written by the historian Ambros on the same point—with which F. Hiller concludes his account of the French master; truth, I say, but cannot add "nothing but the truth." For to most men it is becoming clearer every day that Berlioz's fantastic, picturesque, passionate creations contain pages of exquisite beauty, and volumes of stirring romance which are a living power now and will remain so for a long time to come. In short, Hiller's words leave much in the dark, but illustrate strikingly one most important point—the unique character of the composer's genius. "Hector Berlioz does not belong to our musical solar system—he does not belong to the planets, neither to the large nor to the small. He was a comet—shining far, somewhat eerie to look at, soon again disappearing; but his appearance will remain unforgotten. That a similar one will show itself in the musical firmament is neither to be hoped nor to be feared, and hardly to be expected."

MASSENET'S "HÉRODIADÉ" AND "MANON."

THE author of "Le Roi de Lahore" is the man of the day among composers of French opera. Two works from his pen have lately engaged and are still engaging the attention of Parisian quidnuncs, not as objects of derision, but of praise and honour. The fact is quite justification enough for interest on this

* The minimum of instrumentalists and singers indicated in the score is 178 and 210. Berlioz asked for the first projected Paris production of the work (that which did not take place) 500 performers, but had to be satisfied with 450. At Glasgow there were 120 instrumentalists against 400 singers. But though the number of instrumentalists was less and the number of singers more than Berlioz's minimum, it was especially the vocal element that fell short of the requirements of the occasion. The first tenors seemed to me very weak, but also the basses lacked solidity. Indeed, greater fullness would have been desirable everywhere. Was this shortcoming owing to the distribution of the parts (the composer wrote for a chorus of two soprano, two tenor, and two bass parts; in this case the first tenor part was sung by twenty tenors and the contraltos), to inferior voice-material, or to insufficient practice? The first and the last are no doubt the chief, if not the only, causes.