

Hector Berlioz

“Harold en Italie,” Symphony in four parts with viola solo, Opus 16

HECTOR BERLIOZ was born at La Côte-St-André, near Grenoble, France, on December 11, 1803, and died in Paris on March 8, 1869. “Harold en Italie” was composed between January and June 1834 in Paris. The first performance was given at the Paris Conservatoire on November 23, 1834, with Chrétien Urhan playing the viola solo and Narcisse Girard conducting. Berlioz first conducted it himself, again with Urhan as soloist, in Paris on December 13, 1835.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO VIOLA, the score of “Harold in Italy” calls for an orchestra of two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, ophicleide or tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, harp, and strings.

No northern musician has ever visited Italy and come away unaffected. Schütz, Handel, Tchaikovsky, Bizet, Barber, and Henze have all responded in their own ways to the idyllic Italian landscape, civilized by the relics of antiquity and beautified beyond compare by the Renaissance. Wolf never went there, but he came under its spell; on Debussy, too, Italy left its mark, though he was less affected than most.

Berlioz spent more than a year in Italy in 1831 and 1832, having won the Prix de Rome, instituted by the French Government to enable French artists to study in an environment of classical art treasures, whether painting or sculpture. Musicians were loosely thought to need the same benefits, but for Berlioz the price of a few years’ state pension was exile from the central sources of his art. He had already developed a strong distaste for all Italian opera from disgust at the noisy enthusiasm of the “dilettanti,” as its fans were termed. In Rome itself he found the cultivation of music indescribably narrow and parochial; the musical establishment at St. Peter’s shocked him as being miserably inadequate for such an immense building. He was not much interested in architectural treasures in themselves, more in their potential for music. In Florence it is clear that he was more preoccupied with reading Shakespeare than with his surroundings.

In the country, on the other hand, in Subiaco, and on the long walk from Naples to Rome, he really found musical inspiration. “I long to go to Mount Posilippo,” he wrote, “to Calabria, or to Capri, and put myself in the service of a brigand chief. That’s the life I crave: volcanos, rocks, rich piles of plunder in mountain caves, a concert of shrieks accompanied by an orchestra of pistols and carbines, blood and Lacryma-Christi, a bed of lava rocked by subterranean tremors: *allons donc, voilà la vie!*”

At Alatri, on his return from Naples, Berlioz and his two Swedish hiking companions spent a dreadful night on hard beds, plagued by fleas and by the “young men serenading, going round the village all night singing beneath their mistresses’ windows, to the accompaniment of a guitar and a terrible squawking clarinet.”

Here clearly is the background to the last two movements of *Harold en Italie*. But the work did not come into being at that time. In 1834, over a year after Berlioz’s return to Paris, Paganini, in admiration of the *Symphonie fantastique*, asked Berlioz for a work in which he could display his powers on a fine Stradivarius viola. Berlioz at first planned a choral work based on the last hours of Mary Queen of Scots, but somehow the ideas were transmuted into the four-movement symphony with solo viola *Harold en Italie*, incorporating two passages that had actually been composed in Italy for the overture *Rob Roy*, which Berlioz had recently rejected. It is with Harold’s own theme that the solo viola first enters:

The new work was to be a series of Italian souvenirs in a symphonic frame with a title alluding to Byron. Donald Tovey's *bon mot* has relieved us of one obligation: "There are excellent reasons," he wrote, "for reading *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. But among them I cannot find any that concern Berlioz and this symphony." He was right insofar as the four movements of the symphony do not enact the contents of the poem, but he was wrong to suppose that Harold is an irrelevance: he is the spectator of events and scenes, not a participant in them. Harold is, of course, a Byronic Berlioz. All four movements picture outdoor scenes drawn from the most vivid experiences of his Italian stay. The melancholy of Byron's hero is clearly heard at the opening and in the third-movement Serenade, echoes of the spleen so vividly described by Berlioz in his *Memoirs*. The pilgrims and tolling bells in the second movement (defly scored for horns and harp) appeared in any Italian itinerary of the time. Mendelssohn, whom Berlioz met in Italy, put a pilgrims' march into his own *Italian* Symphony. Berlioz felt no special sense of identification with pilgrims in this movement as he did with hillsmen and brigands, but this makes no difference to the elegant musical design of the piece, nor to its evocative color. It became a favorite piece in Berlioz's concert tours in the 1840s and 1850s, often detached from the rest of the symphony.

The Serenade is an ingenious exercise in creating a folksy atmosphere while at the same time combining different rhythms, the more languorous melody on the English horn unperturbed by the jaunty piping of the hillsman or the stately span of Harold's theme. Such absorption in rhythmic detail typifies the whole symphony, composed at a time when cross-rhythms, atmospheric rhythms, and unusual rhythms of every kind were uppermost in Berlioz's mind. He was also thinking of the overlapping orchestras in the first-act finale of *Don Giovanni*, each with its own dance rhythms, and emulating the same effect.

The last movement borrows the device of parading previous themes in the manner of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, not for any convincing reason, but to draw the work together and to pay tribute to the finest symphonic model Berlioz knew. When it is the turn of Harold's theme to be recalled (on the viola), it has become so protracted after its successive elongations in previous movements that it only achieves half its span. The frenetic vigor of the finale makes a stirring close interrupted only once by distant memories of the Pilgrims' March. The solo viola's final phrases in this brief interlude are drowned by the orchestra's savage interruption, and Harold is heard no more.

Harold in Italy remains a symphony, not a concerto, for the traditional balance between soloist and orchestra is shifted. Berlioz was the first to perceive the viola's potential as an expressive instrument, and because it is a dramatic and expressive rather than a virtuoso work, the soloist is rarely the protagonist, more often a bystander marking his presence with a recurrent theme. Paganini was startled and offended by this; he found the solo part "too full of rests" and never played it, although he later came to appreciate its worth in no uncertain terms by making Berlioz a gift of 20,000 francs at a time when the composer was most in need, allowing him to compose the next symphony, *Roméo et Juliette*, fittingly dedicated to Paganini.

The music of *Harold en Italie* is full of youthful vitality, tinged with that appealing romantic sensibility that Berlioz borrowed so poetically from literature. For him it was an autobiographical vignette; the Italian experience was something to which all his later music, from *Benvenuto Cellini* to *Les Troyens*, would bear powerful witness.

Hugh Macdonald