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Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*: A Performer's Perspective



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INTRODUCTION

The year 2003 marked the bicentennial birth year of French composer Hector Berlioz (1803–1869). Berlioz is probably best known for his keen orchestration skills as evidenced in his symphonic blockbusters *Harold en Italie*, *Le Carnaval romain*, and *Symphonie fantastique*, and in his *tour de force* operas *Les Troyens*, *Béatrice et Bénédict*, and *La Damnation de Faust*. Yet he also composed several collections written for solo voice with guitar and for solo voice with piano. Of the latter, his six song work *Les Nuits d'été* is most widely studied in the voice studio. Since the set is almost always performed with orchestra, it is not commonly known that the cycle was written originally for piano accompaniment. Berlioz, at the request of particular singers who wished to

perform them, orchestrated the majority of the songs only some fifteen years after their initial 1841 publication.

Several criteria usually are considered when determining whether any given set of songs constitutes a cycle, chief among them unity of poetic idea (as in Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*) and/or unity of musical idea (as in Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*). This article does not seek to answer the question of whether *Les Nuits d'été* is by definition a song cycle, but rather assumes that it is and seeks to explore its cyclical nature based on one aspect only: that the six songs which comprise the set can be sung from the viewpoint of the same poetic and musical persona, and that the musical elements support this. The poetic persona, undoubtedly that of a young lover, begins a metaphorical journey in which he experiences the beginning of love, philosophizes on its nature, undergoes the agony of separation, endures the death of his beloved, yet moves through it all and emerges with an unsought wisdom.

The voice of the poetic persona is, of course, only one aspect of the larger “voice” question. Who speaks when we unite poetry with music? If we start with the concept of *self*, is it the *self* of the poet? The composer? The performer? Clearly the voice of the poem and the voice of the music can be and often are different, and it is the composer's voice that initially serves to bring an amalgamation of the two. But what of the interpreter, the performer? Certainly the singer adds immensely to the listener's understanding of the text-with-words

phenomenon, a necessary interpreter of this new hybrid of two arts. The performer adds a third voice, forges yet another persona, through which the listener may be either transported or shut out; this persona changes with each performance, is highly subject to individual interpretation, and is never static. The “voice” of the poetry/music (i.e., art song) is constantly evolving based on the singer's personal experiences and, more importantly, that of the audience. The listener hears only what he has ears to hear; yet the hearer's own nature, background, temperament—in short, his subjectivity—is paramount to his enjoyment and understanding of the performance. As audience members we read ourselves into the poetry; we process ourselves into the music. It is the singer's goal to facilitate and guide the listener's response to the performance through all the means available to him, whether they be musical, poetic, personal, or historical. This article will present poetic and biographical information on both Berlioz and his chosen poet, Théophile Gautier, and then discuss each of the six songs from a performance and musical perspective.

THE LANGUAGE, THE POET, AND THE COMPOSER

French poetry had its direct roots in the medieval troubadours, who were not casual minstrels at all but highly conscious poets. Their rhyming verses were purposefully tied to musical rhythms common at the time and were meant to be sung. It was not

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

until the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries that French poetry took a step away from music and demanded recitation rather than cantation, primarily through the writings of Charles d'Orléans and the poet Villon.

The most prevalent form in French poetry is the *alexandrine*, which consists of a line of six, eight, or ten iambic feet. Unlike English poetry, what is measured here is not the number of accented beats but the number of syllables in each line, whether stressed or unstressed. According to Jacques Barzun, this final divorce of poetry from music left French versification with only two strong accents in each line: one at the *caesura*, or break, and the other at the end, usually marked by the rhyme.¹ Parenthetically, this fact helps explain the mute *e* that abounds in French song and often confuses American singers, who tend to feel that the rules for pronouncing it are capricious at best, malicious at worst. Again according to Barzun, the mute *e* is pronounced at the poet's and/or composer's behest, depending on whether its sound is needed to achieve the exact count of syllables for the *alexandrine*.²

French rhyme scheme is also much more rigid and structured than that commonly found in English poetry. Where an English speaking poet might be able to rhyme "moon" and "June," "do" and "true," and even "care" and "war," the Frenchman demands much more of himself when rhyming. Since the *alexandrine* by its nature restricts the poetic idea to one line at a time (*enjambment*), it follows that the strongest syllable must fall on the last one, an idea not antithetical to the sounds and flow of the French language. Therefore the word at the end that rhymes must be clear, which for French means an identical vowel

sound, and usually an identical consonant preceding the vowel sound. "Sommeil" and "vermeil," "armant" and "charmant" constitute rich rhymes in French poetry; rhymes such as "doux" and "trous" would be barely acceptable. The neoclassical system outlined by Racine and Molière further dictated that rhyming words must also end with the same letter or its equivalent, even if that letter is silent. In masculine pairs, it would be illicit to rhyme "près" and "prêt;" in feminine pairs, "faites" and "nette,"³ even though the words are pronounced the same. The verses of nineteenth century poet Théophile Gautier perfectly exemplify these lofty yet disciplined French poetic ideals.

Gautier was born on 30 August 1811 at Tarbes, moving to Paris in 1814. He spent his summers fifty kilometers east of Paris visiting relatives who were in service at the Montesquious estate at Mauperthuis; there he came into contact with the writer Gérard de Nerval and painter Louis-Edouard Rioult. In his adolescence he was torn between choosing a career as a painter or a writer. Early nineteenth century artists were often as preoccupied with literature as they were with art, and it was, paradoxically, the art studio that encouraged the young Gautier's poetic vocation. Indeed, in all the arts there was a fervent interest in new ideas and bold techniques, an urge to experiment in all forms. These leanings were beginning to crystallize into a recognizable movement that we now associate with Romanticism. As Gautier himself expressed in his *Histoire du Romantisme*,

Les générations actuelles doivent se figurer difficilement l'effervescence des esprits à cette époque; il s'opérait un mouvement pareil à celui de la Renaissance. . . . Des parfums vertigineux se déga-

geaient des fleurs; l'air grisait, on était fou de lyrisme et d'art. Il semblait qu'on vint de retrouver le grand secret perdu, et cela était vrai, on avait retrouvé la poésie.⁴

[The current generation has to imagine with difficulty the effervescence of our spirits in this time; a movement took place similar to that of the Renaissance. The dizzying perfumes were freed from the flowers; the air intoxicated, we were crazy about lyricism and about art. It seemed that we came to find the great lost secret, and it was true, we had found poetry.] (Trans. by SW)

Gautier was introduced to Victor Hugo by Nerval and increasingly grew away from Rioult's studio, with the result that in mid-1830 the soon to be nineteen-year-old teenager published his first book of poetry at his father's expense. But the July 1830 political uprising shattered his youthful dreams of literary recognition, as his poems were left unsold to a terrified Parisian public. The 1830 Revolution served as an "intense disillusionment" to many young Romantics; Gautier's poetry took on a pessimistic tone and for the rest of his life he reserved his greatest scorn for politics.⁵ In the ensuing years he lived with other artistic friends in the dilapidated Doyenné district of Paris. He even lived for a while in an attic, styling himself as "la Bohème du Doyenné," a lifestyle that Puccini later popularized in his well known opera.

At the age of twenty-four Gautier had established himself as a financially viable writer with his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, a study of romantic yearning and disillusion but filled with moral ambiguity. The novel also served to establish his lifelong reputation for the scandalous. By 1838 Gautier was composing poetry continuously and in that year published *La Comédie de la mort*, which grouped together fifty-seven assorted pieces

Sherri Moore Weiler

from the exhilarating Bohemian years. For the first time the young writer's mature poetic talent was revealed.⁶ The collection is loosely premised on the spirits of literary and historical personages appearing to the narrator during the course of a journey through the after-life, and a dead maiden conversing with the worm about to destroy her body.⁷

Several elements in particular distinguish Gautier's artistic and aesthetic maturity in this collection. Gautier, in his poetic persona, is not only afraid of physical death, but profoundly terrified by the idea of spiritual death, which for him is far worse than physical death.⁸ His obsession with death, and fear of the relentless march of time that can lead only to physical mortality, is periodically relieved by the celebration of art as the sole refuge from the ugly vicissitudes of life.

In *La Comédie de la mort* Gautier evinces an important evolution in his art: he discovers the "ballad cycle," which offers a more diffuse way to unify his imaginative treatment of psychological or emotional states.⁹ The essentially sentimental and wistful nature of the French *romance*, as well as the artlessness and naivety of its folk-like elements, could not fail to draw Gautier, as his own artistic temperament mirrored these traits. These qualities are united in a small group within *La Comédie de la mort* that included "Romance," "Tristesse," "Les Papillons," "Absence," "Barcarolle," "Lamento," and "Villanelle Rhythmique." These last are four of the six that Hector Berlioz chose to set to music for *Les Nuits d'été*.¹⁰ (Appendix 1 provides a list of the titles bestowed by Berlioz and the keys for both the piano and orchestral versions.) Gautier, unlike Goethe, saw the *mélodie* as a mutually creative ven-

ture. It is for this reason, no doubt, that his *La Comédie de la mort* inspired so many French composers, including Bizet, Fauré, and Duparc. In fact, "Villanelle" was set not only by Berlioz but also by twenty-three others; "Le spectre de la rose," by eight others; "Sur les lagunes," by twenty others; "L'Île inconnue," by eighteen others; "Absence," by sixteen others; and "Au cimetière," by three others.¹¹

Hector Berlioz, whom Théophile Gautier met through Victor Hugo, was born 11 December 1803 at La Côte-Saint-André, the son of a prominent physician who completely took over the young Hector's education after his tenth birthday. Berlioz was particularly drawn to French and Latin literature and to geography, particularly travel books, which excited his imagination. His favorite Latin author was Virgil, and in his *Mémoires* he told how his father's reading of the story of Dido and Aeneas reduced him to tears. Four decades later this emotional germination blossomed in his opera *Les Troyens*. He received rudimentary instruction in flute and guitar, but he never studied piano and never learned to play more than a few chords on that instrument. It is interesting to note that he found old copies of Rameau's *Traité de l'harmonie* and Catel's *Traité de harmonie* and taught himself harmony without access to a keyboard. He began to compose seriously at about age thirteen or fourteen. Despite the teenaged Berlioz's intense interest in music, at seventeen he acquiesced to his father's wish that his son follow him into medicine. He was sent to Paris to the École de Médecine, having already obtained his bachelor's degree in Grenoble in March 1821. He could not stay away from the Opéra and within a month of his arrival had heard Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, which made a

deep and lasting impression on him. In fact, Gluck's knack for writing a clean, spare, yet beautiful melody caused him to become the composer the young Berlioz admired most. After attending medical school for two years, with interruptions, he abandoned that field. In 1822 Berlioz was admitted to Le Sueur's composition class at the Conservatoire on a part time basis; by 1824 he had composed the *Messe solennelle* and resolved to be "no doctor or apothecary but a great composer."¹²

Unfortunately, this resolve did not sit well with his father in La Côte, who reduced and intermittently refused Berlioz's allowance. For at least five years, the young musician was forced to live by borrowing from friends, taking students, even singing in the chorus at the Théâtre des Nouveautés. He wrote occasional articles for the press, which later proved to be a principal source of income. Berlioz entered the Prix de Rome in 1826, and on his fourth try in 1830 he won first prize. This was important to him as a means of convincing his parents of the seriousness of his musical talent. In the years to follow he forged his friendship with the poet Gautier, nearly ten years his junior. For a time following Berlioz's marriage to Harriet Smithson the two lived in the same Montmartre neighborhood. Among their compatriots were Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Flaubert, Balzac, and Delacroix, whom Gautier far-sightedly included in this summation: "Hector Berlioz me semble former avec Hugo et Delacroix la Trinité d'Art Romantique."¹³ [Hector Berlioz, it seems to me, forms with (Victor) Hugo and (painter Eugene) Delacroix the Trinity of Romantic Art.] Gautier admired Berlioz's work very much; in fact, it was he who wrote the com-

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

poser's obituary following his death on 8 March 1869.

Berlioz was extremely cognizant of creating an inherently French approach to his songs. In fact, he stated that he wanted his songs to be as different from Schubert's as possible.

I want only that their existence be known, that they are not shoddy goods . . . and that these "petite compositions," which have nothing formally or stylistically in common with Schubert's, require for proper execution singers and pianist—musicians—of consummate artistry.¹⁴

While some elements of Schubert's lied settings cannot escape comparison—after all, both composers were using the raw material of poetry for composition—other elements belong to Berlioz and are distinctly French, most particularly his use of musical color and harmony, and the nature of the French language, which dictated that his rhythms match its meter. Moreover, his 1856 orchestration of the six songs of *Les Nuits d'été*, fifteen years after their initial publication, was something Schubert never accomplished with his approximately 600 songs.

Much attention has been called to that fact that Berlioz's 1856 orchestrated version of *Les Nuits d'été* is of much higher musical caliber than the version for voice with piano alone; and it is true that, except for performance at the occasional recital, the songs are rarely performed as such. Berlioz was a masterful orchestrator, a painter with sound where instrumental colors were concerned. Yet he wrote the original 1841 version specifically with piano accompaniment, and apparently orchestrated the songs only at the request of specific singers (with the exception of "Absence"). The songs in their original version are not fully appreciated in their historical context and invite further critical

inquiry. There are no recordings currently available that feature solely voice and piano; in fact, so well known are the orchestral songs that performers no doubt think that the piano part, like an opera piano-vocal score, is simply a reduced orchestral version.

THE MUSIC

The score used for reference is the Urtext of the New Berlioz Edition, published in the original 1841 keys, but based on the Urtext orchestral version of 1856. The edition was revised by Douglas Woodfull-Harris, issued by the Berlioz Centenary Committee London, and published by Bärenreiter in 1994.

Villanelle

The initial song Berlioz chose for *Les Nuits d'été* was number 56 (of 57) in Gautier's *La Comédie de la mort*; Berlioz followed the Gautier ordering for the cycle except for this song, which he moved from its last position to first. "Villanelle" has the distinction of being the only song of the set in which Berlioz honored the strophic form of the poem exactly as delineated by Gautier. Even so, the result is far from simple; the harmony alone removes the setting from the simple drawing room *romance* style prevalent in France at this time.¹⁵ The texture is bright and lightly articulated; the accompaniment consists of staccato triads, which frame the harmonic structure and provide rhythmic impulse throughout the piece. The original key of A major remains the same in both the original piano version of 1841 and in the orchestration of 1856.

The vocal line is tied to the accompaniment in that it is responsible for outlining the harmonic structure.

There is a recitative-like tag at the end of each of the three strophes. Between the first and second strophes, this vocal line centers on the dominant seventh scale, repeats itself on the tonic, and quickly repeats the V⁷ cadence to resolve cleanly on tonic A major before continuing as the introductory measures of the next strophe. This procedure varies before the third strophe by prolonging the introductory material to allow progression through the subdominant minor in a restatement of the principal theme. The voice might be expected to enter mirroring this new, minor mode—but instead it re-enters in tonic A exactly like the first two strophes with no modulatory preparation whatsoever. The startling thing is that it works, and works well. The listener expects a change of mood, and may even expect a menacing new element to intrude, but rather Berlioz, through the song's persona of a young lover flush with new love, tells us that all is well in this paradise of spring, and we are truly relieved to find it so.

The second strophe contains canonic imitation in the bass line of the piano accompaniment, while the right hand continues to provide the harmonic filler (mm. 44–46, 48–49). This imitative pattern repeats beginning at m. 54 at the interval of a major ninth and shortly after at the interval of a perfect fifth (Example 1).

The third strophe, as stated above, enters on the tonic after an elongated introduction on the subdominant minor key of D. After another section of canonic imitation of the voice at the octave, five measures of chromatically descending figuration are heard in the bass line of the piano, which serves to modulate through F[#] major on the way to B major. Further intense chromaticism and rapid modulation occur through the next four measures,

Sherri Moore Weiler

Example 1. "Villanelle," mm. 44-60.

Example 2. "Villanelle," mm. 61-85.

finally landing on a stable C major, the minor mediant of tonic A.

An important musical element introduced in "Villanelle" is Berlioz's use of the flatted sixth scale degree. This first occurs at m. 30 and returns again in the third strophe at m. 114. Julian Rushton claims that its function is to reinforce, at a moment of climax, an element that is already in the music, and that it causes the

expected diatonic sixth of F[#] in the second strophe (m. 70) to sound all the more exceptional (Example 2). The effect, he states, results from the song's chromatic norms, and "diatonicism becomes an expressive nuance."¹⁶ This musical gesture of the flatted sixth is repeated several times throughout the cycle, lending musical and thematic cohesiveness to the symbolic lover's journey.

The singer represents in "Villanelle" a persona filled with the joy of a new relationship, just as the poetic imagery represents the beginning of a new seasonal year. The performer must be cautious not to rush the tempo as the song builds in excitement, while the pianist must maintain a carefully placed, light staccato throughout, never becoming heavy handed. Both musicians must be sensitive to the playful imagery; the singer in particular must be careful to raise the pitch sufficient to the mood of the sixth in the second strophe (m. 70) and in the C-natural/C-sharp scale leading up to it.

Le spectre de la rose

If the first song of the set bursts with a spring-born *joie de vivre*, the second song tenderly mourns a loss of innocence. Contrasting images of "un songe virginal" with a death that "tous les rois vont jalouser," Gautier breathes life into the story of a young girl's first ball told through the eyes of the rose she plucked to wear on her bosom. Annegret Fauser points out that the alternation of light and dark vowels in the first four lines of the poem are placed to emphasize these very images of innocent virginity and sexual awakening as evoked by the symbol of the rose, who speaks to the dreaming virgin.¹⁷

*Soulève ta paupière close
Qu'effleure un songe virginal,
Je suis le spectre d'une rose
Que tu portais hier au bal.*¹⁸

Raise your closed eyelids/
Caressed by a virginal dream/
I am the ghost of a rose/
That you wore yesterday to the ball.
(Trans. SW)

French vowels are both brighter and darker than typical English vowels, and much more mouth movement

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

is required when speaking or singing French to achieve this juxtaposition. The darker vowels tend to have a more sensuous resonance, while the lighter ones sound more innocent. In this excerpt nearly every French word of more than one syllable contains both a bright and a dark vowel. The singer can do much to emphasize this simply by being aware of it and allowing those natural French vowel placements to come through in performance.

The song's original key is B major, but it was orchestrated in 1856 in D major. Set in modified strophic form, the song uses extensive arpeggiated accompaniment, and the sublime, arching theme that first is heard in the piano introduction is repeated by the voice at the beginning of each strophe. The strophic variation is achieved by a decidedly different harmonic ending to each verse, echoing the contrasting poetic sentiments, so that the form might be considered to be ABA-CAD. The three stanzas written by Gautier sound as six in Berlioz's hands. The first strophe ends *sans ralentir* at the final beat of m. 21 in B^b major and builds to its highest pitches of the song through a fairly simple and almost routine harmonic outline of I³₃-V⁷-I-V⁷/V-I. The rose seems to exult at having been plucked, still sparkling, and promenaded all evening long at the ball; Gautier employs the images of the "still sparkling" rose ("encore emperlée") and the "starry fête" ("la fête étoilée") to achieve rich rhyme as well as potent metaphor.

The second strophe quickly pulls away from the sweeping opening line to a progression of diminished seventh chords that serve to underscore its explicitly nocturnal images. These last descend by semitones from C[#] minor to B major in mm. 38-41,

36
A ton che-veu vien-dra dan-ser. Mais ne crains
rien, je ne ré-cla-me Ni mes-se ni De Pro-fun-dis;
42 F Ce lé-ger par-fum est mon â-me, ce lé-ger par-fum est mon â-me, Et j'ar-ri-ve, j'ar-ri-ve

Example 3. "Le spectre de la rose," mm. 36-45.

adding a sense of mystery to the supernatural elements associated with the rose-ghost's nightly dance (Example 3). Brian Primmer maintains that such progressions often appear in Berlioz's music when a sense of "spiritual, bodily or factual disintegration" is suggested by either the text in a song, or the expressive intent of an orchestral piece.¹⁸ The strophe ends with a recitative; beginning at m. 42, the voice of the rose, through musically ascending thirds, claims to have arrived from paradise. Berlioz's use of an eight-measure crescendo and syncopation in the rhythm attests to the urgency of the rose's desire that the young girl believe him.

The final strophe begins with a whispered expansion of the beginning theme with a vocal elaboration (m. 51) extending a major third higher than the octave jump found in the first two iterations. This expansion occurs on the word "digne" ("worthy") and lends emphasis to the next statement: "Et pour avoir un sort si

beau, / Plus d'un aurait donné sa vie." (And to have a fate so beautiful, / More than one would have given his life.) This rose doesn't regret his end; rather he celebrates that destiny decreed *his* beauty be added to personified Beauty. Berlioz ends this final strophe with yet another recitative, the accompaniment echoing the voice first a major third below then above before ending on a tonic tag of three simple chords. The exposed final quotation, both poetically and musically, is a culmination of the highest order of Romantic themes. That the rose assumes anthropomorphic traits evokes the world of nature as well as a heightened sense of individuality; that the rose achieves a level of spiritual salvation bestows a transcendence only achieved by poetry united with music.

The singer's persona has been broadened to encompass the rose's imagined thoughts. Not told from the "human" point of view, "Le spectre de la rose" requires the performer to

Sherri Moore Weiler

dramatize a make-believe world, and this challenge can result in a greater artistic license if the singer's imagination is encouraged to deepen.

Sur les lagunes

It is immediately apparent that Berlioz's third song of the cycle maintains the three-stanza structure of absolute regularity employed by Gautier in the previous two poems. Except for the last line, when ten syllables are used, the structure of each stanza is a six-syllable *alexandrine* with a rhyme scheme of ABABCD-DEE. The final rhymed couplet also functions as a refrain, as the same text is repeated in each stanza. The vocabulary is simple, the imagery transparent, and a graceful assonance and alliteration occur in the heart rending cry of the refrain lines: "Que mon sort est amer! / Ah! sans amour s'en aller sur la mer!" (How bitter is my fate! / Ah! without love to go [sail] on the sea!)¹⁹

Gautier chose to title his poem "Lamento: La Chanson du pêcheur," verses that Berlioz composed in G minor, the only song of *Les Nuits d'été* set in a minor key. Like the sixth song of the group, "L'île inconnue," the rocking motion of the 6/8 meter is highly suggestive of the sea. The ternary setting makes use of a recurring motif built upon the interval of a minor second, which repeats throughout the A section and briefly rather than repetitively in the A' section that begins at m. 76. It also functions in the A section as a means to utilize the flatted sixth scale degree, which Berlioz used to such wonderful effect in "Villanelle." This same semitone idea appears in the B section in linear form at mm. 57–58 as descending sighs, which turn to thirds as they ascend over contrapuntal half-step movement in both the bass and

The musical score for "Sur les lagunes" (Example 4) spans measures 52 to 67. It is written for voice and piano. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 6/8. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (mm. 52-56) shows the vocal line with lyrics "deuil ! La co - lom - be ou - bli - é - e," and the piano accompaniment with dynamics *poco sf* and *pp*. The second system (mm. 57-62) shows the vocal line with lyrics "Pleu - re, pleu - re et son - ge à l'ab-sent, Mon à - me pleu -", and the piano accompaniment with dynamics *pizz* and *cresc.*. The third system (mm. 63-67) shows the vocal line with lyrics "re et sent. Qu'elle est dé - pa - reil - lé - e.", and the piano accompaniment with dynamics *un poco riten.*, *dim.*, *mf*, and *p*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and articulation marks.

Example 4. "Sur les lagunes," mm. 52–67.

treble clefs (Example 4). At m. 61 the *appassionato* section employs the half-step figuration in the treble clef as an *affrettando* answer to the bass clef's harmonic outline of A minor/major and dominant E minor, emphasizing the mournful keening of *la colombe oubliée*, the forgotten dove. The F-natural in mm. 62–65 functions as a flatted sixth of tonic A minor/major, and the "non-A" harmonies in these measures are really dominant E minor/major, with the pedal D serving here as a lower neighbor to E. This serves to bring about the "weeping" motif of the minor second, as well as to provide harmonic function as an embellishment of the E⁹ chord it precedes. After the piano anticipates in D minor (dominant of G minor) the phrase "Que mon sort est amer!" that the voice echoes in C minor (subdominant of G minor) in the next measures (mm. 68–69), the music returns to tonic G minor for the descending,

wailing lament that closes each stanza. The third, final stanza brings in new thematic material with the surprising modulation to G^b major in m. 83, which serves to establish a new tonic before the not unexpected appearance of the flatted sixth tone of E-natural. The presence of E allows the harmony to progress through various E⁷ and C⁷ chords to lead to F major in m. 88 at the *con fuoco* section. It is worthy of note that Berlioz, in his only minor mode song, applied the most blatantly major mode harmonies for the song's highest emotional content: "Ah! comme elle était belle / Et comme je l'aimais! / Je n'aimerai jamais / Une femme autant qu'elle." (Ah! How beautiful she was / And how I loved her! / I will never love / A woman as much as her [Trans. SW].) The section progresses through F, C, A^b, and G major chords before returning to G minor with the last sixteenth beat of m. 97. A repeat of

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

the dramatic refrain occurs for the last time at m. 98; but the section beginning at m. 106 adds a final eleven-bar sobbing lament that modulates from a very expressive Neapolitan harmony at m. 107, through C major and G major before finally ending on the dominant D major. This extremely unexpected ending gives the listener the feeling that the lover's pain will never end, just as the music has no resolution.

Our speaker, still in the persona of a young lover, has experienced a tremendous loss, the death of his beloved. Through contrasting images of the whiteness of both the weeping dove and the beloved's body in death, with the immense darkness of the night that covers him like a shroud, we too experience his intense pain. He pours out his agony in a primal howl, which diminishes into a whisper as the anguish becomes too much to bear. The final musical image of the song, anchored by its 6/8 meter, is the tremolo effect of rapidly alternating broken intervals of the perfect fifth, minor sixth, and major sixth. The effect of a rocking boat, eternally adrift at sea, *sans amour*, cannot be escaped in either the poetry or the music. As the boat moves on through the night, it leaves the ever-widening ripples of its wake on the empty sea.

Absence

The fourth song of Berlioz's cycle is undoubtedly the most famous one, as its simplicity renders it accessible to a wide variety of student voices. It consists of three refrains bracketing two verses, rendering its setting, both poetically and musically, as a rondo form (ABACA). Except for one very minor note duration change in the last refrain (at m. 60 the C# of "La" is an eighth note, whereas it is a quarter note in the first two refrains), and

the omission of an eighth rest before the final iteration of "vermeil," the three are exactly alike. The only real musical difference in the refrain iterations occurs in the composer's direction to the performer that the third refrain be sung *sotto voce ed estinto*, *ppp*. Berlioz did not specify dynamics for either of the first two refrains.

Berlioz set every verse of his chosen texts for *Les Nuits d'été* except in "Absence." The original poem in Gautier's *La Comédie de la mort* contained eight strophes; Berlioz set only five. In the omitted verses, the poet's persona is that of a wounded dove whose soul flies into the beloved's mouth;²¹ in the song cycle the persona continues to be that of the young male lover. Julian Rushton suggests that Berlioz's original intention may have been to progressively expand the musical forms, as occurs in other indisputably cyclic works such as Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* and Schumann's *Dichterliebe*.²² If so, his expansions seem to occur in matched pairs: 1-4; 2-5, 3-6. The clearly strophic "Villanelle" would parallel the simple refrain form of "Absence," while the greater complexity of "Le spectre de la rose" would mirror "Au cimetière," and "Sur les lagunes" would be comparable in form to the most complex "L'Île inconnue."²³ Rushton further claims that Berlioz may have altered the poetic form of "Absence" to make a fully cadenced refrain form, which in itself is a model and variation.²⁴

While the remaining songs were, as far as we know, not orchestrated until shortly before their 1856 republication, "Absence" is the exception. The song was orchestrated in 1843, ostensibly for Berlioz's then paramour, the mezzo soprano Marie Récio.²⁵ "Absence" is free of chromatic key relations, and its harmonic structure

is relatively simple. The song opens with the dominant C# at octaves, which resolves to the tonic on the first chord and is unmistakably the clarification call of a horn. Even in the original piano version there is no doubt of its annunciatory function. The voice immediately echoes the theme, longingly calling for the beloved to return: "Reviens, reviens, ma bien-aimée!" The singer claims that, like a flower far from the sun, the flower of his life has closed, far from his lover's rosy smile. The theme, though full of pain, also resonates with eager hopefulness that his unappeased desires will be met. This second horn call extends to a V $\frac{1}{2}$ before concluding in the tonic once more. The expository section of the refrain begins with a tonicization of V $\frac{7}{ii}$, which becomes a ii $\frac{6}{4}$ on the very next chord, progressing through an expected I $\frac{6}{4}$ cadence to the dominant. But where we might expect a tonic resolution, Berlioz has more to say. Over a sweeping ascending vocal line, this harmonic pattern repeats: "La fleur de ma vie est fermée" is supported by a ii $\frac{6}{4}$, I $\frac{6}{4}$, ii $\frac{6}{4}$; here the vocal line begins a huge descending motion over I $\frac{6}{4}$, V $\frac{7}{V}$, I, V $\frac{7}{V}$ with a feminine cadence to tonic I (mm. 8-15). The three refrains have no variation in harmonic structure. The two verse sections are a little more interesting, since they are contrasting. The first verse beginning at m. 16 consists of a transitional chromatic passage that leads to a mediant relationship of the main key at "Ô sort amer! Ô dure absence!" Functionally, this serves as a repeat of the opening phrase's harmony, since it is essentially an elongated dominant-tonic in the new but short-lived harmonies of A major (V) and D# minor (ii $\frac{6}{4}$). Berlioz uses the VI and iv chords in the new key, leaving us with our own musical "grands désirs inapaisés," in a

Sherri Moore Weiler

manner of speaking, on the dominant A⁷. After a short fermata, this “new” dominant fades into the distance while Berlioz summons his original dominant to announce a return to the main key of F[#], exactly as the song began (Example 5). The second verse (mm. 42–52) proceeds along the same lines, with contrasts in harmonic elements, but is essentially the same musical treatment. The raising of the vocal line by a major third and its rhythmic echo in the treble clef lends a sense of urgency while the singer expresses great impatience by listing the countryside, villages, hamlets, valley, and mountains that keep the lovers separated, and which seemingly only exist to tire the horses’ feet.

With each ensuing repetition of the refrain, the voice gets fainter, reverberating with desire growing ever more intense, until the final repetition fervently whispers the singer’s plea: “Come back, come back, my beloved!”

The performer’s greatest challenge in “Absence” is primarily a technical one. He or she must be able to successively reduce the dynamic level at each refrain while keeping the *p* and *pp* sections vibrant and focused.

Au cimetière

The three strophes that Berlioz chose not to set in “Absence” were verses that spoke of the soul of a wounded dove flying into the beloved’s mouth. Perhaps it was his own literary savvy that told him to save the image for a different setting, a more poignant setting. Subtitled “Lamento,” “Au cimetière” abounds in dove imagery: it is the white dove, singing his sickly tender melody, at once both charming and fatal, that draws the grieving lover to the tomb of his beloved. The dove’s song can be harmful, yet it is mesmerizing and

Example 5. “Absence,” mm. 1–30.

reminds the young man of a sigh from the heavens of a lovelorn angel. He compares the dove’s song to the weeping of an awakened soul grieving on earth at the misfortune of having been forgotten. In “Sur les lagunes,” which also uses dove imagery and is also subtitled “Lamento,” it is the lover who bemoans that the angel who took her away did not want to take him. If the two personas are the same, and both poetic metaphor and musical motif suggest this is true, then the young man’s psychological state has

deeply deteriorated. He seems to be no longer simply expressing his deep grief, as in “Sur les lagunes,” but is now completely lost in it, powerless to find his way back to the realms of reality, unable to differentiate the natural from the supernatural.

The stagnant mental state expressed in Gautier’s poetry is reflected in Berlioz’s music. The repetitive trio of quarter notes plods relentlessly onward for the first section of the ternary ABA form, until just before m. 51, where it begins the B section with

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

a pattern of diminution to the eighth note, which Donald Pyle claims is “suggestive of a heartbeat.”²⁶ The voice functions as a part of the chordal structure of the piece, but the immobility of the line is reminiscent of the keening associated with unrelieved mourning; it has no sense or reason, yet the agony must somehow be relieved. The melody is among the most restrictive Berlioz ever wrote, and is an excellent example “of the concentrated, passionate melancholy . . . that will act on the mind with the effect of a powerful drug—if the listener is prepared to yield.”²⁷

Julian Rushton, attempting to prove that *Les Nuits d'été* is a cycle, bases his premise on a collection of simple melodic archetypes that appear at significant junctures, primarily at the beginnings of stanzas. “Au cimetière” uses five of these patterns, more than any of the other songs.²⁸ Furthermore, he suggests that if such patterns are a method of composition, then there is a conceptual consistency with the more exposed *idée fixe* permeation of other themes.²⁹

“Au cimetière” also, according to Rushton, makes extreme use of harmonic and tonal ambiguity, yet it always refers to D minor despite the key signature of D major. This occurs primarily through the use of B^b, the flatted sixth of D major and an integral component of the natural and harmonic minor scales. While its metrical mode is in three-quarter time, much of its melody, supported by chord-change over a pedal, could be barred in duple groups³⁰ (Example 6, mm. 3–5, 9–11, and 16–23). There is almost no dynamic variation within the song; Berlioz allows the singer to move between *pp*, *pppp*, and *ppppp*. To borrow Donald Pyle’s heartbeat metaphor, the arpeggiated accompaniment beginning at m. 68 suggests a quick-

Example 6. “Au cimetière,” mm. 1–26.

ening pulse as the poetic persona feels a memory coming back “sur les ailes de la musique” (on the wings of music). Berlioz employs “spooky” diminished seventh chords immediately following (mm. 80–86) as the young lover sees a shadow in the guise of an angel, passing in a trembling light and wearing a white veil. He believes this to be his dead lover’s soul, as seen in the return of the A section (m. 105), which is stanza five of the six-stanza poem. He resolves never again to return to the tomb at twilight, to hear the pale dove singing its plaintive song.

This song should be sung very nearly like a chant, even trance-like. The performer must be able to achieve

a sense of other-worldliness without sacrificing connection with the audience. Vocally, this is not difficult once the proper relationship of tension and balance is reached among the poetry, the music, and the performer’s own intuitive nature. Berlioz was clever and correct in setting this song in the singer’s upper-middle range, where the voice at very soft dynamics can sound much like a keening wail.

L’île inconnue

While each song of *Les Nuits d’été* is complete in itself, the performance of all the songs as a group provides a whole more satisfying than the sum of its parts. This is especially true in

Sherri Moore Weiler

regard to the last song in the cycle, “L’Île inconnue.” Both poetically and musically, conclusiveness is felt. The mood found in the poetry, and reflected in the singer’s persona throughout the six songs, moves from joyful anticipation through loss, intense grief, and finally to acceptance with a touch of irony. Berlioz embellished Gautier’s four-line refrain, six-line verse format (ABACAD) by subdividing the final A section into two parts and separating them with the D material, so that the resulting ABACADA musical rendering is really the beginning of A with a D phrase inserted. This helps contribute to the ironic elements in that each previous refrain poses a question in the first two lines (“Tell me, my young beauty, / Where would you like to go?”) and offers a sense of choice and anticipation in the last two lines (“The sails puff up their wings, / The breeze will blow!”). But in the last A section the young beauty answers, in the harmonically prolonged dominant key of C major: “Take me, said the beauty, / To the faithful shore / Where one loves forever!” To which the narrator (our young lover?) replies: “Those shores, my dear, / Are hardly known to exist / In the land of love.” He is able to speak now from the voice of bitter experience. Yet still he continues to move forward: “Where would you like to go? / The breeze will blow!”

Gautier’s title for “L’Île inconnue” was “Barcarolle,” which is always typified by a rocking, boat-like, 6/8 meter in music. “Sur les lagunes” is also set in 6/8 meter and has a water theme, but its tempo is much slower; and where the image was that of a lagoon, stagnant and dank, here the fluency of the tempo suggests a rapidly moving boat, its sails filled with wind, slicing through the waves. The contrasting tempo is *allegro spiritoso*, the

dotted-quarter note equaling a metronomic 96. Musical conclusiveness is achieved in part because the upbeat tempo finishes what the first 6/8 did not—a sense of moving on—and also because “L’Île inconnue” exploits and resolves motivic features accumulated in the first five songs.³¹

Whether Berlioz was aware of these motivic relationships, whether or not they were intentional, is unanswerable. For all that Berlioz the prolific writer and music critic wrote about his own and others’ music, Berlioz the composer was noticeably reticent about these six songs. In fact, he admitted toward the end of his life that he had never heard the cycle in its entirety. Annegret Fauser suggests that perhaps the songs were too close to his own heart, that they were representative of his deepest sentiments at an emotionally vulnerable time in his life.³³ His marriage to Harriet Smithson was breaking down; his

symphonic compositions were not being received with the accolades they so richly deserved; he was turning towards a future with Marie Récio, who was his paramour for two decades. But authorial intention is not necessary for artistic greatness, and there can be no doubt that the six songs of *Les Nuits d’été* brought a new seriousness to the French *romance* and a burgeoning respect across Europe for the beginnings of the *mélodie*. Berlioz’s small but germinal compositions were a gift to French art song, which would culminate decades later in the songs of Chabrier, Chausson, Duparc, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, and Poulenc.

ENDNOTES

1. Jacques Barzun, *An Essay on French Verse* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991), 16–17.
2. *Ibid.*, 19.

Appendix 1

Berlioz’s Title [Gautier’s title where different]	Poetic Form	Musical Form	Key in 1841 (piano)	Key in 1856 (orchestra)	Mood
Villanelle [Villanelle rhythmique]	3 strophes	Strophic	A Major	A Major	Spring has arrived! Morning
Le spectre de la rose	3 strophes	Through— composed	D Major	B Major	Tender; haunting
Sur les lagunes [Lamento: La Chanson du pêcheur]	3 strophes	Through— composed	G Minor	F Minor	Intense pain from loss of beloved
Absence	8 strophes	Rondo, ABACA	F# Major	F# Major	Loneliness at distance of beloved
Au cimetière, subtitled by HB Claire de lune [Lamento]	6 strophes	ABA; 6 arranged as 3	D Major	D Major	Melancholy visit to grave of beloved at sunset
L’Île inconnue [Barcarolle]	4-line refrain, 6-line verse, ABACAD	Rearranged by HB: ABACADA	F Major	F Major	Ebullient with a touch of irony

Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*

3. Ibid., 25–27.
4. P. E. Tennant, *Théophile Gautier* (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1975), 1–3.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Ibid., 5–6.
7. Albert Smith, *Théophile Gautier and the Fantastic* (University, MS: Romance Monographs, Inc., 1977), 55.
8. Joanna Richardson, *Théophile Gautier: His Life & Times* (London: Max Reinhardt Ltd., 1958), 38–40.
9. Tennant, 47–52.
10. Ibid., 53–54.
11. Peter Bloom, “In the shadows of *Les Nuits d'été*,” in Peter Bloom, ed., *Berlioz Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90–91.
12. Hugh Macdonald, “Berlioz, Hector,” in L. Macy, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online* (Accessed 15 October 2002), <http://www.grove-music.com>.
13. Léon Guichard, *La Musique et les lettres au temps du romantisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 53; quoted in Gale Mayo Finlayson, “Hector Berlioz as a Literary Figure” (Unpublished master of arts thesis, The Florida State University, 1968), 21.
14. Bloom, 94.
15. Rushton, “*Les Nuits d'été*: cycle or collection?” 119.
16. Ibid.
17. Annegret Fauser, “The Songs,” in Peter Bloom, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119.
18. Brian Primmer, *The Berlioz Style* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 187.
19. Bloom, “In the shadows of *Les Nuits d'été*,” 101.
20. David Cairns, *Berlioz, 1803–1832: The Making of an Artist* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1989), 56.
21. Rushton, “*Les Nuits d'été*: cycle or collection?” 115.
22. Ibid., 118.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 120.
25. Bloom, “In the shadows of *Les Nuits d'été*,” 93.
26. Donald Alan Pyle, “The Mélodie of Hector Berlioz as Evidenced by *Les Nuits d'été*” (Unpublished D.M. treatise, The Florida State University, 1972), 18.
27. J. H. Elliot, *Berlioz* (London, 1938), 153; quoted in Rushton, “*Les Nuits d'été*: cycle or collection?” 125.
28. Ibid., 123–25.
29. Ibid., 128.
30. Ibid., 132–33.
31. Rushton, “*Les Nuits d'été*: cycle or collection?” 133.
32. Fauser, “The songs,” 119.

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As a performer Weiler was selected by Mstislav Rostropovich to sing the mezzo solo in Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* with the National Symphony in 1992, which helped instill a great love and appreciation for Russian vocal literature. For more than a decade Weiler coached Russian language and song literature with Svetlana Velichko, a graduate of and member of the piano faculty of the Moscow Conservatory. The two have a compact disk on the Centaur label, released in 2001, titled *Russia: Golden Century of Song*. Weiler's doctoral treatise centered on preventing counterproductive tensions induced by Russian diction in American singers. She has performed the Verdi Requiem with Jerome Hines, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with Erie Mills, and a Schubert bicentennial recital with John Wustman in 2000. She has appeared in numerous roles with Anchorage Opera, Sacramento Opera, Florida State Opera, and Cleveland Opera. Dr. Weiler has given recitals for Willamette University, Portland State University, Oregon Music Teachers' Association, Anchorage Opera, Anchorage Festival of Music, the University of Alaska Anchorage, Florida A&M University, and Shorter College.