Who’s Afraid of Berlioz?
Reflections on the “Berlioz Problem” and the “Acticity” of the Musical Work

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Abstract
This article argues that there is one issue that can be useful in expounding the “Berlioz problem”, namely our oblivion to how the musical work is not only constituted by, but also continuously caught in, a meander of acts. We might call this the “acticity” of the musical work. The acticity of Berlioz's music is defined by his use of the guitar as a composing tool.

The article follows how acts of playing and composing on the guitar are inscribed in the score and how the physicality of these acts is still present and creates the specificity of the orchestral writing, and further, how this “impure” materiality demands new modes of development. The acts do not simply condition the orchestral writing, they are present in, and constitute the particularity of, the score; but more importantly, they may even illuminate an ontological character of every musical work, its acticity.

Keywords
Acticity, Berlioz and the guitar, practice studies, guitar as composing tool

Introduction

Berlioz remains a puzzling figure. The belief in the clumsiness of his harmony, the naïveté of his counterpoint, and the negligence of his forms has not been dissipated. Few contest his greatness: what is in question is his competence.

Charles Rosen

Since the first public attack on Berlioz, in Revue Musicale in 1832, there has been a persistent “Berlioz problem”. Despite its popularity, his music has challenged aesthetic norms, analysis and musical discourse. Berlioz has been criticised for his awkward harmonic progressions, for his use of false basses and for his inability to write melodies. Undoubtedly, it has been easier to point out Berlioz’s weaknesses than to argue for his strengths. Unlike other “progressive” composers, the provocative power of Berlioz has never quite dwindled, which is why Jacques Barzun could as late as in 2003 write an article entitled “Fourteen

Points about Berlioz and the Public, or Why There Is Still a Berlioz Problem” (2003, 193–201). Yet we should not forget that it is we who have the problem, not the composer, which is why we may ask whether there are some blind-spots in our understanding of music that have consistently hindered a comprehension of Berlioz’s music. If so, could we then use “Le cas Berlioz” as a mirror in which to examine some disregarded aspects in our understanding of music?

This article will argue that there is one issue that can be useful in expounding the “Berlioz problem”, namely our obliviousness to how the musical work is not only constituted by, but is also continuously caught in, a meander of acts. I am going to propose that we might call this the “acticity” of the musical work. At this stage, however, I will refrain from giving a more elaborate definition of acticity, as my ambition is to let the following reading of the music of Berlioz demonstrate the usefulness of the term and how it can better explain the particularity of Berlioz’s music. Furthermore, I will argue that through developing the term “acticity”, we may better understand how we have institutionalised music and, consequently, how we have developed a concept of music that has persistently rekindled the “Berlioz problem”.

Berlioz reception history has not followed a conventional pattern. His music has persistently attracted the harshest criticism – the controversies around his music and his talent have never quite died down. How can we understand the criticism? How can we understand the slight whiff of disapproval surrounding his music from even progressive composers and musicians? Certainly, there has been no shortage of attempts to explain why Berlioz’s music continues to confound listeners, but it is hard to understand how his use of harmony, melody, rhythm or orchestration – those elements we associate with the concept of work – can still be controversial in a post-postmodern era. So, what does the music do that can explain “Le cas Berlioz”?

There has been no shortage in the literature of attempts to explain the “Berlioz problem”. Two strategies dominate. The first is to treat the composer in psycho-biographical terms, often blending a rather uninformed reading of his Memoirs (for example, failing to situate the text within the genre in which Berlioz conscientiously wrote) with an inflated version of French romanticism (remembering too well the historical uniqueness of the assumed autobiographic programme of the Symphonie fantastique). This mélange explains – according to Barzun – why Berlioz has so systematically been tagged in pejorative terms (“wayward,” “eccentric,” “wild,” “baffled”) even by his “advocates” (Barzun 2003), as well as how Julian Rushton could conclude that “the heart of the main question about Berlioz [is] whether he is some sort of freak” (Rushton 2008).

The second approach, which was first publicly introduced in the vitriolic attack by Fétis in 1832, is to question Berlioz’s musical training and talent (Fétis 1832, 366). In the writings and comments of Maurice Ravel, Pierre Boulez, Charles Rosen and many others, the “awkwardness” and “clumsiness” of Berlioz’s music is explained by the composer’s lack of musical competence, not least due to his failure to play the piano or any other instrument for that matter (or, more to the point, any other instrument that mattered). As Sir Charles Hallé formulated it, “Berlioz was no executant upon any instrument (for being able to strum a few chords on the guitar does not count)” (1896, 65). And yet, what if strumming chords on the guitar could and did count for the particularity of Berlioz’s compositional practice?

The following discussion depends on some argumentative steps that deserve to be further elaborated. If these steps are useful in demonstrating the main aim of this article – to present and briefly discuss the term “acticity” and its potential for better explaining the “Berlioz problem” – our discussion will also strengthen the historical relevance of the argu-
mentative steps themselves. A focus on the term “acticity” has the potential to draw out and strengthen positions that may not necessarily be controversial, but are still under-exposed in the literature. So, in order to simplify the trajectory of this article, I will now advance the outline of these argumentative steps. The present article assumes that:

- Composing music in the beginning of the nineteenth century was largely a question of mastering the craft of composition.
- The piano profoundly influenced the craft of composition as well as the theoretical understanding of music. It became the “instrument of reference”.
- Organicism, as a vital concept for both composition and performance in the nineteenth century, was gradually replaced by a more “ossified” understanding of music in general, and of musical performance in particular. In the twentieth century, the term “structure” became a keyword in music terminology and theory; the term was grafted on and came to replace the model of organicism. Yet the piano was still able to maintain its role as the preferred instrument of reference.
- The persistent dissonance between Berlioz’s music and the dominant concept of music – not least the dominant explicatory, theoretical and analytical models used in academic writing – can largely explain “Le cas Berlioz”.
- Berlioz used the guitar as his composing tool for writing orchestral music. I have elsewhere given a historical account and an analytical justification for the validity of this argument (Hovland 2017). In the current article, the purpose is to study some of the implications of this argument in relevance to Berlioz’s compositional practice and the ontology of the work of music.

Presentation

In 1831, Berlioz met frequently with Mendelssohn in Rome. Although Mendelssohn found pleasure in discussing music and art with this “agreeable and informed” man, secretly he reacted with horror to the music of his French colleague. To understand Mendelssohn’s reaction and his claim that Berlioz “did not want to hear any outside voice”, we have to consider that to become a composer at the beginning of the nineteenth century was first and foremost a question of internalising a set of skills to the degree that it became second nature. In France, learning to compose was not an abstract or academic endeavour, it was a question of developing the craftmanship that Luigi Cherubini represented and favoured as an institutionalised practice at the Conservatoire de Paris, and it was this practice that Berlioz encountered when he began his studies at the same institution, but that he never quite adopted. The interesting question is why this young composer who, according to Mendelssohn, “keenly and correctly … evaluates and recognizes everything” was unable to learn the basic skills of this craft? And more importantly, since Berlioz did not employ these skills, how did he compose?

A commonly held theory is that Berlioz simply sat with his feather pen at a table and notated his music directly in the score (Rushton 2008, 65). This may at first glance appear as a credit to the composer’s (aural) abilities, but it can be turned quickly into an accusation, claiming that the composer was only scratching notes on a paper, without the faintest idea of how they would sound (cf. Boulez’s criticism cited above). It is this suspicion that may have infuriated Fétis. For him, Berlioz was simply an “impotent” composer, without talent and lacking the necessary skills. Undoubtedly, Berlioz was provocative not because he
breached some abstract aesthetic rules or theoretical notions of good composing, nor because he had attached a programme note to his first symphony or altered the schemes of musical form, but rather because he blatantly flouted the musical craft and practice that his fellow composers and theorists had with much assiduity acquired and internalised. Even Schumann, in his overall positive review of the *Symphonie fantastique* in his famous 1834 article in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, allowed himself to transmit – and thus, to some extent, sustain – the French adage that questioned whether this was actually music: “Que cela est fort beau, quoique ce ne soit pas de la musique” (Schumann 1835).³

In recent times, Charles Rosen has been one of Berlioz’s most vocal critics. We must give him credit for stating so openly that Berlioz’s main deficit was the fact that he never learnt to play the piano, or more precisely, the *Well-Tempered Keyboard* of Bach. Rosen’s account is interesting and deserves to be quoted fully.

Berlioz did not have, in his training, the necessary corrective that almost every other contemporary composer had from childhood: the *Well-Tempered Keyboard* of Johann Sebastian Bach. This was the basis of instruction at the piano. Through this work, Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, and more or less everybody else learned to play the piano. Even if their training in composition was theoretically defective … they learned the contrapuntal realization of harmony in a purely practical way – by playing Bach. For Chopin and many others, the *Well-Tempered Keyboard* was the foundation of all composition. It is impossible to overestimate the educational value of this work for the early nineteenth century. Berlioz, however, could not play the piano, and he thought Bach was a bore. He played the guitar, the flageolet, and the kettledrums; and he loved Gluck. (Rosen 1996, 554–5)

The argument speaks volumes. In fact, in its list of distinguished figures who learnt to compose in this way it suggests that it was by playing the piano – and in particular the music of Bach – that musical competence was achieved. Not having learnt the piano, at least at some level, would then most likely exclude any young man or woman from becoming an accomplished composer.

Of course, it is tempting to dismiss Rosen with ridicule, but his attack may well have struck a chord. The role of the piano in the nineteenth century music is hard to exaggerate. Not only was it on this instrument that even the symphonic repertory was most frequently encountered, often in arrangement for four hands, but it was indeed the instrument that nurtured nineteenth-century compositional practice. Music was learnt, accessed and internalised through fingers playing the piano. And the piano’s ability to replicate and visualise the notation system can make us forget the degree to which its idiomatic properties and the “visual layout” may have conditioned our concept of music. The instrument became a *technology of knowledge* in the musical world of the nineteenth century.

But there is more. The compositional techniques (motivic-thematic work, counterpoint, variation techniques and so forth) and the question of form – reliant on the importance of harmonic progression and tonal cadences, and unsurprisingly, on those cadences that are idiomatic to piano – depended on a relatively free and “swift” employment of the motivic material, on a “purity” in which the secondary parameters played no significant role. But not only did contemporary compositional practice reside in this pianistic take on composition, so too did nineteenth and early twentieth-century music theory, analysis and vocabulary, and the role of the piano in the practical, theoretical, analytical and conceptual understanding of music cannot be ignored. If the centrepiece of the nineteenth-century musical

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². Cf. Fétis’s (1832, 366) critique of Berlioz’s impotency.
³. “Sure, it is very beautiful, but it is not music.” Schumann used the French words in his article.
“habitat” was the piano, not least if you were a composer, can Berlioz's lack of pianistic competence explain why he never did adopt and internalise the skills of Cherubini?

Undoubtedly, not composing (or even conceiving) music in pianistic terms will draw forth a different type of musical material, and will call for other musical acts to inform the compositional process – acts which may leave traces in the score. And there are thus good reasons to pay attention to how and what Berlioz composed, not least as he is probably one of the few orchestral composers in the nineteenth century who never played the piano or conceived music in pianistic terms.

In previous (and forthcoming) studies, I investigate Berlioz's use of the guitar as a composing tool (see Hovland 2017). Not only can the use of this instrument explain his unconventional harmonic progressions, his singular use of counterpoint and the particularity of his melodies, but more importantly, this instrument may reveal a previous stage in the compositional process and therefore give us some information about a compositional activity that we can normally only access through the study of sketches, a route blocked by the dearth of sketches from the composer's hand. In fact, the degree to which Berlioz was reliant on the guitar while composing gives us 1) an argument against the idea of an abstract and purely imaginative way of composing, 2) a way to disclose a distinctive material that may reveal Berlioz's compositional practice, 3) an opportunity to see Berlioz's creative activity as an attempt to carve out a new aesthetics, and finally, 4) a path towards a different understanding of the work of art – towards what I will define as the acticity of the musical work (by which I mean its quality or state of being constituted by – and continuously constituting – acts). In fact, Berlioz's use of the guitar as a composing tool shows us how he was led to develop other qualities and to include other elements in his compositional practice.

The theoretical backdrop for the present paper is practice studies, which take as its point of departure the study of the constituting acts of a practice. This perspective brings forth new aspects of musical competence and knowledge and challenges established vocabulary and theory. It is this perspective that has led me to coin the term “acticity”, in order to better account for the compositional practice of Berlioz. I further believe this term will prove useful in explaining ontological aspects of music that have not been fully engaged with in the philosophical writings of Roman Ingarden, Lydia Goehr and Peter Kivy, despite, in particular, Goehr's commitment to explain the ontology of the musical work in and through historical musical practices. And yet, the main aim of this article is not to engage a philosophical discussion of the ontology of the art nor to pinpoint a rigid definition of acticity, but to show how this term is a necessary outcome of a hands-on research of Berlioz's compositional practice. For these reasons, I would now like to discuss some relevant cases that can illustrate the usefulness of the term “acticity”.

First Theme: Marche au Supplice
The degree of orchestral innovation in the beginning of the fourth movement is unique. It is not only the dominant role of the two pairs of timpani, who play the processual rhythmic pattern, coperti, and with double drum-sticks on the first quavers, then the rest of the quavers with only right-hand drum-sticks, all recreating – nearly too vividly – the terror of the post-revolutionary Paris Commune. Even stranger are the pizzicato chords of the contrabasses, divisi in four. To my knowledge, this had never been done before Berlioz, nor can we say that it became a standard trait thereafter. In opposition to this percussive orchestral music, are the brassy horns playing their quasi-fanfare in syncopation (see Example 1).
IV.

Gang zum Hochgericht.
Marche au Supplice.  The Procession to the Stake.

2 Flauti.
2 Oboi.

2 Clarinetti in C (flats).

I. II. in B basso (Si b grave).
4 Corni.

III. IV. in Es (Mi b).

4 Fagotti.

2 Cornetti in B (Si b).
(Cornets à pistons.)

2 Trombe in B (Si b).

Trombone I e II.
Trombone III.

2 Tuba.

Timpani I
in B (Si b) F (Fa).
Baguettes d’éponge.  
Mit Schwarmenschlägeln.  

With sponge-headed drum-sticks.

Timpani II
in G (Sol) D (Re b)
Baguettes d’éponge.  
Mit Schwarmenschlägeln.  

With sponge-headed drum-sticks.

Tamburo.
Cinilli.

Gran Tamburo.
(Grosse Caisse.)

Violino I.
Violino II.
Viola.
Violoncello.
Contrabasso.

Allegretto non troppo. (d = 72)

*) On peut, dans ce morceau, doubler les instruments à vent.  (Note de H. Berlino.)
In diesem Satz können die Blasinstrumente verdoppelt werden.  
In this movement the wind-instruments may be doubled.  
H. B. I.
Example 1: Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique, mvt 4, opening bars.
The unpianistic quality of this music is clearly demonstrated by the famous Liszt transcription. Neither the percussiveness nor the contrasts between the different layers are present in Liszt's piano reduction. But played on the guitar, every detail of this opening reveals its guitaristic quality. The four notes of the contrabasses are simply the G-minor chord played on the guitar, with two open strings and third and first finger on the low E and A strings. Further, the later divisi chords are typically guitaristic (see Example 2).


4. I use the term “guitaristic” to describe the likelihood of a musical excerpt having been conceived according to the idiomatic properties of the guitar. This, however, does not necessarily make the music easily to perform on the instrument.

5. The chord voicing is clearly a sign of idiomatic playing. This chord, putting the greatest interval on top, is rather unusual for the piano, which has the ability to give the chord a “lighter” voicing, putting the smaller intervals on top and the bigger at bottom. This will avoid the muffled sound a chord like this would easily make when transposed to the bass-section of the orchestra.
Playing Berlioz’s music on the guitar demands tapping the string, *sul ponticello*, on the first chord, then playing the next five quavers on the bridge, a technique that suggests both the muffled deep chord of the contrabasses and the percussive sextuplets of the timpani, and interestingly, only by repeatedly using the right-hand (thumb), just as Berlioz asks the timpanists to only use the right-hand drumsticks. Furthermore, the brassy sound of the two horns are – given this playing technique of the timpani and bass parts – ready at hand, as this is played *ponticello* on the guitar. In fact, these syncopated notes are within the positions of both the right and left hands (still holding the G-minor chord), and the brassy sound is simply rendered by not moving the right hand away from its position above the bridge. The two fingers of the right hand register the *sul ponticello* sound by not departing from playing close to the bridge.

In other words, not only is it all playable on guitar, even the different playing techniques and orchestral colours of the score are largely transferrable in the guitar version. That the rest of the accumulative build-up is highly guitaristic is interesting, as it may further illustrate the role of the guitar in the compositional process of this very new and original orchestral music. So, while Liszt's transcription can only render this opening in a rather monochrome sound, the guitar transcription brings forth all the three different layers distinguished by timbre and technique. Still, what we need to grasp from this example is that the act of producing a specific timbre on the guitar and the use of idiomatic playing techniques become formative acts that actually inform the orchestral writing.

The percussiveness of the opening music thus has functionality and attributing compositional importance to what could be called the “secondary elements” is indeed an essential part of Berlioz's technique. In fact, we discover that the different playing techniques and timbres are used as acts to differentiate the layers in the music and to attribute roles and functions to these layers. Later in the movement the same techniques and timbres are used as elements for compositional processing (a role that conventional musical theory and analysis ascribes to the motivic material, cf. the “motivic-thematic work”). The confirmation of this technique is found in the seven bars leading to rehearsal number 54 (see also six bars before 56), where we encounter something that could be described as *Klangfarbenmelodie*. But even four bars earlier, a diffraction begins of the different playing techniques and timbres as part of the compositional processes that are leading to the accumulative section from rehearsal number 54 (see Example 3).

One might argue that the guitar transcription is too inventive – that it inscribes playing techniques that were not typically used by guitarists in Berlioz's day. But this objection lacks force in the case of Berlioz for at least three reasons: 1) Berlioz was not using the guitar to create “good” and well-sounding solo music for this instrument. It was a composing tool for invention and for developing new musical material. 2) As this score and this movement illustrate so well, Berlioz sought new innovative ways to orchestrate for every instrument he used. Why should he not have the same inventive attitude to the instrument he actually played well? 3) The contemporary variety of playing techniques on the guitar was greater than one might suppose when focusing on the leading guitar composers' works. The guitar was an instrument that fostered many autodidact virtuosos and, accordingly, a wide range of different playing styles and techniques (Dallman 1972).

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6. In Aguado’s guitar school from 1820, this technique is presented and called “Tambura” (Aguado 1820, 49).
Second Theme: Songe d’une nuit du Sabbat
What music! The shimmering sound of the *divisi* violins and violas, playing with mutes, creates an orchestral texture that makes it fair to ask whether this is the first pure composition in timbres (*Klangfarbenkomposition*). This moment is fascinating in historical terms as well; not only does it borrow from Weber (e.g. the use of diminished seventh but most of all the motive of a falling octave in glissando played by flute and piccolo, which points to The Wolf Glen’s scene in *Der Freischütz*), but it also provides an arsenal of orchestral effects that Wagner will eagerly adopt in his music dramas. Notice, for example, the shimmering *divisi* strings, the gesture of the rising passage in the basses, the use of crescendo and accent to form directionality, the jittery figurations in the high strings, the chromatic falling *tutti* violins and violas in *ppp*, and the dark turning amorphous murmur of basses in the fourth bar.

The multitude of colours are provided by the active use of differing playing techniques (*tremolo, legato, muted, glissando, spiccatò, pizzicato*), and of differing dynamics (as in the span of four bars, the dynamics varies from *ppp* to *f* with nearly all the intermediate shades).

It is hardly possible to make a clear distinction between rhythm, percussive sounds, timbre and rapid figurations in these bars. Nearly every “natural” metric value is used in these ten opening bars: tremolo, demi-semi-quaver, semi-quaver sextuplets, semi-quavers, quaver, crotchet triolts, crotchets, minimis, semi-breves, pedal point. Still, the general movement is clear: from a tremolo in high pitch, the music goes through different “diffractions” and ends up in a tremolo in the deep register in the “Gran Tamburo”. From pure shimmering timbre to dark amorphous murmuring timbre. Then all repeats once again (a semitone higher), making these first 20 bars or around 90 seconds of music an introduction of *Klangkomposition, avant la lettre*. And yet, despite borrowing the flute-piccolo glissando figure (and its peculiar timbre) from the Wolf Glen, it is hard to grasp how Berlioz could even imagine such music, only some five years after Beethoven’s last symphony. This is music in which nearly every nuance in dynamic and metric value is used (and most of them in the first four bars), music that offers an extraordinary wide range of playing techniques and different timbres, music that has almost no motives (with the exception of the “borrowed” Wolf Glen figure). All of this illustrates the degree to which these opening bars constitute highly original orchestral writing, constructed by a skilful melange of the pure acoustic qualities of different sounds, in which the usual primary parameters such as melody and harmony have little importance. This is a sonic organisation in which the *physicality* of both the sounds and the acts needed to produce these sounds are included and organised according to “the laws of physics” – or perhaps we should say according to acoustic or phenomenological operations.

How did such music even occur to the composer? The guitar transcription of the score tells us all we need to know. Nearly every musical figure, every timbre, and to a large extent also every playing technique, follows directly from the act of playing the guitar. The tremolo in the first bar, played by the thumb on damped strings (with the palm of the right hand), the legato trait of the basses, and the percussive sound of the timpani – all are present in the idiomatic playing of the first bar. The crisp and rhythmic intense figuration in the high register in the third bar may again be rooted in his use of the guitar (although the diminished seventh chords have a slightly different design). The downward moving chromatic chords in the fourth bar, played staccato and *ppp*, are hardly idiomatic for any other instrument than the guitar, and the murmuring sextuplets in the basses in the next bar are again utterly guitaristic. Every note is not only playable but based on the simplest change of fingering imaginable and the use of the open third string, the G (see Example 4).
Example 4: Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, mvt 5 opening bars, transcription by the author.
Third Theme: The Idée Fixe

After these 20 opening bars of the fifth movement (“Songe d’une nuit du Sabbat”), the idée fixe returns, but in these bars it is mise-en-scène as a dance-like tune (playing in the distance), accompanied by timpani and bass drum and now in an iambic pattern that for the first time in the symphony gives the “melody” the rhythmic solidity one would expect from a main symphonic Allegro theme; this is also the first time the rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment is integrated in the “melody”. This is contrary to previous appearances of the idée fixe. And by now we should not be surprised that all this is playable on the guitar. Even the grace notes are idiomatic, as is the accompaniment (see Example 5).

Example 5: Symphonie Fantastique, mvt 5, “Allegro,” transcription by the author.

If we now look at some of the previous appearances of the idée fixe, we find many and varying versions, which further serve a variety of functions within the musical development. As an example, let us look at the version of the idée fixe found at the end of first movement (see Example 6). At this point it has the role of ending the movement, and it is presented in its most simple version with no vivifying elements: its naïve and simple form not only points to a guitaristic origin but also suggests that it is the mise-en-scène that explains the role of the idée fixe. In fact, it is the inclusion of other musical elements or acts that define the way it “works” in the music. Interestingly, it never returns twice in the same shape or to the same soundscape; all is always changing. Yet, when the melodic contour and its soundscape change considerably, other constituting elements, in particular the odd dynamics (see below), assure its “identity”. Nevertheless, throughout all the versions, the idée fixe remains utterly guitaristic, also in the sense that specific idiomatic and acoustic qualities of the guitar playing and its timbre is actively present in each version. It is these qualities which may explain how the “melody” attains a high degree of physical or acoustic presence and is hardly never presented simply as a theme.

Example 6: Symphonie Fantastique, end of first movement, transcription by the author.

The idée fixe first appears in the symphony as the main Allegro theme in the first movement, and it is this “melody” that will form the central part of this movement (as well as of the whole symphony). But as a symphonic theme it is presented without any form of solid accompaniment. As already mentioned, in its first appearance the percussive and uneven
counter-figurations in the low strings are hardly the form of forward going and nourishing accompaniment that an Allegro theme in a first movement of a symphony needs. What actually gives vitality and purpose to the idée fixe is the use of highly counter-intuitive dynamics and of unusual accentuations and notated tempo modifications. In fact, the odd dynamic figurations give shape to the idée fixe, providing the vitality and directionality it needs, and it will return time and again in the work, maintaining to a large degree the same dynamic contour even though other elements may change. To my knowledge, a similar odd use of the dynamics has never been used so consistently before Berlioz.

Development

What my transcriptions may reveal is how the physical act of producing the specific playing technique or timbre on the guitar is processed into the score. By necessity – as the composer needed to extend his pool of material – the physical act of playing is used in a constructive manner to create new material. Conversely, the orchestral writing, while frequently ignoring conventional priorities, challenges order and creates new (and rearranges old) rules of composition and orchestration.

Thus, as the examples show, there is a surprisingly rich variety of compositional material included in the Symphonie fantastique. Limiting our attention to what we may call the “motive-based material”, we have already seen the use of two very different kinds: the (bar-long) module, which despite its brevity is infused with elements of characterisation, and the long “melody” – at least 31 bars – of the idée fixe. Still, even this “melody” is completely infused with secondary parameters and diverse elements of characterisation. Clearly, neither type of motive-based material, with all their “physical” presence, inbuilt functionality and elements of characterisation, could have had the role as a motive or a theme in music that relied on motivic-thematic work, or what we may call “motivic ideality, waiting for realisation”. In fact, we may say that the heterogeneity of this material is in conflict with the founding ideas and principles of dominant compositional practices in the nineteenth century, and even to some extent in the twentieth century.

In his “Brahms The Progressive”, Arnold Schoenberg makes an epitome of a compositional technique that uses a pure intervallic motive as the unit (or brick) in the musical edifice. For example, in his analysis of the second movement of the Brahms’s A-minor String Quartet, Op. 51, he shows how a short two-plus-two-note motive, C#–D#, E–D#, is the basis of the texture (“Satz”) (Schoenberg 1975, 430). We might say that this material is ideal for music that has existing forms to fill. A more positive observation would be that the malleability of the motivic material guarantees coherence and “wholeness” to the music. In either perspective, there is no contradiction between form and content/material. The degree to which Schoenberg himself was reliant on this motivic transformation is clear in his Op. 11, no. 1, but we may also claim that this technique of motivic transformation (based on “purified” intervallic motives) was a necessary condition for the development of the twelve-tone music, as well as for the development of much twentieth-century music analysis, especially thematic analysis.

In Schoenberg’s own writings, the relation between form, organisation, logic, coherence and “living organism” is a fundamental idea:

7. This theme is also particular in its ability to extend itself, even to the extent that it becomes hard to draw a line between where it ends and where the continuation is actually only a prolongation of the same “melody”. This may sound a bit too inventive, but interestingly enough, Berlioz himself articulated this as a characteristic of his melodies. See “Postscriptum” in Berlioz (1969).
Used in the aesthetic sense, form means that a piece is organized; i.e. that it consists of elements functioning like those of a living organism … The chief requirements of the creation of a comprehensible form are logic and coherence. The presentation, development and interconnection of ideas must be based on relationship. (Schoenberg 1967, 20)

Of course, this technique of motivic transformation, as well as Schoenberg’s reference to logic and coherence, can further be related to the Beethoven model of motivic transformation (most clearly expounded by studying the use of the main motive in his fifth symphony) and to the term “organicism”. The model of organicism, of a (motivic) cellule that grows into (symphonic) form, became an important “recipe” in the nineteenth-century music. Nevertheless, after World War Two the process implicated (i.e. the act of growing and the dynamic principle of change) became less accentuated, not least in performances.8 Indeed, already in the 1920s – two decades before this so-called post-war paradigmatic change in the concept of music – there was underway a slow transformation towards a more rigid understanding of musical forms, which was further sustained by the transfer to a more metronomic and equidistant concept of musical time in musical performance. The organic model was (surprisingly, although obviously unintentionally) complicit with this “ossification” of form and performance; and what emerged as the leading principles in music theory, analysis and even performance reflected to a large extent the idea of the musical work as structure.9 Undoubtedly, this change influenced the ontological character of the musical work as well as the character of music theory and analysis. Joseph Kerman’s claim that “from the standpoint of the ruling ideology, analysis exists for the purpose of demonstrating organicism, and organicism exists for the purpose of validating a certain body of works of art” becomes particularly relevant if we accept that the organicism of the nineteenth century was “hardened” and translated into structures, which served the twentieth century’s main analytical tools and the canonisation of a particular repertory, in particular the German music from the so-called first Viennese school to the second (Kerman 1980, 315). The ossification of organic forms led to nicely ordered structures, to the notion of musical organisation as a mise-en-structure.

How does all this relate to Berlioz’s music? In Berlioz’s music, we find techniques of transformation, not least of rhythm and the secondary parameters (dynamics, colour, phrasing, articulation). Still, the sheer physical and acoustic character of the materiality (thus its lack of “ideality”) as well as the length of the “melodies” in Berlioz’s music, make the adoption of the Beethoven model of motivic transformation and of organic growth as principle of form quite irrelevant. Clearly, this can explain the so-called “unanalysable” character of Berlioz’s music. Indeed, these observations can help us better understand the “fate” of Berlioz’s music, caught in a double bind: first it pays for not adapting itself to the dominant compositional craft of its own time, then it is charged with not being adaptable to the dominant twentieth-century musicological and analytical models.

9. Underlying this change in the concept of music and performance is of course the modernism of the twentieth century, with its “dehumanization of art” (in Ortega y Gasset’s phrase, which forms the title of a 1925 essay) and its turn from a “qualitative” to “quantitative” (or metronomic) concept of musical time (as Stravinsky had it). See Ortega y Gasset (1969) and Stravinsky (1959). In music as in the other fine arts, the general turn is away from organic (or human) forms towards geometry and structures. The reaction against Romantic music and its concept of organicism is thus an essential step in the history of musical modernism. What makes this change more complicated is the fact that even the Schoenberg school is deeply rooted in organicism. Still, the impact of this change is obvious, not least due to the defining or “disciplinary” role of the recording industry, enforcing a new ideal of clean and lean recordings, and the dominance of a more metronomic concept of musical time in performance. For a further discussion of these issues, see Taruskin (1995), Said (1991), and Hovland (2007, 116–34).
And yet, organicism did to some extent allow for a focus on the acticity of the work, not least in performance. Since organic modelling is hardly the dominant mode of development in Berlioz’s work, the question of how the music is formed becomes urgent. Undoubtedly, due to the nature of the materiality (the acts he mises en œuvre), Berlioz needed to engage other categories of form and development. In the examples we have studied, we may discern three ways of organising the music (i.e. “modes of development”):

- acts of dramatising,
- acts of acoustic construction (or phenomenological “maniement”),
- acts of narrating.

The opening of “Marche au Supplice” is an example of “acts of dramatising”. Here the music is actually describing a procession, in which the “real world” musical means are not only present (i.e. the procedural use of percussion instruments) but also emphasised dramatically through the orchestration. The procession is there in the music, with all its dramatic posture. The post-revolutionary terror is (re-)enacted in the music and creates a highly dramatic setting. The musical form is attained through these acts of dramatising.

The opening of “Songe d’une Nuit” is an example of what we can call “acts of acoustic construction”. Not only does the material tend towards becoming pure physical sound, or timbre, but the general outline may be better understood in acoustical than musical terms. The diffraction, the fluttering sound, the near-amorphous murmuring, and the general movement from high to low all reflect how sound is organised according to its acoustic properties (and laws), as well as according to phenomenological perception. Sound is treated, that is organised and formed, like a physical phenomenon. We will call this a phenomenological “maniement”, preferring the French word to the English “handling”. In fact, by focusing on how the physical properties of sound (high, low, dense, open, continued, diffracted, descending, ascending, etc.) are the point of departure for the maniement, we can also better reveal how the music is constructed. As the example from “Songe d’une nuit” shows, the movement begins with a fluttering timbre, descending into an amorphous muttering, only to repeat itself a semitone higher, thus with added intensity. Modes of development in Berlioz’s music are frequently created by the use of basic physical energies, such as using directionality (e.g. rising or falling texture), by various means of intensification (use of dynamics, tempo modifications, timbre, etc.) or by build-ups of kinetic energy (for example by incessantly and insistently repeating the same short rhythmic figure). Also, the use of chromaticism can be regarded as a means of intensification and a way to create directionality, not primarily in a harmonic-analytical sense, but more in a pure physical one.

The way the “melody” or the idée fixe traverses the symphony can be seen as an “act of narrating”. In a simple manner, there is a “subject” that we follow, or rather, that reacts to different settings, and by following this “subject” a story may be narrated. In the first movement, we could say that through maintaining the identity of the “melody”, applying change, contrast, suspension and fulfilment, the idée fixe is presented more or less like a character in story. And this epic or narrative quality thus shapes the Symphonie fantastique, with or

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10. Richard Wagner’s 1869 essay “Über das Dirigieren” illustrates the importance given to tempo modifications and the notion of “Melos” as essential characteristics of what we may call a Romantic performance practice. Wagner also strongly sustained the metaphor of “organicism”. But even the writings of Heinrich Schenker confirm the importance of organicism and its relation to a dynamic performance, although the “Americanization of Schenker” (to use William Rothstein’s term) implied a clear shift towards the general mise-en-structure. As far as I have found in my research, Schenker himself never used the word “Struktur”.

without the aid of the programme. In other words, the high degree of identity (or distinctiveness) of the *idée fixe*, its ability to support change, its length, as well as its distinction (or contrast) from the accompaniment (or the soundscape in which it occurs), is better adapted for supporting a narrative than an organic development as principle of form. It is a principle of form that is not based on motivic-thematic work or ready to be codified as structure. Instead, the course of the *idée fixe* tells a “story”.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that traces of these acts or modes of development cannot be found in the music of other early nineteenth-century composers. But even in the works of Beethoven, in which the phenomenological *maniement* certainly has importance, they are integrated in a musical (organic) development. The character of “being music” is never questioned. The “eccentricity” of Berlioz’s music can be explained partly by the pure physicality of the material he uses and partly by the presence of these non-organic and non-structural modes of development. Yet the obvious point is that the material Berlioz developed needed other modes of development than could be provided by the alliance of “tonality – motivic-thematic work – organic development”. In fact, Berlioz did understand the necessity of employing organisational principles to compensate for the “shortcomings” of his compositional material in regard to adopting conventional categories of form.

**Recapitulation**

The originality of Berlioz’s music can thus to a large extent be explained by his use of a different *material*, which is impregnated by the idiometrically developed acts of playing and composing on the guitar, and by the need to compensate for the dearth of textural, motivic and polyphonic development that resulted from his guitar-based compositional method. Because of this, comprehending Berlioz’s music and compositional practice requires a *change of perspective*. And the concept of “acticity” may help us better understand the ways in which the character of Berlioz’s work was different from his contemporaries. But equally important, it casts light on an aspect of our concept of music that has been clouded.

Indeed, my coining of the term “acticity” is not based on an abstract thinking but on the need to articulate a quality of the work that becomes evident when studying how the guitar is inscribed in the score, how that inscription leads to novel orchestral writing, and how the composer was capable of finding a set of “new” modes of development and enunciation in order to cope with this change in materiality. \(^{11}\) This process is modelled in Figure 1.

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11. The term “acts or modes of development” is preferred to variants of “form” or “organisation”, as it has the quality of not indicating something accomplished or “ossified”. In comprehending the acticity of the work, we may need to also reflect on the choice of terminology, not least since many musical terms come with implications that are rather convenient for describing the work as *mise-en-structure*. 

**Figure 1:** The trajectory from the guitar to the development of musical forms.
In other words, the use of the term “acticity” becomes a necessity caused by following how acts of playing and composing on the guitar are inscribed in the score, and how the physicality of these acts is still present, and creates the specificity of the orchestral writing, and further, how this “impure” materiality demands new modes of development. The acts do not simply condition the orchestral writing, they are present in, and constitute the particularity of, the score; but more importantly, they may even illuminate an ontological character of every musical work – its activity – which we tend to forget, and without which the work as a score would simply become a senseless assemblage of dots and lines.

The conceptuality and utility of the term “acticity” bear an obvious resemblance to the way the terms “facticity” and “fact” are used in human sciences. Let us therefore turn to a topic from historiography that may obliquely illustrate the usefulness of the term “acticity”. If the historiographical distinction between “datum” and “fact” expounds how facts are reconstructed from data, or the “documents at the researcher’s disposal”, it further explains how fact is “not the source itself, but the process it refers to”, whether this process is created by a historical narration or by using a given analytical or methodological perspective (Dahlhaus 1983, 34). In other words, the term “facticity” reflects the manner and “content” of what a scientific or conceptual field define as facts. A study of the facticity of a given field will therefore be a question of blindness and insight: what is conceived as “fact” and what is unseen.

If we apply this terminological reflection to our study it can explain the miscomprehension that Berlioz has endured: viewing Berlioz’s music from the angle of an already classified and narratively well-ordered perspective, as historical, musicological and analytical facts, the “inner working” of the music and its aesthetic quality become invisible or jarring. The prevailing construction of facticity (i.e. the quality or state of being a fact) of the musical work is maladapted for dealing with the music of Berlioz as data. And even if the prevailing facticity is based on dominant historical, analytical and aesthetic perspectives that are also subject to historical change, Berlioz’s works have consistently maintained a high degree of incompatibility, hence the persistent “Berlioz problem”.

But there is more. The concept of the musical work that has prevailed for the last six decades has supported a reification of the musical work. This has been sustained by the technological development and the commercialisation of the recording industry, which turns the work into a fixed object or a “thing”, and this has also had implications on the facticity of the work. Consequently, a facticity that sustains the mise-en-structure of the musical work is not only blind to the inner workings of Berlioz’s music, it is also blind to what we may consider as an important ontological property of any musical work of art (i.e. its activity). In other words, what we consider to be fact is already defined by the prevailing historical, analytical, social and methodological perspectives that systematise, categorise, narrate and assign value to music. The process of defining and attributing facticity is mainly a unidirectional movement; the musical datum (e.g. the work) is comprehended from the perspective of the predominant historical, analytical and theoretical systematisation, and as we have already discussed, those elements of the work (as “data”) that are not recognised become invisible or even “proofs” of incompetence. By applying the concept of “acticity”, this directionality may be reversed. This change of perspective may also, it is hoped, include the acts that constituted and continuously constitute the musical work.

The advantage of the term “acticity” lies in how it may contribute to unfolding an ontological quality of the musical work. The term’s relevance therefore goes beyond Berlioz. In

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12. By studying the changes in facticity of a work – that is, to study what is recognised and defined as a fact – would indeed be to trace an important historical development, a history of reception, not only of the work itself, but also of the prevailing concept of music.
In this article we have followed some argumentative steps that may better explain the Berlioz problem. The first of these was that composing in the beginning of the nineteenth century was a practice based on a highly developed craft that Berlioz never really adopted. The principal reason for this was his inability to play the piano, which was the instrument that largely defined the notion of both composing and music theory in the nineteenth century (and even later). As the harmonic and melodic “plasticity” of the piano was not integrated into Berlioz’s writing, he had to develop other acts of composing and modes of development.
and enunciation, implying that the dominant compositional techniques (“motivic-thematic work”) and formal thinking (organicism) had to be challenged. A further important argumentative step or premise is the transfer from organicism to *mise-en-structure* – the ossification of both form and performance in the twentieth century. Again, the music of Berlioz became “dissonant”; its inherent forms were attuned to neither organicism nor the *mise-en-structure*, and it was overly constructed by the use of secondary parameters, not least tempo modifications and continuously changing dynamics.

Facts come easy; they are likely to be presumptuously self-evident, clear and more or less self-sustaining. Through education, institutionalisation, socialisation and other ways to enter into a discursive practice, we are included in a community of facticity, a community that agrees to take some things for granted, but that also agrees on how to grant things. What is not compatible to our dominant order of facticity is easily defined as a problem, whether it is the music of Berlioz, or the “fact” that there have been no great women artists – the so-called “Women Problem” first tackled head on by Linda Nochlin (1971). To create these problems is to dislocate the responsibility. Indeed, as a classifying explanation it says more about the perspective of the “definer” than the “defined”. This is why seeking the perspective of (or from) the defined may enlighten our zones of blindness. It is this change in perspective that the present study attempts to accomplish. To take the perspective from what is excluded from the order of facticity with which we operate is to use a mirror to better identify our blind spots. It is to be hoped that this study of Berlioz’s music – and of his hands playing the guitar – has shed new light on how we have come to ignore the acticity of the work of music, and how the work is constructed by, and reliant on, a continuous process of creating acts.

In simplistic terms, we may say that the study of Berlioz’s use of the guitar as a composing tool has allowed us to not only rethink the Berlioz problem, but to investigate our own concept of music. Thus, changing the perspective involves a need for us to consider the premises on which we found a Berlioz problem. It is this change of perspective that further activates the need to rethink the ontological particularity of the work in general. The term “acticity” allows us to address the particularity of Berlioz’s work and may reveal what we have excluded from our facticity – from our concept of the musical work of art.

And yet, who are we fooling? Would anyone prefer Berlioz’s perspective to the one that has created the “Romantic Generation” (including Beethoven, Brahms and Wagner), or to all what we have learnt – and invested in – through our education as musical scholars, musicians or composers? And even if we only take the term “acticity” with us, it will still contradict how we handle the musical work, our thinking and taste. In fact, are we not better off by describing Berlioz as a “monster” as Verdi did, and by this echoing the same word by which the monk-biologist Mendel was described by Michel Foucault, as the one who “spoke the truth” but was still not “dans le vrai” (within the true)? Are we really willing to challenge our own perspective and belief in structure, or would we rather, if sufficiently challenged, confess our angst as Martha finally did, when she was returned her own taunting question at the end of the long journey through the night and struggle in Albee’s play?

Who’s afraid of Berlioz, Berlioz, Berlioz?
We … are … we … are …

This is our problem, which I hope we will find the courage to confront.

15. “People have often wondered how on earth 19th-century botanists and biologists managed not to see the truth of Mendel’s statements. … Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not *dans le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse: it simply was not along such lines that objects and biological concepts were formed. … Mendel was a true monster, so much so that science could not even properly speak of him” (Foucault 1982, 16).
References


