

Berlioz

BÉATRICE BÉNÉDICT



OPERA BOSTON

On September 11, 1827, everything changed for Hector Berlioz.

He was a struggling composer, only 23 years old. Cut off financially by his father after he dropped out of medical school to study music, he lived in poverty and supported himself by singing in the chorus in a vaudeville theater. He was still studying composition at the Paris Conservatoire, although had published a handful of songs and had composed stacks of music, including a complete opera that would never be performed.

What he called the “supreme drama” of his life began that night in 1827, when a company of actors from London arrived at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in Paris to present a season of plays. On September 11, they offered *Hamlet*. The works of Shakespeare had never caught on in France, but that was now about to change. Many prominent figures in French artistic and intellectual life were in the audience for *Hamlet*, and so was Berlioz, thanks to a friend on the Odéon staff who gave him a pass to get in.

“Shakespeare, coming upon me unawares,” Berlioz wrote decades later, “struck me like a thunderbolt. The lightning flash of that discovery revealed to me at a stroke the whole heaven of art, illuminating it to its remotest corners.”

The Ophelia that night, Harriet Smithson, was an obscure actress whose strong Irish accent had compromised her career in London. In front of a French-speaking audience, she

became a star because of her beauty, charm, and her passionate, individual and tragic characterization. Paris fell in love with her, and so did Berlioz, who returned four nights later to see her in *Romeo and Juliet*, although he was afraid he would be consumed by the flames of Shakespeare’s genius...

Legend has it that Berlioz was so inspired by Shakespeare and Smithson that he cried out “That woman shall be my wife, and on this play I shall write my grandest symphony.” In his autobiography he denies he ever said any such thing, although it would have been completely in character for him to have done so; in any case, he did ultimately compose a great dramatic symphony, *Roméo et Juliette*, and after several years, and surmounting formidable obstacles, he did in the end marry Harriet Smithson.

The marriage was happy for awhile, but the happiness didn’t last. Harriet was not the Ophelia or Juliet or Desdemona that Berlioz was as much in love with; she was an ambitious actress who could not sustain the initial sensation she created and could not build a career as an English-speaking performer in France. She grew stout and turned to drink. Rather than impersonating tragic figures behind the footlights, she became one in real life, and

she made Berlioz utterly miserable. Ultimately he and Harriet separated acrimoniously, although he supported her for the rest of her life.

What did last was Berlioz’s love for Shakespeare. He wrote several works based on Shakespeare - the most famous is *Roméo et Juliette*, but he also composed an overture to *King Lear*, a “Funeral March for the

Final Scene of *Hamlet*,” a “dramatic fantasy” on *The Tempest*, and a ballad for singer and orchestra called *La mort d’Ophélie*. He read Shakespeare often, attended productions wherever he was, quoted and praised Shakespeare repeatedly in his letters, journalism and books, and even read entire plays aloud on social evenings. One of his many unfulfilled ambitions was to compose an opera based on *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Furthermore, it is not too much to say that nearly all of Berlioz’s mature music was *inspired*

*Opera Boston’s production of Berlioz’s
Béatrice et Bénédict opens in the
Cutler Majestic Theater Friday Oct. 21
at 7:30 PM with repeat performances
on Sunday Oct. 23 at 3, and Tuesday
Oct. 25, again at 7:30 PM.*

by Shakespeare although they may also derive from Berlioz's enthusiastic response to other literary sources - Virgil, Goethe, Sir Walter Scott, Byron; his music, whatever its subject or source, is Shakespearean in aspiration, method, scope, variety, inclusiveness and humanity.

Berlioz's final work was *Béatrice et Bénédict*, an opéra-comique, based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

As far as we know, Berlioz never saw a production of this play, but he proposed composing an opera based on it as early as 1833, when he asked a friend to lend him a copy of the play; about twenty years later he prepared a scenario for a *Much Ado About Nothing* opera, but nothing came of it.

In 1858, however, Berlioz accepted a commission from his patron and friend, Edouard Bénazet, who was the manager of the casino in the German resort spa Baden-Baden. The casino was building a new opera house for the pleasure of its patrons, and Bénazet asked Berlioz to compose an opera for the opening, *Le Chevalier Nabel*, a supernatural tale set during the 30 Years' War.

Berlioz had spent happy weeks at Baden-Baden during four summers, working under exceptional conditions, conducting an orchestra he hand-picked himself in enterprising programs of his own devising, so he accepted the offer. Soon, however, he found himself in despair over the libretto, and asked to be released from his obligation. Instead Bénazet pursued the matter, and Berlioz proposed the *Much Ado About Nothing* project that had been on his mind for nearly three decades, agreeing, for an additional fee, to write the libretto himself.

Berlioz originally intended this to be a one-act opéra comique with spoken dialogue; as he worked on it, the piece grew, so he divided it into two acts. For the first revival after the premiere, a production in Weimar, he added a couple of additional musical numbers which became a permanent part of the score.

Béatrice et Bénédict uses only one aspect of Shakespeare's complex and sometimes very dark comedy - the opera is almost exclusively about the "merry war" between the titular lovers, and the scheme of the other characters to expose the true feelings about each other that neither Beatrice nor Benedict will admit to him -- or her -- self. Gone from the cast are the villain, Don John, and the comic constable

Dogberry; gone is the whole evil plot to destroy the complementary pair of lovers, Hero and Claudio. The old joke goes that *Béatrice et Bénédict* is *Much Ado About Nothing* without the ado!

For Berlioz, Héro and Claudio represent an idealized romantic dream; Beatrice and Benedict represent a more complex human reality. He introduces a new comic character, Somarone (Italian for "great donkey," although it might be translated less delicately as "big ass"). Somarone is a musician, who in some respects represents the Parisian musical establishment against which Berlioz railed and campaigned most of his life, even as he craved and courted its favors and emoluments. In other respects, though, Somarone is a caricature of a vainglorious musician whose work obeys the rules although it has nothing to do with the emotional context - no wonder Berlioz labels Somarone's leaden double-fugue wedding song as an "Epithalame grotesque." Hugh Macdonald, editor of the score in the New Berlioz Edition, points out that some of Somarone's lines come from notoriously toplofty remarks by Gluck and Spontini, composers that Berlioz admired (as a young man, Berlioz went to the library to copy out by hand whole operas by Gluck that he wanted to study).

Berlioz took some substantial swatches of the dialogue directly from Benjamin Laroche's translation of the play into French and lightly edited them: about 300 lines in all. The rest he wrote himself, although he avoided anything like the notorious credit for the 1929 Hollywood version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, "by William Shakespeare, with additional dialogue by Sam Taylor." There are Shakespearian quotations or allusions in some of the lines Berlioz created for music as well, and not just from *Much Ado* -- the final duet of Beatrice and Benedict is a kind of tribute to Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech in *Romeo and Juliet* that he had so memorably set, twice, in his dramatic symphony. "Love is a torch ... Love is a flame, A will o' the wisp coming from who knows where, Gleaming and vanishing from sight... Madness, after all, is better than stupidity."

Opera Boston has chosen to perform the music in French and the spoken dialogue in an English version by David Kneuss, the director of this production and the Executive Stage

Director of the Metropolitan Opera. Kneuss is best-known locally as the director of most of Seiji Ozawa's semi-staged and fully-staged operas in Boston and at Tanglewood (and at the Saito Kinen Festival in Japan); he directed Ozawa's fondly-remembered performances of *Béatrice et Bénédict* more than 30 years ago, and, of course, serves as stage director for the current production. Kneuss restored, and lightly edited, the dialogue from Shakespeare that Berlioz had used in French translation and translated and adapted Berlioz's own lines.

Berlioz was in poor health and often in bad temper in the last years of his life; he was 57 at the time of the premiere in 1863. But composing *Béatrice et Bénédict* composing the opera was evidently a great joy and a consolation – as well as a relief and relaxation after the years of labor and frustration that he had invested in his greatest work, the epic opera *Les Troyens*.

He wrote to his son, "I'm really enjoying myself and composing my score *con furia*," adding that "the music . . . comes to me so quickly I can hardly keep pace." He confirmed this by writing to a composer friend that the opera was turning out to be "gay, caustic, occasionally poetic." The most poetic moment in the opera is the Nocturne duet that closes the first act. Berlioz did write the words in a romantic setting; he was sitting on the battlements of the ancient castle in Baden-Baden. Music, however, could apparently come to him anywhere; he sketched out the musical ideas for the Nocturne at a meeting of the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris while one of his colleagues droned through an interminable speech.

He chose and rehearsed his cast in his own apartment in Paris; the singers came through for him on opening night; although the orchestra struggled a bit, he was quite satisfied with the premiere and, after revisions and additions, he was also pleased with the work itself, which he called "one of the liveliest and most original things I have ever done." The opera is, as he famously remarked, "a caprice written with the point of a needle."

Berlioz was more than 20 years younger than Verdi was when he composed *Falstaff*, but the atmosphere, feeling and unobtrusive master craftsmanship in these two final operas – *Béatrice et Bénédict* and *Falstaff* – are in some respects comparable; both operas are scherzos

by composers of the highest seriousness, and both exhibit a valedictory lightness of touch.

There are fifteen musical numbers in all, not counting the overture, which Berlioz composed after all the other music and which has enjoyed popularity on the concert stage for decades. Familiar as it is, the overture repays close listening because it introduces music from six key episodes in the opera itself. And the overture is no mere potpourri of the best tunes – the opening gesture, for example, leaves you off balance with one foot in the air. The rush of triplets in the strings is like a shiver of pleasure, and then there's something more bumptious yet inconclusive. And then an unexpected pause – a moment to catch breath, restore balance. In one of his inspired second thoughts, Berlioz used this music for the finale of the opera – in its beginning is also its end. "Let us love for a moment, and tomorrow we will be enemies again," Béatrice and Bénédict sing, and the chorus chimes in with final cries of "Tomorrow!" as triplets carry the work off in temporary triumph. Those racing triplets are also a device through which Berlioz ties the disparate sections of the overture together.

The opera that follows is a model of spontaneous-sounding symmetry – an aria for Bénédict in the first act, an aria for Béatrice in the second; a lively trio for the men in the first act, an eloquent trio for the women in the second. The music is enlivened by constant rhythmic and harmonic surprise and by ingenuity of orchestration (after all, Berlioz did write one of the major treatises about the art of orchestration) – an example would be Somarone's drinking song with the chorus in the second act, accompanied by trumpets and guitar (Berlioz's own instrument). The guitar also accompanies the "distant chorus" offstage in the second act, music summoning the lovers to their wedding; onstage the wedding march turns into an octet, featuring four soloists and the four-part chorus.

The work is full of the most precise and elegant orchestration which keeps up a running dialogue with the words and voices that is as full of quicksilver wit as the verbal volleys of the title characters. The woodwind writing is both atmospheric and volatile, and Berlioz is attentive to the tiniest detail. In the reflective Nocturne, for example, murmurous strings accompany the harmonious vocal lines of Héro and Ursule as they sing of the peaceful night,

the moonlight, and the song of the nightingale; a solo oboe represents the “meadow insect, humming invisibly in the feathery grass.” In fact, you can barely hear these notes, but you can feel them because they move in the palpating rhythm of a heartbeat.

In the first act trio, Bénédict jokingly tells his friends if he ever agrees to marry, he will let them set a sign on his house that says “here you may see Bénédict, the married man!” This music comes back to haunt him in the shortest number in the score, the full orchestra, the chorus, Héro, Ursule, Claudio and Don Pedro, intone the words on the sign as it is carried onstage. Berlioz paradoxically marks the music “a little bit majestic,” an indication of a little bit of irony in the stern but affectionate tone.

The action takes place in Messina, in Sicily, so much of the music is kissed by the Italian sun and caressed by Italian moonbeams, and if this is Sicily, there must be an example of the national dance, the dashing syncopated Sicilienne in the first act, which Berlioz repeats as an entr’acte before the second act. Scholars have made the poignant discovery that Berlioz consciously or unconsciously took the tune for the Sicilienne from his first published song and placed it in his final work, 43 years later.

The spoken dialogue delivers the plot; the music probes more deeply into the thoughts and feelings of the characters – or adds a comment. The opening aria of Héro, for example, is full of feeling, conventional but heartfelt, but when she bursts into a coloratura explosion of joy, the vocal writing is so extreme that she has gone overboard; these are Hallmark Card effusions.

This is quite different from the brilliant virtuoso conclusion of Béatrice’s great aria in the second act. Here the feelings are profound and in deep conflict – does she hate Bénédict or does she love him? She recalls her terrible dream after he went off to fight the Moors; she woke up, laughing that it was only a dream, but strangely she simultaneously found herself in tears. She does love him. “Farewell disdain, farewell sharp mockery. Béatrice in her turn falls victim to love.” In this aria we overhear a character in the process of discovering her true feelings, and the music is glorious – the melody of the slow section is a descending chromatic scale; at the end the scales are rushing upward in exultation.

Béatrice et Bénédict has been slow to claim

its place in the international repertory, in part because it is a piece that makes its best impression in intimate spaces, not in a large opera house. It had to wait nearly a century for its American premiere, who took place in a concert performance in Carnegie Hall in 1960. But the real impetus for revival arrived with the first commercial LP recording in 1962 which was superbly conducted by one of the opera’s staunchest advocates Colin Davis, who recorded it again in 1977 and in 2000 and led it most recently in Paris in 2009. The opera is now widely performed, although not in the great theaters like the Met, which has never presented it. The work is more often encountered in concert, in student performances, or as staged by smaller opera companies - the cast is not large, and the scenic demands are modest (it is fun to read the list of props Berlioz asked for - “wreathes of oakleaves,” “at least 10 tambourines,” “two or three demijohns, or large bottles,” “rose arbors with real roses,” “a table with pewter goblets”). Of course, the opera requires a gifted conductor and a virtuoso orchestra.

Over the last 50 years such mezzos as Josephine Veasey, Janet Baker, Yvonne Minton, Susan Graham and Joyce DiDonato have appeared as Béatrice; Boston contributed two of its own, D’Anna Fortunato, who sang the part with Glimmerglass Opera in 1988, and Lorraine Hunt (Lieberson) with the Boston Lyric Opera in 1993. Plácido Domingo is the most prominent of the singers who have recorded Bénédict, and several British tenors have succeeded in the role - John Mitchinson, Stuart Burrows, and Robert Tear. There have been two major sets of New England performances - the Boston Symphony Orchestra presented semi-staged performances in Symphony Hall and at Tanglewood in 1978, with Seiji Ozawa conducting. In Symphony Hall Frederica von Stade and Burrows sang the title roles (Gwendolyn Killebrew deputized for an ailing von Stade at some performances; at Tanglewood Jon Garrison sang opposite von Stade, and he also sparred with Hunt (Lieberson) at the Boston Lyric, when Robert Spano conducted.

-Richard Dyer