

Topic Page: [Berlioz, Hector, 1803–1869](#)

Definition: **Berlioz, (Louis) Hector** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

French composer, a leading figure in the French Romantic movement. He is noted for innovative orchestral writing, and the emphasis he laid on orchestral colour. His *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) is an example of programme music. Other works include *Harold in Italy* for viola and orchestra (1834), the operas *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838) and *The Trojans* (1855–58), and the *Requiem* (1837).

Summary Article: **Berlioz, (Louis) Hector (1803–1869)**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

French Romantic composer. He is regarded as the founder of modern orchestration. Much of his music was inspired by drama and literature and has a theatrical quality. He wrote symphonic works, such as *Symphonie fantastique/Fantasy Symphony* (1830) and *Roméo et Juliette/Romeo and Juliet* (1839); dramatic cantatas including *La Damnation de Faust/The Damnation of Faust* (1846) and *L'Enfance du Christ/The Childhood of Christ* (1850–54); sacred music; and three operas: *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838), *Les Troyens/The Trojans* (1856–58), and *Béatrice et Bénédic/Beatrice and Benedict* (1860–62).

Berlioz studied music at the Paris Conservatory. He won the Prix de Rome in 1830, and spent two years in Italy. In 1833 he married Harriet Smithson, an Irish actress playing Shakespearean parts in Paris, but they separated in 1842. After some years of poverty and public neglect, he went to Germany in 1842, where he conducted his own works. He later visited Russia and England. In 1854 he married Marie Recio, a singer.

Berlioz was born at La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France, the son of a doctor who taught him the flute, but wished him to study medicine. As a boy he also learnt the guitar and picked up theoretical knowledge from books. Sent to the École de Médecine in Paris in 1821, he found the studies so distasteful that he decided to give them up for music. His parents opposed this, but Jean Lesueur accepted him as a pupil in 1823, when he at once set to work on an opera and an oratorio. The following year he wrote a Mass, which was lost for many years and was given its first modern performance in 1993. He entered the Conservatory in 1826, but failed several times to gain the Prix de Rome, winning it at last with the cantata *La mort de Sardanapale/The Death of Sardanapale* (1830). In the meantime he had fallen in love with Harriet Smithson and expressed his feelings for her in the *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). On the point of going to Rome, he became engaged to the pianist, Marie Moke, who during his absence married Camille Pleyel.

He wrote much in Rome, notably the overtures *King Lear* and *Rob Roy*, and returned to Paris in 1832, this time meeting Harriet and marrying her in October 1833. To supplement his income he became a music critic, writing witty and brilliant dissections of the follies of Parisian musical life. His *Grande messe des morts/High Mass of the Dead*, commissioned by the French Government in 1836, was performed the following year at a memorial service for soldiers who had fallen in Algeria. In 1838 the violinist Niccolò Paganini sent him 20,000 francs so that he could devote all his time to composition; the Paganini-inspired *Harold en Italie/Harold in Italy* had been written in 1834 and was followed by *Roméo et Juliette* and *Benvenuto Cellini*. He separated from Harriet in 1842 and started a liaison with Marie Recio. He travelled much with her during the next few years, and conducted in Germany, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Russia, and London. His brilliant légende dramatique *La Damnation de Faust* was

premiered in 1846 and the massive *Te Deum* in 1855, but Berlioz continued to suffer throughout his life from lack of public recognition, particularly in his own country. After Harriet's death he married Marie in 1854; meanwhile he had resumed his journalistic work. He composed his masterpiece, the vast opera *Les Troyens*, in the late 1850s. The practicalities of staging such a work in the Paris of his time were forgotten as he entered the world of Virgil's epic poem.

Berlioz completed his last opera, *Béatrice et Bénédict* in 1862, and Marie died the same year; he later abandoned composition. He suffered much ill health during the 1860s and was greatly depressed by the death of his son Louis in 1867. After another visit to Russia he had a bad fall at Nice, where he had gone for his health in 1868, and he grew gradually more infirm.

For many years Berlioz's reputation rested on his *Symphonie fantastique*. It was not until his operas and other large-scale works were widely performed in the 1960s, that his true genius was fully revealed. He wrote seven books, including *Traité de l'instrumentation/Treatise on Orchestration* (1844) and his endearing but not always reliable *Mémoires*.

Works
Opera *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838), *Les Troyens* (two parts, 1856–58) and *Béatrice et Bénédict* (after Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, (1860–62).

Orchestral *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), *Harold en Italie* (with solo viola) (1834), *Roméo et Juliette* (with voices) (1839), and *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale/Funeral and Triumphant Symphony* (for military band, strings, and chorus) (1840), concert overtures *Carnaval Romain/Roman Carnival* (1844), *Le Corsaire/The Corsair* (1844).

Choral and songs *Mass* (1824), *Grande messe des morts* (Requiem, 1837), *La Damnation de Faust* (1846), *Te Deum* (1849–50), and *L'Enfance du Christ* (1850–54); 6 smaller vocal works with orchestra or piano, including *La mort de Cléopâtre/The Death of Cleopatra* (1829) and *La mort d'Ophélie/The Death of Ophelia* (1847); 28 songs including the cycle *Nuits d'été/Summer Nights*.

quotations

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