

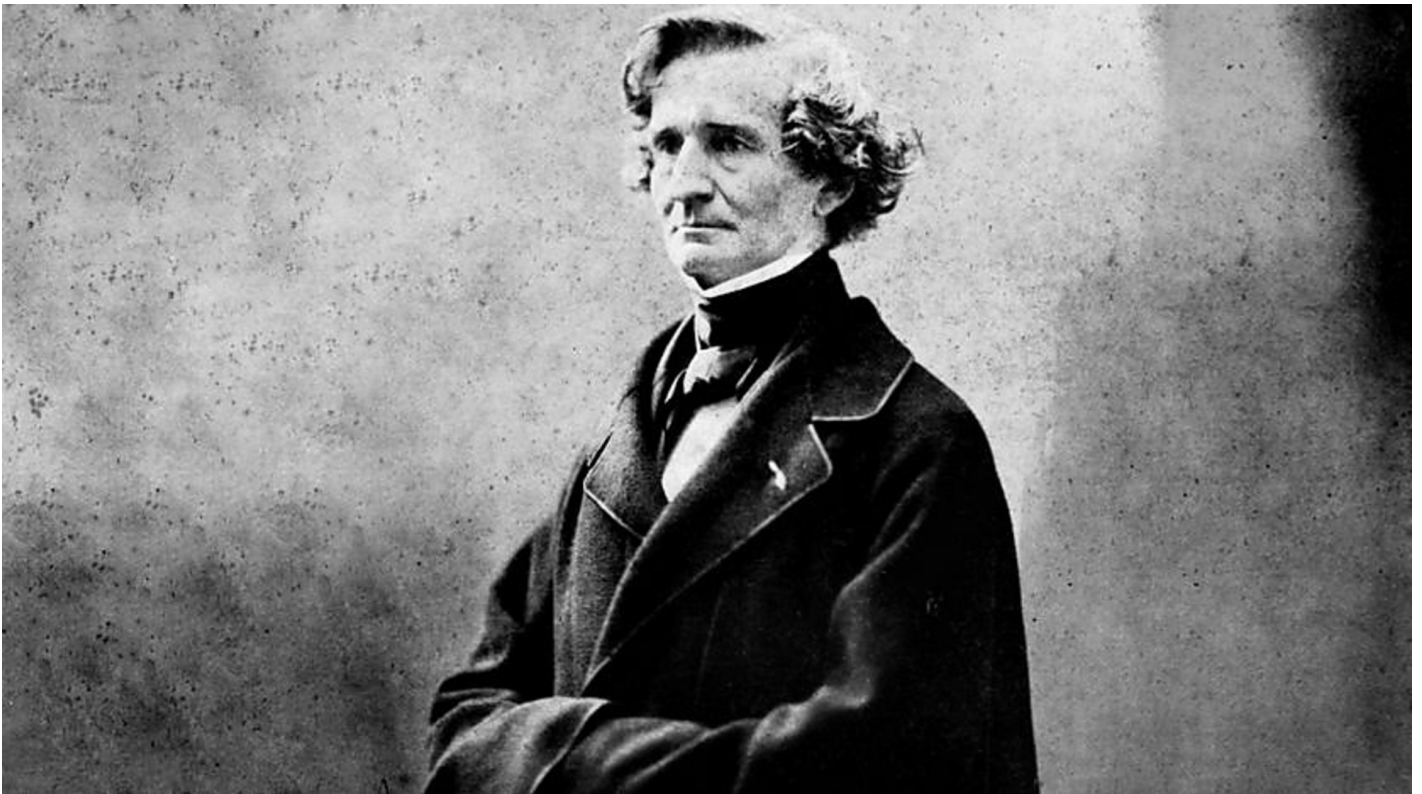


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The Grande Messe des Morts and the Absence of God Transcript

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The Grand Messe des Morts and the Absence of God

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On the face of it, it may seem strange that Berlioz of all people should write a big requiem, at a time when religious music was not particularly important in France; stranger still that, near the end of his life, he actually wrote to a friend to say, just after the Requiem had been published in a new edition in Italy, "If I were threatened with the destruction of all my works save one, it would be the *Grande Messe des Morts* that I would save from the flames." This is slightly odd, if you think of Berlioz's ostensible attitude to religion. He is extremely caustic. He begins his memoirs, perhaps significantly, by describing his first communion, but in a fairly mocking way, as if laughing at his own naïve childish faith:

"I was brought up, needless to say, in the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Rome. This religion, charming now that it no longer burns people, was for seven long years the joy of my life, and although we have long since parted company, I have always retained most tender memories of it. I heard mass every day and took communion every Sunday and went regularly to confession, in order to say to my director, "Father, I have done nothing," to which the good man would reply, "Very well, my child, continue." I followed this counsel all too faithfully for a number of years."

Here he shows that, even if he has quarrelled with the Church, he still retains affectionate memories of it. He is not as implacably opposed to it as Verdi was, as you can tell in *Don Carlos*, in the music that he gives to the Grand Inquisitor. Berlioz is a bit more tolerant, but only a bit; he is still rather cynical on the subject. For instance, when he talks about monks, he makes a pun on the great soprano, Adelina Patti. He quotes the Latin phrase, "Oportet pati", which means "suffering is our lot". He says, "For music lovers, this of course means we must have Patti, but for the monks, it means bring the pate." He is scathing about monks!

And if he is no great friend of the Church, he is the sworn enemy of God. His frequent expressions of dissent all point in the same direction. He luxuriates in the idea of being an atheist, and the good Lord gets a bad press in Berlioz's writings.

When he's talking about the beautiful Andromache scene, in *The Trojans*, he says there is nothing so silly, so absurd as "an author, who, like the good Lord, looks at his work on the seventh day and finds it good," but he says, "This is the effect I had when I'd read what I'd written, when I'd read this Andromache scene."

He writes to a friend, saying that several of his friends have died: "I'm never out of the cemetery. The good Lord is gunning us down!"

He once sent a new triangle to Liszt. Liszt was going to perform Berlioz's symphony *Harold in Italy*, which has a triangle part. He says, "It's made in the image of God, like all triangles, but unlike other triangles, and certainly unlike God, it's in tune!"

Writing about the death of his wife, Harriet, in his memoirs, he says, "God, standing aloof in his infinite unconcern, is revolting and absurd... Shakespeare alone, for the souls of artists, is the living and loving God."

So why is this man writing so much religious music? In his memoirs he writes that, as a boy, "the Christian religion was the joy of my life". I think that is the thing. He lost his faith, but he did not lose the need to believe. This is why, in a way, I think he had to write the Requiem. It is a very bleak work, and not just because the requiem is a fairly bleak subject. It is the way Berlioz treats it.

We are always told about the huge forces that Berlioz deploys, with characteristic extravagance. But what people forget is that, in writing this work, Berlioz was continuing the tradition of the French Revolution. He was taught by a man called Jean-Francois Le Sueur, a composer who was very active at the time of the Revolution and the Consulate and the early days of Napoleon's empire; this was an age in which, as you know, they had abolished God. They worshipped a sort of supreme being, but he was not the Christian God. Music was terribly important in this period because it was the way of uniting the people and giving them a sense of sort of national identity and consciousness, in an age when France was really up against it. It was being attacked by all the nations of Europe.

Music was an expression of the national will. Huge musical celebrations took place in the Champ de Mars in Paris, and composers wrote great pieces for them, scored for forces as large as the Berlioz Requiem. Obviously Berlioz's imagination was seized by this idea, and his teacher told him about how, before there was going to be a great big concert in the Champ de Mars, the composers would stand in carts in the streets and would teach the people the tunes that were going to be sung by thousands of voices later. I think that's a wonderful idea: Le Sueur, standing in a cart in a street, surrounded by people and teaching them tunes. I think that Berlioz wanted to revive this tradition. It appealed to his imagination. But he gives it a different twist, because, under Le Sueur and Gossec and all these other people, the music is expressing the will of the French people, in a time of national crisis. Berlioz, however, universalises this tradition and the French revolutionary community is replaced by the

human race throughout the ages, voicing their frail hopes and fears and longings.

This talk is called "The Absence of God", which is true of the Requiem. God is not quite absent, but his existence is certainly in doubt. There are mass apocalyptic moments where he uses four brass groups, but in only three of the movements of the mass. In these sections he evokes the Last Judgement, but most of the Requiem mass is focused on human beings and their frail hopes and fears. This evening I want to focus on these more intimate moments. What is fascinating about the sound colour of the Requiem is that, for most of the time, horns are the only brass instruments to offset the very bleak sound of the woodwind. He has a huge force of woodwind instruments - flutes, oboes, cor anglais, clarinets - and it is this very bleak mourning sound that I think absolutely dominates.

You could say that Berlioz is attracted to the text of the Requiem mass not by religion but by its drama. It is intensely dramatic. There is no more dramatic text in the world.

Even as a student, Berlioz was intent on making a given text a 'better' text. He competed for the Prix de Rome, which was the absolutely obligatory thing for music students in Paris because it gave you five years when you were pensioned by the state, as well as a gold medal, which, as Berlioz said, when sold, would pay your rent until you got to Rome. He competed several times because he did not obey the rules. The rules stated that, although the text was always a very violent one - there was usually some woman committing suicide - it all had to be done in an extremely discreet and decorous manner. Someone once accused Berlioz of writing music much too violent for the death of Cleopatra, to which he said, "Well, I can't write soothing music when the Queen of Egypt dies, bitten by an asp."

In his first cantata, *The Death of Orpheus*, he improved upon a rather stilted text; he shifted things around, he cut things out, he added things, and needless to say, he did not win the prize. Such was his habit as a dramatist, and he does the same with the texts both of the Requiem and of the Te Deum. He has this wonderful idea of a Dante-like tripartite scheme: hell, purgatory and heaven. He shifts things around so that the text of the hell portion can be intensified. He shifts bits from other parts of the mass into the Dies Irae section, and, similarly, he suppresses some things. For instance, there is a wonderful moment in the Rex Tremendae when the struggling mass of humanity is begging God, if he exists, to number them: "Voca me cum benedictis", "Number me among the blessed." This struggling chorus says, "Voca me..." but they cannot complete the sentence because they are so terrified. That is a typical Berlioz stroke, cutting out those two words. As a dramatist, he feels perfectly free to do this.

He says, "God, in his remote and infinite unconcern, is revolting and absurd," but nevertheless, he cannot give up the idea that maybe there is a God, and he can identify with the generations of human beings who are praying to a God who may not exist. They are struggling, in a way, to create this God. So, what you get in the Requiem is the first movement, the Requiem and Kyrie, which is, as it were, in a church service, and then you get the vision - of hell, of purgatory, of heaven - and then, in the final movement, you return as if purged. You return to the church service and the work concludes as a church service. I think it is a wonderfully imaginative idea, and what makes it work is Berlioz's ability to identify with all these human longings and fears. He is at one with everything that is going on. He is absolutely at one with the visionary events he describes, and his imagination is in direct contact with the unending generations of human history.

He is there, in the stunned aftermath of the day of judgement, the extraordinary movement, which I am going to play in a moment. This is the "Quid sum miser", "What shall I do? Wretched me," when even the just man has reason to fear. This is an example of that very intimate, quiet music. It is just scored for cor anglais and bassoons, tenors and basses. He takes the theme from the beginning of the Dies Irae, the previous movement, and he gives it to these wind instruments. It is an extraordinary passage. It is what Wilfred Mellers called "the piteous fragmentary desolation". It is human beings alone in an empty universe, reaching out towards a God who may not be there.

[Music plays]

I am now going to pass to the Offertory, which, for many people, is their favourite music in the Requiem. Berlioz used to play it on his concert tours in Germany and in Russia, and it always made a tremendous impression. Schumann, who heard it Leipzig, said that it surpassed everything. It is a beautiful movement.

Its theme comes from a work that Berlioz wrote when he was twenty. He was commissioned to write a solemn mass for a church in Paris, and he wrote this kyria, a semi-fugal movement. This long, very remarkable tune does such surprising things and has very strong accents on the off-beats at the end of each phrase. It reappears twelve years later in the *Grande Messe des Morts*. I thought we could just hear the beginning of the Kyrie. Here, it is in three-four, in three-time, and it is faster. In the Requiem, it becomes four-time and slower.

[Music plays]

In the Offertory, he once again does things to the text. He has this idea. He likes movements built around a single note pitch, or a double pitch, in this case. The funeral procession in his *Romeo & Juliet Symphony* is like that, and the septet in *The Trojans* is built round the dominant note, C. You find this often in Berlioz. Here, the idea is that these are the souls in purgatory, generation after generation of them, and all you can hear is

fragments of their prayers. Round this two-note chant, the fugal orchestra moves in a kind of wordless sympathy. It is a wonderful movement. It ends with the words, "As thou promised to Abraham and his seed forever." In Latin, it is: "Quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini ejus." But Berlioz wants to end on a note of hope, so he changes the order of the Latin, and they sing, "Quam olim Abrahae et semini ejus promisisti." The last word is now "thou promised", and suddenly, this D Minor goes into a radiant D Major.

[Music plays]

Obviously, one of the things that appeals to Berlioz's imagination about this piece, quite apart from religion, is this idea of huge musical festivals. As a child, he read about the Panathenae of the Athenians, and also about the great celebrations in the Temple of Solomon. So, when he got to Paris and became a student of the composer Le Sueur, who told him all these wonderful stories about the big musical manifestations in the Champs de Mars and everything, his imagination was fired yet again. So, you can see why the idea of a requiem, commissioned by the Minister of the Interior, appealed to him, because it was essentially fulfilling an idea that already existed in his mind. I think it goes much deeper than just the idea of a grand, communal celebration. You can hear Berlioz, the reluctant atheist, all the way through this piece. As my last musical example, I thought I would play something from the opening movement. This will actually come from the final movement because, when the vision of the middle movements fades, and you come back to the church service, the music from the original movement resumes. Here, as at the end of the Offertory, you get momentary glimpses of hope, of a sudden move into a radiant D Major, but most of the time, it is tragic.

[Music plays]

There is a sort of resignation at the end, not a great deal of hope. There is more doubt. So, you can see why Berlioz had to write this and why, in a way, the Requiem is different from the Funeral and Triumphal Symphony, another mass work that he wrote in honour of the people who died in the 1830 revolution. He also had another plan, never realised, of writing a seven-movement symphony in memory of the great men of France. But this is different. This is something that he had to write, but perhaps did not know why.

In a particularly lovely section of his memoirs, he talks about falling in love at the age of twelve with a girl five years older, who lived nearby, called Estelle. He went on loving her, hopelessly, all his life. While he was composing the Requiem, he dreamt about the absence of Estelle, the goddess of his boyhood. In the dream, he sat in Estelle's grandmother's garden, at the foot of a tree, alone. Estelle was not there and he kept repeating, "Where is she? Where is she?" Similarly, he is writing a work, calling himself an atheist but still holding a longing, the pain of a lost faith. It is a sharp and deep pain. Shakespeare satisfied this need. He said of Shakespeare, "Thou art our father, our father which art in heaven, if there is a heaven." But he cannot stop wanting to believe that there is one and that God is not this 'revoltingly' remote, unconcerned being, but a loving and living God. However, as he cannot commit to this, he turns to Shakespeare.

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