

## Romanticism, Rebellion, and the Music of the Future

An essay by Thomas Hampson and Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold  
From the liner notes of *Berlioz, Wagner, and Liszt: Romantic Songs* (EMI, 1994)

“A cesspool of mud and filth!” was Richard Wagner’s first reaction to Paris when he arrived there after fleeing Riga in 1839. Yet, like countless musicians before him, the beleaguered composer had been drawn to the French capital with its diverse and stimulating cross-section of artists, thinkers and prime movers. To some degree Wagner’s observations about mid-19th-century Paris were correct: the network of unpaved boulevards teemed with carriages, carts and pedestrians; sewage ran into the streets, and the scarcity of public baths made smells formidable. Yet Paris boasted Europe’s oldest university, arguably its finest cuisine, and a rich array of spectacle and serious entertainment for its citizenry. It was gas illumination in 1829 that gave the metropolis its nickname “City of Light,” but it was the radiance of its artistic and intellectual climate that made the appellation endure.

19th-century Paris was the center of modern science, historical scholarship, philosophical, social, political and religious theory, as well as the cradle of literary, artistic and musical innovation. As the birthplace of 18th-century revolution, she bequeathed a legacy of violent political and cultural change to the subsequent era. The collapse of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* into the bloodbath of the Reign of Terror resulted in the rise of Napoleon, at first hailed by the Romantics as a symbol of energy and transforming power, only to be mourned, as Beethoven did in the lugubrious chords of the *Eroica*, as the heroic ideal *manqué*. The Napoleonic Wars plunged Europe into chaos, with shock waves rippling as far as the Third of May Spanish insurrections or the ill-fated 1803 Irish Rebellion for which Berlioz’s inspiration, Robert Emmet, was hanged. Waterloo afforded reactionaries and monarchists momentary triumph, but it was not long before regressive policies such as Metternich’s 1819 Karlsbad decrees met with organized protest. When the French Bourbon king, Charles X, passed the July 1830 ordinances suspending freedom of press and assembly and disbanded the Parliament, students, intellectuals, workers and artists, among them the passionately partisan Berlioz, took to the barricades to proclaim a constitutional monarchy. But throughout Europe the pendulum of liberalism and conservatism vacillated with uneasy, if exciting, tension.

Eighteen years later Parisians again flooded the streets to overthrow Louis Philippe; in the same 1848 a series of similar uprisings spread across central Europe, culminating in the 1849 Dresden Revolt, which forced the anarchistic Kapellmeister Richard Wagner back into peripatetic exile. The fallout from the turbulence of the first half of the 19th century contributed to the rise of pan-European nationalism with its series of political movements to consolidate the map, among them Parnell's Irish Home Rule, Garibaldi's Unification of Italy, and Bismarck's Reich, as well as a growing interest in folklore, myth and ethnic roots which would reshape the artistic consciousness of the late century. Yet, despite the turmoil of the age, the 19th century clung to a Romantic notion of the perfectibility of man, a belief imparted from the Enlightenment and transformed in the crucible of revolution into a kind of progressive humanitarianism, which combined the natural idealism of Rousseau with faith in an advancing industrial age. Again, it was in Paris that prominent social thinkers like Chateaubriand, Heine, Marx and Saint-Simon congregated. With his radical tract, *Le Nouveau Christianisme*, the influential Parisian, Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), who had fought in the American and French rebellions, articulated a plan for the reorganization of society into a bourgeois socialist universe where artists, scholars, industrialists and workers would all strive to create a halcyon *nouvelle époque*. A true child of Romanticism, Saint-Simon had appointed artists as priests and arbiters of the new society. The converts to the Saint-Simonian aesthetic theory of noble moralizing, socially aware art included George Sand, Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugel, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, and even—to a lesser degree—Richard Wagner. An ambivalent Catholic, Berlioz wrote in 1830, "I am convinced that Saint-Simon's plan is the only true and complete one," and he enthusiastically contributed his socially-inspiring *Chant des Guerrier* to the movement.

Art which could transform, elevate, lift the veil of mundane existence to reveal the multi-tiered universe of the soul—this was the Romantic mission in every phase of its expression. In literature it found voice in the apocalyptic tongue of Blake, the humanistic idealism of Shelley, the nationalistic nostalgia of Moore, in the *Sturm und Drang* of Goethe and Schiller, in the searing irony of Heine, in the pantheistic delicacy of Lamartine and Gautier, in the élan of Musset, the Orientalism of Hugo, or in the liberalism of Sand. Visual art, too, underwent a revolution which radically re-examined the techniques of applying paint and brought a riot of spontaneous brushwork and color to the canvas. Painters like Delacroix and Gericault challenged

the Academies classicism with shocking works like *The Raft of the Medusa*; the German Nazarenes and the English Pre-Raphaelites outfitted chivalric romance in modern psychological terms; Caspar David Friedrich, Constable, Turner and the Hudson River School charted the interaction of the heroic individual pitted against equally ennobling and demonic natural forces.

Man against Nature, rebel against reactionary, divine interlocked with human – the 19th century was an age of contraries. Perhaps nowhere more than in its musical history did the dichotomy of conservative and modern seem so prevalent. Across the span of the age, reason, sobriety and symmetry of form were exchanged for passionate feeling; precision and intimacy gave way to expansiveness, affirmation to doubt, and accomplishment to questing, as 19th-century composers and performers struggled to test the limits of tradition and enlarge the dimensions of their art. Among the innovations of the period were the syntactical and structural experiments toward longer, more lyrical melodies, greater chromaticism, increased dissonance, more complex rhythms, and frequent *rubato*; the creation or improvement of instruments which permanently altered sonority and color; the expanded, radicalized symphonic, concerto, and song forms; and the coexistence of absolute and program music. In the realm of vocal-choral music, opera, spurred on by the theatrical reforms begun by Gluck in the 18th century, witnessed the death of the *seria* and *buffa* forms; the emergence of the bel canto of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Auber and Boieldieu; the rise of Meyerbeerean grand opera (with Paris as the capital of the genre); and the gradual movement away from formulae toward integrated music-drama. Linked to opera's search for an evolving, increasingly flexible musico-poetic speech was the flourishing of art song and the birth of the modern song recital, phenomena fuelled by the Romantics' passion for poetry, myth, and story-telling in dramatic miniature as well as by the expanded pianistic possibilities pioneered by Schubert, Schumann, and Liszt. Then, too, perhaps more than in any other historical epoch, music proved to be a truly universal language, eradicating linguistic and class barriers and moving from church to court to concert hall and private home. In an age when every bourgeois family owned a piano and every educated individual possessed a considerable degree of musical literacy, it was not at all surprising that the appetite for new works was vigorously demanding, and musical taste was a matter of hot debate. Fanning the fires of these debates was the new crop of music journalists which sprang up as music criticism entered the modern age with publications like Schumann's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Heine's

*Lettres de Paris*, Berlioz's *Le Corsaire*, or Wagner's numerous self-published polemics.

Indeed, it was in just one such journal in 1859 that Ludwig Bischoff, borrowing from the title of a Wagner essay, used the term *Zukunftsmusik* to describe the modernists of his day, among them Wagner, Berlioz, and Liszt. For Bischoff and countless other journalists of the time, these three made an ideal musical trinity—an idea reinforced by Liszt's and Wagner's close personal and artistic ties. Only Berlioz balked at the epithet. Reluctant to join any movement, suspicious of Wagner's overbearing ego, and assertive about the uniqueness of his own voice, Berlioz declined Liszt's offer to make him the elder statesman of the moderns under the aegis of Wagner. Nevertheless, deny it though he might, Berlioz did have a number of things in common with Wagner and Liszt. All three revered the dramatic models of the Antiquity, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller; all three shared an interest in myth and explored similar subjects, among them Hamlet, Christ, and Faust. Though their melodic styles were dissimilar and Berlioz did not advocate the advanced chromaticism of Liszt and Wagner, all three did nevertheless experiment boldly with tonality, and took the art of orchestration, musical collaboration and poetic-dramatic expression to new heights. Each in his own way sought to create a new diction at once epic and intensely psychological, mythic and quasi-religious, bold and provocative. Instances abound among the three composers' works that illustrate their conscious and subliminal cross-pollination—from the correspondences of Berlioz's *idée fixe* and Wagner's *Leitmotif* to the echoes of Liszt's vertical chord structures and non-conventional scales in Wagner's operas—and none of this is surprising given the shared circle of friends, events and artistic inspirations that dictated their respective biographies.

For more than fifty years from Berlioz's and Liszt's first meeting in Paris in 1829 until Liszt's death in 1886, the three composers interacted with a cooperative and competitive ambivalence that marked three distinctive geniuses. Of the group, Liszt was the most selfless and angst-free, confident enough in his musical position to give generously to the others, and it was he who proved to be the central cementing force in these intersecting creative histories. The friendships among the three enhanced their lives and work. It was Berlioz, recently returned from his Prix de Rome year abroad, who introduced Liszt to his first love, Marie D'Agoult, in whose salon both composers associated with the likes of Heine, Sand, Chopin, Hugo,

Musset and Delacroix, while it was Liszt who witnessed Berlioz's marriage to Harriet Smithson and who championed the elder composer's works in festival productions during the Weimar years. Liszt offered the same personal, financial, and artistic solace to Wagner, whom he had met in 1841, abetting his flight from Dresden, introducing him to prominent Parisian musicians, conducting the 1850 Weimar premiere of *Lohengrin*, and devoting himself from 1862 onward – the bond strengthened by Wagner's love for Liszt's daughter Cosima – to proselytizing for Wagner's works. Even the eternally self-absorbed Wagner responded to Liszt's generosity with a degree of emotional fidelity rare among his relationships, once writing: "My being has passed into yours." As for Wagner's sentiments toward Berlioz, these proved to be more cautiously collegial than expansive: as Kapellmeister in Dresden he helped mount Berlioz's works, and the two identified with each other's feelings of frustration and neglect as musical pioneers. But Wagner cordially disliked Berlioz's second wife, Marie Redo, and the gulf widened between them after each published some rash and misinterpreted criticism of the other's work. Still, throughout their lives, each of these three preserved a significant respect for the others, aware at some subconscious level of their shared struggle to revolutionize musical form and dramatic speech. In this effort, Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner not only composed the grand-scale works for which they are best known, but they each devoted energy at varying points in their careers to the art of song. For Berlioz and Wagner, composing for voice and piano occupied their youthful careers and constituted only a fraction of their total output, while for Liszt, his eighty-four songs represent a more significant body of vocal composition. Yet, however atypical Wagner's early "curiosities" or Berlioz's unorchestrated songs are, they are important documents which reveal the development of each composer's musical language and thematic material. All three, for example, relied on contemporary poetic inspiration, drawing texts from major writers like Hugo, Heine, Musset, Moore and Tennyson as well as minor ones like Reboul, Rellstab and Scheurlin, just as they returned to the great lyric voices of the past like Goethe and Schiller. All three recognized the noble marriage of music and poetry, and all three were influenced by the dual forces of the evolving German *Ballade* and *Lied*, as passed down from Schubert, Schumann, Franz or Loewe, and of the developing French *mélodie* derived from the older romance tradition and enriched by the influence of heightened folksong such as Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*.

Yet another bond linked all three, despite any disagreements, in spiritual sympathy. "My orphaned songs," Liszt once called these smaller-scale compositions, expressing the hope that a prominent singer would give them voice. And in this wish he was not alone, for both Wagner's and Berlioz's songs experienced the same neglect. Insisting his Muse "was more comfortable in grander idioms," critics have often failed to recognize Berlioz's songs as the miniature masterpieces they are; hailing him as a theatrical innovator, historians have overlooked the musico-poetic drama in Wagner's early piano-vocal compositions. If Berlioz and Wagner railed at what they considered ungrateful audiences and philistine critics, the more philosophic Liszt contented himself in lavishing care on these often confessional gems and wistfully yearning for a verdict such as the one Hans Richter pronounced at the composer's Bayreuth graveside in the chilly spring of 1886: "You will all see! You will have to come back to Liszt!" Recalling that epitaph, so uncannily prescient for all three composers, we arrive at this recording in homage to Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner and their quest for a thoroughly modern, innovatively expressive, dramatically-motivated musico-poetic speech.

## **BERLIOZ**

It was Thomas Moore's poetry, popularized by the Irish bard's French exile from 1820 to 1827 and by his friend Thomas Goulet's translations, as well as his sympathy for Irish nationalism fuelled by his association with the Saint-Simonian Globe, and his mad passion for the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, that prompted Berlioz to set the nine songs he published in 1830 under the title *Neuf Melodies imitées de l'anglais*. Later reissued as *Irlande* in 1850, the series reflected Berlioz's affinity for the Celtic brand of elegiac heroism as well as for the melodic cadences of Gaelic-inspired verse. Returning from the theatre one night in 1827 after seeing Kemble's troupe perform Hamlet, intoxicated by Smithson's Ophelia and inspired by a book of Moore's *Melodies* he found lying open on the piano, Berlioz feverishly set "Élégie" to Moore's poem addressed to his martyred friend Robert Emmet. "Struck by the pride, tenderness, and deep despair of Moore, music flooded out of me," Berlioz recalled of this uncharacteristically spontaneous creative outburst. In 1829-30, the composer completed the cycle which represents the culmination of his early vocal writing. While "La belle voyageuse," "L'origine de la harpe" and "Adieu, Bessy!" are essentially conventional strophic melodies, Berlioz imbues their piano parts with hints of his masterful orchestral palette, while the deliciously dangerous

harmonies of “Le coucher du soleil” and “Élégie,” and the latter’s unusual deployment of rests and exclamatory words prefigures Wagner’s symbiosis of music and text.

## **WAGNER**

Of the handful of songs that Richard Wagner wrote, the best known are the *Wesendonk Lieder*, composed as sketches for *Tristan* in 1857, in the throes of his affair with their poetess, but the majority are early works, six dating from 1839-40, as part of his first attempt to conquer Paris and persuade the French to his genius. Accordingly, for several of these Wagner chose French-language texts from contemporaries like Hugo and the little known baker-turned-poet, Jean Reboul, represented here by the hauntingly pessimistic “Tout n’est qu’images fugitives,” or from the 16th-century Pléiade poet, Pierre de Ronsard, with his carpe diem poem “Mignonne”—both texts set with a graceful elegance that seems derivative but is not without the composer’s distinctive word-precise flair for drama. More characteristic, perhaps, is Wagner’s compelling rendition of “Les deux Grenadiers,” set to a French version of Heine’s famous poem and composed shortly after Wagner’s meeting with the poet upon his arrival in Paris in 1839—several months before Schumann set the same verses in German! Designed to curry favor with its Francophile patriotism, Wagner not only embellished the French text a bit, but also employed the Marseillaise in the closing lines of the song—a device which Schumann also used, though in Wagner’s hands the effect is more bombastic and less ironic, if undeniably dramatic. Indeed, Wagner the dramatist is ever-apparent in the remaining three selections: in the 1831 Leipzig settings of two of Mephistopheles’ lyrics from Goethe’s *Faust*—No. 4 with its dervish-like malevolence and No. 5 with its ironic serenade—and most of all in the sharply limned, bitter dialogue between the boy and the tree in Georg Scheurlin’s “Der Tannenbaum,” in which Wagner draws not only on the traditions of Loewe and Schubert, but also foreshadows motifs that would later appear in *The Ring*.

## **LISZT**

A similar reliance on dramatic effect, violent contrast, unrestrained bursts of emotion and brilliant color links Franz Liszt’s songs to Wagner’s as Liszt’s melodic genius and pianistic virtuosity create a convincing bridge back to Berlioz’s work.

Motivated to compose piano-vocal works by his early arrangements of Schubert's songs, his transcriptions of Beethoven's and Mendelssohn's Lieder for piano, as well as by his acquaintance with many of the poets of his day, the diversity of Liszt's cosmopolitan heritage is reflected not only in the five languages on which he composed but also in the range of moods and styles he was able to conjure. At his most expansive as in Uhland's eerie ballad, "Die Vatergruft," he proved himself capable of antique dignity and gloomy Romanticism; in a more reserved but equally potent vein, he endowed Heine's "Im Rhein" with majestic pianistic virtuosity and his "Vergiftet sind meine Lieder" with a venomous brevity and intensity. Then, too, Liszt is a master of lyrical word-tone painting, here revealed in the nostalgic Rellstab settings, in the unadorned melody of Redwitz's "Es muß ein Wunderbares sein," or in the sublimity of Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh." And if his single English-language setting, Tennyson's "Go not, happy day," is an anomaly, Liszt is perhaps most memorable in his Gallic mode, represented here by the three Hugo settings: the gentle romance, "Ah! Quand je dors;" the witty, light-footed *mélodie*, "Comment, disaient-ils;" and the haunting elegy, "La tombe et la rose." In all Liszt's songs, the piano is a potent partner for the voice, advancing in short, pregnant motives that retain their identity despite their development, while the vocal line is grounded in a melodic purity. In this Liszt stands at the fulcrum of a fused German and French song tradition, just as he remains the pivotal catalyst between the other two composers of this recording.

*THOMAS HAMPSON AND CARLA MARIA VERDINO- SÜLLWOLD, 1994 – originally published in the CD coverlet of February 5, 1994*