

# Some Thoughts on the Berlioz ‘Symphony for Band’

When one requests to see the ‘autograph’ score of the great *Symphony for Band* by Berlioz in the National Library of France in Paris, what one encounters is a ‘presentation score,’ that is, a clean copy in the hand of his copyist, Rocquemont, with the exception of the first six pages which are in the hand of Berlioz.<sup>1</sup> There are no corners dirty from conductor’s turning the pages, no pencil markings made by conductors and in general no evidence that this score was ever used for a performance.

On the other hand, one immediately notices that the cover, which is entirely in the hand of Berlioz, is quite different. It is dirty, torn and bent and has been attached with tape to the presentation score. Judging by this cover, it was torn from an earlier score which *was* used in performance. We wish we could see the previous score.<sup>2</sup>

The fact is, as is the case with other of his compositions, Berlioz seems to have made changes and corrections over a long period. We suspect, for example, that that torn and dirty cover now taped to the ‘autograph score’ currently in Paris was originally part of an earlier score which he took on his six-month tour of Germany in 1843, hence its much used appearance. Even assuming the copy in Paris today was made to replace, and perhaps make corrections in, the ‘travel’ version, nevertheless this ‘final score’ in Paris has some additional changes, in red ink, made after it was completed. Not only that, but the sudden reappearance of the hand writing of Berlioz on page 71 and on pages 106 and 107 indicates that he was *still* composing as this ‘final’ copyist score was in progress. What was he doing?

One of these brand new passages includes the extraordinary abrupt shift (it can hardly be called a modulation) from Bb to A major. This passage contains a reference to the ‘Dresden Amen,’ which we believe is a tribute to his friendly association with Mendelssohn during the German tour and the latter’s *Reformation Symphony* which uses this cadence extensively. It is the most heart-lifting and thrilling four bars of the entire symphony.<sup>3</sup> The other passage in the hand of Berlioz in this ‘final’ score is a strengthened final cadence. Here, while waiting for Berlioz to supply his latest changes, we can see the bored copyist filling the margins of the score paper with doodles.

<sup>1</sup> Even the portion in Berlioz’ hand is also a copy as can be seen by the alignment, etc. Another indication of this score not being truly an original autograph score is the fact that it has no original page numbers. Some for random pages do have numerical figures which have no relationship to the order of pages in this score.

<sup>2</sup> Berlioz, in letters of 1844, 1845 and 1851, as well as the printed schedule of the Exposition de l’Industrie concert of August, 1844, contain information on numbers of players needed. No such information by Berlioz is this specific regarding the very first version.

<sup>3</sup> Mendelssohn and Berlioz did not get along well when they first met in Rome as young men. Subsequent letters before Berlioz’ arrival in Leipzig on his tour make it clear that both men were nervous about this reunion. However they got along in splendid fashion, Berlioz mentioning that Mendelssohn treated him ‘like a brother.’ during the month they were together in Leipzig.

The publication of this 'final' score by Schlesinger in the Fall of 1843 includes even more changes, though minor. And finally, the composer's famous treatise on instrumentation was published in December, 1843, and it contains a quotation of this symphony. The manuscript for the treatise<sup>4</sup> contains autograph corrections on nearly every page and the subsequent published form has still further changes!

<sup>4</sup> Now in the Bibliotheque de Grenoble.

With this many changes made *after* the 'final' version was set on paper, one wonders how many changes were made earlier. Unfortunately all earlier scores were apparently destroyed, but from a variety of sources one does find a few clues which shed light on the earlier forms of this symphony. Since we began with the final version, we will proceed to consider the earlier forms of the score in reverse chronological order.

The most important change in the symphony before the German tour was the addition of the 53 bar choral part for the end of the third movement, which was done sometime before a performance of this version in Brussels in September, 1842. We have one important clue regarding what the third movement was like before the addition of the choral finale, and this is found in a letter of 1840 by the famous French composer, Adolphe Adam. He reported that the entire third movement was constructed in four-bar phrases. Yet in the version we know today, one finds in the middle of this movement a long section of three-bar phrases, the character of which is a long vamp. I had always assumed the purpose of this section was merely to build momentum. Recently, however, I did a performance of this symphony in Germany in a hall in which the stage did not allow enough room for chairs for a large chorus. That posed a problem as I did not want the chorus to stand for the entire symphony just to sing a few bars at the end. The second and third movements are connected, so they can't just enter before the movement they sing. As I was walking around this German town thinking about this problem one day, it suddenly dawned on me that perhaps Berlioz had the same problem (early concert halls being smaller by today's standard), and that perhaps he added the long vamp for the purpose of marching in the chorus. I tried it and it was just enough time to bring in a large chorus (in two lines) and furthermore it was most dramatic from the audience perspective to have the chorus passing among them in the middle of the movement.

The pre-choral score seen by Adam may be the same as the version of February, 1842, in which the composer added for the first time the optional string parts. We are assuming the first version with strings was similar to the string writing in the 'final' version now in Paris. It may have been quite different, however,

for we find that in a performance on November 7, 1842, Berlioz conducted the choir and band on stage and Habeneck conducted the strings in the pit. Indeed he advertised at this time that this was a symphony 'for two orchestra.'

Perhaps an additional suggestion that the original version of the score with strings may possibly have been different from the string writing in the version we know is a letter to his sister, dated 5 February 1842, in which he mentions that he has 'just rescored (*que je viens de reinstrumenter*) the third movement,' a phrase which seems to go beyond merely the adding of doubling strings.

And before this version there is yet another which stands after the original, first form and before the one with strings. This intermediate version is mentioned by Berlioz in his autobiography in which he writes of making, 'my usual corrections and retouching' after the first version, but before the addition of string and choral parts. This version of the symphony was performed on August 7, 14 and November 1, 1840 and one of the August performances was heard by Richard Wagner and prompted his famous observation that it was only this symphony for band which finally convinced him of the genius of Berlioz. We also know that the symphony originally had a different name from the one we know today, *Symphonie Militaire*. The second movement also had a different title, 'Hymne d'Adieu.'

Well, what do we know of the very first version of this symphony? As is well-known, some form of this music was used at the first outdoor performance as the military performers marched to the performance site. But surely this early street version was different from the music we know today. Certainly the first movement, 'Marche funebre,' in the form we know today contains music which stylistically seems out of place as music to be performed while marching down the street.<sup>5</sup> We are thinking, for example, of the cries of terror in the unison woodwinds punctuated by the canon-like sounds of the great bass drum and timpani beginning in measure 240 and the soft, haunting trombone melody of the transition section in the recapitulation.

Indeed, there are again some clues that at least the street version was much simplified. In fact, Berlioz, in his autobiography, says exactly this, 'I thought that the simplest plan would be best for such a work.'<sup>6</sup>

Additional significant clues pointing to an original street score being very different from the version we know today are found in the testimony by two distinguished scholars, Prod'homme<sup>7</sup> and Pohl,<sup>8</sup> who had the opportunity to examine early materials which no longer exist. First, they both agree that the original

<sup>5</sup> The simplified version of the great forte unison trombone utterance of the first movement exists in some later scores and may reflect a special simplified form for use in the street.

<sup>6</sup> *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz* (New York: Dover, 1966), 232.

<sup>7</sup> J. G. Prod'homme, *Hector Berlioz* (Paris, 1927), 138.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Pohl, *Hector Berlioz' Leben und Werke* (Leipzig, 1900), 140.

instrumentation was quite different from the (indoor) version we know today, in particular being very heavy in percussion. Even more significant are the keys of the original natural horns given by Pohl. The natural horns in Eb, G and D would be appropriate for the second and third movement we know today. However, they would be impossible for the current first movement, which is in F minor. The implication of this is that the original first movement was probably in G minor, the alternative being that the horn players would have to walk down the street carrying five crooks on their arm. All things considered, not to mention simple logic, the available information suggests the first movement originally played by military musicians marching down the street was quite different from the first movement we know today.

This brings us to a tradition which, we believe, has caused many conductors to fail to appreciate this masterpiece. The first recording, decades ago, was made by a French conductor whose career was in the fields of military and popular music. He, no doubt taking the first movement title, 'Marche funebre,' literally, performed the first movement in his recording at a *very* slow pace as would be characteristic for a dirge. The resultant problem is that the melodic material of the first movement, consisting of long note values, taken together with a very slow tempo results in a performance which is tedious and boring.

I had a conversation with this French conductor in 1991, at a time when we were both working on an engagement in Italy, and, among other things, I found he had no knowledge of the original band works of Saint-Saens, who is a very big composer in France. He said, for example, that he was unaware of the *Occident et Orient*. I asked him specifically if he had looked at the autograph score of the Berlioz Symphony and he said no. This is regrettable, for if he had, he would have seen that the first movement contains a metronome marking of quarter = 72, some 20% faster than his performance. Had he performed the movement at that tempo, the modern performance history of this masterpiece might have been quite different.

There is no evidence that Berlioz ever had in mind a slow, dirge-like tempo. For one thing, Berlioz tells us, in a letter to his father, that in the street performance, during which he conducted 210 military band musicians while walking backwards, that they performed not only the first movement six times but also the third movement six times. Well, if one imagines the soldiers marching at a funeral procession pace of 60 quarter-notes per minute or slower as characteristic of a dirge, then the third movement becomes musically impossible. And, conversely, one

cannot imagine a circumstance in which the 210 walking musicians changed the speed of their walk eleven times during the procession in order to accommodate the differing tempo needs of the two movements.

A common tempo at which both movements might be walked and played while maintaining some musical logic for both might be one of about 72 quarter-notes per minute. Curiously, this is exactly what is written in the autograph score. Berlioz wrote in ink, at the beginning of the first movement in the surviving 'final' score, 'due Metr: de Maelzel.' But he did not originally notate in ink a number following this. What follows is '72,' written in pencil, which may represent his adding this after some additional reflection. Scholars do not agree whether the '72' is in Berlioz' hand, but even if it is not one can still suppose it was added by someone familiar with the tempi used in performances which Berlioz conducted, for this particular score does not appear to have ever been used in later performances and thus the '72' is not added by some later conductor.

The significance of this metronome marking of '72' becomes more interesting because of another metronome marking, also indicating '72,' and which is in the hand of Berlioz, in the second movement. In the second movement he gives '72' as the tempo associated with an *Andantino poco lento e sostenuto*. The first movement, where the tempo of '72' appears, carries the Italian words, *Moderato un poco lento*. Leaving aside the fact that our modern metronome gives the 'Moderato' range as being 108 – 120 beats per minute(!), normally one *would* expect a general Moderato range to be somewhat faster than that of an Andantino. Did Berlioz originally have in mind an even faster tempo for the final indoor version of the first movement? Or did he perhaps consider that the limiting language following the Moderato, 'un poco lento,' would bring the tempo down to something similar to the quarter-note = 72 of the Andantino in the second movement?

No matter how one analyzes this language, with accompanying tempo numbers, one fact remains very clear and that is that Berlioz never intended the final version of the first movement to be played slower than a metronome marking of quarter-note = 72. This will be perfectly clear to the modern conductor if he only proceeds as he always should, letting the music itself determine the tempo, and dismisses from his mind any extra-musical thoughts of an actual funeral procession. This is all the more important because the music we perform today is clearly not the same music played in the streets of Paris in 1840.