

BÉATRICE ET BÉNÉDICT

HECTOR BERLIOZ

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The phrase “much ado about nothing” could have been used by the detractors of Berlioz, the inventor of modern orchestra and a kind of Napoleon of concert. As fiery as he was rigorous, Berlioz could mobilize and conduct over 2000 singers and musicians, arranging mammoth concerts during the great exhibitions. He also introduced the electric metronome in France, making it possible to increase the number of performers in the wings. In the 1840s and 1850s, while his reputation was spreading over Europe, the Parisian press caricatured him at length: Grandville portrayed him conducting “a gunfire concert”; Gustave Doré drew his frail figure facing a wall of choristers; Cham showed him “using his electric stick to conduct an orchestra with musicians in all regions of the globe.”

In 1861 when Berlioz “cautiously” retitled his adaptation *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, his motive was not so much to avoid criticism, which he scorned, as to refocus the plot on a couple of minor importance in Shakespeare’s profuse play *Much Ado about Nothing*. How curious is such a drastic adaptation from an admirer who condemned the transformation of past masterpieces in order to keep with the style of the day and thundered that “everybody has taught lessons to Shakespeare”, toned down since the 18th century. Yet, should Berlioz not be forgiven for his final score in the light of a whole oeuvre inspired by the Elizabethan playwright? Shakespeare, whom Victor Hugo referred to as a model of dramatic freedom in his preface to *Cromwell* in 1827, was also a tutelary figure for Berlioz – both artists were not yet 25. From then on, Berlioz’s musical thought was prompted by the will to place drama at the core of the orchestra and enrich symphony through epic lyricism by way of a synthetic art that was to stand out in concert – which Wagner later carried on in drama.

It is necessary to understand what led 57-year old Berlioz, worn-out and bitter, to meet the problem of adaptation head-on after a preference for dramatic symphony with *Roméo et Juliette*, the triptych for chorus and orchestra of *Tristia* (with scenes from *Hamlet*), the *Grand Overture* to *Le Roi Lear*, and after having larded his scores, including his Virgilian testament *Les Troyens*, with epigraphs, Shakespearean scenes and devices.

Béatrice et Bénédicte is an act of faithfulness. Berlioz spent his last years with thoughts turned to the past and wished to embrace everything: Italy, where his imaginative world had been shaped, Shakespeare, of whom he arranged readings for his friends, his love for the actress Harriet Smithson – the fascinating Juliet and Ophelia – a passion transcended through creation (*La Symphonie fantastique* and *Lélio* were written for her) and eventually assuaged in marriage. The reappearance of his first melody, *Le Dépit de la bergère* (1819), in the

sicilienne of Act I and as an entr'acte, tells us a good deal about his determination to conclude.

Among Shakespeare's comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* is adopted by 1833, when the reasonable actress is reluctant to marry the ardent musician. With its indictment of marriage, so relished in French comic genres, the play has got everything to arouse his sardonic verve. 27 years later, misfortunes have piled up: after passionate but fickle Camille, inspiring but depressive Harriet, comes burdensome Marie, who dies two months before the premiere of *Béatrice*. The three shrews have somehow tamed the romantic lion without trimming his claws or hardening his heart: he falls in love with young and mysterious Amélie. By simplifying the dramatic plot of the play, Berlioz depicts the two couples, Héro and Claudio and Béatrice and Bénédict, as a diptych of marital hell and passionate love, the only thing capable of giving soul to life.

Béatrice et Bénédict was "a caprice written with the point of a needle," the last pleasure indulged in by a musician who believed his oeuvre was completed. When Édouard Bénazet, the director of the casino in the spa resort of Baden-Baden, commissioned an opera from him for the summer of 1860, Berlioz first showed reluctance, busy with the publication of his *Memoirs* and *Les Grottesques de la musique*. Such a task would have meant a lot of work to no avail as the piece would not have been performed in Paris, a repertoire-oriented city where the premiere of *Les Troyens* had been postponed. As a result, it is possible that Berlioz opted for *Much Ado*. For as soon as he found his subject, he dropped a historical libretto and was carried away. It should be noted that he had conducted the Baden-Baden orchestra every summer since 1856 and that the new theater of that highly cultural town (with visitors such as Pauline Viardot, Bülow, Clara Schumann, Brahms and Gounod) was to be inaugurated with great pomp. Moreover, Bénazet paid Berlioz a handsome fee and gave him carte blanche.

From October 1860 to February 1862, inspiration is back: with its "charming gaiety," his *opéra comique* in two acts is "one of the liveliest and most original" of his scores. He is delighted with the character of Somarone, a burlesque composer who elaborates upon Shakespeare's Balthazar inspired by both Lelio – an autobiographical figure – and touchy Spontini, one of his masters.

In the first months of 1862, Berlioz has the singers rehearse – including wonderful Anne Charton-Demeur, his future Dido – with the help of Saint-Saëns, then deals with the staging as caprice "requires extreme delicacy of execution." Many French go to Baden new theater and attend the premiere on August 9th. Reyer and Gounod have come to applaud this musical achievement of utter imagination and refinement. Yet, praise from France cannot make up for years of incomprehension. "There are people who do not get over their amazement at the success of an opera written, composed and conducted by the same man": *La Damnation de Faust* failed at the Salle Favart 16 years earlier. "They discover that I have melody, that I can be cheerful and even comic": *Benvenuto Cellini* has never been played in Paris after its fiasco in 1838 at the Opera. "They realized that I was not making any noise when they saw that the brutal instruments were not in the orchestra."

On 22 March 1863, the female duet of the first act achieved triumph at the Société des concerts du Conservatoire. Three days later, Berlioz bequeathed his scores to that institution. But whereas *Béatrice et Bénédict* in its German translation was performed that year in Weimar and Baden, with the addition of the female trio and the offstage chorus of the second act, it was premiered in France as late as 5 June 1890 at the Odéon theater... 27 years after Berlioz died. "They will not ask me to perform [*Béatrice et Bénédict*] in Paris," he wrote in 1863, "it will be just as well; it is not Parisian music." Although performing the work was contemplated at the Opéra Comique by 1863, it was not performed

there until one century later on 12 February 1966 with recitatives that made it into an opera!

In February 2010 the work is played for the first time at the Salle Favart in its original form. Premiered before but composed after *Les Troyens*, *Béatrice et Bénédict* is Berlioz's authentic testament, a concentrate of music and wit as an allusion to the Opéra Comique of Grétry and Marivaux.

SYNOPSIS

Act I

In Messina in the 16th century the Sicilians celebrate victory over the Moors by the troops of valiant general Don Pedro, whom governor Léonato is about to receive. His daughter Héro awaits the return of her beloved Claudio with impatience, but her niece Béatrice taunts military valor, aiming her sarcastic remarks at another officer, Bénédict. The reunion is as tender between the engaged couple as it is stormy between Béatrice and Bénédict, who trade insults and mockery with a strange pleasure. When Claudio learns of his imminent nuptials from the general, he is as delighted as Bénédict is horrified. Don Pedro and Claudio conspire to lead the two enemies to also marry in accordance with the governor's secret wish. Somarone, the music teacher, conducts his choir and orchestra for the evening festivity. His so-called masterpiece is given a rough handling by the choristers and rehearsed before a general not so keen on music. When the musicians have left, the general and Claudio start a conversation about Béatrice with the purpose of making Bénédict believe that she is madly in love with him. The young man eventually recognizes Béatrice's qualities and decides to give up his pride and succumb to love. On her part, Héro had a

similar discussion with her attendant Ursule and Béatrice overheard them. The night is falling with its share of promises.

Act II

In the governor's palace, the banquet is in full swing and the cellar is soon empty. Already quite drunk, Somarone improvises a drinking song for the guests before the ceremony. Béatrice is tormented by her feelings but she eventually admits to herself that she loves Bénédict and that her aversion might have been fear to yield to love. Surprised and overjoyed to find a softened Béatrice, Héro and Ursule undertake to convert her to marriage. Before the wedding celebration, the two former enemies are on the verge of quarreling but Bénédict succeeds in stirring the defiant maiden. As the bridal procession enters, a second marriage contract is produced which hastens avowals: Béatrice and Bénédict get married... for the better and for the worse.