

Rossini's William Tell [Act II] (Part III)

In the last two installments of his analysis of Rossini's masterpiece, Berlioz continues to separate the wheat from the chaff, acclaiming the second act as the high point of the work. Speaking of acclaim, the issue of the composer's relation to his audience recurs so often as to form the review's main theme. In this installment, an opening tirade sets forth the distinction to be made between applause from the crowd and from connoisseurs. Thus when Berlioz makes a closing gesture of echoing the superlatives emitted by the crowd, we must take him with a grain of salt (see Editor's Introduction, Berlioz on Music). Were any doubts to remain on the matter, the final installment would set us straight. There Berlioz explicitly condemns the musical instincts of the crowd and insists that for a composer worthy of his mission, only the applause of the discriminating few should count. Rossini, to his mind, thus frequently violates the dignity of his art and of his own genius by cynically pandering to the masses, either out of sheer laziness or out of base material motives—as Berlioz says at one point, like a “canny businessman.” Having got those suspicions off his chest, Berlioz can give way to enthusiasm for the gems to be found, indulging in several poetic flights of critique admirative.



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The curtain rises on a hunting scene. Horses gallop across the stage. The fanfare that we had already heard two or three times in the previous act sounds again. It is orchestrated differently, true enough, and linked to a fine chorus,

but this theme so frequently repeated is in itself of quite little note, and that is unfortunate. It could be argued that the composer's hands were tied by the demands of the plot. As we have said, however, Rossini could have had his librettist arrange the scenes in a different sequence, so as to avoid so many opportunities for monotony. He failed to do so and came to regret it, but too late. Let's go on. In the middle of the chorus just mentioned, a diatonic passage played by the horns and four bassoons in unison shows an energetic originality. And the entire piece would be captivating, if not for the torment felt by an even mildly delicate constitution subjected to innumerable heavy beats on the bass drum. The effect is all the more regrettable as it underscores rhythmic forms that are wholly devoid of novelty. I know Rossini will respond with: "These forms you disdain are precisely those that the public most readily understands." Agreed—but if you profess so much respect for the habits of the ignorant crowd, you should also limit yourself to the commonest things in melody, harmony, and orchestration. You refrain from doing so, however. Why, then, condemn rhythm alone to vulgar treatment? Besides, music criticism cannot and must not take such considerations into account. Am I, concerned exclusively with the art of music for so many years, in the same class as the music lover who attends an opera every three or four months? Have my ears not acquired greater discernment than the ears of a student who enjoys playing flute duets on Sundays? Am I a know-nothing like some tradesman in the rue Saint-Denis?¹ In a word, do you acknowledge progress in music, and in criticism a quality of taste and judgment that distinguishes it from blind instinct? Surely you do. Then it doesn't matter how easily the public does or does not understand new things! We are not concerned here with material issues and production; our concern is with music as an art. Besides, audiences are not so stupid as we are wont to believe, particularly in Paris. They don't reject innovations that are presented honestly and confidently. The people who are hostile—it's almost pointless to name them—are the self-proclaimed experts. No, really, such reasons are unacceptable. You composed a common rhythm, not because the public would have refused to hear any other, but because it is easier and, particularly, quicker to repeat what has been done so often than to attempt newer and more distinguished forms.

The far-off Bell Chorus seems to support our opinion, as its style provides a contrast to that of the chorus that precedes. Everything in it bespeaks the

1. Berlioz refers to a working-class section of Paris. Note, at the end of this tirade, the assurance that the ordinary public is in fact more receptive of novelty than the pundits—a recurrent theme of Berlioz's early criticism.

charm of purity, freshness, and novelty. The piece even ends with a sequence of chords that is beautifully effective even though the harmonic progression is forbidden by all the rules in place since there have been schools. I refer to the chain of diatonic perfect chords moving in parallel under the four repetitions of:

*Voici la nuit.*²

According to the masters of musical science, it is written most incorrectly, for the basses remain at the octave below the first sopranos and consequently always a fifth below the second sopranos. The perfect C major chord is followed by one in B major, then one in A minor, and finally one in the tonic key of G. The reason for the pleasing effect of these four successive parallel fifths and octaves is first of all the brief silence that separates the chords, a silence sufficient to isolate them from one another and give to each fundamental sound the appearance of a new tonic. The second reason is the artlessness of the piece, which not only allows, but actually accentuates the picturesque side of this *infraction of the rules of the ancients*. Beethoven wrote a similar series of perfect chords in the first part of the “Eroica” Symphony; everyone recognizes the majesty of that passage. So much for strict rules in music! . . .

Hardly has the evening hymn just cited faded like a delicate twilight when the horn fanfare returns along with the inevitable dominant pedal:

*Du gouverneur le cor résonne;
C'est notre retour qu'il ordonne.*³

These two lines are sung by the chorus and the lead hunter entirely on B-flat. The observations made earlier apply even more directly and strongly in this case. . . . Starting with the next piece, the composer rises to a higher plane; the style is quite different. Mathilde's entry is preceded by a long ritornello doubly interesting for its harmony and its dramatic expression—an ideal rendering of the contained passion, the feverish, heart-pounding agitation of a girl forced to hide her love. Then comes a recitative in perfect diction, impressively dialoguing with the orchestra, which repeats fragments of the ritornello. This introduction is followed by the well-known romance “Sombres forêts.”⁴

2. “Behold the night.”

3. “The governor's horn resounds; / it orders us to return.”

4. “Dark forests.”

Rossini has composed few pieces, in our opinion, as elegant, fresh, melodically distinguished, and successfully modulated as this one. Beyond the immensely impressive vocal line and harmony, it shows a sort of melancholy accompaniment in the violas and first violins, as well as a *pianissimo* effect in the kettle-drums at the beginning of every stanza that grips the audience's attention. You think you're hearing one of those sounds of nature coming from who knows where, such as you notice deep in the woods on the calmest of days—one of those strange sounds that deepen your awareness of silence and solitude. Now, that is poetry, that is music, that is art—beautiful, noble and pure, such as the lovers of art would like to experience always. This style is sustained to the end of the act, leading us from one marvel to another. The duet between Arnold and Mathilde, so full of knightly passion, is marred only by a long pedal on G, alternating, as tonic and dominant, in the horns and trumpets; at certain moments, the effect is painful. Then, we have to criticize the maestro for excessively heeding the old French composers who would have thought themselves dishonored if, at the mention of “glory” and “victory,” they failed to bring on the trumpets. Rossini treats us like the dilettanti of 1803, admirers of Sedaine and Monsigny.⁵ As soon as his libretto says:

*Retournez aux champs de la gloire,
Volez à de nouveaux exploits.
On s'ennoblit par la victoire.
Le monde approuvera mon choix.*⁶

he must have thought: “That absolutely calls for a fanfare; we're writing for Frenchmen!” It strikes us, too, that the very long duet would be better if the motif of the ensemble:

*Dans celle que j'aime*⁷

5. Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719–1797), librettist and playwright, and Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (1729–1817), composer, two of the founders of the *opéra-comique* genre, who collaborated notably on *Rose et Colas* (1764) and *Le Déserteur* (1769). Sedaine collaborated with Grétry on *Richard Cœur de Lion* (1784) and an earlier *William Tell* (*Guillaume Tell*, 1791). In his own late *opéra-comique*, *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, Berlioz will mock some of the militaristic conventions of the genre, notably the inevitable rhyme of “gloire” and “victoire.”

6. “Return to the fields of glory; / fly to new exploits. / Victory is ennobling. / The world will applaud my choice.”

7. “In the one I love.”

were not repeated. Since the tempo of this passage is slower than the rest, there necessarily follow two interruptions that break the general flow and chill the scene by prolonging it to no effect. But between this moment and the final chord of the second act, no such mistake recurs. Walter and William appear; Mathilde takes flight; Arnold remains to hear himself bitterly rebuked for loving the daughter of the tyrants who rule Helvetia. There is nothing lovelier than this recitative, as expressive and noble vocally as it is orchestrally. Two phrases are especially striking for their ring of truth—Walter's:

*Peut-être plus qu'un autre
Dois-tu chercher à les connaître*⁸

and William's challenge:

Sais-tu bien ce que c'est que d'aimer sa patrie?

At last the tragic ritornello of the trio bursts forth. Here I confess that, despite my role as critic and its obligations, I find it impossible to let my cold scalpel touch the heart of this sublime creation. What is there to analyze—the emotion, despair, tears, the cries of a son distraught at the news of his father's murder? God forbid! Make carping little observations about details? Quibble over a *gruppetto*, a flute solo, an obscure second-violin part? No. If others have the heart to do that, let them. I don't have it in me. I can only exclaim with the crowd, "Beautiful! Superb! Wonderful! Heartbreaking!"

Still, I have to be sparing with my words of admiration, since I will need some for the rest of this act, which almost continuously maintains the same high level. With the arrival of delegations from three Swiss cantons, the composer had the opportunity to write three pieces of entirely different styles.¹⁰ The first chorus has a strong, robust character, indicative of a community of rough-handed, muscular plowmen. The second chorus, with its soft, gentle melody, points to the timid shepherds. They express their fears with captivating grace and simplicity. The men of the canton of Uri arrive in their fishing boats on the lake, while the music imitates, as closely as instrumental music

8. "Perhaps more than anyone else, / you should seek to know them."

9. "Do you really know what it is to love one's country?"

10. Similarly in *Les Troyens*, Berlioz will use worker delegations with characteristically varied music at the court of Queen Dido.

allows, the gestures and rhythmic efforts of a crew of oarsmen. As soon as the last arrivals have disembarked, all three choruses combine in an ensemble, chanting rapidly *mezza voce*, accompanied by pizzicato strings and a few muffled chords in the woodwinds:

*Guillaume, tu le vois,
Trois peuples à la fois
Sont armés de leurs droits
Contre un pouvoir infâme.*¹¹

These lines, sung first by the fishermen's chorus and then taken up by the others, who intersperse their exclamations and brief asides, convey strong dramatic truth. They depict a crowd whose members, moved by hope and fear, can barely contain their agitation and, all trying to speak at once, keep interrupting one another. The execution of this *coro parlato* is very difficult—a partial excuse in passing for its quite poor rendition by the choristers of the Opéra.

But William starts to speak, and they fall silent. “Arrectis auribus adstant.”¹² He stirs them; he excites them; he informs them of Melcthal's cruel death, promises them weapons, and finally asks them bluntly:

“Will you support us?”
The chorus answers, “Yes, have no doubt! All of us.”
“Ready to win?”
“Yes, all of us.”
“Ready to die?”
“Yes, all.”

Then, in one voice, they swear gravely and solemnly, *by the God of kings and shepherds*, to free themselves from slavery and wipe out their tyrants. This gravity under such circumstances would be absurd in the case of Frenchmen or Italians; it is admirable in a cool-headed people like the Swiss, whose resolve is less sudden but lacks neither firmness nor the strength to succeed.

11. “William, as you see, / three peoples together / are armed with their rights / against a loathesome power.”

12. The entire sentence is: “Silent arrectisque auribus adstant” (“With ears alert, they stand there in silence”), Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1:152.

The tempo does not quicken until the end, when Arnold, seeing the first rays of sunlight, cries:

“Daybreak, our signal, our call!”

William: “Signal of victory!”

Walter: “What cry should respond?”

Arnold (alone): “To arms!”

Arnold, William, Walter (together): “To arms! To arms!”

The entire chorus, the actors, the orchestra, and the percussion not heard since the beginning of the act sound: “To arms!” Then the whole mass of instruments rushes like an avalanche into an impetuous *allegro* under a final, terrible war cry streaming out of all those heaving chests at the dawn of a first day of freedom!

Ah, sublime! Let's catch our breath.

(To be continued in the next issue)