

# Letters to Her, *For Piano* by Chrétien Urhan

*The first solo violist for Berlioz's Harold in Italy also harbored aspirations as a composer. Berlioz sympathizes with his poetic sensibilities while voicing some reticence about his compositions. Skirting the issue of program music per se, Berlioz takes the work's programmatic title as pretext for laying out his creed of music as a powerful vehicle of expression, best understood by musically educated sensibilities. In one piece by Urhan he objects to a conflation of emotional and literal storms, since in his view—the tempest in Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony notwithstanding—music is best suited to the sphere of human emotion. One senses his wish to correct the assumption that he would inevitably condone pictorial imitation, given the misunderstandings aroused by his own program for the Symphonie fantastique.*



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What a strange title, don't you think?<sup>1</sup> In itself, it challenges a whole order of ideas. A mere glance at these few words will rouse a hearty laugh in some people for whom music has nothing to say to the mind and should simply entertain the ear, as Boileau charged, lest it fall into absurdity.<sup>2</sup> All right, let

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1. The actual title is more original, proposing as it does a genre of musical letters: *À elle, lettres pour le piano* (*To Her, letters for piano*).

2. *Art poétique*, Part 3, line 36. Berlioz substitutes *amuser* for *étourdir* (to amuse vs. to deafen the ears) in the line “Sans rien dire à l'esprit, étourdir les oreilles” by Boileau, the so-called legislator of the Classics; the passage refers to theater in general, not music, but Boileau's disdain for music was well-known.

them laugh! The writer will certainly not begrudge them a moment's fun. He is not a man to be perturbed if the crowd fails to understand him. Nor does he waste his time arguing with dilettantes and dandies. What, after all, does it matter to a true artist if the power of his art goes largely unrecognized? He has long known that a fine, deep, all-embracing feeling for the poetic is granted only to the few.

Certain critics stubbornly maintain the old and silly proposition that music is meant for everyone.<sup>3</sup> Let me ask them this: Is music nothing but an arrangement of notes that brings some degree of pleasure to the ear? Even supposing that to be true, is there not a significant difference between the response of a peasant who has never experienced artistically organized sounds and the impression made on a listener whose ear has already undergone some cultural shaping? Are there not even countless individuals wholly impervious to such training?

"Oh, no doubt," comes an immediate response from defenders of the popular in art. "We don't deny that, to be appreciated, music demands a certain sophistication and a cultivated ear, but there is a big difference between the uncouth peasant who has heard no voices save those of his bulls and the civilized city dweller."

Ah, there you go, gentlemen! Once you agree on the principle, you are bound to accept the logical consequences. There is a difference, you say, between the fellow behind the plow and the season-ticket fan at the Bouffes. But might there not be an even wider gap between the white-gloved dandy and the ordinary musician playing the double bass in a corner of the orchestra? The gentleman in the dress circle probably can't tell the difference between major and minor, while the performer with a solid grounding in the technical aspects of his art may be endowed as well with the richest of sensibilities. It may often happen that the very music that makes the one swoon with pleasure leaves the other sickened. Moving up a few levels, will the sensibility and knowledge of a Beethoven, for example, not differ markedly from those of the performer we've just mentioned?

Upon hearing certain works, one person may experience only weak and ill-defined sensations, while another may have the strongest possible reaction, positive or negative. I challenge you to deny the reality of such variation in our constitutions and minds. That settled, it is absurd to maintain that "music is

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3. Berlioz is referring to the handbook for the layman under the title *La Musique mise à la portée de tout le monde* (Music for All, 1830) by his nemesis, Fétis.

meant for everyone,” for the obvious reason that not everyone is made for music, or for all types of music. Which brings us to the question of musical genres. Do you think that such a trifle as Lebrun’s opera *Le Rossignol* (or a hundred others I could cite) is the product of an order of ideas anything like the one that produced Beethoven’s C minor Symphony? Surely not! Well, the person filled with admiration for Beethoven’s work can hardly keep from going mad on hearing Lebrun’s *whatever*.<sup>4</sup> That is why (and this brings us back to our subject) most dilettantes, i.e., people whose musical appreciation is limited to distinguishing whether a note is in tune irrespective of its place in the work as a whole—the sort of people who are charmed by productions composed solely to entertain the ear, and no more—that is why, I say, most people will find any composition by Urhan ridiculous. Urhan and those who share his vision believe that music can express the most delicate nuances of feeling. And they are right—or, rather, they necessarily believe so, because it is obvious *to them*.

Lesser sensibilities, on the contrary, thinking of music only as a minor pleasure, deny the very possibility of expressive powers in music. And deny it they must, since that deeply poetic sensitivity is not a reality *to them*.

“In that case,” I’ll be told, “you don’t believe in absolute Beauty, do you?” You’re right, I do not—if what you understand by that term is something recognized as beautiful by all human beings throughout the world.

But this discussion could take us farther afield than I care to go. Suffice it to say that the publication whose title heads this article is especially addressed to simple, tender souls inclined to religious melancholy, persons who shun anything crude as much as anything falsely sentimental. Only among such persons can *Letters to Her* attract understanding readers, and to them I commend Urhan’s work, convinced that they will find it very much to their liking. “Absence,” “Memory of a Better World,” “Storm,” and “Calm” are the four letters that constitute the entirety of this short work. The first and last are my favorites. The feeling of isolation that torments the soul in the absence of the beloved, the serenity that gently soothes the heart when passion’s cruel turmoil is spent, are depicted in tones worthy of Gessner and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Berlioz uses the word *chose*, i.e., that unmentionable “thing” by Lebrun.

5. The Swiss poet Salomon Gessner (1730–1788) was known for his *Idylles* (1756). Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737–1814) was the author of *Paul et Virginie*, also in the idyllic tradition, a work much loved by the adolescent Berlioz.

It does seem to me that the piece called "Storm" opens with a sequence more suggestive of the muffled roar of a real storm than of a tumultuous storm in the heart, the sort of storm the composer no doubt had in mind. This flaw is the more serious in view of the title itself, which might imply a double meaning. Still, though a host of composers fall into the same error, there are very few to whom you could point it out with any hope of being understood.

And so Urhan is the one we address. Useless to add that such a composition can be appreciated only in a small circle and that a performance 'mid the splendor of a fashionable salon would destroy its effect.

HECTOR BERLIOZ