

September 2022

Nouvelles lettres de Berlioz, de sa famille, de ses contemporains,
ed. Peter Bloom, Joël-Marie Fauquet, Hugh J. Macdonald, and
Cécile Reynaud

Ralph P. Locke

Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, ralph.p.locke@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp>

Recommended Citation

Locke, Ralph P. (2022) "*Nouvelles lettres de Berlioz, de sa famille, de ses contemporains*, ed. Peter Bloom, Joël-Marie Fauquet, Hugh J. Macdonald, and Cécile Reynaud," *Music & Musical Performance*: : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp/vol1/iss1/6>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music & Musical Performance by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Book Review

Nouvelles lettres de Berlioz, de sa famille, de ses contemporains. Edited by Peter Bloom, Joël-Marie Fauquet, Hugh J. Macdonald, and Cécile Reynaud. (Correspondance générale, IX, suppléments 2.) Arles and Venice: Actes Sud/Palazzetto Bru Zane, 2016. [788 p. ISBN 9782330062552 (paperback). €30.] Illustrations, bibliography, indexes.

In 1860, Richard Wagner was in Paris, trying to arrange for the Opéra to give the world premiere of the revised version of *Tannhäuser*. In a letter probably written in May of that year, Hector Berlioz invited him to come over to dine. The various guests that evening, he promised, will share “a very lovely pineapple” direct from Brazil. And, after everyone else leaves, he and Wagner “will have the freedom to spend time together in my study.” Presumably he meant that the two would talk about topics of common interest, such as the Parisian musical world or the recent activities of their mutual friend Franz Liszt. Berlioz’s “pineapple letter” has now been published for the first time in the book under review (pp. 548–49). It was apparently written later than any other that survives between Berlioz and Wagner. (They did meet again two months later at Pauline Viardot’s house for an advance hearing of parts of *Tristan und Isolde*.)

Earlier that same year, Berlioz had written a sharply disapproving newspaper column about Wagner’s musical style. Still, the friendliness evident in this letter shows him interested in maintaining an active relationship with Wagner based on an open exchange of views. The pineapple letter will, I hope, lead commentators to be more cautious when they—or we, for I am as guilty as anybody in this—write, or tell students, about a supposed sudden and complete breakdown in the relationship between these two bold spirits during the last decade of Berlioz’s life.

This is just one of many revelations to be encountered in a major new book, whose title in English would be *New Letters of Berlioz, His Family, and His Contemporaries*. (For the webpage at the publisher’s site, click [HERE](#).) The title page (but not the front cover) adds a series title: Hector Berlioz, *Correspondance générale IX, suppléments 2*. The book is thus the final volume in the much-praised edition of all surviving letters—and any that were transcribed before the original sources were lost—written by the composer or to him (by family members, friends, professional colleagues, and government officials).

This review is a somewhat expanded and lightly revised version of one that first appeared in *Music Library Association Notes* 74, no. 1 (September 2017): 102–6, and appears here by kind permission.

The *Correspondance générale*—a title that scholars often abbreviate as *Corr. gén.* or *CG*—was published by the Paris firm Flammarion between 1974 and 2003. Its eight volumes may be found in numerous libraries around the world. The primary volumes (*Corr. gén.* I–VII), edited under the supervision of Pierre Citron, are arranged chronologically. *Correspondance générale* VIII, edited by Hugh Macdonald, is an 850–page supplement that provides numerous corrections and makes available letters that had become known too late to be included in the relevant chronological volume.



Nineteenth-century illustration of a pineapple, presumably much like the one that Berlioz invited Wagner to share with him.

Since the publication of the first supplemental volume in 2003, hundreds more letters have surfaced. This is in part a tribute to the success of the *Correspondance générale* itself. Other factors have helped as well, such as: (1) the increased speed of communications between scholars—and between scholars and archivists—that has made it easier to locate a letter and then consult it, perhaps in a photocopy or scan; (2) more letters finding their way from private hands into public libraries, notably the important Richard Macnutt Collection, now in Paris at the Bibliothèque nationale de France; (3) access by the editors of *Nouvelles lettres* to transcriptions of many letters that reside in distant libraries or in private collections; (4) the inclusion in this

volume of a number of transcriptions (often incomplete) that have appeared across the decades in catalogues of rare-book dealers.

By any kind of logic, *Nouvelles lettres* (*Corr. gén.* IX) should have been published—like the preceding eight volumes—by Flammarion. Apparently, that firm was unwilling to take the financial risk. Fortunately, the editors of this “second supplement” were able to find a safe haven for their project at the Center for French Romantic Music (Centre de musique romantique française), whose offices are located at the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice. Additional funding was provided by Smith College, the Fondation d’entreprise La Poste (associated with the French postal service), the Berlioz Festival in Isère, and the Musée Hector-Berlioz in La Côte-Saint-André. The commendable publisher is Actes Sud, one of the most prolific producers of French-language musicological studies. In the world of music scholarship, Actes Sud is perhaps best known for a remarkable five-volume collective work guided by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Musiques: Une encyclopédie pour le XXIe siècle* (2003–2007).

The editors of *Nouvelles lettres* are a formidable international team. To mention only some of their many accomplishments: Hugh Macdonald is the editor-in-chief of the *New Berlioz Edition* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969-2005); Peter Bloom has written extensively on Berlioz and his socio-cultural milieu; Joël-Marie Fauquet is the renowned authority on a number of French composers (including César Franck and Edouard Lalo) and editor of the path-breaking 1400-page *Dictionnaire de la musique en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); and Cécile Reynaud has co-edited numerous publications on musical life in nineteenth-century Paris, including (with Pierre Citron, Jean-Pierre Bartoli, and Peter Bloom) the *Dictionnaire Berlioz* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

The book, though quite thick, is a pleasure to hold in the hand, peruse, and get lost in. Thanks no doubt to the aforementioned subsidies, the price has been kept down to a remarkably affordable €30. (The asking price at amazon.com [accessed 1 January 2018] is higher—about \$56—yet still reasonable.) I would call this the musicological bargain of the year, and a great gift for any music lover comfortable in reading French!

The editors have largely followed the practices of *Corr. gén.* I–VIII. The most important difference is that they felt freer than did the editors of the earlier volumes to insert letters about Berlioz written by one member of Berlioz’s family to another. Similarly, they included not only numerous letters written to Berlioz by his contemporaries—as the previous volumes did—but also some letters about Berlioz that one contemporary wrote to another.

The editors have abandoned the practice, maintained throughout the first eight volumes, of printing in italics any letter not written by Berlioz. I welcome this change. Long passages in italics are tiring to the eyes, and the italics may suggest, inadvertently, that such letters are somehow less interesting than those by Berlioz himself, which is often not the case in the present volume.

Numerous fascinating stories are told, or hinted at, in the marriage-and-family letters. The volume more than doubles the number of available letters that Berlioz wrote to his first wife Harriet Smithson, to their only child—the often troubled and lonely Louis—and to Berlioz’s longtime mistress and, eventually, second wife Marie Recio; or by one of those three intimates to Berlioz (or, again, sometimes to a family member, e.g., Harriet writing to their son).

Particularly revealing are some worried missives from or between members of Berlioz’s family of origin. His two sisters, their uncle Félix, and other relatives wonder just what Hector thinks he is doing in his unconventional approach to a career. They comment positively or negatively on his marriage to Harriet Smithson, or on his alliance with Marie Recio. They try to find a wife for Louis (as we see in a long letter from cousin Ernest Caffarel to Berlioz’s sister Adèle, January, 20, 1860, pp. 540–4). And Louis, in several letters written during his adult years, expresses a touching pride in his father’s artistic achievements—pride sometimes bordering on desperate adoration.



Berlioz, at mid-career and clearly a sharp observer (as seen in a contemporary engraving, dated 1856).

It is worth stressing that numerous letters here are by (or to) individuals outside of music who were extremely prominent at the time, such as Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugo, and the painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Many letters reveal new details regarding other musicians of the time: their views, activities, and interactions with Berlioz. Some of these musicians are still famous, others nearly forgotten. There are many new things to be learned here about, for example, Ferdinand Hiller (in a letter from the violinist Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst), Charles Gounod, Louis Antoine Jullien, Paul Julien (a talented violinist who died at age 26), Berlioz’s esteemed composition professor Le Sueur, Liszt, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Ernest Reyer, Gaspare Spontini (his views on sacred music), and Clara Wieck (shortly before her marriage to Schumann).

But of course the greatest interest lies in the additional letters by Berlioz himself, nearly all written in the witty and precise manner that we know from his *Memoirs* and from his abundant music criticism. We learn much about Berlioz’s precarious finances, his health problems, and

cultural events of the day. Numerous letters by Berlioz—and indeed by family members—refer to current political developments, to plays that the writer went to see, or to both at once. For example, Berlioz reports (to his sister Nanci Pal, December 19, 1848, p. 332) on a play that he greatly enjoyed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville and that ridiculed the famous proto-communist slogan proposed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, “Property is theft.”

Often, of course, biographical matters spill over into musical ones. For example, one of my favorite exchanges consists of an episode that I don’t recall reading about previously or at least not in this amount of detail. Berlioz had written a dismissive review of a harmony textbook by the noted Conservatoire professor Henri Reber.² Berlioz felt that Reber’s rule-laden book gave the impression that writing good harmony is a mechanical matter, and he expressed, amusingly, some worry that the book could lead to an outpouring of “simple-minded *romances*” (i.e., parlor songs) and “bankrupt cavatinas” by amateur composers and by performers with little to say. One amateur composer, Mme. Tarbé de Sablons (whose son Ernest was an active music critic), took offense and tried twice to call on the composer but was not given admittance. At some point she apparently referred to him as an “ogre.” Berlioz wrote puckishly to a friend (who also knew the woman in question): “As I said in that annoying column [*dans ce fâcheux article*], ‘There are amateurs who truly are artists, and professional musicians who are detestable amateurs.’ [So] why wouldn’t Mme Tarbé de Sablons simply put herself in the former category? Is it because of excessive modesty?” (ca. December 23, 1862, pp. 590–92).

The new letters will be crucial evidence for resolving all kinds of lingering questions regarding Berlioz’s works: how he managed (or failed) to get particular works commissioned or accepted for performance, how effective the early performances were, how the works were disseminated (through manuscript copies and printed editions), and how published reviews and private opinions of musicians of his day reflected all of these activities.

I cannot resist sharing portions of several letters here. In one, the twenty-year-old Berlioz, studying in Paris, defends to his sister Nanci (who was eighteen at the time) his recent refusal to write to their parents. His father and mother leave him no choice, he says, because of their determined opposition to his budding musical career. The sense of distress is palpable here, not least in a phrase in which Berlioz, as if breathless, omits grammatically crucial commas: “[Our parents] do not wish to hear me say a single word relating to music. In that case—given that this art is the core principle of my actions[,] my thoughts[,] my desires—I keep my mouth shut and don’t know what to fill my letters with. . . . I ask you to point out to Papa that I have no umbrella nor wood for the coming winter, and that I do not know how I can, with only 100 francs per month, procure those things for myself” (November 4, 1823, p. 44, with comma-deprived facsimile on the facing page).

In another letter, likewise to Nanci, the now-twenty-seven-year-old rails against his parents for having prevented his twenty-five-year-old sister from marrying a man toward whom she felt

2. Several of Reber’s compositions have been successfully revived and recorded in recent years. For example, his sharply characterized Symphony no. 4 in G Major, Op. 33, performed by the period-instrument orchestra Le Cercle de l’Harmonie, conducted by Jérémie Rhorer (on the Naïve/Ambrosie label).

warmly and who had much speaking in his favor. “I myself would like to *love* a woman who was at once a *black African* [*Négresse*, underlined], a *Jew*, an *actress*, and—on top of all this—the *bastard daughter of an executioner*. And I would marry her with delight, while stomping upon a pile of prejudices and smashing them into fine powder” (March 17, 1830, p. 82).

To that same sister Nanci, Berlioz—in a letter written when he was forty-one—revealed with keen self-awareness how he viewed his own role as a commentator on musical events, including new compositions. The passage addresses a basic question: whether a critic should be an impartial observer or, instead, a deeply committed and even polemically inclined participant in the compositional community. In December 1844, a highly original work by Félicien David, *Le désert* (*The Desert*), received its world premiere at the Conservatoire. This *ode-symphonie* tells the story—though without costumes, sets, or onstage movement—of a caravan moving through an Arabian desert; it calls for a tenor (or two tenors singing different numbers), men’s chorus, and orchestra, plus a narrator declaiming plot information in verse. Berlioz wrote a review declaring the work a masterpiece and contrasting it to what he considered the boring predictability of many Haydn symphonies. (For my review of a wonderful new recording of *Le désert*, click [HERE](#). It provides links to sample tracks from the CD.)

Nanci must have asked him whether he believed that David’s “symphonic ode” was really so wonderful. He replied with welcome frankness, revealing among other things how attentively many Parisians at the time read his newspaper articles and how intensely—pro and con—they sometimes reacted:

My friends were very unhappy to see me speak so forcefully and firmly in favor of Félicien David. They say I exaggerated, etc., etc. But I said what I felt. No element of calculation, no hidden intent, entered into what I did. If that’s a crime, I’m guilty. In this world full of soulless money-merchants, even enthusiasm[, it seems,] has to be taxed. Still, I received a mountain of thank-you letters—and compliments from men and women alike—about that article.

This past Sunday, when I entered the Théâtre-Italien (for David’s second concert), a kind of murmuring went around the hall. People congratulated me, *embraced* me, shook my hand, hailed me as if they would never stop. There were even some young people in the seats on the floor who, when they saw me applauding, were so silly as to applaud me as well and to call out “Vive Berlioz!”

On the other hand, my enemies say that the reason I said what I did is that David is sailing in my wake: that his *ode-symphonie* derives in part from my own symphonies. But, heavens, it’s because I find it beautiful! And it’s consistent with my own ideas. Clearly, had the opposite been the case, I would have felt nothing of the sort and, as a result, would not have written as I did (January 1, 1845, p. 253).



Caricature of the composer Félicien David (by Paul Nadol), ca. 1860, stressing his frequent attempts at evoking scenes of nature in lands then deemed exotic (e.g., Arabia and Brazil).

The annotations to the letters, some of them hard-won by the expert editorial team, are splendidly detailed. Readers should be warned, though, that certain individuals are not identified when the person is being referred to by first name only. For example, the Alexis whom the thirty-one-year-old Louis mentions with almost startling fondness on p. 628 is clearly (if you've been reading page-by-page) Louis's closest friend, Alexis Berchtold, who would later go into exile because of having supported the Paris Commune in 1871. In fairness, I think I recall encountering this same treatment of first-name mentions in many other editions of famous people's letters. If a composer's letters could be put online, the research process could be more reliable and indeed greatly enhanced: imagine being able to search for a single resonant word, such as *église* (church), *public* (e.g., concertgoers), or *liberté* (in whatever concrete or metaphorical sense).

The three indexes are enormously helpful. The first identifies all mentions of Berlioz's musical works. The second provides brief biographies of all correspondents and points the reader to letters in the volume written by or to that individual. The third is the usual kind of index, giving page references for any person, city, or institution mentioned in a letter or in an editorial note.

Since I mentioned my dream of total online access to Berlioz's letters, I should mention one helpful guide: Michel Austin and Monir Tayeb's [Hector Berlioz Website](#), which can be consulted in either French or English. Many of its sections quote—how can one resist quoting?—passages from the often-vivid letters of the composer, and a [separate index](#) allows readers to locate the full letter in question in one or another volume of the *Correspondance générale* (including the ninth and final volume, i.e., the *Nouvelles lettres* under discussion here).

Thanks to this wonderful treasure-trove of a book, we are now able to discover a variety of new facts about Berlioz and the musical and cultural life of his day—information that can help us ask more interesting questions about, and to craft more appropriate and trenchant interpretations of, mid-nineteenth-century Europe, the musical figures who inhabited it, and most of all Hector Berlioz, who was the greatest native-born French composer between Jean-Philippe Rameau and Georges Bizet. Or, as Liszt put it in a letter from 1838—published here in its entirety for the first time—Berlioz was “the most vigorous musical brain in [today’s] France,” surrounded by opponents who “were nasty mediocrities [*méchantes médiocrités*]” (October 1, 1838, to the noted scholar and librarian Ferdinand Denis, p. 152).

That Berlioz was, in addition to all this, a master of the pen adds to the fascination of this superb volume, which enriches our sense of the daily realities facing one of the most inventive and principled composers ever to tread this earth. *Nouvelles Lettres de Berlioz* only reinforces my judgment, written forty years ago, that Berlioz’s letters “make captivating and enlightening reading . . . [and should be] placed on the shelf next to the letters of Mozart and Mendelssohn.”

Ralph P. Locke

Eastman School of Music <rlocke@esm.rochester.edu>