Not Quite Romeo: Berlioz, Smithson and the Unspoken Truth

Hope Salmonson

Mount Allison University

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Abstract

This paper explores Hector Berlioz's tempestuous relationship with Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson, its connection to his *Symphonie Fantastique*, and the lack of scholarship surrounding these subjects. Using collections of Berlioz's memoirs and letters to analyze their twenty-six-year relationship, this paper notes the lack of emphasis, within music scholarship, on Berlioz's mistreatment of Smithson. In addition, this paper draws on the works of Jessica Valenti, Fabio Mariani and Sherry B. Ortner to analyze and relate conceptions of virginity, particularly the purity myth, to Hector Berlioz's letters. Finally, it suggests that the current scholarship continues to reinforce Berlioz's historical legacy as an esteemed Romantic composer, despite contemporary discussions of "locker room talk" and sexual misconduct, and their appearance within the literature.

Keywords

Hector Berlioz, Harriet Smithson, *Symphonie Fantastique*, Romantic Period music, misogyny

Erratum

This paper states that Berlioz divorced Harriet Smithson in 1844. Berlioz was not granted a legal divorce, and we regret the error. Although our talented authors and reviewers make every effort to ensure the accuracy of the work we publish, we acknowledge that this is not always possible at the undergraduate level.

Not Quite Romeo: Berlioz, Smithson and the Unspoken Truth

Hope Salmonson
Year II – Mount Allison University

There are many sides to every story. Typically, the story of Hector Berlioz describes a self-taught musician who stepped away from a promising career in medicine to become the next great French composer after Jean-Philippe Rameau (1726–64).¹ Berlioz is often remembered as a Romantic genius, plagued with an addiction to opium and a tumultuous love life, with mistresses and wives.² These aspects of his life are reflected in *Symphonie fantastique: Épisode de la vie d'un artiste* (1830), his first symphony and arguably his best-known work, which tells the story of a young musician encountering and falling for a beautiful woman.

This woman is referred to as “the beloved” and is represented by an *idée fixe* that pervades every movement of

1. Barbara Russano Hanning, “The Early Romantics,” in *Concise History of Western Music*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 428, <https://digital.wwnorton.com/concisehwm5>.

2. P. L. Wolf, “Hector Berlioz and Other Famous Artists with Opium Abuse,” in *Neurological Disorders in Famous Artists* vol. 3, ed. J. Bogousslavsky et al. (Basel: Karger, 2010), 86.

the symphony.³ The beloved's rejection—or perceived rejection—of the musician's love leads him to overdose on opium, not killing him but subjecting him to a nightmare wherein he has murdered his beloved. In his dream, he is punished by public execution and mocked in the afterlife by ghouls, monsters, and witches—including his beloved, whose melody is far more “trivial and grotesque” by the finale.⁴

Symphonie fantastique, in a myriad of ways, was written for and about Harriet Smithson (1800–54), the Anglo-Irish Shakespearean actress with whom Berlioz was enamoured and obsessed.⁵ P. L. Wolf suggests that the program to *Symphonie fantastique* was “born [sic] out of Berlioz's despair” that Miss Smithson did not reciprocate his feelings.⁶ Jeffrey Langford expands on this, stating that “the symphonic exposé of Berlioz's unrequited love for the Irish actress Harriet Smithson marked a new fusion of music and literature in the nineteenth century.”⁷ That is to say, Smithson is often understood only as the muse that inspired Berlioz's composition; however, this is but one side of the narrative, and it scarcely reveals anything regarding the real-life interactions between the musician and his “beloved.” The story of Harriet Smithson and

3. Jeffrey Langford, “The Symphonies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. Peter Bloom (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54. Also see Hector Berlioz, *Fantastic Symphony: An Authoritative Score, Historical Background, Analysis, Views and Comments*, ed. Edward T. Cone (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

4. Langford, “The Symphonies,” 57.

5. Peter Bloom, “Berlioz and Liszt ‘in the Locker Room,’” *Studia Musicologica* 54, no. 1 (2013): 78, ProQuest.

6. Wolf, “Hector Berlioz,” 86.

7. Langford, “The Symphonies,” 53–54.

Hector Berlioz is multi-faceted and complex; yet, the scholarship regarding their relationship leaves out many critical details that contextualize and explain their meeting, their marriage, and the musical works that Smithson inspired Berlioz to write.

Alternatively, this essay offers a more comprehensive chronology between Hector Berlioz's first encounter with Harriet Smithson and her death. Additionally, it observes how certain well-respected resources on the subject show a bias in Berlioz's favour by omitting crucial details of his and Smithson's lives. It concludes by considering a twenty-first-century approach to Berlioz, especially in light of such topics as American "locker room" talk, Donald Trump and recent movements to combat sexual violence in public and professional spheres.

La vie de deux artistes

Among the many details sometimes confused are the specifics of Berlioz and Smithson's interaction prior to *Symphonie fantastique's* performance. Berlioz first encountered Smithson on September 11, 1827, while attending a performance of *Hamlet*, in which she was playing Ophelia.⁸ His interest in Smithson began upon seeing her in this role, as he reminisces in a memoir:

I can only compare the effect produced by [...] dramatic genius, on my imagination and heart, with

8. Hugh MacDonald, "Berlioz, (Louis-) Hector," in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001; online ed., 2001, updated February 28 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51424>.

the convulsion produced on my mind by the work
of the great poet whom she interpreted.⁹

Berlioz and Smithson did not meet at this performance; and while Berlioz was enamoured with her, she did not know who he was.¹⁰ As is apparent in a letter written to his dear friend and poet Humbert Ferrand, Berlioz was frustrated that Smithson was not yet acquainted with him: “Oh! Unhappy woman! If she could for one moment conceive all the poetry, all the infinity of such a love, she would fly to my arms, even if she must die from my embrace.”¹¹ In Berlioz’s eyes, he was doing everything he could to make her notice him, but felt that she did not recognize it.¹²

Soon after, Berlioz encountered false rumours that Miss Smithson was romantically involved with her manager.¹³ He took this scandal as a personal offense, writing in another letter to Ferrand,

I pity her and despise her. She is an ordinary
woman, gifted with an instinctive genius for

9. Hector Berlioz, “Shakespeare—Miss Smithson—Fatal Love—Moral Lethargy—My First Concert—Cherubini’s Droll Opposition—His Defeat—His First Dose,” in *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz from 1803 to 1865*, trans. Rachel Holmes and Eleanor Holmes, ed. Ernest Newman (New York: Dover Publications, 1960): 66.

10. Edward T. Cone, “The Composer and the Symphony,” in *Fantastic Symphony: An Authoritative Score, Historical Background, Analysis, Views and Comments*, by Hector Berlioz, ed. Edward T. Cone (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 7.

11. Hector Berlioz to Humbert Ferrand, Paris, February 6, 1830, in *Lettres intimes* (1882): 64, quoted in Cone, “The Composer,” 7.

12. Hector Berlioz, “Miss Smithson Again—A Benefit—Cruel Fate,” in *Memoirs*, 91–93.

13. Cone, “The Composer,” 7.

expressing lacerations of the human soul that she has never felt, and incapable of conceiving a great and noble passion such as mine for her.¹⁴

This newfound hatred of Smithson, based on a rumour is in stark contrast to his obsessive love for her. It is also what led him to compose the final two movements of *Symphonie fantastique*. In particular, his anger inspired having the “beloved” return in the finale as “only a prostitute, fit to take part in such an orgy.”¹⁵ At this point, Berlioz and Smithson still had not met.

Berlioz’s concert on December 9, 1832 featured *Symphonie fantastique* with a “toned-down” program; the sole change being that all five movements were part of the opium hallucination, instead of only the last two.¹⁶ This concert also featured *Symphonie fantastique*’s sequel, a monodrama titled *The Return to Life*, or just *Lélio*. Within this play, Lélio, again representing Berlioz, mentions “the Juliet, the Ophelia whom my heart cries out for...,” revealing to Smithson that Berlioz was referencing her.¹⁷ When Berlioz and Smithson finally met a day after this concert, Berlioz was quickly fixated on her to the point of obsession. Less than a week later, he wrote the following letter to her:

14. Berlioz to Humbert Ferrand, Paris, May 13, 1830, in *Lettres intimes* (1882): 70, quoted in Cone, “The Composer,” 9–10.

15. Berlioz to Humbert Ferrand, Paris, April 16, 1830, in *Lettres intimes* (1882): 68, quoted in Cone, “The Composer,” 9.

16. Edward T. Cone, “The Symphony and the Program,” in *Fantastic Symphony: An Authoritative Score*, 26–27.

17. Cone, “The Composer,” 15–17.

If you do not desire my death, in the name of pity
(I dare not say of love) let me know when I can see
you. I cry mercy, pardon on my knees, between my
sobs!!!

Oh, wretch that I am, I did not think I deserved all
that I suffer, but I bless the blows that come from
your hand.

await your reply like the sentence of my judge.¹⁸

Berlioz's fixation with Smithson soon escalated to
an interest in marriage. On December 18, 1832, still less
than two weeks after first meeting Smithson, Berlioz
asserted their supposed romantic fate in a letter to Liszt,
who had also attended his double-feature of *Symphonie
fantastique* and *Lélio*.¹⁹

There is no question of our marrying at the
moment. [...] I shall never leave her. It is my
destiny. She understands me. If it is a mistake, I
must be allowed to make it; she will brighten the
last moments of my life which, I hope, will not be a
long one.²⁰

It remains unclear whether or not Smithson truly
reciprocated Berlioz's adoration for her, but his letters
claim that she did. Berlioz writes, "I love her! And my love
is returned. She *told* me so yesterday in front of her sister
[...]." ²¹ But, by August 1833, she was still unsure if

18. Berlioz to Harriet Smithson, Paris [December 10–18,
1832], in *Selected Letters of Berlioz*, trans. Roger Nichols, ed. Hugh
MacDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 102.

19. Bloom, "Berlioz and Liszt," 77.

20. Berlioz to Franz Liszt, Paris, December 19, 1832, in
Selected Letters, 103.

21. Ibid.

marrying him was the best option for her. To pressure her into marrying him, Berlioz took a lethal overdose of opium in front of her—Berlioz, a former medical student and opium addict, knew very well how much could kill him—and would only agree to take a life-saving emetic if she promised to marry him.²²

Smithson, likely not wanting to be implicated in the death of the great Hector Berlioz, succumbed to his threat, and the two were married on October 3, 1833 at the British Embassy in Paris.²³ According to Edward T. Cone, the history of *Symphonie fantastique* should end on that day, “the wedding day of Hector Berlioz and his Henriette, with the hope that the two live happily ever after.”²⁴ It is notable that Cone never mentioned Berlioz’s suicide attempt, opting instead to gloss over and write only that the two were married, similar to many other scholars that neglect to include important details of their courtship.

This violent and possessive interaction is very rarely detailed as much as it was in Peter Bloom’s “Berlioz and Liszt ‘in the Locker Room,’” and the dynamic of this courtship is treated as a minor detail by writers like MacDonald, whose *Grove Music* article on Berlioz mentions that “after a bizarre and stormy courtship, they were married” with no further explanation.²⁵ In his edition of *Selected Letters of Berlioz*, MacDonald also fails to mention any of the letters Berlioz wrote to Ferrand which belittle

22. Hector Berlioz, letter of August 30, 1833, in *Correspondance générale*, ed. Pierre Citron et al., vol. II, 112 (Paris: Flammarion, 1972–2003), cited in Bloom, “Berlioz and Liszt,” 79.

23. Wolf, “Hector Berlioz,” 86.

24. Cone, “The Composer,” 17.

25. MacDonald, “Berlioz, (Louis-) Hector,” *Grove Music*.

and berate Smithson.²⁶ Sometimes, scholars even avoid the incident completely, such as Wolf, who merely writes that “Berlioz did eventually woo and win Miss Smithson.”²⁷ This minimizes and ignores the ways that Berlioz manipulated Smithson into marriage, creating a false narrative that his interest in her was healthy, but, as the aforementioned letters indicate, this was certainly not the case.

Married Life (and Death)

Bloom’s article examines how Berlioz and his contemporaries discussed his marriage to Smithson with others. According to Bloom, Liszt truly admired the intensity of Berlioz’s love for Smithson. This is apparent in Liszt’s faithful composition, *L’idée fixe, Andante amoroso pour le piano d’après une mélodie de H. Berlioz*, which Bloom speculates “would pay tribute to Berlioz for the intensity of his love [...]”²⁸ In comparison, as Bloom points out, Berlioz’s comments about Smithson were decidedly vulgar, in a letter he sent to Liszt on October 7, 1833—just four days after their wedding—with a very particular postscript:

Well, was I right to believe the secret voice of my heart? *My experiment* succeeded; yes, so much so that it has left me completely exhausted. But wait until tonight.

Adieu. H. Berlioz.

26. For further reference, see MacDonald, ed., *Selected Letters*.

27. Wolf, “Hector Berlioz,” 86.

28. Bloom, “Berlioz and Liszt,” 82.

[P.S.] A virgin, as pure as the driven snow.²⁹

The second-last sentence of this letter reveals Berlioz's opinion of Smithson: that he thought of her as a sexual object rather than a wife. Bloom speculates that the "experiment" Berlioz refers to was a way to boast about his own sexual performance. He jokes that Berlioz might have been referring to "the result of having attempted to lead his bride through the thousand-and-one stations of passion and ecstasy."³⁰ Bloom finds Berlioz's "indelicate confidence" dishonourable, commenting that his mention of Smithson's virginity "unwittingly reduces the history of a woman to the story of her body."³¹ Berlioz wrote to Ferrand with a solemn, almost defensive tone, as if to declare for certain that Smithson had not been sexually active before meeting him, which contrasts the disrespectful letter which Berlioz sent to Liszt.³² Sexual interactions, at the time, were very private details which no honourable man should disclose.³³ This social standard makes Berlioz's declaration to Liszt and Ferrand of having deflowered his wife more surprising and appalling.

Bloom also examines the possibility that, Smithson was not a "virgin" and Berlioz claimed that she was, for the sake of their reputation.³⁴ Jessica Valenti connects present-day and historical concepts of "purity" to abstinence-only sex education, which promotes "that boys want sex and

29. Berlioz to Franz Liszt, October 7, 1833, in *Correspondance générale*, 119, quoted in Bloom, "Berlioz and Liszt," 83.

30. Bloom, "Berlioz and Liszt," 85.

31. Ibid, 76.

32. Ibid, 85.

33. Ibid, 76.

34. Ibid, 84.

they'll do anything to have it, and girls own sex and have to [...] be the gatekeepers of sexuality.”³⁵ According to Valenti, “virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a “good” (i.e., “moral”) girl and therefore worthy of praise.”³⁶ The “good girl” concept is also a reflection of the economic value placed on a woman's virginity; Fabio Mariani acknowledges that “in many (modern) societies, being a ‘good’ girl increases the potential for personal status mobility: in this respect, virginity plays the same role as a dowry, enhancing the girl's value for a higher-status spouse.”³⁷ Thus, Smithson, as a respected actress and also publicly associated with Hector Berlioz, would have benefited greatly from being perceived as a “good girl”—a revealing detail overlooked by most scholarship about the two.

This ‘purity’ myth—that virginity and abstinence can be used to determine a woman's worth—gives context to Smithson's situation.³⁸ Given the amount of discussion surrounding women being treated as property of either their father or husband, and the socioeconomic benefits of ‘chastity’ to a woman, it would be better for both Smithson

35. Anastasia Kousakis and Jessica Valenti, “Why is America So Obsessed with Virginity?,” in *Gender and Women's Studies: Critical Terrain*, 2nd ed., edited by Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice, 421.

36. Jessica Valenti, “The Cult of Virginity,” in *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010), 24.

37. Fabio Mariani, “The Economic Value of Virtue,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 17, no. 4 (December 2012): 324, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10887-012-9084-7>. Also see Sherry B. Ortner, “The Virgin and the State,” *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 3 (1978).

38. Kousakis and Valenti, “Why is America,” 419.

and Berlioz if nobody thought that she had been “claimed” by someone before their marriage. Berlioz, on one hand, would not be ridiculed for engaging with a wanton woman, and Smithson would be more respected for having ‘saved’ herself for her husband. This context certainly makes more sense of Berlioz’s insistence that he deflowered her, yet it is often overlooked by scholars who neglect to research the full depth of their relationship.

The two letters regarding Smithson’s virginity were excluded from both Hugh MacDonald’s *Selected Letters*, and Jacques Barzun’s *New Letters of Berlioz 1830–1869*. This shows a lack of emphasis on the harmful nature of their relationship, where mentioning Berlioz’s objectification of Smithson would drastically change the perspective of this period of their lives, perhaps souring the good name of a composer as prevalent as Berlioz.

Berlioz and Smithson’s marriage, unsurprisingly, quickly grew more toxic. One potential reason is that Berlioz often compared Harriet Smithson to a Shakespearean character, basing his infatuation with her on the way he saw her on the stage. Hugh MacDonald argues that Berlioz fell out of love with Smithson because he was ultimately disappointed that she could never be the Juliet or Ophelia that Llio cried out for.³⁹ Some authors try to place more direct blame on Smithson, like Wolf, who called her “an alcoholic and a shrew, [...] an excellent actress whose star had eclipsed.” Generally, Smithson is blamed for the failure of the relationship—either she could not live up to

39. MacDonald, “Berlioz, (Louis-) Hector,” *Grove Music*.

her husband's expectations, or she was simply a bad person and wife.⁴⁰

For all of his possessive obsession with Smithson, Berlioz was also paradoxically unfaithful to her towards the end of their marriage. He eventually married the singer Marie Recio, who had been his mistress for twelve years, from a year before his divorce in 1844 up until Smithson became ill and died ten years later.⁴¹ However, to Berlioz's credit, he cared for Smithson up until her death in 1854, "and retained a warmth of affection for what she had meant to him and for her inspiring qualities as an artist."⁴² When she passed away, as he mentions in his seventy-sixth memoir, he was heartbroken by her fall from fame and eventual death.⁴³

Approaching Berlioz Sensitively in 2019

The final twenty-six years of Harriet Smithson-Berlioz's life were ceaselessly occupied by Hector Berlioz. The extent to which her own achievements as a Shakespearean actress, and her influences on his life, are understated in scholarship on Berlioz is concerning, considering the closeness between the two. Few biographies were written on Smithson herself, and even in Berlioz's biographies, his longest and dearest relationship is largely absent.

40. Wolf, "Hector Berlioz," 87.

41. Cone, "The Composer," 17.

42. MacDonald, "Berlioz, (Louis-) Hector," *Grove Music*.

43. Hector Berlioz, "Death of my Sister—And of my Wife [...]," in *Memoirs*, 467–468.

Furthermore, this information has the potential to bring a new perspective to Berlioz's life and music, especially *Symphonie fantastique*. There is a noticeable pattern of the omission of specific, damnatory information, pertaining to Berlioz's opinions and treatment of Smithson. This skews the way that contemporary musicologists, historians, and professors approach Berlioz—often in his favour.

Bloom himself, a prominent scholar of Berlioz, refers to his “vierge” letter to Liszt as “locker room” discussion, a fairly modern term in American politics that “refers to the unelevated discourse that is characteristic of men, even those of educated station, as they shower and dress after sports in the room where they have stored their clothes,” but which extends beyond the locker room itself.⁴⁴ The most prominent and recent example of locker room talk is Donald Trump's 2005 conversation with Billy Bush, which was caught on a live microphone. In the recording, Trump and an unknown speaker—presumably Bush—discuss in violent, lewd detail women's bodies and Trump's attempts to pressure women into having sex.⁴⁵ This leaked conversation sparked scandal, controversy, and outrage at the eventual president for his blatant disregard for women. If Berlioz's letter to Liszt is to be considered as the same sort of “locker room” banter in which Trump and Bush were implicated, why then is there no similar discussion about *Symphonie fantastique*?

44. Bloom, “Berlioz and Liszt,” 75.

45. Mark Makela, “Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.

The answer lies, concluding where I began, with Jeffrey Langford's claim that Berlioz's treatment of the image of Harriet Smithson in *Symphonie fantastique* birthed a whole new legacy of Romanticism. The darker side of Berlioz's interactions with Smithson before and during their marriage holds crucial contextual information pertaining to Berlioz's life and music, but excluding that information may serve to protect a more positive—if incomplete—notion of how we continue to consider Berlioz today.

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