

# Hector Berlioz, Les grotesques de la musique (1859)

Released seven years after [Soirées de l'orchestre](#), this collection was commissioned by the publisher La Librairie nouvelle early in 1859. At that time Berlioz had just contributed a series of musical anecdotes to the magazine *La Chronique parisienne*; it was in the same spirit that he fashioned a volume intended to be “amusing even while saying something cruelly serious” (CG V, 19 Feb. 1859). From his articles of the 1850s he put together a collection of narratives, portraits, and anecdotes extracted from their context to form a veritable gallery of characters. Echoing the dedication of *Soirées de l'orchestre*—“To my good friends the musicians of the orchestra of X\*\*\*, a civilised city”, he addressed his *Grotesques* “To my good friends the choristers of the Opera of Paris, that barbarous city”. Between a Prologue in the form of a humorous letter addressed to the choristers of the Opéra and a final sally that closes ironically with the music of the *Dies irae* (“that tune so gay and familiar”), the collection consists of a baggy collection of vignettes, witticisms, and anecdotes turning sometimes to aphorism, interrupted by four lengthier Dispatches which include a hilarious account of a thermal cure at Plombières and Baden and a colourful review of Berlioz’s own concerts in Marseille, Lyon, and Lille.

Whereas in [À travers chants](#) Berlioz gave pride of place to Germanic music, here it is French musical life to which he primarily devotes himself. Nourished on La Fontaine, Molière, and Boileau, whom he loved to parody, he takes after the moralists of the Grand siècle in serving up a mordant satire of musical life to his contemporaries. The “grotesques” are in the first place all those for whom music “deranges the brain” (maniacs and monomaniacs, blinded by their passion), but also, more generally, the amateurs, the arrangers, the orchestrators, the time-beaters, the bad translators, and all the wretched musicians. Drawing on every weapon of humour and irony, Berlioz skewers the stupidity of the public, the deafness of conductors, the pretensions of singers, the despotism of directors, the incompetence of critics, the silliness of libretti, the commercialism of Parisian life, the insignificance of the opéras-comiques (“sparrows”) that swarmed in flocks, the mediocrity of all who concoct or consume the noxious “musical stew”.

Berlioz did not neglect to include himself in this gallery of grotesques: he finds occasion to portray himself as a conductor terrorising his choristers, a critic menacing singers, or again a prophet of doom (in the bravura piece entitled “The Lamentations of Jeremiah”). But the drollery is equalled only by the spleen of a composer whose artistic ideal is worlds away from the musical realities of his time. Whereas *Les Troyens*, only just finished, would never manage to secure a performance, it was as a writer that this new member of the Institut de France would find success, following that of *L'Enfance du Christ* and the *Te Deum: Les Grotesques* would go through several re-editions as well as a German translation, made by Richard Pohl in 1864, and which Berlioz found wanting—it must be said that the volume’s flights of fancy render the translator’s work difficult.

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