

## Eddie Covington Bass—*Thematic Procedures in the Symphonies of Berlioz*

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Considering the amount of prose that has been given over to Berlioz the man and the composer, relatively little has been devoted to an analysis of the music itself. Eddie Covington Bass's *Thematic Procedures in the Symphonies of Berlioz* is a welcome sign of growing interest in the music, and though its analytical approach is too limited to provide a truly satisfactory account of Berlioz's thematic structure, it does offer a thoroughly documented study of one method of constructing a melody.

Bass opens his study with a brief, but adequate, historical account of the four works involved: the *Symphonie Fantastique*, *Harold in Italy*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Funeral and Triumphal Symphony*. The justification for considering these works as a group is the fact that Berlioz, himself, called them "symphonies" and, given Berlioz's great familiarity with Beethoven's compositions, "it is not likely that there could have been any confusion of genre" (p. 2). This statement implies that there is some feature of Berlioz's symphonic writing that sets it apart from his other works. The implication is misleading, because the author is well aware that Berlioz often mixed genres and that he transferred music originally written for overtures, operas, and cantatas to the symphonies; the *Symphonie Fantastique* and *Harold in Italy* are prime examples. Bass, however, skirts the point and makes no attempt to differentiate the themes of the symphonies from those of other works. The "Symphonies" of the dissertation's title is merely a means of limiting the analysis to the four works named. Beethoven's *Eroica* and Liszt's *Faust Symphony* are also included in the study to provide some degree of historical perspective for the Berlioz works. As the study is basically analytical, however, little is made of the historical comparison between Berlioz and Beethoven or Liszt.

The heart of the dissertation consists of separate analyses of Berlioz's initial statement of themes and his later development of them. The analysis adopts a method employed by Edgar Alden in an earlier dissertation ("The Role of the Motive in Musical Structure," University of North Carolina, 1956). This method deals almost exclusively with repetition within the melodic line—either exact or modified—as a thematic procedure. For all the value such an analytical method may have in the study of motives, it presents an unbalanced view of Berlioz's themes because it shunts aside such other essential characteristics as phrase length, cadence patterns, harmonic direction, and chromatic alteration. In essence, it would appear that Bass started with the method and applied it to Berlioz, rather than starting with Berlioz and working toward an analytical approach that would best explain the material. In

the end, the analysis falters in its attempt to elucidate Berlioz's melodic structure.

Given this major limitation in the basic method, the analysis presented is orderly and comprehensive. In the chapter on initial thematic statements, for example, Bass distinguishes seven different forms of repetition:

- exact
- transposed, but non-sequential
- modified pitch contour
- modified rhythmic contour
- minor modifications of pitch and rhythm
- sequential
- thematic transformation.

His review of the extent to which each form of repetition can be found in the symphonies is further subdivided by the size of the musical unit involved (short motive, long motive, phrase) and by whether the repetition is successive or not.

The chapter on thematic development repeats the same group of categories and adds several other alternatives for handling thematic material, such as fragmentation of a theme before or after its first appearance, motivic relationships between themes, the transfer of a theme from one context to another (the *idée fixe* and the "Harold" theme), and contrapuntal combinations of thematic material. Again, each section of the chapter is subdivided by the size of the musical unit and the various forms each procedure may take.

With this analytical approach, Bass is able to highlight those types of repetition the composer favored and those he rarely used. Berlioz, for example, "characteristically made minor modifications in phrases of the same theme" (p. 70). Berlioz also employed transposed repetition relatively often because it "provided a means of thematic continuity between phrases" of a modulating theme (p. 46).

Observations such as these—and there are many in the study—have some value, but tend to fall short of defining the major characteristic of a typical Berlioz theme: continuous and subtle modification of all melodic elements. The analytical method can identify a point of chromatic alteration but does not go far enough with the harmonic implications of the change or with the nature of the alteration that propels the melodic line forward. In the end, Bass himself concludes that the themes are "essentially non-repetitive," and that for all the rigorous analysis the study presents, "Berlioz's melody remains elusive" (p. 211).

Bass clearly knows these works well. He has diligently searched out each instance of each procedure he discusses and gathered them conveniently into an Appendix. There are many musical examples, and each aptly illustrates the point under discussion, a virtue not to be taken for granted. As it stands, the work is a thorough study of one rather limited aspect of Berlioz's melodic lines.