One of the most individualistic composers in classical music is Hector Berlioz. Born in southern France in 1803, he traveled across Europe from England to Russia, though he was most active in Paris. There, he established a reputation as both an incorrigibly theatrical dramaturge and a cultural iconoclast given to all sorts of bizarre and grotesque indulgences that defied received logic and good taste. He is most famous today for his pioneering *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), which excellently represents his dramatic tendencies. The piece depicts scenes such as an opium-induced hallucination, a fantastic ball, a public execution, and a witches' sabbath, all in the traditionally abstract idiom of the symphony.

[Insert image 2]

When, in 1837, Berlioz was approached by the French government with a commission to create a work commemorating the martyrs of the July Revolution of 1830, the resulting piece was characteristically hyperbolic. That work, entitled *Grande Messe des Morts* (lit. *Great Mass of Death*), was a setting of the text for the Catholic requiem Mass. Berlioz, an atheist, was unfettered by the pious considerations that affected many composers of sacred music and caused them to emphasize solemnity, and was similarly unimpeded by any ideas of the proper, traditional treatment of sacred texts. Instead, he devoted his full powers to realizing the dramatic potential that he saw in the Mass. In the process of doing so, he did not refrain from altering, rearranging, and interpolating the sacred text. Reviewing the work, prominent critic Eduard Hanslick wrote that "Berlioz does not bind himself down even to an exact observance of the text… [f]or him the words are, as it were, only slaves, whom he commands and tyrannises over as he likes in the service of his musical inspiration."

The ways in which Berlioz portrayed the high drama of the requiem, from its extended sequence concerning judgment day ("Dies irae") to an offering in hopes of salvation ("Offertorium", "Hostias"), are many. Foremost in the memory of most who have experienced this work is the dazzling array of orchestral colors and effects that he produced. Berlioz's foremost musical strength was unequivocally his talent for orchestration and deep understanding of the qualities of different instruments, and he put it to excellent use in the composition of the *Grande Messe*. Especially prominent is his widespread use of brass, then a relative newcomer to the orchestra. He made use of it not just as a blunt instrument to be deployed whenever he desired for the greatest volume of sound possible, but also as contrasting individual characters of sound possessed by the various brass instruments.

Perhaps the single most famous portion of the *Grande Messe des Morts* is the beginning of the "Tuba mirum." It is, dramatically and sonically, one of the climaxes of the entire ninety-minute work. Accompanying textual descriptions of trumpets sounding throughout all the cavernous reaches of the world, Berlioz organized four brass ensembles of trumpets, trombones, and tubas at the corners of the orchestra (in numerous modern performances, such as this televised one by Jukka-Pekka Saraste and the Westdeutsche Rundfunk Symphony Orchestra, the brass bands are placed at four sides of the hall instead). To illustrate the wealth of intent that can be gleaned from even the simplest of choices, let us investigate the ways in which these groups are deployed, and ascribe purpose where we can.

[Video 3]

Most prominent is the simple placement of the ensembles. Because of their spatial displacement, the audience perceives their sound as coming from many different places at once. This refers to the text of the movement: “Tuba mirum spargens sonum / Per sepulchra regionum” (“The trumpet scatters wondrous sound through the sepulchral places”). Beyond the issue of location, the material the brass bands play in their opening fanfare, which they later reprise, also carries multiple meanings. The rhythms of each part are fairly straightforward: dotted rhythms, which are long-short patterns similar to bugle calls (historically associated with military music, which is doubly appropriate considering that the occasion for this piece’s premiere was the funeral of a French general); and triplet rhythms, which are groupings of three equal-duration notes and call back to regular upwellings among the strings in the preceding "Dies irae" sequence. Berlioz’s masterstroke is to set these two rhythms against each other. The conflicting cadences compound with the disorienting dispersed placement of the musicians to create a genuinely bewildering atmosphere. In a successful performance, the audience feels swept about by dreadful forces from all sides until the confusion is resolved by the entry of the timpani (at 15:05 in the video).

[Insert image 3]

Another exhibition of Berlioz’s mastery of orchestration comes near the end of the work. After the furious “Lacrymosa” movement, where the timpani and brass choirs make something of a return, the mood changes to a reflective solemnity. The movement immediately succeeding, the *"*Offertorium*"*, is sober to the point of gloom. It consists of a single repeated melodic phrase that winds its way through a number of keys and all sections of the orchestra while the choir intones the Latin words to the Offertory prayer on a single note. [Video 2] The "Hostias," which follows—and continues the same prayer—is even more austere. The lyrics consist of the following: “Hostias et preces tibi laudis offerimus. Suscipe pro animabus illis quarum hodie memoriam facimus,” meaning, “We offer to you sacrifices and prayers. Acknowledge them for those souls whom we memorialize today.” The male voices pronounce this prayer almost unaccompanied, but their speech is punctuated by chords formed by flutes and trombone. It is difficult to describe with words the unique effect that is created by Berlioz’s orchestration here. The trombone, which descends into the very bottom of its range, plays the bass notes of the chords more than three octaves below the flutes. The gulf between the pitches is almost tangible, as is the juxtaposition of sound between the snarling trombone with the whispering flutes, and the cavernous disconnect of pitch and sound between the instruments presents an analogue to that which separates the praying supplicants from God.

[Video 3]

This is not the only time that Berlioz experimented with space and displacement in his portrayals of the divine in music. In his *Te Deum*, composed approximately fifteen years after the *Grande Messe,* his instrumental forces include an orchestra and an organ, situated at opposite ends of the church. The orchestra, representing humanity, and the organ, representing God, engage in a dialogue throughout the work, and the space between them is again used to symbolize the metaphorical distance of the divine.

Beyond this metaphor, too, the *Grande Messe des Morts* and the *Te Deum* share a common compositional genesis and philosophy. They, and a handful of other works of the composer, are notable in the classical music canon for their enormous proportions, not merely of number of performers, but also in the manner of their development. These so-called “architectural” or “monumental” works seem to unfurl gradually through almost obscure, incremental change, which feels at the same time inevitable and inscrutable. Berlioz himself was aware of this quality, and cultivated it deliberately; of his architectural works, he wrote that “The musical problems I have tried to solve in these works… are exceptional, and require exceptional methods… the form of the pieces, the breadth of style, and the deliberateness of certain progressions, the goal of which is not at once perceived...give those works their strange gigantic physiognomy and colossal aspect” (Berlioz 488-89).

While we have discussed some examples of Berlioz’s intentional, meaningful choices in the *Grande Messe*, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the myriad of other ways in which music can be meaningful to an audience totally regardless of the composer’s intent. While they are not always the first to spring to mind—the question “what does music mean” is usually code for “what does the composer mean” in discussions of art music—it is important to remember that music, especially when composed and performed by separate artists, is heavily mediated by a diverse array of influences. The composer’s intention provides one side of the story, but by no means a complete one. A popular complementary theory of musical meaning is that which was proposed by Leonard Meyer in 1956, which suggested that moments where the audience’s expectations are subverted are the ones which we find to be emotionally meaningful. While this can certainly stem from compositional intent (the composer sets up certain expectations in order to “trick” us), it can also derive from other sources, such as unfamiliarity with genre or composer. A listener who is familiar with the idiom of Berlioz will certainly have a different reaction to the *Grande Messe* than one who is not, and will likely find a different meaning in it as well. It is easy to imagine someone whose conception of classical music is *Für Elise* and the “Moonlight” Sonata being shocked by the aggression and fury of the "Tuba mirum," for example. As we have explored above, the composer’s choices can be revealing of desired effects on both an emotional and an intellectual level. However, it is important to remember that the true meaning of any piece of music is what the audience makes of it.

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