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Call for papers

What Berlioz heard *Orchestral sounds and practices at the crossroads of the 18th and 19th centuries*

International symposium - March 19-21, 2026 - Lyon and Saint-Étienne

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Organizing Committee

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Background

We propose to enter the auditory universe of the 19th century through a particularly keen ear: that of composer, critic and conductor Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). This choice has many advantages: it offers rich, well-documented material¹, and takes advantage of a personality who was very attentive to the transformations of the century and the upheavals in the way people listened (in which the composer participated). It does, however, require a certain amount of caution, as Berlioz's perception of sound phenomena was certainly very particular: a seasoned experimenter² and "inventor of the modern orchestra³", he was extremely sensitive to the complex sound organization known as the orchestra, and to its evolution. In the course of his many activities in Paris and his travels in Italy, Germany, England and Russia, Berlioz had the opportunity to hear orchestras in a wide variety of contexts and repertoires that sometimes predated his birth. The way orchestras sounded during his lifetime was the result of orchestral practices that had been evolving since the mid-18th century.

The symposium considers the study of the orchestra as the manifestation of a sound phenomenon, a gathering of instruments and instrumentalists, an ensemble of musicians playing alone or accompanying a performance, based on the opportunities Berlioz had to hear orchestras throughout

¹ Berlioz's life is very well known, and specialists have completed remarkable scientific editions of his musical and literary works (see indicative bibliography below).

² Berlioz was constantly on the lookout for special sound effects, for example the bells in *Symphonie fantastique*, the near and far effects of the "Marche de pèlerins" in *Harold en Italie*, the clarinet wrapped in a canvas or skin bag in the fifth movement of *Lélio ou Le Retour à la vie...*

³ In the words of Hugh Macdonald in *Berlioz, La voix du romantisme*, C. Massip and C. Reynaud (eds.), Paris, Fayard, 2003, p. 123.

his life in symphony, opera and church. This broad vision of the orchestra, as a loosely defined entity (at the outset), enables us to move beyond generic considerations⁴ and avoid preconceptions - often anachronistic - about what an orchestra is, and how it should sound.

In addition to exploring Berlioz's everyday life, the aim is to study the practices and modalities of musical performance in all contexts where an orchestra is called upon for public performances: in addition to the *what*, *when* and *where*, the aim is to shed light on the *how*⁵, for each performance of a work heard by Berlioz. In this respect, the insights of specialists in the repertoire and orchestras of the last third of the 18th century are extremely valuable: we cannot understand the evolution in interpretations of works by Gluck, Piccinni, Grétry, Salieri, Méhul⁶... if we do not question how their music sounded at the time of the first performances. What did Berlioz really hear at Salieri's performance of *Les Danaïdes* on November 9, 1821 in Paris, and to what extent did this work already sound different from what it did in 1784? Naturally, we will also need to question the music of the composers he quoted most often, such as Beethoven, but also Spontini, Rossini, Weber, Meyerbeer... For example, what did Berlioz hear in Frankfurt, where he attended a performance of *Fidelio* in December 1842? How did Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* sound on March 13, 1848 at London's Exeter Hall? These are just some of the questions that have prompted a wealth of work in the fields of acoustics and historical organology⁷.

Finally, the exploration is not limited to objectively documentable facts: it also extends to perceptions. The investigation takes us into Berlioz's mind: thanks to his numerous writings, but also to the traces left by his activities as a composer⁸, it is possible to question, with some precision, not only what he heard, but also how he perceived it. This approach can be exploited on a wider scale, in all the writings and memories of listeners of the time.

In the end, the aim is to form the starting point of a network for the study of the evolution of orchestral sound, which on the one hand will show the constant feedback mechanisms between what the composer hears and what he composes, and on the other hand will map out orchestral practices in Europe at a time when sound is gradually becoming a crucial parameter in the process of creation and reception.

Proposals for papers may be submitted along the following topics (possibility of crossing several topics, non-exhaustive list):

1. Specific research work on the way Berlioz made orchestras sound as a conductor (for his own works and those of other composers), and on the possible repercussions of this activity on his own orchestral compositions.
2. Specific research work on the performance conditions for any work heard by Berlioz during his lifetime involving an orchestra. Following on from the work carried out in historically informed practice, orchestral materials, treatises and writings will be studied in order to learn more about performance modalities. Particular attention will be paid to staffing levels, arrangements and practices.

⁴ These include symphonies as well as operas, religious music, ball music, stage music... and all the settings in which an orchestra is called upon. This overcoming of generic considerations is typical of Berlioz's work (see, for example, Julian Rushton, "Genre in Berlioz", *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, Peter Bloom (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 41-52).

⁵ Gather as much information as possible to describe in detail how a piece of music, performed at an identified concert, is played. For example: how many instrumentalists were in the orchestra that day? On what material (in terms of scores and separate parts), but also exactly which instruments (in relation to developments in instrument making and current practices in different regions...)? According to what spatial arrangements? With what pitch? What articulations, tempi and phrasing?

⁶ See: Teulon-Lardic, Sabine, "Du lieu à la programmation. Une remémoration concertée de l'ancien opéra-comique sur les scènes parisiennes (1840-1887)", *L'Invention des genres lyriques français et leur redécouverte au 19^e siècle*, coordinated by A. Terrier and A. Dratwicki, Lyon, Symétrie/Palazetto Bru Zane, 2010, pp. 347-385.

⁷ Particularly attentive to developments in the field of instrument making, Berlioz judged musical instrument competitions at several exhibitions.

⁸ Berlioz was in the habit of extensively retouching his scores. The methods of genetic criticism (sketch studies) provide us with information on the stages of the creative process, some of which are directly linked to opportunities Berlioz had to hear works.

3. Detailed research work on the history of ensemble practices within a given institution, taking into account questions of location, size, but also layout and conducting... Beyond the established symphony orchestras⁹ or the many orchestras attached to a theater, the gradual introduction of new instruments in the pedagogical offer of the Conservatoire de Paris and other French or European conservatories, in full expansion during Berlioz's lifetime, can also be questioned.

4. Specific research work on a corpus or a composer particularly relevant to the 18th and 19th centuries (taking into account questions of staffing, layout, conducting, etc.).

5. More general research work on the constitution and gradual standardization of the orchestral sound: how does the orchestra gradually find a new definition, through the evolution of its constituent desks and their functionalities? How do texts (orchestration treatises, correspondence, encyclopedias, reviews) and preserved musical sources bear witness to this evolution? How does this evolution fit into the European context? Is it possible, for example, to demonstrate the constitution of a specifically French orchestral sound, from Rameau to Berlioz, in parallel with the development of the orchestra in the German-speaking world initiated by the Mannheim School and Viennese classicism?

6. More general research work on the repertoire: observe how the major orchestral genres emerge in relation to the development of the orchestras that carry them. Alongside the symphony and concertante forms, sacred music, opera and genres including other art forms such as dance will also be examined, along with the reception they received.

7. The orchestra also represents a sound material that composers soon began to sculpt. Can more or less technical accounts¹⁰ guide us as to how contemporary listeners, composers and performers listen to and receive the orchestra? What are the issues surrounding these sounds?

8. Reflections on the notion of timbre and its links with the evolution of instrument making (possibility of taking very specific concrete cases, such as the progressive enlargement of the percussion family or the multiple wind instruments developed by Adolphe Sax): how does the booming instrument making enter into dialogue with the construction of the orchestra? Most of the new instruments of Berlioz's time made their appearance in lyric works, before being introduced, sometimes several decades later, into the symphonic repertoire. This discrepancy merits a study in its own right.

9. Enlarging the corpus: the conductor and reductions for keyboard and piano-chant were developed as the 18th century progressed, but have not yet been the subject of major studies. The aim here is to examine how these objects came into being, how they were transformed, and how they bear witness to the evolution of the orchestra itself.

The symposium aims to bring together a wide range of methodologies, from score analysis and vocabulary studies to publishing history, reception research and correspondence observation. Reflections can be drawn from a wide range of fields (e.g. literature, the history of listening, the social history of performance practices, etc.).

Proposals (between 500 and 1500 words), accompanied by a brief biobibliographical note on the author, should be sent before **May 12, 2025** jointly to:

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⁹ See, for example, Stefan Keym's work on the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra.

¹⁰ More intuitive and less technical than Berlioz, Théophile Gautier frequently mentions a composer's orchestration in his theater reviews. His perspective is that of a music-loving writer, not that of a musician or composer. Generally speaking, most music reviews published in the Parisian press in the 19th century were written not by musicians, but by men of letters. See: Reibel, Emmanuel, *L'écriture de la critique musicale au temps de Berlioz*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2005.

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