

A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 5

Adolf von Henselt was known as the Chopin of Germany. He was skilled enough a pianist and composer to deserve the comparison. Henselt wrote harmonically advanced piano miniatures similar to Chopin's. Where Chopin based his music on the mazurka and other Polish dance forms, though, Henselt drew from the German *ländler*. This seems to have limited him somewhat. Henselt found less opportunity for innovation in the German folk styles he based his music on, but even so, he wrote colorful, richly Romantic music.

In 1831, when Henselt was 25, King Ludwig the First of Bavaria had been impressed enough with his skill to give Henselt a stipend, so that he could move to Weimar to study with Johann Nepomuk Hummel. But where Hummel was an elegant, graceful virtuoso, Henselt played differently. He'd been developing a style that kept the piano at full volume for long passages, emphasizing the percussive power he was capable of. So he didn't find Hummel's teaching especially helpful, and after eight months at Weimar he moved to Vienna to study composition with Simon Sechter, who would also mentor Anton Bruckner in composition about twenty years later.

From 1833 to 1835, while Henselt was studying with Sechter, he devised his own method for piano practice and secluded himself to develop his technique. Henselt practiced the piano obsessively throughout his career, routinely spending ten hours a day developing his unique, powerful approach to playing. When he gave performances, he would go backstage to practice his piano exercises during intermission. By 1836, the fourth year of this fanatical practice regimen, Henselt had been practicing so relentlessly that he suffered a physical and psychological breakdown, and needed to take some time away from his routine. He gradually stretched out his hands over the years, so that he could reach wider and wider distances on the keyboard. Henselt didn't have large hands, but he worked so diligently at stretching them, he could reach an 11th – an octave plus a 4th – in both hands. He would tell people to look at the skin on his palms. "It's like leather," he would say. He developed so much strength in his hands, he could produce thundering fortissimos from a piano with his hands alone, where Liszt had to play from his shoulders to achieve the same effect. Henselt's piano style emphasized legato, which means he held notes for their full rhythmic length, or even slightly longer, resulting in seamless connections between the notes and the ability to create long, unbroken musical phrases while he kept the piano at full volume, without needing to use the piano's sustain pedal. This was how Henselt achieved what every virtuoso instrumentalist dreamed of in those days: the ability to imitate the soaring, expansive phrasing of Europe's famous opera stars.

Felix Mendelssohn said that Henselt's specialty was playing "widespread chords, and all day stretching his fingers over arpeggios played prestissimo." Clara Schumann was impressed by Henselt's piano playing and writing. She often performed his music, especially the *Etude in F-sharp Minor*, Op. 2 no. 6, and the *Piano Concerto in F Minor*. In 1838 Henselt met Robert Schumann, who said of their encounter, "Our first meeting was, I may say, like that of two brothers. At times there's something demonic about him, like Paganini, Napoleon, or Madame Schröder. At other times he seems like a troubadour, with a large cap and feathers." (Wilhelmine Schröder, for those who are a little rusty with their 19th century German opera history, was a soprano famous for her intense dramatic performances. Richard Wagner admired her artistry a great deal.)

For all his skill, though, debilitating stage fright prevented Henselt from performing successfully for large audiences. He could play well for small audiences in the salons at Berlin, but large audiences so terrified him, he was unable to control his hands and call upon his phenomenal technique, which may have been superior even to Franz Liszt's. Liszt is known to have told his students, "Find out the secret to Henselt's hands."

From 1838 onwards, Henselt lived and worked in Russia. He did much to establish the Russian school of piano playing. Henselt became court pianist at St. Petersburg and was the most influential pianist there before Anton Rubinstein. When he first arrived in Russia, he overwhelmed audiences with the emotional intensity of his playing, and with the power he could produce from a piano. His stage fright continued to frustrate him, though, leading him to focus more and more on teaching. After 1856, when Henselt was 42, he gave public performances on only three occasions, but his powerful style did much to set the standard for Russian piano playing through the 19th and 20th centuries and even into our time. Henselt was Anton Herke's teacher, and Herke taught Mussorgsky the piano. Henselt also taught Nikolai Zverev, who taught Scriabin and Rachmaninoff. Rachmaninoff named Henselt as one of his most important influences. Later in the 20th century, Sviatoslav Richter was the great master of the powerful Russian piano technique that owes a good deal of its origins to Henselt.

Henselt did almost all of his composing as a young man, before he gave up performing. His 1837 composition is the *Poème d'Amour, Andante et Étude Concertante in B major*, Op. 3. He married in 1837, and the *Poème d'Amour* is a love song, a musical depiction of his romance with his bride. As the full title states, the *Poème d'amour* is also a concert etude. In 1837 Henselt had almost completed two sets of piano etudes, his Op. 2 and Op. 5. He finalized and published the two sets in 1838, so I can't count them as 1837 compositions, but you can hear them along with the 1837 *Poème d'amour* on an album by Piers Lane. They are well worth hearing if you like the Chopin piano etudes, and for some context, Chopin completed the Op. 25, his second set of etudes, in 1836 and published them in 1837. Henselt's etudes stand up well next to Chopin's.

Ole Bornemann Bull was one of the great violinists of the 19th century. He was born in 1810, in Norway, and the national landscapes, folk culture, and mythology there inspired a unique style of playing and composing in Bull. He stood out amongst his French, German, and Italian contemporaries. His melodies and phrasing seemed unusual, even weird to them; but nationalism was one of the important themes of Western cultures in the 19th century, so in the end Bull's eccentric, distinctive, Norwegian style was an asset for him. A performance by Ole Bull brought audiences into a world of sound unlike any other.

In 1814, as part of the fallout of the Napoleonic wars, a Swedish and Russian army conquered Denmark. For more than 400 years by that time, Norway had been part of the Oldenburg Monarchy, a union between Norway and Denmark. After the Swedes and Russians defeated the Danes, they decided that Norway would be given to Sweden, which had been trying to conquer Norway throughout its 400 years in union with Denmark. Norway, inspired by the recent revolutions in the United States and France, resisted Sweden's effort to annex it, and fought a short war with Sweden in the summer of 1814. Sweden won, and the result was that Norway was allowed its own constitution and parliament, but was united to Sweden under the rule of Carl Johan, the Swedish king. Norway became a constitutional monarchy, then, but where the constitution and parliament were Norway's own, the monarchy that ruled it was Sweden's. Norwegians were not pleased with that arrangement. Norway resisted the authority of the Swedish monarchy, refusing to amend its constitution even at the Swedish royal decree.

On the 17th of May, 1829, Norwegian patriots held a public rally in the city square at Christiania, the capital of Norway that is called Oslo today. The rally was a celebration of the Norwegian constitution of 1814. It was also in bold defiance of the Swedish kings, who had outlawed these annual rallies because they bolstered Norwegian nationalism. The Swedish police force, heavily outnumbered by the demonstrators, called for reinforcements and the scene fell into violence. Some of the demonstrators were beaten, others trampled by the horses of the Swedish cavalry. In response to the standoff the Swedish king backed down, and

made the annual rallies to celebrate the Norwegian constitution legal. Norway would not be fully independent until 1905, but the 17th of May 1829 became symbolic in Norway's struggle for independence, in something like the way that the 4th of July 1776 had for the United States.

Ole Bull was there at Christiania on May 17th 1829, proud to have been part of his country's historic patriotic rally. He was 19 years old that year, and had already mastered the violin. He could also whistle one melody while he hummed another, so one of the ways he liked to demonstrate his virtuosity was to perform six-voice fugues by Bach, playing four of the voices on his violin while he whistled and hummed the other two. The day after the rally on May 17th 1829, Bull left Norway for Germany, to introduce himself to the violinist and composer Louis Spohr. Much to his disappointment, though, he found Spohr's violin playing square and pedantic, with none of the individualistic, Romantic flair that he'd developed in his own playing. Spohr, for his part, found Bull's eccentric, quintessentially Norwegian style of playing bizarre, so the two were not a match as teacher and student. In 1831 Bull moved to Paris, looking for mentors who could work with his style and help him start to find work. He heard Paganini play soon after he arrived in Paris, and soon Bull was playing regularly with none other than Chopin. Bull took lessons with an opera singer during his first stay in Paris, to learn how to phrase music in a style that was more in keeping with Continental tastes. He moved next to Bologna in Italy, where he would make a name for himself. Isabella Colbran, the Spanish soprano and wife of Rossini, the famous opera composer, heard Bull playing up in his apartment while she was walking past on the street below. She went up and introduced herself, and through the connections she made for him, Bull was invited to perform in concert with the great soprano Maria Malibran.

Just how good a violinist was Ole Bull? In the biography written by his second wife, Sara Chapman Bull, whom he married at Madison, Wisconsin in 1868, we read this review of Ole's performance of his 1835 composition *Polacca Guerriera*: "No person who has not tried it can conceive of the extreme difficulty of playing at once distinct parts on each of the strings. It requires muscles strong as iron, and elastic as Indiana rubber. Paganini had sufficient elasticity, but not sufficient strength. Ole Bull is the only man in the world that ever did it. When the Parisians first heard him produce this wonderful effect of four violins, it seemed so incredible that the story was circulated that it was all a deception; that some other musician was playing two of the parts behind the scenes." So there you have it. While he didn't acquire the legendary reputation that Paganini did, many musicians and critics who heard Bull considered him to be the better player. Robert Schumann was one musician who thought so. He called Ole Bull, "the greatest of all."

Bull was a made man thanks to that 1835 composition, *Polacca Guerriera*. It was his signature piece. It opened the doors of Europe's concert halls and elite musical circles to him. He moved back to Paris in May, 1835. Meyerbeer gave him the loudest cheers after the Paris premiere of the piece. In 1836 he married a young woman he'd met during his first stay at Paris, then travelled to London to give a series of concerts. A performance at London that included the pianist Sigismund Thalberg and the soprano Maria Malibran won over the English critics. Bull was close to Malibran when she died at London that year, after singing so powerfully at a concert, while she was ill, that the sheer exertion may have brought about the hemorrhage that killed her. In 1836 and 1837 Bull gave 270 performances in the UK. After that he travelled back to the Continent to perform to rapt adulation by critics and audiences in Germany, Russia, Finland, Sweden, and finally back to Norway, where he arrived at Christiania in July 1838, after nine years abroad. On the way, towards the end of 1837, he finally met Paganini on his way through Paris. The great Italian had heard all about Bull's incredible playing and unique style, and received him like an old friend. (By the way, for those of you hoping to hear about Paganini's life and work in 1837, we're a few years too late

for that. Paganini had retired from performing and composing in the fall of 1834.) After meeting Paganini, back on the way to Germany in December 1837, Bull gave concerts at Brussels and Kortrijk, in Belgium. At Kortrijk Bull met a collector who took great interest in his violin. The collector persuaded him to trade his Guarnerius for another, a 1742 Guarnerius, which was Bull's primary instrument for the next 25 or 30 years. As his reputation and wealth grew, Bull became a collector of fine violins himself.

Ole Bull's 1837 composition is called *Cantabile Doloroso e Rondo Giocoso*. It's for solo violin and orchestra, and lasts about eight and a half minutes. It's a piece Bull liked to perform alongside his signature composition, the *Polacca Guerrerica*. The two works are very different. The *Cantabile* is drawn from the style of Italian opera and is meant to be a crowd pleaser, where the *Polacca Guerrerica* is a more original, personal expression. You can hear both pieces performed on violinist Arve Tellefsen's album *Ole Bull: A Norwegian Pioneer*, with the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra.

I'll tell you what I think: Hector Berlioz – not Ludwig van Beethoven – was the first great revolutionary composer of the Romantic era. It's a controversial question in classical music, a great topic for discussion and debate. Just a generation before mine, most listeners would have named Beethoven the first great revolutionary Romantic, without thinking twice. Since the 1980's and '90s, though, when the period instrument orchestras and historically informed performance practice staked their claim over music before Brahms and encouraged us to hear Beethoven's music in the context of the high Classicism that came before it – and even the Baroque dance rhythms that came before that – many people have started to think of Beethoven's music as having much less to do with Romanticism. Certainly you can call Beethoven revolutionary, but I don't think it's right to call him a Romantic. Beethoven drastically expanded the proportions of the Classicist forms and techniques that he'd studied with Haydn and Salieri. He drew on the *Sturm und Drang* that had colored much of Haydn's music with dramatic extremes of expression. Beethoven also drew on the expressive intensity of the *empfindsamer* style of C.P.E. Bach, which was often dark and coloristic. As Beethoven aged and went deaf, he developed an avant-garde, post-Classicist style that was uniquely his, but he drew on the past to construct it. Beethoven's middle- and late-period styles sound very different than the early Romanticism of *bel canto* opera, or Chopin, or Liszt, or the Schubert *lieder*. There are some exceptions in Beethoven's work. His *Piano Concerto no. 4* and his programmatic *Symphony no. 6* are two good examples, but these were out of the ordinary in Beethoven's catalog. I think it's fair to say that in Beethoven's personality there was something of the Romantic spirit, but as a composer he worked with Classicist or post-Classicist styles and techniques, not with Romanticism. In fact, the only other 19th century composer who dealt with the same aesthetics as Beethoven was Anton Bruckner, and Bruckner was one of the great *post-Romantics*. So if you want to know what Romanticism was about, if you want to hear the first great orchestral music by a master of the revolutionary new music of the 19th century, it's Hector Berlioz you want to listen to. When Berlioz composed his *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1830 – his breakthrough piece – it was just 3 years after Beethoven died, and only 6 years after Beethoven completed his *Symphony no. 9*. Beethoven's ninth symphony sounds much more like Haydn than Berlioz. Berlioz, a Frenchman who wasn't constrained by the old conventions of the First Viennese School, was the genuine Romantic. So the argument goes.

The first of the two great works Berlioz composed in 1837 was his *Requiem*, or as he entitled it, *Great Mass for the Dead*. In 1836 Monsieur de Gasparin, the French Minister of the Interior, was about to retire. As his final official act in office he decided to commission Berlioz to compose a setting of the Latin requiem mass, to be performed at a memorial celebration for those killed in the Revolution of 1830, and on the second anniversary of the

death of General Mortier, who was killed in an assassination attempt on the “Citizen King,” Louis Philippe. The scandal and intrigue that would beset the Berlioz’s work in 1837 began at once. Another government official, a man of old-fashioned tastes who did not understand the modern music that was replacing *bel canto* opera by that time, was not happy that the Minister of the Interior had chosen Berlioz. Berlioz does not mention the man’s name in his memoirs, but he does tell a story about the official, saying that in the opinion of the bureaucrat, Beethoven was only modestly talented. Berlioz exclaimed in his memoirs, “*Beethoven was not devoid of talent!*” These were the sort of people Berlioz had to work around, in the French bureaucracy, when he tried to have his music performed. Our small-minded government official decided he would sabotage Berlioz’s commission by stalling until Gasparin had retired, then passing the commission along to someone else. Luigi Cherubini, who I discussed in *A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 1*, was the director of the Paris Conservatoire at the time, and he was adamant that *his* requiem should be performed at the memorial, not Berlioz’s. But Gasparin was determined that Berlioz compose the music for the event, so when he heard that our Rossini-loving government official was conspiring to wrest the commission away from Berlioz, he summoned the man to his office, reprimanded him, and made sure that the commission went to Berlioz. As soon as Berlioz finished writing the music, the ceremony for the victims of the Revolution of 1830 was cancelled. A few months later, though, a French general was killed in North Africa, where France was fighting to establish its empire. So Berlioz’s *Grande Messe des Morts* was premiered at the church in the *Les Invalides* complex, to commemorate him.

Berlioz’s rivals weren’t finished with him yet, though. They had failed to prevent Berlioz from receiving the commission to compose his *Requiem*, but they could still sabotage the performance. That’s where conductor François Habeneck becomes part of this story. Paris audiences knew Habeneck for having conducted the first French performances of the Beethoven symphonies, starting in 1828. Habeneck and Berlioz weren’t even on speaking terms when it came time to choose the conductor who would lead the performance of the *Requiem*, but Habeneck was Paris’s leading conductor. There was no avoiding him. He would conduct the performance, and his attempt to ruin it, purely out of spite for Berlioz, is one of the best-known stories in the history of classical music. The biggest moment in Berlioz’s *Great Mass for the Dead* comes in the second movement, during the “Tuba Mirum.” Four brass choirs enter from the four corners of a large cathedral to proclaim the resurrection of mankind. The huge, thundering chord that they play along with the orchestra is one of the most awe-inspiring moments in all of classical music. Berlioz’s *Requiem* is a challenging piece for a conductor from the first page to the last, but if there’s one moment above all others in the score when the conductor’s guidance is absolutely crucial, it’s the entrance of those four separate offstage brass ensembles. François Habeneck chose that moment to try to sabotage Berlioz’s *Requiem* at its premiere. When he got to the measure right before the big entrance, right at the moment when hundreds of musicians all around the cathedral were looking at him for their cue, Habeneck laid down his baton, stopped conducting, and reached into his snuff box for a pinch of tobacco. Berlioz was ready for him, though. Berlioz had been suspicious throughout the rehearsals that Habeneck might pull a stunt like that, so when the conductor set down his baton seconds before the biggest moment in the *Requiem*, Berlioz, who was seated just a few steps behind him, ran forward and took over as conductor. He gave the crucial downbeat, the brass choirs played their first chord in time with the orchestra, and the performance went on to the delight of the audience.

My favorite recording of Berlioz’s *Grande Messe des Morts* is of the 2010 performance by the Wrocław (vrote-slaw) Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, tenor soloist Robert Murray, and conductor Paul McCreech. There are a number of very good recordings of the piece, in fact, and I encourage you to become familiar with them. I might devote a blog post to them,

or start a discussion in the forums at AYICM.com to explore the many performances I've enjoyed. McCreesh's recording, though, captures the sound of Berlioz's score in a cathedral much like the one at *Les Invalides* in Paris, where it was first performed. It makes use of period instruments, so we hear exactly the instrumental colors that Berlioz had in mind, and the choir sings the Latin mass with a French accent. McCreesh's record is the most authentic experience available of the *Requiem* as Berlioz himself conceived it. The audio engineering is demonstration-quality, as well. There's no piece of music that benefits more from today's standards of audio engineering than this. The *Grand Mass for the Dead* is famous for its thundering brass writing, but those mighty fanfares lead many to overlook the fact that most of the music is quiet and introspective. McCreesh brings out the best of the full range of the score, from different shades of color in the lightly scored passages to the roar of full orchestra and choir surrounded by the four brass choirs.

If you think of the French Revolution as something that happened back in the 1780's and '90s, right after the Revolutionary War in the United States, you might be surprised to know that it was still very much ongoing during our current "year in classical music." Since Hector Berlioz was the first great revolutionary Romantic composer, it's apropos to discuss his *Great Mass for the Dead* in the context the French Revolution. The music was originally commissioned as part of a ceremony to commemorate the victims of the Revolution of 1830. Berlioz premiered his *Grande Messe des Morts* in the cathedral at *Les Invalides*, which was a military installation in Paris. *Les Invalides* is part of the story of Bastille Day, the 14th of July 1789, which is the French equivalent of the 4th of July 1776 for the United States. On Bastille Day, the revolutionaries stormed the armory at *Les Invalides*, taking the muskets and cannons they used to attack the Bastille, a military fortress and prison. The groundwork for the French Revolution had been developing for some time by 1789, but fall of the Bastille was its symbolic beginning, and the start of the civil war the French revolutionaries had to wage to try to impose the reforms they desired. It's significant that Berlioz composed a setting of the Roman Catholic requiem mass to commemorate part of the Revolution, because the French Revolution was, among other things, a war against the Catholic Church. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote that the mass murder of Orthodox Christians in Russia under the communists was inspired by the massacre of French Catholics, when they refused to accept the ideology of the revolutionaries and took up arms in defense of their King and Church. Vladimir Lenin said that the Great Terror of the French Revolution was the best model for the Bolsheviks as they encountered Christian resistance to their plans. France's Great Terror was the first modern genocide, according to Solzhenitsyn. More than 300,000 people were killed from 1793 until 1799, and it only stopped then, when Napoleon came to power, because he needed to calm things down at home so that he could go to war, to impose Liberal ideology throughout the rest of Europe by force. After Napoleon's empire was overthrown, two French kings took the throne again. The first was Louis the Eighteenth, who ruled from 1815 to 1824. He was followed by Charles the Tenth, who held the throne until The Revolution of 1830. The idea during this fifteen-year chapter of French history was to reconcile the new, revolutionary Liberalism with the traditions of King and Church by setting up a constitutional monarchy, like the one in England. A great many French people had remained loyal to King and Church throughout the revolution, especially outside of Paris. When Louis the Eighteenth took the throne, he began by trying to walk a middle road to reconcile Liberalism with traditionalism. As his reign continued, though, he leaned farther and farther towards traditionalism, restoring wealth and power to the monarchy and the Catholic Church. Charles the Tenth succeeded Louis the Eighteenth in 1824. He seemed even more determined to bring back the *Ancien Régime*. Revolutionaries took to the streets of Paris at the end of July in 1830, and after three days of battle Charles The Tenth fled Paris. A month later King Louis Philippe, "the Citizen King," took the throne. Berlioz was originally commissioned to write his

Requiem to commemorate those who died in the Revolution of 1830 to establish the “July Monarchy.” But governing was all but impossible for the Citizen King, because after the many governments overthrown since Bastille Day in 1789, French people had no reason to think that the current political situation was permanent, and they had divided into irreconcilable factions. There was the extreme left, which had started to seriously propose socialism for the first time. There were more moderate revolutionaries who wanted to establish a French democracy or republic. There was an imperial faction that wanted to finish what Napoleon had started, forcibly overthrowing the other monarchies throughout Europe and establishing Liberalism throughout the Continent. Even the traditionalists on the right were divided, with some wanting to see the old Bourbon dynasty restored where others pledged their loyalty to the new Citizen King. It was a time of turmoil, with everyone ready to support their faction when the next regime change took place. There was a series of uprisings, attempts to replace the “July Monarchy” with a republic, and a number of assassination attempts on King Louis Philippe. One of the most violent of these assassination attempts was in 1836, the year before our current “year in classical music.” This was the environment in which Berlioz composed his *Great Mass for the Dead*. Berlioz himself was agnostic. He wrote his *Requiem* to celebrate a political revolution, not the Christian prophecy of humanity’s resurrection from the dead. Berlioz took extensive liberties in his handling of the texts of these Catholic liturgical prayers, so much so that one analyst of the music, Thomas Schacher, wrote that, “theologically speaking, the bridge which links mankind to God is broken.”

Habeneck had not been able to sabotage the premiere of Berlioz’s *Requiem* in 1837, but he was able to ruin the premiere of his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*. Berlioz was nearly finished composing the score early in 1837 when he was commissioned to write the *Requiem*. He had to set his opera aside to write the *Grande Messe des Morts*, but he was able to finish it by the end of the year. The first performances were given in September of 1838. Berlioz would have conducted the music himself if he’d been allowed, but François Habeneck was the leading conductor in Paris in those days, and was again chosen to conduct Berlioz’s music. Habeneck led three months of rehearsals and three performances of the opera, and he did all this, apparently, with no other goal in mind than to spoil the production and do as much harm to Berlioz’s reputation as he could. Habeneck was hostile and short-tempered with the singers and the orchestra, making their experience with the music as unpleasant as he could to turn them against Berlioz. One part of the opera is a *saltarello*, a fast dance number, but even after Berlioz pleaded with him, Habeneck kept conducting it so slowly that the dancers couldn’t perform their choreography. The critics and the public reacted to Habeneck’s train wreck of a production with outright hostility towards Berlioz. The audiences booed and hissed, and never again would the Paris Opéra invite Berlioz to stage his work there.

There was more to the failure of *Benvenuto Cellini* than Habeneck’s conducting, however. Grand Opera was the prevailing style at the Paris Opéra in those days. Grand Opera made extensive use of all the different art forms. It was an exhilarating spectacle, but much of the spectacle – sometimes *most* of the spectacle – was non-musical. Grand Opera was a synthesis of music, acting, stagecraft, poetry, literature, dance, painting, sculpture, and so forth. It was a synthesis of all art forms. Meyerbeer was the star composer at the Paris Opéra in the 1830’s. He understood opera in those terms and was an expert judge of how much expression and effect in a Grand Opera should come from the music, and how much from the other art forms involved. Berlioz, by contrast, was not an expert judge of what Parisian audiences wanted out of Grand Opera. The Paris Opéra had stopped performing Berlioz’s favorite opera composers, Gluck and Spontini, because they didn’t lend themselves to the Grand Opera style. Berlioz, like Gluck and Spontini, thought of an opera mostly as a musical score. He approached the composition of an opera in much the same way that he approached an instrumental piece, and wasn’t interested in downplaying the music at the

appropriate places to give the other elements of a Grand Opera room to play their part. Julian Rushton, in his analysis of Berlioz's music, writes that *Benvenuto Cellini* was a box office failure because it contained "too much good music." If you only listen to the music, Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* will strike you as much a more sophisticated piece than Meyerbeer's 1836 opera *Les Huguenots*, which was the great event at the Paris Opéra in the 1830's. Think of it like a movie in our time, though. If a movie had a phenomenal soundtrack but the plot was weak, the acting was poor, the director made patchwork out of it, the special effects looked fake, and so forth, it wouldn't matter very much that the music was good. It would still be a bad movie. That's a good comparison to help understand why *Benvenuto Cellini* wasn't well received. It's a masterpiece of an opera, without question, but it's so unique and original, brimming with such a wealth of the avant-garde, that its merits weren't widely recognized until listeners who were acclimated to late Romantic and Modernist styles heard revivals of the piece in the 20th century.

Fortunately for me, recommending a recording of *Benvenuto Cellini* is easy to do, because only one recording of the complete original score exists. Most recordings of the opera are of the heavily abridged version that was performed at the Paris Opéra in 1838. A lot of Berlioz's music was cut from that version, as Habeneck and his other detractors sabotaged the production. In 2003, though, John Nelson recorded a very good performance of the restored original score for Virgin Classics. It spares me the problem of choosing a recording based on the quality of the singing and acting, which would inevitably upset fans of the performances I didn't choose. I should mention, though, that there's a third version of the opera available on record. Franz Liszt produced the opera at Weimar in the 1850's, in an effort to revive it and improve its reputation. Liszt was one musician who realized how good the music was, despite the fiasco of its first run at Paris. Liszt wanted to edit the score for his production, though, resulting in a third version of *Benvenuto Cellini*. If you're interested in the Weimar edition of the opera, I recommend Roger Norrington's record.