

**Cours de Composition – Vincent d’Indy**  
**La Poème Symphonique Orchestral, pp.315-16**

*It is always interesting to read the opinions of one composer upon another, especially when the commentator is also a teacher. D’Indy was a pupil of César Franck whose views should probably be taken seriously. He was also very self-assured, insisting, for example, on the wonders of cyclic form, just because Franck often (but not invariably) used it. In translation of this very brief section from D’Indy’s composition course, I have attempted to trim some of the author’s wordiness, which reads rather as if someone had taken down an unscripted talk verbatim. I have also altered the paragraphing.*

HECTOR BERLIOZ, whatever anyone says, did not invent the symphonic poem; however, he is its uncontested reviver, the true initiator of a new orchestral form, in which formerly there were only the most rudimentary essays. Each work of this composer that is not a music drama in the full sense is in the form of a symphonic poem, that is to say, subject to an extra-musical idea. Of course, we will recognize here the natural inclination of his talent, his eminently “romantic” culture, his personal tastes; but one may wonder if this entirely sentimental explanation was not simply a pretext for another consideration: the simple fact of his ignorance of composition and form, and the belief, too common at that time and indeed since, that education in these matters was impossible and useless.

His technical formation was, by his own admission (1)<sup>1</sup>, very rudimentary. His biographers usually tell us that he could manage without it; it is not certain that this was his own opinion, especially as he grew older. On the contrary, we believe that he was cruelly aware of this gap in his early education, and that he was forced to let himself be guided by a “programme”, because he did not possess the slightest technique that would have permitted him to do otherwise. We have already seen Beethoven proceeding cautiously in his exact imitation of the symphonic form bequeathed by his predecessors, before continually demanding of himself some logical attempt to innovate based on experience.

On the contrary, we see Berlioz accepting without control (or rather, for lack of control) suggestions that were often out of line with his inventive faculties; and his work was not always well served, indeed far from it, by this lack of discernment due above all to his ignorance. Also, while admiring the magnificent surges of energy that we find, we cannot consider them models for imitation, for there is always some presumption that one possesses sufficient qualities of talent to overcome deficiencies in knowledge. This illusion manifests itself, consciously or not, in most imitators of Berlioz.

In fact, Berlioz formed a “school,” and that is precisely why he had reason to wonder if this “rebirth of the symphonic poem,” which is in large part due to him, was an advantage for those destined towards music? Despite all contradictory opinions which have been formulated, one would do well to recognize today that the influence of Berlioz on symphonic music was far more rapid and profound than that of Wagner on music drama. One cannot help thinking that the law of “minimum effort” applied in the matter of composition, and perhaps despite himself, the composer of *Symphonie Fantastique* had been responsible for the reckless confidence shown by a whole generation of composers of symphonic poems.

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<sup>1</sup> ADRIEN BARTHE, who was professor of harmony at the Conservatoire at the time of Amboise Thomas, told his students that, in his youth (c. 1850) he went regularly to Berlioz to “work” with him. The work consisted of listening to tunes which Berlioz sang or whistled, and writing them down for him, and choosing harmonies which suited them best, and then realize them correctly - all things that the author of *Damnation of Faust* knew himself to be incapable of; it suited him also with the most touching simplicity. A.S. [Auguste Sérieyx, editor of the volume, 1901-1902.]