

Harriet Smithson, the Ennis-born wife of Hector Berlioz

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Hector Berlioz, the great French composer, perhaps best known for his *Symphonie fantastique*, *Carnaval romain*, *La Damnation de Faust*, *Les Troyens*, and his *Requiem*, died in Paris on the 8th of March 1869. The centenary of his death has been appropriately commemorated in divers ways in many widely separated parts of the world. Normally such an anniversary would be allowed to pass unnoticed in the pages of this *Journal*, but by his marriage to Harriet Constance Smithson, a native of Ennis, Co. Clare, Berlioz indirectly associated himself with North Munster. It is thought fitting, therefore, that this association should be recalled during this centenary year.

Although she was born in Ennis and reared in Ireland, and although she was always regarded as Irish by her contemporaries, Harriet Smithson is only rightly so by accident of birth. Both her parents were English, her father, William Joseph Smithson, being of Gloucestershire descent. He was an able and popular actor and was also a theatrical manager who worked in Ireland, mainly on the Waterford-Kilkenny circuit. First in December 1789, and at irregular intervals afterwards, the Smithsons visited Ennis. William Smithson even fitted up his own theatre there when he first arrived — it held about two hundred people and was in Bridewell Lane (now Cooke's Lane); in 1814 the theatre was turned into a school and three years later it became a fever hospital. It was on one of these visits to Ennis, on the 18th of March 1800, that Henrietta (always called Harriet) Constance Smithson was born.

Due, perhaps, to the continual travelling of her father's touring company, Harriet was adopted (*recte* : fostered ?) at the age of two by the Rev. Dr. James Barrett of Ennis, and she thus lived in the town during her childhood, until his death in 1807 when she was placed at Mrs. Tournier's School, in Waterford.

Harriet took up acting partly as a result of her father's failing health, and in 1815 made her first appearance on the stage of the Crow Street Theatre, in Dublin. During the following years she also played in Belfast, Cork and Limerick, not without some success. In 1817 she went to England and made her debut on the English stage at Birmingham. Although obviously lacking in experience, she caught the eye and very early in 1818 she was appearing at Drury Lane, in London. Later she joined the Royal Coburg Theatre, the theatre which was later still to become famous as the Old Vic. During the years that followed, Harriet played in many places, including Covent Garden and the Haymarket, in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh, in Scotland, Liverpool, Manchester and other provincial towns in England, and she even made successful returns to the Dublin stage. Although a fine actress, playing leading roles, her distinct but not very powerful voice, which was often not too easy to hear in the vast Drury Lane theatre, combined with her Irish brogue to hamper her efforts to win outstanding success in England. It was in France that she was to really achieve international acclaim.

Although Harriet had already played in France in October 1824, in English plays being produced by her brother at Boulogne and at Calais, it was not until the autumn of 1827 that she went to Paris — as leading lady in a dramatic company led by William Abbott and Charles Kemble. They performed several plays at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, including "The Rivals" by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet". Hector Berlioz, then a poor but promising young composer of twenty-four (three years Harriet's junior), first saw her acting the part of Ophelia in the latter play — and promptly lost his heart to her. Many years later he wrote of her in his *Mémoires* (first draft completed in 1854, the year of Harriet's death; printed in 1865 but not published until 1870, a year after his own death), recording that "No dramatic artist in France ever touched and excited the public as she did. No press notices ever equalled the eulogies which the French papers published in her honour." She also appeared as Juliet, and Berlioz, having seen her also in that role, wrote that "it was too much . . . I knew that I was lost." But the ardent, impassionate, impetuous young composer failed to even meet Harriet during her stay in France.

In 1829 Berlioz published some musical settings for Moore's *Irish Melodies* as a sort of homage to the country of Harriet's birth, and in the same year he also composed *Huit Scènes de Faust* expressly for her. These latter he numbered Opus 1, thus demonstrating that he felt that all that he had previously composed was of no account, a nice compliment to his muse; the *Huit Scènes* were later to play an important part in the evolution of his famous *La Damnation de Faust*. Also in 1829, Berlioz wrote to a friend, Albert du Boys, mentioning his continuing ardour for the actress and his continued failure to meet her. Never one to conceal his emotions, Berlioz had, however, let it be known that he worshipped her, something which caused her more consternation than appreciation, and she answered through an intermediary that it was quite impossible that she could ever reciprocate the same feeling for him as he expressed for her.

The continued failure to meet and win Harriet caused the ever-Romantic Berlioz to turn against her. In order to publicly denounce her and express his feelings, he wrote an extraordinary, autobiographical, new work which he called *Episode de la vie d'un artiste, grande symphonie fantastique en cinq parties*, commonly known under the abbreviated title of *Symphonie fantastique*. The music was accompanied by a long and detailed script in which he outlined the *idée fixe* he had of his obsession with a love which leads him to suicide. The first performance of the work was deliberately fixed for the 5th of December 1829, the very day on which the Opéra was to give a special benefit performance for Harriet.

Despite this rather petty and unusual attack, Harriet continued to triumph on the French stage and, indeed, in May 1830 gained the rare distinction of receiving employment by the directors of the Opéra-Comique — to play a silent role (as she did not speak good enough French she had, of necessity, to be cast in dumb roles) in the comic opera *L'Auberge d'Auray* by Carafa and Hérold. Fortune did not shine on Harriet this time, the directors absconding without paying her. Nothing if not audacious, Harriet turned to the highest authority in France for redress, writing to the King, Louis-Philippe, asking him to intercede with the Minister of the Interior to pay her from funds which she believed they had for the theatre. Her request, however, was turned down.

Berlioz meanwhile was in Italy, but he returned to Paris late in 1832. Still apparently smarting from his failure with Harriet, he made arrangements to again display publicly his feelings for her with another performance of the *Symphonie fantastique*, followed by a sequel, a new autobiographical work of much lesser importance, called *Lélio, ou Le Retour à la vie*. Harriet was back in Paris at the time, playing with her own company at the Théâtre des Italiens, and she was rather maliciously invited to the public performance of the two works which her rejection of the composer's advances had inspired. She went, but only as a member of the audience.

The concert was held in the Conservatoire de Musique, on the 9th of December 1832. Heinrich Heine, the noted Late Romantic German poet, was present at the concert and has recorded that Berlioz "was at the extreme end of the hall, beating a drum in the orchestra. In the stage-box sat the famous actress from Covent Garden; Berlioz had his eyes fixed upon her and whenever their eyes met he beat away at his drum like a madman." A few days later Berlioz actually met Harriet for the first time—and promptly fell hopelessly in love with her again.

The story of the final assault on Harriet's heart is well known. It appears that the composer took a not too severe dose of poison in her presence one day, giving as reason that he had despaired of ever winning her heart and hand. When she protested that she did, in fact, love him and would marry him, he did not dramatically tell her that it was regrettably too late, but told her where to find the antidote to the poison which he had strategically placed nearby!

On the 3rd of October 1833, Hector Berlioz and Harriet Smithson were married, much against the wishes of the groom's family. It was probably not only Harriet's profession as an actress but also her religion which influenced the Berlioz family in its objections. Harriet's father had been a Freemason (he described himself as "Brother Smithson" and mentioned the active support of the Freemason Lodge No. 60, in Ennis, when advertising a performance of Shakespeare's "As You Like It" which was to be performed in Ennis on the 22nd of February 1790), and this religious problem probably likewise goes far towards explaining why the marriage took place in the British Embassy in Paris, rather than in a church.

The marriage, despite the estrangement from Berlioz' family and the heavy financial burden of Harriet's debts on a virtually impoverished musician, was initially a very happy one. The following year they moved to Montmartre and a son, Louis, was born to them in August 1834. Reconciliation with the Berlioz family came in 1837, but relations between Berlioz and his wife were beginning to become strained. This was largely due to Harriet's frustration at the failure of her acting career, and because she allowed herself to become bitter and jealous of the women Berlioz encountered in the course of his work, a jealousy for which there was (according to the *Mémoires* at least) no justification. Indeed, Berlioz has recorded that "By dint of being accused and incessantly nagged and harrassed [by Harriet], always unjustly, until I could find no rest or peace at home, I came at last, partly by chance, to enjoy in actual fact the position wrongly imputed to me, and my life was transformed." Berlioz had, in 1841, taken as mistress an undistinguished mezzo-soprano called Marie Recio.

The marriage finally collapsed completely in 1844 when Berlioz separated from Harriet who had lost her looks and had taken heavily to drink. Though separated, Berlioz continued to see Harriet occasionally and contributed to her support. Harriet's health disimproved, and for the last four years of her life she suffered from a paralysis which deprived her of speech and motion. Then, on Friday, the 3rd of March 1854,

Madame Harriet Berlioz, née Smithson, the Ennis-born actress who had gained international renown and had won the heart of one of the great composers of all time, died.

Berlioz, true to form, was temporarily heart-broken, but six months later regularised his liaison with Marie Recio by marrying her. Harriet was buried at Montmartre, where an inscription in the cemetery there reads :

Henriette Constance Berlioz Smithson,
née à Ennis en Irlande,
morte à Montmartre le 3 mars 1854.

Ten years later, however, her remains were disinterred and were placed in a vault in the larger cemetery at Montmartre, next to those of Berlioz' second wife, Marie Recio, who had died in 1862. The Berlioz link with Ennis was finally snapped when Louis, the only child of the marriage, died of yellow fever at Havana in 1867, two years before his father's own death.