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*A Night at the  
(Imaginary) Opera:*

The visual dimension in Hector  
Berlioz's *Lélio, Roméo et Juliette* and  
*La damnation de Faust*

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## Abstract

In keeping with the spirit of Romanticism, Hector Berlioz has always been something of a rogue figure. Works like *Lélio*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La damnation de Faust*, which Daniel Albright refers to as ‘semi-operas’, occupy an uncomfortable place within the concert hall. The intersections between song, symphony, opera and the spoken word that form these works immediately pose questions concerning musical unity, narrative interpretation, issues of genre, and performance style. While the musical and literary aspects of the three compositions have been the subject of scholarly attention, this study turns its gaze onto the various *visual* dimensions that are present within *Lélio*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La damnation de Faust*. By emphasising the presence of spectacle in Berlioz’s compositions, questions soon arise concerning the implications of these visual elements for performance. Berlioz’s relatively early work, *Lélio*, illustrates the extent to which the composer is already concerned with how the visual suppression of performing bodies can create and change narrative meanings. *Roméo et Juliette* raises the curtains that hide *Lélio*’s musical forces. Rather than simply distilling Shakespeare’s drama into music, Berlioz relies instead on a visual memory of *Romeo and Juliet* to replace the absence of physical characters within his ‘symphonie dramatique’, thus creating an aural rendition of a past theatrical event. Through an exploration of the spectacle within *Lélio* and *Roméo et Juliette*, we see how Berlioz has constructed a visually detailed imaginary theatre that resides within the score. An understanding of this imaginary theatre is integral in the subsequent analysis of Berlioz’s controversial and wonderfully diabolical *La damnation de Faust*. This work is performed as often in the opera house as it is in the concert hall. However, an in-depth analysis of the

libretto and score reveals curious and occasionally contradictory visual implications. The impact that these contradictions have on the visual dimension in the performance of *La damnation de Faust* will be explored through a reading of two ground-breaking productions: Raoul Gunsbourg's *La damnation de Faust* from 1893 – the first production to treat Berlioz's score as an opera; and Robert Lepage's mixed-media production of *La damnation*. The work of these two directors serves to highlight, perhaps inadvertently, the problematic effects of Berlioz's imaginary theatre on the necessarily more concrete realisations of *La damnation* when confined within the opera house. However, the cinematic approach of Lepage suggests another avenue of performance that has the potential to reveal new dimensions of Berlioz's unique dramatic-symphonic works. Ultimately, it may be that the supreme technicolour nature of Berlioz's music always functions to transport us beyond our own mundane experiences and forever challenges us to seek something beyond the limits of the possible, however much those limits might change.

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