An Aesthetic of Eccentricity: A Narrative Analysis of Two Early Berlioz Overtures

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An Aesthetic of Eccentricity: A Narrative Analysis of Two Early Berlioz Overtures

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ABSTRACT

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An Aesthetic of Eccentricity: Narrative in Two Early Berlioz Overtures

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The peculiar style of Hector Berlioz has been scrutinized by generations of music critics and described by contemporary music scholar Stephen Rodgers as an *aesthetic of eccentricity*. Yet broad aspects of the eccentricities inherent to Berlioz’s approach have received little analysis, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the role these irregularities play within his overall style. Recent theoretical developments in the area of narratology within musical analysis have provided the analytical tools necessary to uncover and explain details of Berlioz’s *aesthetic of eccentricity* that have been left undefined. The following thesis summarizes the findings of a narrative analysis of *Les Francs-Juges Overture* and *Le Roi Lear Overture* while showing how the peculiar aspects of Berlioz’s style, and the narrative interpretation of his music, are essential to understanding his legacy within the era of Romantic music. The musical examples cited within this thesis have been transcribed from *Hector Berlioz: New Edition of the Complete Works, Volume 4 and Volume 20*. This author has titled each musical example based on its context within the narrative analysis.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHODOLOGY

Felix Mendelssohn had grave misgivings regarding the manner in which Hector Berlioz stretched and distorted many commonly accepted conventions of early nineteenth century music. Particularly with his approach to formal design, “what he found so philistine about Hector Berlioz was ‘that with all his effort to go stark mad, he never once succeeds’” (Tovey, 75). Mendelssohn was far from alone in his objections and for generations music scholars and critics shared his sentiments concerning various aspects of Berlioz’s music. In addition to his approach to formal design, the imbalance and asymmetry upon which Berlioz’s phrases are constructed is subversive to the typical German and Italian tradition seen at the end of the classical era, an observation noted by musicologist John Warrack in his article “Berlioz’s Melodies” (1969). Warrack contends that this practice causes Berlioz’s melodic structures to be founded on irregularity, a negative feature of his style that undermines the effectiveness of his phrasing.

Musicologist Ernest Newman shares Warrack’s concerns regarding Berlioz’s phrasing in his essay entitled “Berlioz’s ‘Irregularities’” (1972) in which he states “that while he is infinitely inventive in the main body of his melodies his cadences are to a large extent simply a variant after variant of a single basic procedure” (Newman, 127). Newman feels this aspect of Berlioz’s style causes the overall impact of his music to be less effective because his phrases finish without a sense of conviction.

In his authoritative book, *The Romantic Generation* (1995), Charles Rosen describes critics of Berlioz’s style, such as Mendelssohn, Warrack, and Newman, as possessing a contemporary view. He states, “to this day, the belief in the clumsiness of
his harmony, the naiveté of his counterpoint, and the negligence of his forms has not been dissipated” (Rosen, 544). However, recent scholarship views Berlioz’s music from a different perspective. In his book, *Form, Program, and Metaphor in the Music of Berlioz* (2009), Stephen Rodgers contends, “Berlioz was no madman who jettisoned all convention and followed only the whims of his imagination or the dictates of his programs” (Rodgers, 84). Instead, Rodgers asserts that Berlioz’s pursuit of richer and more complicated formal designs was driven by the need to express his fascination with richer and more complicated poetic ideas. Though Rodgers delivers an insightful correlation between Berlioz’s use of form and the programs of his works, his monograph falls short of addressing these two musical parameters within the overall aesthetic of Berlioz’s style. Rodgers also acknowledges there are peculiar aspects of Berlioz’s music that are still unexplained, what he refers to as Berlioz’s “aesthetic of eccentricity” (Rodgers, 139).

Recent theoretical research conducted in the area of narratology allows for analysis that is inclusive of the musical parameters Rodgers does not examine and can provide additional insight into the aesthetic of eccentricity he describes. Perhaps a narrative analysis of Berlioz’s music can explain the composer’s irregularities and eccentricities in a positive light, one which demonstrates intent and purpose rather than negligence or clumsiness. It is this author’s intent to apply narrative analytical techniques to two of Berlioz’s early concert overtures: *Les Francs-Juges Overture* (*The Free Judges*, 1826) and *Le Roi Lear Overture* (*The Overture to King Lear*, 1831). This analysis will result in a clearer view of Berlioz’s aesthetic of eccentricity. These early
overtures, opus numbers three and four respectively, are well suited for narrative analysis because they demonstrate how his eccentric style is a deliberate and defining component of his music. The findings will summarize eccentricities of Berlioz’s style within the broader examination of how well he presents musical narrative and how the narrative interpretation of his music demonstrates art’s primary function in our lives: to reflect upon, comment on, and influence the world around us. A brief review of sources on narrative analytical techniques follows.

Vera Micznik: Story and Discourse

In her article “Music and Narrative Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler,” (2001) Vera Micznik describes musical narrative as consisting of two main components: story and discourse. Micznik defines story as musical events analyzed at the semiotic level: containing morphological, syntactic, and semantic characteristics. Each semiotic level provides increasingly complex stylistic meanings as she identifies coherent musical units independently of any perceived timeline or sequence of events. Micznik describes this part of her methodology as “moving vertically or paradigmatically from one level of meaning to another within each event, and . . . not accounting (yet) for the horizontal or syntagmatic temporal unfolding of events,” (Micznik, 203). Micznik first dissects the morphological and syntactical aspects of the musical material, discerning characteristics such as intervallic, harmonic, and rhythmic content that comprise cells, motives, and themes. The relationships between the qualities of these units are examined as well as the role cells, motives, and themes may have in respect to grammatical and formal functions. Once the individualized traits of these units
are broken down and evaluated, she is able to assign semantic meaning to the musical material. Connotations such as *affect, character, mood,* and *topic* are examples of possible semantic meanings which arise from “recognized codes according to which both composers and listeners associate by convention certain musical ideas with extramusical concepts” (Micznik, 210).

A simple example of this type of analysis is illustrated by the semiotic characteristics that portray the topic of dance. In particular, the musical attributes that identify the genre of waltz include a triple meter, usually 3/4, with each measure containing an accented downbeat in the bass voice with beats two and three as unaccented harmonic accompaniment. A sweeping melodic line which outlines symmetrical phrases then creates the image of dancers gliding gracefully across a ballroom floor. The semantic connotations of the waltz are rich and abundant. For instance, a composer or listener might identify the waltz, or other dance genres, as representative of the European aristocracies where such music was regularly performed and thoroughly developed for centuries within the courts of high society. It is possible for many differing topics to portray a variety of static associations within a musical work, but Micznik’s process for perceiving narrative is incomplete until the second level of her methodology is applied to an analysis.

Once Micznik has thoroughly examined the musical parameters that are inherent within the *story,* she begins to examine the aspects of *discourse* within the work. *Discourse* is the particular way in which the events that comprise the *story* are developed and what meanings can be discerned by the temporal unfolding that is thereby produced.
It is important to realize that Micznik’s theory of *discourse* shows “not only that ‘events’ of the *story* are carriers of narrative meaning, but also that the discursive strategies themselves produce levels of meaning” (Micznik, 219). *Discourse* gives shape to a musical narrative because the process in which the composer gives direction and purpose to the semiotic material is revealed. Within a discursive strategy, the use of musical gestures creates momentum as a piece unfolds and the arising connotations of this narrative action, such as the processes of accumulation, dissolution, or disorientation, illustrate the transformation of meaning and value associated with particular semiotic events that comprise the *story*.

One piece that illustrates the relationship between Micznik’s *story* and *discourse* is *La Valse* by Maurice Ravel. Premiered in 1920, Ravel’s one movement work makes excellent use of the waltz as a musical topic. Out of the soft and fragmented beginning of the piece, a waltz theme arises and is sounded throughout the orchestra. As the piece continues however, Ravel uses a series of musical gestures, such as inappropriate and erratic choices in orchestration, unexpected harmonic modulations, the disintegration of established waltz rhythms, and an unmanageable, out of control tempo to depict the decay and ultimately the destruction of the waltz genre. Listeners and critics have interpreted Ravel’s piece as representative of the demise of European society and the devastation seen in the aftermath of the First World War. If one views the semantic connotations of the waltz topic, the *story*, as symbolizing European aristocracies, the musical gestures, or *discourse*, that comprise the discursive strategy employed by Ravel distinguish the piece as musical narrative.
Eero Tarasti: Isotopies and Modality

Micznik’s methodology, the combination of two levels of meaning, *story* and *discourse*, is an effective starting point for the interpretation of music as narrative. The Finnish musicologist and semiologist Eero Tarasti offers a similar two level approach in his publication *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics* (2002) which provides additional methodological insights that are unique and can supplement Micnik’s methodology. In the first level of his analyses, Tarasti segments the music into *isotopies*, which he describes as “a set of semantic categories whose redundancy guarantees the coherence of a sign-complex and makes possible the uniform reading of any text” (Tarasti, 304). Similar to scenes in a play or chapters in a novel, *isotopies*, or musical episodes, are the fundamental narrative unit in Tarasti’s approach and they derive their character from a variety of musical parameters. The possible criteria for the segmentation of music into *isotopies* can be thematic, topical, functional in terms of formal design, or another musical factor, so long as a meaningful, coherent unit can be distinguished. Once segments are established, Tarasti proceeds to examine the markedness within each *isotopy* in respect to the factors of *spatiality*, *temporality*, and *actoriality*.

*Spaciality* considers tonal and registral relationships, such as key centers, choices in orchestration, and the locality of range and tessitura. *Temporality* concerns the factors of rhythm and meter and the influence of recall and expectation. *Actoriality* attempts to recognize and describe any anthropomorphic aspects present within themes and motives. Tarasti’s use of these three categories to identify and interpret the inherent semiotics of a
given passage can be equated to Micznik’s story level of analysis because both approaches utilize a variety of musical parameters in an effort to demonstrate the strategic markedness inherent within a particular musical passage.

Like Micznik, the second level of Tarasti’s analysis enhances the meaning of the semantic characteristics found within the first level of his methodology. In the second tier of Tarasti’s approach, each isotopy is assigned a modality. The term modality describes a “series of emotional states that account for the way a listener unites a musical text with human values” (Tarasti, 304). In other words, this concept describes the semantic or “extramusical” meaning associated with each isotopy and its role within the musical narrative. Tarasti identifies and illustrates several possible modalities. He describes “being” as a state of rest, a passage that is consonant and stable within the context of the narrative. The modality of “doing” depicts the dissonance of a dynamic event or action, a passage that challenges a preceding isotopy in some way. “Must” illustrates the resignation of a musical passage that is bound to the obligations of form, style, or genre. An isotopy that exhibits the energy of motion and musical directedness associated with attaining a goal might be assigned the modality of “will”. Though Tarasti only provides a limited number of examples, there are numerous associations that might define the modality of an isotopy as long as the association is substantiated by the musical properties inherent within the particular passage. Through his use of modality, Tarasti is able to convincingly express each isotopy as being either static or dynamic, a useful feature of his methodology because each musical segment can be shown to reinforce an established status quo, or move against it. By determining the role of each isotopy, and
its connection to adjacent isotopies as the piece progresses, the analyst is able to effectively articulate the narrative trajectory of a piece and the meanings that arise as a result. In this way, Tarasti’s modality is similar to Micznik’s discourse because it demonstrates how musical gestures create and define the relationships between individual semiotic events as the narrative develops.

Byron Almén: The Narrative Level of Analysis

Micznik’s use of story and discourse and Tarasti’s application of isotopies and modality provide a sturdy starting point for the narrative analysis of instrumental music. Each approach uses a two-level method to thoroughly examine an exhaustive variety of musical and “extramusical” categories for analysis. The methods of Micznik and Tarasti are expanded in Byron Almén’s A Theory of Musical Narrative (2008). Almén considers these two-part approaches, among others, within the context of a third methodology technique, what he refers to as the narrative level. The concept behind the narrative level of analysis was borrowed from James Liszka’s The Semiotic of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol (1989). Liszka’s idea, which he applied to literature, asserts that all narrative inherently creates an order-imposing hierarchy, the establishment of which creates tension between the order of the hierarchy and the possible transgression of that order. Throughout the course of a narrative, the perceived markedness and rank relationships established by the hierarchy undergo conflict and revaluation. Liszka calls the process of resolving this conflict transvaluation. Almén suggests the application of transvaluation to literary narrative is equally relevant to musical narrative and his transvaluative approach is important because “if one can articulate the prevailing
oppositions within a work, and if one can observe how they are *transvalued* within that work, then one is articulating its narrative trajectory” (Almén, 66). According to Liszka, the narrative action created by the *transvaluation* of an established hierarchy will fit into one of four possible archetypal plots: the categories of *tragedy, romance, irony,* or *comedy.*

Each archetype can be expressed as a combination of two binary oppositions according to the manner in which *transvaluation* of the established hierarchy occurs: order/transgression and victory/defeat. Almén’s summarization of Liszka’s classification of the archetypes is seen in Table 1, *Archetypal Plots.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archetypal Plots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tragedy:</strong> the defeat of a transgression by an order-imposing hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(defeat + transgression)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romance:</strong> the victory of an order-imposing hierarchy over its transgression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(victory + order)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Irony:</strong> the defeat of an order-imposing hierarchy by a transgression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(defeat + order)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comedy:</strong> the victory of a transgression over an order-imposing hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(victory + transgression)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Almén realizes that “the determination of a narrative archetype is not solely
dependent on the musical data; it is crucially linked to the interpretive standpoint of the
listener or analyst, who must determine what value to place on events” (Almén, 74). For
example, if a 
tragedy
 can be described as the defeat of a transgression by an order-
imposing hierarchy, the listener must view the hierarchy as an unappealing state and the
transgression as a positive force that is defeated. On the other hand, in a
romance,
when the hierarchy is victorious over the transgression, it is assumed that the established
hierarchy is ideal and the transgressive elements are seen in a negative light. 
Irony
 is
similar to 
romance
 in that the established hierarchy is ideal and the transgression is
viewed as negative, however, in an 
irony
 the transgressive forces are victorious and
overthrow the established hierarchy. This particular archetype is employed by Berlioz in

Le Roi Lear Overture.

Finally, 
comedy
 describes an order-imposing hierarchy that is not ideal and the positive transgressive forces that are able to prevail, as seen in 

Les Francs-Juges Overture.

As noted above, the listener or analyst must assign worth to the events
within the narrative in order to discern which archetype the particular narrative falls
under.

In many cases it may be desirable or necessary for the analyst to move beyond the
four main archetypes and express a narrative trajectory to a finer degree. Almén
describes each main archetype as having subtypes which allow for the analyst to place a
narrative along a range of possible trajectories. For example, within the main archetype
of 
romance,
 one might be able to articulate a “tragic romance” which is characterized by
“a particularly strong transgressive element which becomes associated with highly valued
semantic features within the piece and is extremely active or prominent within the narrative trajectory” (Almén, 166). The relative weakness of the order-imposing hierarchy might suggest a hero that is “young and inexperienced” (166), however, the transgressive elements are still defeated and the ideal hierarchy is maintained. On the opposite end of romance there is a “comic romance” in which “a weak transgressive element and/or a less torturous narrative trajectory” (Almén, 167) would imply a self-assured central character and produce a highly stable hierarchy which is never seriously threatened throughout the piece.

The use of archetypal subtypes is important because the more precisely the analyst is able to position a particular narrative trajectory within an archetype, the more one can expect the analysis to be nuanced, detailed, and produce relevant meaning. In Figure 1, I illustrate the four main archetypes and their relationship with one another. Variation within each archetype will render the analysis at hand either closer to, or farther from, an adjacent category. This concept is demonstrated below: the bold lines separate the four main archetypes while the thinner line labeled “TR” depicts the “tragic romance” described above, while “CR” shows where the “comic romance” previously discussed would fall within the archetypal range.
Discerning the process of transvaluation and tracking the use of a particular archetypal plot is vital because it reveals the pertinence of the narrative analysis of music. The narrative level Almén describes is a useful addition to the methodologies of Micznik and Tarasti because it enables the analyst to classify and situate the musical narrative into a culturally relevant and recognizable scenario. Almén states, “the cultural significance of this third level . . . is not merely taxonomic; the archetypes provide a functional justification and explanation for narrative organization in temporal media. By tracking narrative trajectories in musical works, we are observing strategies that apply to any arena where divergent hierarchies are set against one another, whether political, social, interpersonal, psychological, or ideological” (Almén, 75). In his conclusion Almén reiterates the importance of considering musical analysis within the context of the narrative level outlined above. He declares “it must be stressed that these categories are
particularly important insofar as they give focus to the details of the musical unfolding...these details...actually form the heart of narrative interpretation” (222).

The narrative analytical techniques of Micznik, Tarasti, and Almén described in the pages above will be employed in the following analysis of two overtures by Berlioz. The three levels of narrative analysis contained within their methodologies will strengthen the resultant interpretation and provide detail that is thorough, nuanced, and convincing. The techniques that comprise this author’s subsequent methodology will not only elucidate Berlioz’s *aesthetic of eccentricity*, as described by Stephen Rodgers, but it will also show that musical narrative is an essential and deliberate feature of his early overtures. A summary of the methodology used for this analysis is depicted in Table 2.
Table 2.

*Levels of Narrative Analysis*

I. Semiotic Analysis (meaning gathered from morphological, syntactic, and semantic attributes)

- Described by Micznik’s *story* and Tarasti’s use of *spatiality*, *temporality*, and *actoriality* to segment a work into *isotopies*

II. Analysis of Musical Gestures (perceiving discursive strategies)

- The processes in which Micznik’s *discourse* and Tarasti’s *modality* create and define the relationships between individual semiotic events as the music unfolds temporally

III. The Narrative Level

- Placing the narrative within an archetype based on the *transvaluation* of the musical hierarchy
CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS OF *LES FRANCS-JUGES OVERTURE*

Berlioz completed *Les Francs-Juges Overture* in September of 1826. It was his first full-scale orchestral work and was written for a large orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets in C, two bassoons, a contrabassoon, two horns in E-flat, two horns in D, two trumpets in E, two trumpets in E-flat, alto, tenor, and bass trombone, a tuba in C, a tuba in Bb, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, and a full string section. The overture was conceived not as a standalone concert overture but as an overture to an operatic work, a traditional role for such an instrumental piece. The overture was premiered alongside *Overture to “Waverly”* in Paris on May 26th, 1828. Unfortunately for Berlioz, his three-act “lyric drama”, the actual opera *Les Francs-Juges*, was never successfully produced and much of the music from the production was either destroyed or recycled into some of his later orchestral works. However, the libretto survives and gives detailed insight into the program of the overture.

*Les Francs-Juges* took inspiration from the Vehmgericht, the name given to the secret courts of medieval Westphalia in Germany. The judges of these “silent courts” comprised an organization dating back to the 13th century that exercised great influence, including the power to render capital punishment, through the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. By the time they were completely abolished in 1811, the “Judges of the Secret Court”, had been firmly established in German and French folklore.

The plot of Berlioz’s opera is elaborate and complex. Under the rule of the evil king Olmerik, the medieval German kingdom of Breisgau is controlled by self-appointed judges who commit murder and usurpation to retain authority over the realm. The
rightful king is the hero Lenor, who is in love with Amelie. Unfortunately for Lenor, Amelie is betrothed to Olmerik and the despotic ruler seeks to have Lenor killed. The action intensifies in Act III, where Lenor’s trial in the Vehmgericht begins in a gloomy cave with the menacing judges seated above him in large granite chairs. Lenor condemns Olmerik and the rule of the secret judges as they sentence him to death but before his sentence is carried out he is saved by the good citizens and enlightened peasants of Breisgua. Olmerik is destroyed, Lenor’s rightful reign is restored, and love conquers all.

However predictable, the story of the opera gives the listener insight and an appropriate lens from which to view the musical narrative inherent in the overture. The following analysis considers *Les Francs-Juges Overture* within the context of sonata form, as depicted in Table 3. Then I further divide the music into ten separate isotopies that articulate the narrative trajectory of the piece and give meaning to the musical gestures Berlioz employs. A summary of the narrative level of analysis will also follow.
Table 3.

*Analysis of Les Francs-Juges Overture in Sonata Form*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in Sonata Form</th>
<th>Theme(s)/Motive(s)</th>
<th>Isotopy(ies)</th>
<th>Key Area</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slow Introduction</td>
<td>Discontent/Judges/Heartbeat</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>f/D-flat/C</td>
<td>1-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Terror/Rustic</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>f/A-flat</td>
<td>60-193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Lament/Terror</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>194-343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>Rustic/Terror/Rustic</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>E-flat/c/F</td>
<td>344-571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Celebration</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>572-646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Isotopy One*

The overture commences with a *pianissimo* half note F minor chord in the strings, clarinets and horn from which a solemn dotted eighth-sixteenth note figure in the first violins descends through the second half of the opening measure. The already thin texture dissipates in bar two as the melody in the violins slowly climbs back up an F minor scale and the phrase pauses in the third measure of the piece. Measures four through six mimic the opening three bars only they are up a fourth, sounding a B-flat minor chord, and the texture grows as the violas double the melody down an octave from the first violins. The tempo is marked *Adagio Sostenuto* with the quarter note at 72 beats per minute and the use of space, both metrically and texturally, along with the slow
harmonic rhythm in F minor creates a grave and somber atmosphere. The opening of the overture is seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Somber Introduction*

The texture continues to build as the contrabasses, doubled in the bassoon, enter on a G-flat as the strings and winds sustain a crescendo and the bass voices rise chromatically while continuing the dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm over the next seven bars. The rhythm and the chromatic tension drives the crescendo to a passionate *fortissimo* in F minor as both the strings and woodwinds reach into a high and expressive range. This emotional outcry quickly dwindles as the strings softly descend and the
moving line delicately alternates between the first violins and the contrabasses. The strings reach *ppp* and the harmony moves away from F minor as the prominence of G-flat in measures eighteen and nineteen creates an A-flat dominant seventh chord and leads to a cadence in D-flat major in measure twenty as the first *isotopy* concludes. Against the melancholy mood created as the piece begins, the *fortissimo* F minor chord in measure fourteen serves as the emotional climax of *Isotopy One* and the minor mode helps to demonstrate an atmosphere of discontent. This assertion is reinforced by the shift of the tonality to D-flat major at the cadence in measure twenty. I believe *discontent* defines the modality of the first *isotopy* and effectively foreshadows the impending conflict that will develop as the overture unfolds. Figure 3 depicts the emotional climax of the first *isotopy* and the subsequent cadence in D-flat major.

Figure 3. *Discontent*
Isotopy Two

Measure twenty is suddenly fortissimo and features a powerful new timbre, the contrasting sonority of the low brass, trumpet, horn, bassoon, and contrabassoon. This new theme in D-flat major is dominant as it rises in unison diatonically from D-flat to A-flat. Dotted half notes followed by staccato eighth notes comprise the first two measures of the theme and its third measure strongly repeats four A-flat quarter notes, emphasizing the dominant of D-flat major before the melodic line splits into harmony, spelling out an A-flat major chord as the bass voices descend. This four measure phrase is then answered as the theme now starts a fourth higher on the subdominant G-flat before its conclusion returns to the tonic D-flat major. The theme introduced at the onset of Isotopy Two is seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The Theme of Isotopy Two
The string section joins as the theme moves away from D-flat major with the sounding of C-flat before a menacing minor second motive, from A-flat to B-double-flat, is featured. This motive, shown in Figure 5 below, is heard twice in measures thirty-one and thirty-two before ascending staccato eighth notes rise from the bass voices and land on an A-flat dominant seventh chord and the theme returns to D-flat major with an emphatic cadence as the unsettling eight measure phrase concludes. The theme of *Isotopy Two* is drawn out further as measures twenty-eight through thirty-six are repeated, augmented by staccato eighth notes in the strings and by the addition of a C fully diminished harmony over the menacing minor second motive in measures forty and forty-one. Once again the phrase cadences in D-flat major as *Isotopy Two* draws to a close.
The new tonality, potent orchestration, loud dynamic level, and the strong diatonic nature of the new theme shows its supremacy and grandeur cannot be overstated. In addition, the menacing half-step motive adds a sinister quality to the theme and based
on the libretto of the opera, I believe Berlioz is depicting the domineering judges of the secret court with the material of *Isotopy Two*. Though it would not be uncommon for principal thematic material to appear within the slow introduction of a sonata form movement, one would expect the theme to be sounded in either a tonic or dominant key area. The *Judges’ Theme* is heard in D-flat major, and the less traditional harmonic space enhances the semantic qualities of preeminence and dominance. In this way, the *Judges’ Theme* is effective in portraying the exclusive and unapproachable authority held by the powerful hegemony.

**Isotopy Three**

*Isotopy Three* begins immediately after the final cadence of the *Judges’ Theme* as the violas and oboes, marked *pp*, descend chromatically with three quarter notes in thirds. The mood is defined by the high range of the violas, a register Berlioz describes in his *Treatise on Instrumentation* as “distinguished by its mournfully passionate sound” (Berlioz, 60). The descending quarter notes are answered as the entire orchestra sounds a *ff* chord on the following quarter note that resembles a shriek. Grace notes in the piccolo add to this effect and the tension grows as the pattern rises and is repeated. The shrieks of the orchestra comprise a C dominant-seventh chord, an F dominant-seventh chord, a B fully-diminished chord, and a C major chord in succession. The harmonic motion in the wake of the powerful *Judges’ Theme* creates a chain of dominants that leads back to the functional dominant of the home key, F minor. This passage is seen in Figure 6 below.
Figure 6. *Shrieks*

As the loud dynamic of the *tutti* orchestra slackens, the harmony of this *isotopy* stabilizes on C major as the dotted eighth-sixteenth note rhythm from *Isotopy One* returns to the trombones and they repeat the rhythm on the pitches C and E, sounding like a heartbeat. Marked *piano*, a tremolo C pedal begins in the cellos before the contrabasses and timpani also enter on C, repeating the dotted eighth-sixteenth note rhythm half of a
beat away from the trombones. The rhythmic dissonance is suggestive of a heartbeat seized by fear as the oboes and violas soar over the cacophony with the figure from the opening of the piece while an extended crescendo builds. More voices join the texture as the panicked heartbeat pounds on, reaching a forte dynamic before a *fortissimo* eighth note sounding a B fully-diminished seventh chord in first inversion pierces the tension. The texture thins dramatically and a solo violin, marked *piano*, then delicately echoes the heartbeat rhythm as the tempo slows and a final C major chord marks the end of *Isotopy Three*.

The role of Berlioz’s slow introduction, comprised of the first three *isotopies*, is typical in that it unites “the expression of two seemingly incompatible worlds” (Caplin, 205). The composer is able to effectively create the sense of anticipation with the discontinuities and conflicts exhibited within the introduction of the overture. The introduction’s harmonic goal of C major, the functional dominant of the home key, is also congruent with established norms and the listener prepares for a return to F minor at the start of the exposition. Figure 7 illustrates the final eight measures of *Isotopy Three*. 
F minor returns at a *pianissimo* dynamic in the strings but at the brisk pace of *Allegro assai* and in a duple meter with the half note occurring at one-hundred sixty beats per minute. Eighth notes in the first violin occur off of the second beat of measure sixty and ascend through the next measure in F melodic minor, then the line slackens and emphasis is placed on the downbeat of measure sixty-two, sounding an F minor chord.
This gesture is repeated a third higher in measures sixty-two through sixty-four with a C dominant seventh chord over an F pedal sounding on the downbeat of measure sixty-four before the harmony resolves back to F minor on the second beat of that measure. Then the harmonic rhythm increases as the eighth note line in the first violins leaps up a minor sixth and quickly descends to a B fully diminished harmony on the downbeat of measure sixty-five. The contrabasses and cellos create tension by leaping up by a tritone, from F to B, to achieve the diminished harmony. After beat two of measure sixty-five the violins leap further, this time by the interval of an octave, and descend into a C major harmony on the following downbeat of measure sixty-six. The violins clash with the bass voice in this measure, sounding a D-flat against their C, the interval of the minor second should be noted as Berlioz employs this dissonant interval several more times throughout this isotopy. The violins then drop into a lower range and swiftly ascend in eighth notes on an F minor scale with the chromatic addition of D-natural, traversing an octave and a fourth through measure sixty-seven. Marked con furore, the violins continue their frenetic ascent as the rest of the string section accelerates the harmonic rhythm further in measures sixty-eight and sixty-nine. After moving through an E-flat major seventh chord in first inversion, an A-flat major chord, a G major chord, and a C dominant seventh chord, a forte cadence in F minor is achieved on the downbeat of measure 70, the eleventh bar of Isotopy Four.

Immediately following the cadence, the minor second is emphasized again with a gesture from C to D-flat that is sounded in descending octaves throughout the strings. As the gesture reaches the cellos and contrabasses, the interval changes from a half step to a
whole step, sounding C to D-natural as the gesture reverses direction and returns back to the upper strings. This cacophonous effect punctuates the first theme of the *allegro*. The asymmetrical phrasing, uneven harmonic rhythm, unusual harmonic progression, and prominent dissonance depicts an atmosphere of uneasiness, agitation, and anxiety. The qualities possessed by the theme of *Isotopy Four* evoke a state of trepidation, leading this author to assign it the title of the *Terror Theme*. The passage described above is shown in Figure 8.

![Figure 8. The Terror Theme](image)

A second sounding of the *Terror Theme* ensues as the first violins are joined by additional strings and the beginning of the first phrase is repeated. However, instead of another cadence in F minor, the rising violins pause their ascent and continue sounding eighth notes on E-flat. The violins emphasize this pitch for eight measures as the lower strings are joined by the bassoon and tuba, playing staccato quarter notes that tonicize the key of A-flat major. The quarter notes move diatonically across four measures, generally ascending while spelling out an A-flat major triad on the downbeats of measures eighty-
six, eighty-seven, and eighty-eight. These four measures are repeated before the harmony moves away from the relative major. Then the bassoon, tuba, and strings begin a unison passage, dropping in register and playing syncopated quarter notes. This passage employs more chromaticism as it leads the listener through an uncertain harmonic path and toward a plateau as the strings push into a high range and are joined by the upper woodwinds in measure ninety-eight. The woodwinds and upper strings sustain an A-flat major harmony while underneath, the lower strings oscillate between the pitches G-flat and F, another minor second, alternating the harmony from an A-flat major seventh chord to F-minor seventh chord. By this time, the listener recognizes that the interval of the minor second is pervasive throughout this isotopy, linking it to the minor second motive heard in the Judges’ Theme, shown in Figure 5.

Then the low brass and bassoons enter as the prominent voice in the texture and they fall chromatically over the next two measures. Their E-flat is the seventh of an F minor seventh chord, their D-natural is the third in a B fully diminished chord, and their D-flat is the seventh in an E-flat major dominant seventh chord. The lower strings again emphasize the interval of a minor second, oscillating between E-flat and F-flat in measures one-hundred one and one-hundred two. The low brass and bassoon resume their chromatic descent as the four measure set is repeated and the resulting harmonies depict chaos and confusion as they slide downward. As this passage concludes, the low voices split into harmony in measure one-hundred eight and move from a B fully diminished chord to a B-flat dominant seventh chord which cadences in E-flat major in measure one-hundred ten. Functionally, measures one-hundred through one-hundred...
eight serve as a pre-dominant to the B-flat dominant seventh chord in measure one-
hundred nine. Though this constitutes a typical harmonic progression in the early 19th
century, the passage relies heavily on parallel descending motion. This practice avoids
standard voice leading procedures and the effect is amplified by the unusual positions the
bass voices have within the chords. In this instance, the atypical voice leading
exacerbates the feelings of terror and anxiety given by the foreboding low brass and
bassoons. The passage described above is seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Chromatic Descent
Isotopy Five

The final six measures of *Isotopy Four* comprise a transitional passage in E-flat major, providing a dominant harmony for a new theme in A-flat major. Berlioz presents the contrasting theme of the *allegro* section in the relative major of the home key, F minor. First introduced in the violin, this new theme is much more lyrical than the *Terror Theme* and is characterized by a steady harmonic rhythm featuring common diatonic chords and symmetrical phrasing as it forms eight measure sentences and sixteen measure periods typical of the classical style. The melody also contains many attractive leaps and utilizes dotted rhythms to achieve a dance-like effect. This passage is reminiscent of Beethoven or Cherubini as Berlioz is able to capture rustic simplicity and the image of the pastoral extremely well with this theme. I believe this secondary theme of the *allegro* section, the *Rustic Theme*, represents the good citizens and enlightened peasants of Breisgau because of their vital role in the program of the opera. In the previous *isotopy* the *Terror Theme* established its dominance within the musical hierarchy, but the citizens of Breisgau ultimately rescue the hero, Lenor, from the evil forces represented by the *Judges' Theme*. In addition to references to the opera’s program, the stark contrast of musical characteristics between the two themes of the exposition creates a point of contention, enabling the analyst to describe the *Rustic Theme* as the transgressive element of the overture. For this reason, *Isotopy Five* illustrates to the listener the possibility of salvation for the hero. The *Rustic Theme* is shown is Figure 10 below.
The violins carry the *Rustic Theme* for thirty-two measures before the upper woodwinds enter, sounding the melody for an additional twenty-four measures. Underneath the woodwinds, having passed off the melody, the first violins play an A-flat major version of the *Terror Theme*, whose role has changed and is now ornamental. No longer being used to depict chaos and terror, Berlioz’s alteration of the primary theme of the *allegro* to supplement the secondary theme is not without precedent in classical music but it is curious from a musical narrative standpoint. Perhaps Berlioz is foreshadowing an eventual change in the rank relationship of these two themes. The subtle appearance of the *Terror Theme* within this *isotopy* demonstrates the significant potential of the *Rustic Theme* as a challenger within the musical narrative, but I believe that this compositional choice deemphasizes the tension and undermines the conflict between the themes. The composer has weakened the process of *transvaluation*, which describes the change in rank relationships of opposing forces, by placing the theme which was just recognized as the dominant element of the musical hierarchy in the previous *isotopy* into a secondary role prematurely. One might expect to see such an interaction further along the narrative trajectory but not the first appearance of the transgressive force. The intent
of the composer is difficult to discern because this idea is left undeveloped as the *Terror Theme* does not appear underneath the *Rustic Theme* when it is heard in the recapitulation. Figure 11 illustrates the *Terror Theme*’s supporting role underneath the joyful *Rustic Theme*.

![Figure 11. The Terror Theme in a Secondary Role](image)

After the second iteration of the *Rustic Theme*, the entrance of the low brass, sounding a *fortissimo* A-flat dominant seventh chord with the strings and woodwinds, signals a transition ahead. This dominant seventh chord resolves unusually as the G-flat, the seventh of the chord, does not move down into a resultant triad as expected, but rather it moves up a half step, as the A-flat dominant seventh chord moves to a G major sonority, serving as the dominant of the key center which starts the developmental section of the formal design in *Isotopy Six*. 
Isotopy Six

*Isotopy Six* starts the development section of the overture and draws the listener into a world divided. Though the *allegro* tempo is maintained, the flutes and clarinets have whole notes that form a new slow and sorrowful melody in C minor. In his monograph *Classical Form*, William Caplin explains that the introduction of new motivic or thematic material in the development section of a sonata form movement has classical precedents. He states, “Mozart, in particular, likes to introduce melodies that have no obvious connection to the exposition” (Caplin, 139). Marked *piano* and *dolce expressivo*, this melody is shown below in Figure 12.

![Figure 12. Sorrowful Melody](image)

As the melody continues, the strings, marked *poco f*, interject with fragments of the *Terror Theme*. The flutes and clarinets continue their dirge at a *piano* dynamic, unaffected by the activity of the strings. The intensity grows as the energetic voices of
the low brass punctuate phrases with threatening and sinister outbursts, as seen in Figure 13. The half-step between the G and A-flat in the low brass and the diminished harmony the figure spells out as it descends in minor thirds reminds the listener of the menacing half step motive from the *Judges’ Theme*.

Figure 13. *Sinister Outbursts in the Low Brass*

Throughout the duration of this *isotopy*, the sorrowful melody heard in the upper woodwinds remains introspective, never interacting or seeming to be outwardly affected
by the intense commotion stirred throughout the rest of the orchestra. This compositional effect creates a singular, hopeless voice, one that is numb to the outside world and resigned to his fate. Perhaps the isolated melody represents the hero, Lenor, and as it repeats, still in the flutes and clarinets, the string section retreats to the background. At a soft dynamic, the lower strings play quarter notes on the beat and the upper strings with quarter notes off the beat. At the allegro tempo, this texture, though soft, creates momentum and tension as this passage grows. A large bass drum sounds, followed by the beating of the timpani whose rhythm is written in 3/4 while the rest of the orchestra is still in a duple meter. This effect adds to the strain and pressure as the conflict of this isotopy approaches its climax. In addition to the rhythmic tension, the use of the timpani also serves as semiotic evidence that the judges have reached a verdict and the hero’s execution is imminent. The presence of drums at an execution was a well-established tradition in early 19th century France. Many eye witness accounts of King Louis XVI’s execution make mention of the beating drums as the estranged king was led through the streets of Paris and to the scaffold in 1793. Berlioz would later reuse this effective symbol in the beginning of the fourth movement of Symphonie Fantastique, as the hero of that symphony finds himself in a similar predicament.

The tension created by the ominous mood continues to build until the orchestra unites and a tutti fortissimo passage that ascends in C melodic minor is finally reached. This marks the climax of the developmental section and a brief transition leads to the recapitulation. Though Berlioz’s development section is typical in that it “prolongs the home-key dominant at a deep structural level” (Caplin, 139), it is unusual because it fails
to “generate the greatest degree of tonal and phrase-structural instability” (139) within the piece. Harmonically, no modulations occur within this isotopy, it remains in C minor throughout the entire section. Perhaps the lack of harmonic mobility within Berlioz’s development reflects the immobility of the imprisoned hero described by the musical narrative. The modality of Isotopy Six can be described as condemnation. The hopeless resignation of the melody in the flutes and clarinets, the aggressive and hostile nature of the strings and brass, and the composer’s use of the timpani as a symbol of execution all align with the judges’ sentencing of Lenor’s within the program of the opera.

Isotopy Seven

Isotopy Seven begins with the return of the Rustic Theme. The appearance of this theme marks the beginning of the recapitulation and is a timely relief as it quickly challenges the narrative action of the previous isotopy and reassures the listener that all hope is not lost. The theme is now sounded in E-flat major with the melody once again in the violins. For this rendition of the Rustic Theme, Berlioz employs more ornamentation and depth to the melody as the bassoons and cellos provide additional counterpoint and the horns add short fanfares. The flutes, whose sustained notes carry over the melody, seem to insist that justice and decency will prevail. However, the optimistic mood is cut short as this isotopy suddenly concludes and gives way to the return of the Terror Theme.

Two qualities of this isotopy render it unusual for the beginning of a recapitulation. Though brief, the appearance of the secondary theme in the recapitulation before the primary theme of the exposition betrays the established syntax of sonata form.
This is a practice that Berlioz would later employ in *Symphonie Fantastique* and one that becomes a stylistic norm of the composer. However, within this musical narrative, the shift away from the traditional syntax of sonata form provides the analyst with notable evidence of the rise in the *Rustic Theme*’s status and influence within the musical hierarchy. In addition, one would expect the beginning of the recapitulation to be in the home key of F minor. The unconventional tonality is another noteworthy deviation from sonata form that may provide semantic connotations to the musical narrative. Since the Rustic Theme employs a major mode, F minor is obviously unsuitable. However, the use of E-flat major instead of A-flat major, the relative major that was used in the exposition, is a deliberate choice that could foreshadow a possible change in the rank relationship between the *Rustic Theme* and the *Terror Theme* if the tonality continues to avoid F minor as the recapitulation progresses.

**Isotopy Eight**

*Isotopy Eight* marks the return of the *Terror Theme* as eighth notes in the violins rise from forte chords in the strings, woodwinds, and horns. Unexpectedly, the theme is now sounded in C minor instead of F minor, another sign of the theme’s diminishing standing within the musical hierarchy. In addition to the less significant key center, the asymmetrical phrasing and the uneven harmonic rhythm that added to the *Terror Theme*’s potency in the exposition is now rounded out. For twenty measures *forte* chords are sounded on the downbeat of every other measure and only two harmonies are heard, C minor and B fully diminished over a C pedal. Compared to the exposition, the theme now seems to meander without purpose, trapped harmonically and unable to build into an
effective climax. When the theme finally is able to generate more harmonic motion and move from away from C minor, its efforts are interrupted by long and sinuous passages in the strings and later by a peculiar chromatic line in the upper woodwinds, shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14. *The Terror Theme Interrupted*

The lack of cohesion and potency for the *Terror Theme* throughout this *isotopy* has undermined its impact as a serious threat within the musical narrative. However, the *Terror Theme* finally gains some traction as the low brass enter, resounding their chromatic descent from the exposition, this time the passage is augmented by percussion and shrieks in the piccolo. The entire brass section punctuates the *isotopy*, sounding the menacing half step motive at a *fortissimo* before a brief transitional passage emphasizes C major. Finally, the functional dominant of the home key is heard and the listener
anticipates the crucial moment of the musical narrative. Though it musters some strength near the end, the *Terror Theme*’s impotence throughout *Isotopy Eight* describes the modality of this passage as *decline* and further demonstrates how the musical hierarchy is trending toward victory for the transgressive element of the overture.

**Isotopy Nine**

Entering on a *pp* dynamic, the cellos outline the harmonic context of the *Rustic Theme* in F major with quarter notes on the beat and syncopated eighth notes off of the beat. The horns join the thin texture with quarter notes on beat two of every measure before the bassoons enter as a prominent voice, extending their line down into their lower register before landing on an E-flat for four measures, creating an F dominant seventh chord which serves as a secondary dominant that leads to the sub-dominant. The bassoons outline B-flat major and then C major in quarter notes, quickly returning the harmony to F major as they recede in the texture. As the voices in the background grow, the violins continue building the anticipation as they enter with pizzicato half notes that outline the melody of the *Rustic Theme*. Then a solo oboe joins, playing another background figure in support of the theme before the rest of the upper woodwinds enter with fragments of the melody that overlap and intertwine. The energy is palpable as the orchestra continues to grow, heading toward the climax of the overture. Trombones, trumpets, and horns enter with forte quarter notes, a final push before the *Rustic Theme* finally breaks through and is heard in its entirety. Every voice in the orchestra is at *ff* as the trumpets, upper woodwinds, and violins soar with the melody over the next twenty two measures. The second violins and violas support the melody with sweeping eighth
notes as the bass voices outline the harmony with staccato half notes and the trombones and timpani augment the texture with sustained notes every other measure. The climax achieved by this section is extremely convincing and it is the most powerful tutti section since the Judges’ Theme from the opening of the overture. In addition, the climax of the Rustic Theme has transformed the home key from F minor to F major. Seen in Figure 15, this moment depicts the good citizens and enlightened peasants of Breisgau as they rescue Lenor from the forces of evil and it is the turning point in the overture because the transgressive element of the musical hierarchy finally claims the principal key area, thoroughly stripping the Terror Theme of any remaining power or standing within the musical hierarchy. This definitive change in the rank relationship of the contrasting forces within the musical narrative completes the process of transvaluation.
Figure 15. *The Climax of the Rustic Theme*

Isotopy Ten

The energy generated in *Isotopy Nine* is sustained through *Isotopy Ten*, which serves as a coda for the overture. Led by the horns and trumpets, triplet fanfares in F
major are sounded throughout the orchestra in what seems to be the glorious celebration and triumph of the *Rustic Theme*. However, the orchestra splits when the trombones pierce the fanfares with a sustained D-flat on beat two of measure five-hundred eighty, creating a dramatic change in rhythm and texture as the different sections of the orchestra have scattered entrances before moving chromatically downward and reuniting on the dominant C major. This chromatic descent is repeated before the *Judges’ Theme* suddenly returns, spread throughout the winds of the orchestra at *fortissimo* and again sounded in D-flat major.

The tempo of this section is marked *molto vivo* as the rhythmically augmented *Judges’ Theme* is no longer grand and mysterious but surrounded by shrieks in the piccolo, triplet figuration in the violas and cellos, and the pounding of the bass drum and timpani. With the change of the home key to F major, D-flat major is now a remote tonality, showing the decline in the theme’s status within the musical hierarchy. The introduction of C-flat in measure six-hundred sixteen begins to destabilize the D-flat major harmony near the phrase’s completion. Then the tonality is made ambiguous as D-flat moves to D-natural, creating a fully diminished sonority built on B. I believe the distant relationship of D-flat major to the new home key and its harmonic destabilization, shown in Figure 16, symbolizes the defeat of the “Judges of the Secret Court”.
Figure 16. *Defeat of the Judges’ Theme*

Following the final appearance of the *Judges’ Theme*, a chromatic line of quarter notes in the strings and woodwinds reestablishes forward momentum. Then the use of quarter note triplets gives the effect of an accelerating tempo as the end of the overture...
seems imminent. The strings and woodwinds rise into their upper register before the brass and percussion join the texture. The entire orchestra is at a fortissimo dynamic as the rhythm culminates into a syncopated frenzy while the harmony emphasizes the dominant, C major. Out of the dominant, a cadence in F major is postponed as the forward momentum is interrupted by a G-sharp fully diminished chord which is sustained for four measures. The out-of-place harmony is a final surprise before the feeling of forward motion is quickly restored and an emphatic cadence in F major is achieved as the overture concludes.

The Narrative Level of Analysis

The trajectory of the musical narrative employed by Berlioz in Les Francs-Juges Overture is as straightforward as the plot of his opera. As previously discussed, the introduction of the piece is effective in foreshadowing the impending conflict explored as the overture develops. The discontent for F minor, the powerful Judges’ Theme, and the image of a heartbeat seized by fear all contribute to the establishment of the Terror Theme as the dominant element of the musical hierarchy as the exposition begins. This assertion is reinforced by the dominant role the Terror Theme possesses within the context of sonata form. The Rustic Theme introduces a transgressive element to the overture, challenging the asymmetrical and chaotic qualities of the Terror Theme with its simple and lyrical tune. This contrast is central to the narrative action throughout the rest of the overture, as each of these forces vie for control of the musical hierarchy.

One factor of interest is the listener’s perspective of the hero within the overture. Berlioz creates a narrative in which no recurring theme or melody is assigned to the
principal character. The hero is a passive observer throughout the trials and tribulations of the piece, able to express discontent, fear, or a melancholy state but he is not an identifiable presence. This technique magnifies the helplessness of the hero and it also places the listener closer to the narrative action, arousing empathy as the overture progresses through its conflict while increasing the listener’s ability to identify with the situation and relate the narrative to a meaningful and personal human condition.

In the recapitulation, the narrative trajectory starts to favor the transgressor and when the Rustic Theme is sounded in F major, it is clear the initial hierarchy of the overture has been defeated. Since the Rustic Theme is understood as a positive force and the Terror Theme a negative force, Les Francs-Juges Overture falls into the narrative archetype of comedy. When considering a possible subtype and where this particular narrative trajectory lies on the archetypal range as described by Figure 1 in the methodology portion of this paper, one might classify it as an ironic comedy because it places “a strong emphasis on the initial hierarchy” (Almén, 168). As opposed to a romantic comedy, which would feature a weak initial hierarchy that is easily overthrown, the strength of the Terror Theme in the exposition and its presence and influence throughout the developmental section of the overture demonstrates the formidable opposition the Rustic Theme was eventually able to overcome.
CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS OF LE ROI LEAR OVERTURE

Berlioz composed *Le Roi Lear Overture* while in Nice during the spring of 1831. He had recently read the Shakespearean tragedy and the impact of the work was still fresh in his mind as he composed this overture. Since the program of the piece is explicitly linked to Shakespeare’s play, possessing even a basic understanding of the plot and main themes of *King Lear* will greatly enhance the listener’s cognizance of the musical narrative inherent within Berlioz’s overture. In his memoirs, Berlioz recounts the admiration of the King of Hanover after a performance of the overture in 1854. He declared “‘Magnificent, Mr. Berlioz, magnificent! Your orchestra speaks and you do not need any words. I followed all the scenes: the king’s entry to the council chamber, the storm on the heath, the terrible prison scene, and the lament of Cordelia! Oh this Cordelia! How you have portrayed her – her humility and tenderness! It’s heartrending, and so beautiful!’”.

Though Berlioz could not possibly attempt to recreate a musical symbolization of every notable feature or action found in Shakespeare’s rendering, his musical narrative does poignantly depict the emotional disintegration suffered by the protagonist as well as the outside forces that factor into his eventual downfall. Berlioz is also able to depict themes of strength, madness, love, and reconciliation that are pervasive throughout Shakespeare’s tragedy. Similar to the above analysis of *Les Francs-Juges Overture*, this analysis shows *Le Roi Lear Overture* within the context of sonata form, then I divide the music into distinct *isotopies* that help define the overture’s narrative trajectory and illustrate the musical gestures and modalities Berlioz uses to give the listener semantic
meaning to the music. *Le Roi Lear Overture* can be analyzed within the context of sonata form, depicted in Table 4.

Table 4.

*Analysis of Le Roi Lear Overture in Sonata Form*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in Sonata Form</th>
<th>Theme(s)/Motive(s)</th>
<th>Isotopy(ies)</th>
<th>Key Area</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slow Introduction</td>
<td>King/possibility/King</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>C/E-flat/C</td>
<td>1-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Madness/Cordelia</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>C/G</td>
<td>86-223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Madness/Cordelia/Madness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C/a/C</td>
<td>224-338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>King/Madness/Cordelia/King</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>F/C/C/A-flat</td>
<td>340-590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Madness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>591-637</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Isotopy One

The overture begins with the sounding of a robust, stately theme in a unison forte in the lower strings. The rhythmic combination of staccato eighth notes, triplet eighth notes, and dotted eighth-sixteenths throughout the opening statement characterizes strength and dignity as the theme descends nearly two octaves in the first four bars. Though the harmonic space of the first half of this opening theme is unclear, especially as it rests on the interval of a diminished fifth between D and G-sharp, a swift chromatic slide to G-natural as the theme continues into its second half conveys a sense of
confidence and self-assurance. The harmonic direction is recognizable after the leap of a
descending major sixth, A to C, between measures six and seven. This leap is the largest
interval in the opening theme and the conclusion of the phrase implies the key center of C
major with the presence of an E-natural and the dominant to tonic motion of G to C. In
addition to the semantic characteristics of strength, dignity, and self-assurance, the range
of the lower strings connotes the voice of a dominant male character. These factors
support the supposition that this theme represents the main character of Shakespeare’s
tragedy, King Lear. The *King Theme* is shown in Figure 17 below.

![Figure 17. The King Theme](image)

From the very opening statement of *Le Roi Lear Overture*, the analyst becomes
aware of the peculiar style Berlioz employs so effectively. The presentation of the *King
Theme* exhibits many standard characteristics of the formal function of a sentence as
measures total, the first two measures introduce the fundamental melodic material of the
theme and contain distinct motives such as triplet eighth notes and the dotted eighth-
sixteenth note rhythm. Repetition of the motivic material occurs in the next two
measures which Caplin suggests helps the listener to “learn and remember the principal
melodic and motivic material of the theme” (Caplin, 10). Using Caplin’s terms, the listener is able to discern these first four measures as a presentation phrase which creates demand for the continuation phrase needed in order to complete the sentence and give boundaries to the thematic material. Though Berlioz achieves many of the formal requirements of a classical sentence with the King Theme, he deviates greatly from the influences of the classical period with his use of harmony. According to Caplin, the presentation phrase of a sentence typically provides a tonic and then dominant harmonic context and the continuation phrase fragments the thematic material allowing for the acceleration of the harmonic rhythm as the phrase either concludes on the tonic or returns to the dominant for a half cadence. Berlioz’s presentation phrase ends on the interval of a diminished fifth, G-sharp against D, between the violas and lower strings in measure four. Seen in Figure 17, this interval suspends the harmonic context and the tonic key could be either C major or A minor. Not until the completion of the continuation phrase, which fails to fragment thematic material or accelerate the harmonic rhythm, is the tonic key discerned to be C major. Deviations from previously accepted syntax such as this allow for more expressive detail as far as semantic analysis and musical narrative is concerned. Though the listener is uncertain of the harmonic direction after the presentation phrase, the swift chromatic motion into the continuation phrase and the reassuring conclusion of the sentence in the tonic key projects the character represented by the theme as confident, self-assured, and able minded.

After the horn reiterates the dominant to tonic motion in C major heard in measure eight, the King Theme is immediately repeated in the upper strings. However, a
stark contrast is heard as the muted violins are *pianissimo* and the staccato eighth notes that gave the theme in the lower strings emphasis and strength are now legato. The violins also cadence on C major, completing an echo of the previous statement before the introduction of a B-flat in the upper woodwinds creates a C dominant-seventh chord and the theme’s potency is renewed as it returns to the lower strings on a *fortissimo* F. In its return, the first two measures of the *King Theme* are rhythmically identical to the very beginning of the piece, but following the descending leap of a diminished fifth, F to B, the third and fourth measures are characterized by ascending triplets whose eighth notes are grouped in accented pairs in measures twenty-one and twenty-two. This hemiola-like grouping is a vigorous alteration that outlines the dominant of C major as the phrase concludes. The added harmonic context of this phrase provides greater stability and engenders more confidence for the *King Theme* as its energy is sustained with the interjection of a fanfare-like figure in measure twenty-three, reinforcing the regal image of the king, in the upper woodwinds, horns, and trumpets. The lower strings are joined by the bassoon as the theme resumes a measure later and convincingly finishes the phrase by descending into a low register and once again concluding in C major, as seen in Figure 18.
As seen with the first statement of the King Theme, this phrase is also repeated weakly in the upper strings. These echoes are mere shadows of their preceding statements. The strength and vigor of the lower strings, depicted by the range, articulation, and dynamic level, exudes the power of a king, but the frail and weaker upper strings, which are soft, muted, and lack marked articulation, perhaps illustrate King Lear’s desire to step back from power in his advanced age. This dual conception of the protagonist, along with the theme’s proclivity toward C major, are the main observations to be considered within the first isotopy.

Isotopy Two

The second isotopy commences with the tempo marking poco ritenuto while delicate pizzicato triplets in the string section spell out a C major chord. In the following measure the oboe, marked ppp and with dolce assai, introduces a new, poignant eight-
measure melody that is characterized by balanced phrasing and expressive leaps of an octave and a minor seventh. This new theme is diatonic within C major and the oboe reaches into its highest register before the emotional phrase lands on an A minor chord, the sixth scale degree of C major. The oboe’s melody is depicted in Figure 19 below.

![Figure 19. The Oboe Melody of Isotopy Two](image)

As the oboe concludes its phrase, the melody is passed to the flute, clarinet, and bassoon. They quickly return to the tonic chord, C major, and repeat the new theme with the addition of idiomatic figuration in the first violin. Though the first six measures of the melody are repeated verbatim, the final two measures move away from the previously established key center with the introduction of A-flat and E-flat in the melodic line. This time the phrase cadences in C minor and two beats later, with the sounding of a B-flat dominant seventh chord, the harmonic goal for the next phrase is revealed to be E-flat major. Berlioz’s path from C major to C minor, and then from C minor to its relative major E-flat, deftly links the two unrelated key centers of C major and E-flat major and provides a smooth and seemingly effortless transition into the unexpected tonality. The theme is now ardently sounded in E-flat major by a choir of horns and trombones. Repeated sextuplets in the upper woodwinds follow the harmonic motion of the melody and provide rhythmic intensity. Sextuplets also sweep vertically through the cellos,
violas, and violins, ranging through the wide range of the string section and enriching the overall texture surrounding the theme. In addition to the modulation, the changes seen in the supporting figuration are extremely effective in enhancing the emotional depth of this passage. The third and final sounding of this theme is augmented by an additional measure before it also cadences on C minor and uses the same path, in reverse, to return the tonality to C major as the King Theme returns in the next isotopy.

The passage described above is seen in Figure 20.

Figure 20. Modulation to E-flat
The theme that is pervasive in *Isotopy Two* has been shown to be highly valued at this point in the narrative. In addition to being heard three times in succession, Berlioz’s masterful use of orchestration demonstrates how fully the theme is developed, which helps to distinguish the second *isotopy*’s role within the musical narrative. Given the solo oboe soaring into its highest register in the first statement, the theme’s ability to swiftly and proficiently modulate into an unrelated key center at the end of its first repeat, and the beautifully idiomatic and rhythmically interesting sextuplets that envelop the sonorous brass choir in the final repetition, perhaps Berlioz meant to depict the modality of *possibility* with this passage. The jubilation achieved by these effects represents an ideal musical situation in which the full potential of this theme is realized. This model could serve as the goal and aspiration for the other theme within the narrative, the *King Theme*, as the piece moves forward. I believe this theme and its development throughout *Isotopy Two* represents Cordelia. When considering the context of the Berlioz’s program, the modality of *possibility* portrays the prospect of attaining an ideal social condition in which a highly valued human principle is achieved. Of King Lear’s three daughters, only Cordelia adheres to her own sense of morality, refusing to flatter her father with an exaggerated profession of her for him in exchange for the inheritance of his kingdom. Throughout the play, Cordelia represents true love and devotion and maintains an unwavering sense of moral principle.

*Isotopy Three*

*Isotopy Three* begins with the triumphant return of the *King Theme* marked *fortissimo* throughout the entire string section and also doubled in the bassoon. The rest
of the winds, also at a fortissimo, sound a C major chord from which the theme descends with strength and energy following Isotopy Two. The King Theme resounds the two phrases that comprised Isotopy One as the rest of the orchestra provides a definitive harmonic context, which is lacking in the opening of the piece, by sounding diatonic chords within C major in every other measure. This moment of grandeur, which signals King Lear’s entrance into his council chambers, is also marked by the timpani, whose role within the present context has rich semiotic connotations. Berlioz describes the inspiration for the king’s entrance in the opening of Shakespeare’s play in a letter published in Correspondance generale d’Hector Berlioz. Berlioz states “it used to be the practice at French court, as late as 1830 under Charles X, to announce the king’s entrance to his chambers . . . with the sounding of a huge drum which beat a strange rhythm of five beats; this was a tradition handed down from ancient times. This gave me the idea of accompanying Lear’s entrance to his council chamber for the scene where he divides his states with a similar figure on the timpani”. As the King Theme draws to a close, an emphatic Perfect Authentic Cadence in C major marks the pinnacle of the introduction and echoes of this cadence reverberate throughout the breadth of the king’s chamber as the isotopy concludes. A portion of the passage described above is seen in Figure 21 below.
Figure 21. *The King’s Entrance into His Council Chambers*

*Isotopy Three* demonstrates the increase in value the *King Theme* has acquired by the conclusion of the overture’s lengthy introduction. Its enthusiastic presentation in this *isotopy*, sounded in the home key without the meager echoes and with the booming of the regal timpani demonstrates the theme’s considerable rise in value and power since *Isotopy One*. Following the poignant and ideal realm achieved in *Isotopy Two*, the *King Theme* has engendered the utmost confidence and self-assurance; a theme-actor with the
strength and conviction to meet any future challenge. These qualities define the modality of Isotopy Three, authoritatively establish the King Theme as the dominant element of the musical hierarchy, and makes possible the introduction of trangressive elements as the narrative continues. I believe Isotopy Three also illustrates the vanity of King Lear, a crucial character flaw in Shakespeare’s rendering, because such grand ceremony and fanfare is required simply for the King to enter his council chambers.

Isotopy Four

The listener does not have long to relish the majesty in which the third isotopy concludes as the exposition suddenly takes off with the sounding of a new motive marked fortissimo in the strings. The motive is pervasive throughout Isotopy Four, and it races forward at a bright allegro tempo. Short and concise, its first appearance outlines the familiar key center of C major, but an accented B-natural occurs on the downbeat in the upper voices against a C in the bass voice. The tension created by this dissonance persists throughout the allegro section. Following the first appearance of the motive, the strings race ahead as eighth notes contrast with quarter note triplets and the presence of chromatic passing tones obscures the harmonic direction of the first phrase. Then the new motive is heard several times as it sequences up from C to D, E, and F, before it reaches its pinnacle at G. The time between sequences accelerates as the motive ascends in pitch and numerous chromatic passing tones make it difficult to discern the intended harmonic context of this passage. The momentum generated by the sequence of the motive briefly lands the harmony in E-major and C-major before a highly chromatic passage leads to a cadence in D-major as the energy of the allegro is interrupted and
prematurely declines. I have termed the motive that drives this passage the *Madness Motive*, seen in Figure 22, because of the introduction of dissonance throughout this section and the extremely brisk pace of the *allegro*. In addition, the role the motive plays further along in the musical narrative of the overture leads to its association with King Lear’s descent into madness in Shakespeare’s play.

Figure 22. *The Madness Motive*

Throughout *Isotopy Four*, Berlioz portrays the music as out of control and chaotic. One explicit clue of Berlioz’s intent for the *allegro* that starts the exposition is his tempo marking of, *Allegro disperato ed agitato assai*. As shown in Figure 22 above, Berlioz notates the half note in this *allegro* should reach one-hundred sixty-eight beats per minute, however, as Hugh MacDonald points out in his article “Berlioz and the Metronome” (1992), the tempo marking seems to be “unattainably fast” (Bloom, 23). Most recordings set the tempo of this *allegro* with the half note around one-hundred fifty
beats per minute, fast enough to depict the agitation and desperation Berlioz denotes in
the score but not quite able to achieve the indicated marking.

Within the slow introduction, Berlioz introduced the main character of the
overture and established the King Theme as the dominant element of the musical
hierarchy. The contrast between Isotopy Three and Isotopy Four points toward the out-
of-control and dissonant material of the Madness Motive as being a transgressive element
within the musical narrative. The speed with which Isotopy Four attacks the musical
hierarchy is consistent with how quickly King Lear is met with transgressions in
Shakespeare’s play. Soon after the king enters his chambers and divides his state in the
opening scene, multiple plots and conspiracies are conceived by his chosen successors,
overwhelming the king’s ability to control his kingdom. The transgressive forces of this
isotopy are suggestive of action and dynamism within the narrative plot and are
subversive to the characteristics of confidence, strength, and conviction that embodied
the King Theme throughout the introduction. These factors demonstrate the modality of
this passage as conflict. The use of this modality shows another unusual aspect of
Berlioz’s use of the sonata design. The first entrance of the Madness Motive causes a
point of contention at the very onset of the exposition when ordinarily one would
anticipate the transgressive force to be introduced in the second theme group of the
exposition or in the development section of the sonata design. Placing the transgressive
force in the central role within the sonata design implies that the Madness Motive is
central to the narrative plot and will recur often, much like an Idée Fixe.
Isotopy Five

*Isotopy five* is marked *Poco ritenuto* as the frantic tempo and brash volume of the previous section relaxes as the interval of a half step, D and C sharp, oscillates in the strings before the solo oboe introduces a new theme. Though this new melody is highly chromatic, it also contains many expressive leaps and one immediately recalls the poignant oboe melody of *Isotopy Two* and the feelings of jubilation that theme inspired. The second theme of the exposition is based in G major, an expected key center, while the use of rubato throughout this section elicits a much greater feeling of control and composure as the oboe seeks to soothe the listener following the troubling chaos of *Isotopy Four*. Within the play, it is King Lear’s faithful daughter Cordelia who is the voice of reason through moments of crisis, constantly attempting to avert disaster and salvage her father’s legacy. The theme of *Isotopy Five* achieves this effect and therefore represents Cordelia within the musical narrative. Berlioz’s mindful choice of the oboe to express her pleadings as King Lear is drawn into depravity could have been influenced by his admiration of Gluck’s use of the oboe in a passage of *Iphigenie en Aulide, Act I*. In describing the oboe’s sorrowful tone in Gluck’s opera in his *Treatise on Orchestration*, Berlioz states “what other instrument could so poignantly express these laments of an innocent voice, this prolonged and ever more urgent supplication?” (Berlioz, 167). The description of Gluck’s use of the oboe matches perfectly the role of King Lear’s beloved daughter and an excerpt of the *Cordelia Theme* is shown in Figure 23 below.
The solo oboe voice is predominant for three consecutive phrases and is joined by a solo bassoon as the first repetition of the *Cordelia Theme* finishes. The key area of G major is also very familiar and reassuring to the C major of the *King Theme*. As the entreaty of this isotopy continues, flutes in ascending thirds add to the effect of fondness and affection within the second repetition of the *Cordelia Theme*. As Berlioz states, “an effect of remarkable tenderness can be achieved by two flutes playing successions of thirds in the medium range” (Berlioz, 230). The first violins are the primary voice in the third repetition of the calming *Cordelia Theme* but as they finish the first phrase the use of rubato is discontinued and the final phrase is no longer *poco ritenuto* as the energy pushes the tempo back to the allegro of *Isotopy Four* and the *Madness Motive* returns.

Through his attentive use of the oboe, Berlioz cleverly helps the listener to associate *Isotopy Five* with *Isotopy Two*. The modality of *possibility*, which inspired such strength and confidence for the *King Theme* in the closing of the introduction, is clearly linked to the soothing and comforting presence found within this *isotopy*. If the *King Theme* is to achieve its full potential and stave off the *Madness Motive* for control of the musical hierarchy, it must garner its strength and draw purpose and direction from the loving and supportive *Cordelia Theme*. 

Figure 23. *The Cordelia Theme*
Isotopy Six

The modality of Isotopy Six, struggle, reflects the ensuing clash set up by the two preceding isotopies. A clear dichotomy between the intent of the Cordelia Theme and the intent of the Madness Motive now exists. Isotopy Six explores the conflict of this tension and serves as the development section of the sonata design as the Cordelia Theme must assert itself amid the intense rhythmic and harmonic commotion stirred by the Madness Motive. Sequential momentum builds until the strings sound three fortissimo fully-diminished chords built on G-sharp. Suddenly the texture thins as the Cordelia Theme, at a piano dynamic in the flute and bassoon, attempts to assert itself amid the chaos. But the feeble effort of the Cordelia Theme cannot gain traction and the fervor of the Madness Motive, sounded in all the upper voices of the orchestra, returns and quickly engulfs the weak plea. Again, fortissimo G-sharp fully-diminished chords are repeated and the addition of an E natural to the G-sharp fully-diminished harmony in measure two-hundred fifty-one creates additional tension, especially the minor second between E natural and F natural, which demands resolution. After another sudden change in texture, the Cordelia Theme emerges from the conflicting harmony, sounding its melody in full in the flute and bassoon. The struggle between the Madness Motive and the Cordelia Theme can be seen in Figure 24 below.
The *Cordelia Theme* has risen a whole step since *Isotopy Five* and the melody is now in A minor instead of G major. The harmony in measures two-hundred fifty-one and two-hundred fifty-two is now understood as a dominant, a V-9 of the new key area. The oboe has disappeared as a prominent voice and the minor mode has created the mood of melancholy and resignation. Berlioz’s tempo marking of *perdendo . . . ancora un poco ritenuto* (*fading away...still more slowly*) contributes further to the woeful state of this passage as the theme is shared by the flutes and clarinets at a dynamic of *ppp*. As the *Cordelia Theme* cadences in A minor, the *Madness Motive* stirs in the low range of the strings, restoring the *allegro* tempo. The above passage is shown in Figure 25 below.
Following the cadence in A minor, the energy grows over the next thirty measures and once again momentum clearly favors the *Madness Motive* as Berlioz expands the texture to include all the winds and the timpani in a prolonged crescendo. The culmination of this crescendo reveals the full strength of the motive as it is sounded at *fortissimo* in C major throughout the entire orchestra. This energy and dynamic level is sustained as the *Madness Motive* sequences up through diatonic modes of C major including D minor, E minor, and G major with a dominant seventh before returning to C major as this section reaches its conclusion. Four emphatic C major chords are sounded asymmetrically with three, then four, and then two measures of separation. Between the chords, Berlioz creates rhythmic intensity as the winds disorient the beat, syncopating the measure before each *tutti* chord. The climax achieved by the *Madness Motive* is shown in Figure 26.
Figure 26. *The Climax of the Madness Motive*

The importance of this climatic passage to the musical hierarchy should be observed. Not since the closing of the introduction, in which the *King Theme* confirmed its dominance of the narrative, has there been such an emphatic *tutti* passage. In addition, the climax sparked by the *Madness Motive* is in C major, the same key area previously claimed by the *King Theme*. In its absence, the transgressive element of the musical narrative has challenged the *King Theme* for its domain. The *King Theme* being ousted from the home key of the overture could symbolize King Lear’s loss of control and influence within his own kingdom as plots transpire throughout Shakespeare’s play. The
climax of the *Madness Motive* can be associated to the scene of the great storm in Act III of *King Lear* because the storm marks the point where the king’s madness reaches its height as he rants against the corruption of his two ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan.

**Isotopy Seven**

Out of the climax of the *Madness Motive* the estranged *King Theme* finally returns at a *fortissimo* dynamic level in the lower strings, the bassoon, the tuba, the oboe, and the clarinet. Its return marks the beginning of the recapitulation and at the quick tempo the theme now seems rejuvenated as the dexterity of the low voices is pushed to the limit. The attributes of strength, dignity, and self-assurance which characterized the *King Theme* also return as the theme advances triumphantly forward. However, the theme is now sounded in F major instead of C major, hinting at its decline in status within the musical narrative. The *King Theme*’s occupation of a less valued key area demonstrates the process of *transvaluation* as the narrative continues to unfold. As the theme moves forward, it is heard in its entirety before every voice in the orchestra shouts the primary phrase of the theme in a unison *fortissimo*. Rather than a display of strength, this is a moment of desperation, the final wail before the fraught theme is exhausted of all energy and stripped of any remaining vitality. The texture quickly thins as the tempo and dynamics decrease dramatically and fragments of the theme dwindle into the silence of a grand pause. In keeping with the plot of Shakespeare’s play, I believe this *isotopy* describes King Lear’s reunion with Cordelia as they lead French forces into battle in an attempt to reclaim the King Lear’s sovereignty. The final moments of *Isotopy Seven*
describe the defeat of the French invaders and the capture of Cordelia and King Lear. At this point, the prospect of the King Theme reclaiming control of the musical narrative seems quite dim. The defeat of the King Theme is seen in Figure 27.

Figure 27. The King’s Defeat
Isotopy Eight wastes no time in confirming the relegated status of the King Theme as an energetic shimmering in the violins grows out of the silence of the grand pause and needs only ten measures to build back into another climax of the Madness Motive in C major. G major and B minor chords at a fortissimo dynamic follow the climax and they are separated by a sigh gesture in the violins which is shown in Figure 28 below. This passage contrasts the fortissimo chords with a sparse texture which is metrically disorienting with accented quarter notes on beat four of every measure. This figure emphasizes the interval of a minor second, and its rhythm is similar to the beginning of the Madness Motive. It is heard for eight measures until it is punctuated forcefully by another tutti G major chord and the oscillating half step between G and F-sharp that follows signals the final return of the Cordelia Theme in C major.

Figure 28. The Sigh Gesture
The *Cordelia Theme* returns in the flute and first violin in the tonic key; however, the tempo does not slow to the *poco ritenuto* of the first two renditions of this theme. As the theme moves forward, the woodwinds have syncopated quarter-note triplets behind the melody which add to the feeling of hastiness and uneasiness. The pace finally slows after a tender moment which features the ascending leap of a major sixth in the melodic line, but as the theme approaches its final phrase the *allegro* suddenly returns and the ominous rumblings of eighth notes in lower strings remind the listener of the uselessness of Cordelia’s pleas. The ascending flutes in thirds, which were so tender and affectionate before, lack those qualities at this tempo and the listener also notices the complete absence of the oboe as a prominent voice throughout this passage, severing the link between the *Cordelia Theme* and the optimism of *Isotopy Two*. The theme concludes and the upper strings alternate sets of eighth notes that resemble the *Madness Motive* and sequence upward as a low chromatic line also ascends slowly in whole and half notes in the low brass, bassoon, and clarinet. Energy builds as the chromatic line rises an octave and a half before splitting into a B minor chord, setting the stage for the final entrance of the *King Theme* in the distant key area of E major. The efforts exerted by the *Cordelia Theme* seemed to have been made in vain, as the status of the *King Theme* within the musical hierarchy continues to descend throughout *Isotopy Eight* and triumph over the transgressive *Madness Motive* is ever more unlikely.

**Isotopy Nine**

*Isotopy Nine* is marked by the final appearance of the *King Theme* in measure five-hundred forty-four. The theme returns to the lower strings and sounds the original
pitches of its first appearance and the rhythm of theme has been augmented so that its pace feels similar to the introduction of the overture despite the allegro tempo. However, unlike the introduction fortissimo E major, A minor, G-sharp fully diminished, and D-sharp fully diminished triads have taken the place of the diatonic chords in C major. The theme becomes fragmented and is cut short, ending on a surprising A-flat major triad. This chord occupies a large registral space and with the tuba and timpani only a major third above the lower strings, Berlioz’s tight voicing of this chord in the lower voices effectively portrays the burden of the King Lear’s loss. I believe this passage depicts the grotesque and helpless character King Lear has become upon Cordelia’s death in the play. This passage can be seen in Figure 29.
Cacophony ensues as the character represented by the *King Theme* then completely unravels throughout this highly chromatic section which features frantic eighth notes in the upper strings as they outline the shape of the *Cordelia Theme* while a metrically disjunctive line of quarter notes in the low strings and low brass depicts emotional confusion and tumult. The passage is marked *sempre fff* and the upper strings and upper woodwinds reach into their highest extremes before a shouting of the *Madness Motive* is punctuated with a pizzicato half note throughout the string section. After a
short pause the motive is repeated at piano, concluding Isotopy Nine. Defeat describes the modality of this passage as it becomes clear the transgressive element of this musical narrative is certain to be the victor. Unable to combat the pressures applied by the Madness Motive, the King Theme has been alienated, never to return. This sentiment reflects the death of King Lear in Shakespeare’s play, who after the death of Cordelia finally succumbs to the grief of having lost everything important to him.

Isotopy Ten

The final isotopy of the overture is a coda marked poco piu mosso in which the triumphant Madness Motive, moving faster than ever, sequences upward diatonically in C major from C to A before landing on a dominant seventh chord built on G. Berlioz suspends the final cadence as the Madness Motive reappears in passages of discord. A swift chromatic line in the bass voices plunges the harmony back toward the dominant, G, as the last energetic measures of the piece pass through the subdominant and dominant before the piece concludes with a resolute cadence on C major. With the process of transvaluation complete, rather than mourning the desolate King Theme, Isotopy Ten rejoices in the macabre victory of the Madness Motive and for this reason the modality of this isotopy is morbid celebration.

The Narrative Level of Analysis

Le Roi Lear Overture is Berlioz’s attempt to musically render a Shakespearean tragedy, so one might assume the trajectory of the musical narrative to fit into the archetype of tragedy as well. However, according to the classification used by Almén seen in the first chapter of this paper, a tragic narrative is described as the defeat of a
transgression by an order-imposing hierarchy in which the transgression is seen as a positive force. Though the decline of the central character following the introduction of this overture certainly evokes tragic topics, the process of transvaluation demonstrates how this piece falls into a different archetype. The central character put forward by Berlioz in the introduction features a strong and noble protagonist, one who is not perfect, but one who strengthens throughout the lengthy opening and seems to gain complete control and power throughout the beginning of the narrative. This character’s standing is established as the initial hierarchy and the transgressive element, the Madness Motive, is seen as a force that mutates and overwhelms the positive attributes of the King Theme as the narrative progresses. By the conclusion of the piece, the main character is completely disenfranchised and helpless within his reality, unable to repel the advancing transgressions. With this view, the defeat of the hierarchy by the transgressive components of the narrative, one can point to the musical discourse as placing this particular narrative within the realm of irony.

Recalling the earlier discussion of the four archetypes and their subtypes, Le Roi Lear Overture can be designated as a tragic irony, which Almén describes as the “disintegration or overturning of the initial hierarchy, leaving nothing, or something of lesser value in its place” (Almén, 169). The listener recognizes this scenario within the narrative trajectory of the overture, there is little doubt that the King Theme is of higher value than the discordant and truculent material of the Madness Motive. The placement of this musical narrative into the archetype of irony instead of tragedy, as one might suspect of a musical rendition of a Shakespearean tragedy, reveals another quality of
Berlioz’s *aesthetic of eccentricity*. Whether or not it is perceived to be a flaw, the incongruity between the reference of the program and the actual design of the musical narrative can be misleading and demonstrates Berlioz’s willingness, Mendelssohn might have said clumsiness, in molding and reshaping inspirational materials toward his own expressive end.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

As noted in the introduction of this paper, musicologist Stephen Rodgers explains that Berlioz’s fascination with literature and complex poetic ideas was crucial in the development of his musical style. Not surprisingly, the theoretical techniques of narratology, which were first conceptualized and applied to literature, provide a rich and detailed analysis of Berlioz’s music. The aesthetic of eccentricity that describes Berlioz’s style is prominent throughout both Les Francs-Juges Overture and Le Roi Lear Overture as there are many cases where Berlioz deviates from the common practices of early 19th century music. After an analysis utilizing narrative analytical techniques, I argue that Berlioz’s compositional decisions within these overtures, whether breaking away from tradition or adhering to accepted practices, were made in pursuit of enhancing his musical narrative and that it was this practice that resulted in his peculiar style. The composer placed narrative above all else and when necessary was willing to sacrifice convention to achieve this end.

In many ways, the introduction of Les Francs-Juges Overture is typical of a slow introduction in the classical style. It effectively creates the sense of anticipation before the exposition, it introduces important thematic material, and it builds a powerful expectation for a return of the home key tonic at the start of the exposition. In addition, this introduction embodies a unifying characteristic common to most classical era slow introductions in that the overall mood it depicts is one of hesitation and uncertainty. Caplin states that “they almost always contain something of the hesitant and uncertain” (Caplin, 205), and this attribute aligns with the musical narrative Berlioz wished to
describe within *Les Francs-Juges Overture*. But the mood of his slow introduction to *Le Roi Lear Overture* is in no way uncertain or hesitant. The *King Theme* is seen as powerful and noble force who strengthens throughout the introduction and establishes dominance within the musical hierarchy. I believe Berlioz broke away from the standard practice for slow introductions in *Le Roi Lear Overture* because an uncertain, hesitant mood did not makes sense within the musical narrative he wished to describe.

Another example of when Berlioz’s musical narrative dictates whether he follows or breaks away from stylistic norms is found in the composer’s treatment of the exposition in *Les Francs-Juges Overture*. In an effort to depict terror, anxiety, and confusion, the first theme of his exposition utilizes a high level of chromaticism, an uneven harmonic rhythm, and forms abnormal phrase lengths. For example, a cadence is heard on the down beat of the eleventh bar in the *Terror Theme*’s first appearance. Then the cadence is followed by three measures of rhythmic and harmonic dissonance before the theme repeats starting in the fourteenth bar of the exposition. Berlioz’s unstylistic treatment of phrasing throughout this section is sharply contrasted by the steady harmonic rhythm, diatonic melody, and symmetrical phrases of the second theme. The *Rustic Theme* embodies the classical style and depicts the fair and decent people of the countryside who eventually save the protagonist. This comparison demonstrates purposeful intent and shows the composer’s flexibility as he adapts his compositional procedures to fit the objective of the musical narrative.

In many cases, deviating from the standard harmonic practices of his time allowed Berlioz to not only depict the complex characteristics and qualities of his programs in a
static manner, but also enabled him to describe in greater detail how characters undergo dynamic changes within a narrative trajectory. This point is crucial when considering how these overtures relate to and influence the world around us as we often find meaning not from **what** happens but rather from **how** it happens, a distinction that Berlioz’s *aesthetic of eccentricity* is able to accentuate deeply. For example, according to Caplin, the return of the *King Theme* in the recapitulation of *Le Roi Lear Overture* in the subdominant key area of F major instead of the home key C major, “has antecedents in baroque and preclassical practice” (Caplin, 174). However, based on those previous cases, the material of the main theme would be expected to return in the home key later in the recapitulation or coda. But this established practice did not suit the purposes of Berlioz’s musical narrative. The theme is heard again in the recapitulation but the harmonic context of the *King Theme*’s second return is even further away from the tonic key, effectively describing the king’s descent into madness and tragedy. In each reappearance of the *King Theme*, Berlioz uses the harmonic context to signal changes in the hierarchal relationship of opposing themes, illustrating the process of *transvaluation* and enhancing his description of the overture’s narrative trajectory.

The episodic tendency of Berlioz’s music allows for the methodological techniques of Tarasti, more so than the techniques of Micznik or Almén, to uncover the meaning behind composer’s music. Dividing the score into distinct *isotopies* which are each described by a *modality* provided the clearest insight into the narrative trajectories of these overtures because this technique aligns with the composer’s most important stylistic trait, the *Idée Fixe*. Perhaps the most important deviation from stylistic norms
within these two overtures is the role of the *Madness Motive* within *Le Roi Lear Overture* and how it effects the composer’s use of the sonata design. There has been ample analysis of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and how the composer adjusts and manipulates sonata form to account for the highly episodic and unpredictable nature of his *Idée Fixe*. The *Madness Motive* is similar in how its reoccurrences change the traditional nature and function of different sections within the form to better fit into the trajectory of the musical narrative. For instance, the motive’s frequent appearance throughout the development and recapitulation sections of *Le Roi Lear Overture* and its climax in the development section blurs the roles between development and recapitulation. Normally, the climax of expository material is reserved for the recapitulation and though the *Madness Motive* is pervasive throughout the recapitulation, its high point occurs where it makes the most sense within the trajectory of the musical narrative, and the program that narrative describes, rather than where it would traditionally occur within the sonata design. The preference for narrative before form leads to the blending of various formal designs within Berlioz’s later instrumental music, an eccentricity described in detail by musicologist Stephen Rodgers, and one that defines the legacy of the composer within the genre of Romantic music.

In the conclusion of her article “Music and Narrative Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler,” Vera Micznik finds that the music of Mahler lends itself to a narrative analysis far more than the music of Beethoven. She generalizes that a high degree of “narrativity” is a defining characteristic of Romantic music, particularly late-Romantic music. Her juxtaposition of Beethoven and Mahler is well suited for this
conclusion because the music of the two composers is separated by a substantial margin of time, as each composer’s music is considered to be the height of their respective eras. I believe the level of “narrativity” within Berlioz’s early orchestral overtures rivals that of some late-Romantic works despite *Les Francs-Juges Overture* and *Le Roi Lear Overture* being written in 1826 and 1831. The above analysis demonstrates how the use of musical narrative within these overtures shaped his style, while the clarity with which that narrative is presented reveals how Berlioz’s *aesthetic of eccentricity* helped to establish the zeitgeist of Romantic music.
REFERENCES


