

## **Le cinq mai: chant sur la mort de Napoléon**

Text by Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857)

H. 74, 1831-35

### **Le cinq mai: chant sur la mort de Napoléon**

1. Des Espagnols m'ont pris sur leur navire,  
Aux bords lointains où tristement j'errais.  
Humble débris d'un héroïque empire,  
J'avais dans l'Inde exilé mes regrets.  
Mais loin du Cap, après cinq ans d'absence,  
Sous le soleil, je vogue plus joyeux.

*Refrain:* Pauvre soldat, je reverrai la France;  
La main d'un fils me fermera les yeux.

2. Dieu! le pilote a crié: Sainte-Hélène!  
Et voilà donc où languit le héros!  
Bons Espagnols, là finit votre haine;  
Nous maudissons ses fers et ses bourreaux.  
Je ne puis rien, rien pour sa délivrance;  
Le temps n'est plus des trépas glorieux.

*Refrain:* Pauvre soldat, je reverrai la France;  
La main d'un fils me fermera les yeux.

3. Il fatiguait la Victoire à le suivre;  
Elle était lasse; il ne l'attendit pas;  
Trahi deux fois, ce grand homme a su vivre;  
Mais quels serpents environnent ses pas!  
De tout laurier un poison est l'essence;  
La mort couronne un front victorieux.

*Refrain:* Pauvre soldat, je reverrai la France;  
La main d'un fils me fermera les yeux.

### **The fifth of May: song on the death of Napoleon**

1. Some Spaniards took me on board their ship  
From the distant shores where I sadly roamed.  
Humble relic of a heroic empire,  
I had taken my sorrows in exile to India.  
But far from the Cape, after five years away,  
I sail more joyfully under the sun.

*Refrain:* Poor soldier, I will see France again:  
A son's hand will close my eyes.

2. God! The pilot cried out, "St. Helena!"  
So that's where the hero languishes!  
Good Spaniards, your hatred ends there;  
We curse his chains and his tormentors.  
I can do nothing, nothing to save him;  
The time for glorious deaths has passed.

*Refrain:* Poor soldier, I will see France again:  
A son's hand will close my eyes.

3. He challenged Victory to keep pace:  
She tired; he did not wait.  
Twice betrayed, the great man chose to live;  
But what snakes surround his every step!  
Every laurel contains a poison;  
Death crowns the victor's brow.

*Refrain:* Poor soldier, I will see France again:  
A son's hand will close my eyes.

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Addendum to *Experiencing Berlioz: A Listener's Companion* by Melinda O'Neal  
(Rowman & Littlefield, 2018)

(Le cinq mai continued)

4. Dès qu'on signale une nef vagabonde,  
"Serait-ce lui?" disent les potentats,  
"Vient-il encor redemander le monde?  
Armons soudain deux millions de soldats."  
Et lui, peut-être accablé de souffrance,  
À la patrie adresse ses adieux.  
Mais que vois-je au rivage?  
Un drapeau noir!  
Quoi! lui mourir! ô gloire, quel veuvage!  
Autour de moi pleurent ses ennemis,  
Loin de ce roc nous fuyons en silence;  
L'astre du jour abandonne les cieux.

*Refrain:* Pauvre soldat, tu reverras la France;  
La main d'un fils te fermera les yeux.

4. As soon as any stray ship is seen,  
"Is it him? Is it him?" the potentates ask.  
"Has he come back to reclaim the world?  
Put two million soldiers under arms at once."  
While he, perhaps broken by suffering,  
Bids farewell to the fatherland.  
But what is that on the shore?  
A black flag! What! Could he have died? Him?  
O glory, how you are widowed!  
His enemies weep all around me.  
We flee in silence, far from that rock;  
The light of day departs from the skies.

*Refrain:* Poor soldier, you will see France again:  
A son's hand will close your eyes.

– Translation by Hugh Macdonald  
and Katherine Kolb

Note: Béranger, a poet and songwriter hugely popular among the republican working class, was honored at his death as a national poet. Twice imprisoned for anti-royalist songs under the Restoration, he was influential in fomenting the three-day Revolution of 1830, in which Berlioz also took enthusiastic part. But Berlioz recognized early on the limitations of Béranger's poetic skills: he composed this song, he said, because its "demi-poetry" struck him as expressing musically apt feelings. A tribute to Napoleon he fully admired—and knew by heart—was Victor Hugo's poem "Lui!" (Him!) Unlike Béranger, ambivalent about Napoleon (though not the young Bonaparte, embodiment of republican ideals), Berlioz retained a lifelong admiration for Napoleon. He would also admire—unlike Hugo—the great man's nephew Napoleon III, whom he celebrated in his cantata *L'Impériale*, and implicitly in his *Te Deum*. – KK

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