

The New Criterion

Music

February 2004

"Cellini" at the MET

by [James Penrose](#)

“Malvenuto Cellini”? How astonishing that the public dismissed Berlioz’s early opera *Benvenuto Cellini* with that contemptuous epithet. Luscious arias for the female roles, astonishing rhythmic innovations, a dramatic score that transcends a libretto that itself was the only reason the opera was ever written—*Benvenuto Cellini* has it all. How could Berlioz’s contemporaries not respond to this delightful work? In fact, the sorry reception of *Benvenuto Cellini* established a pattern that echoed throughout the unhappy career of this man who—as he wrote in his bitterly funny *Mémoires*—“had the imprudence to be born in a not very musical nation at a not very musical time.”

Berlioz recounts the origins of *Benvenuto Cellini* in his splendid *Mémoires*. He was thirty-one and earning his living as a musical journalist when he came ...

James Penrose is **James F. Penrose** writes about music for *The New Criterion*.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 22 February 2004, on page 59

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/cellini-penrose-1592>