

Synopsis

PART I

Acts I and II In and around the Walls of Troy

PART II

Acts III and IV Dido's Court

Act V The Trojan encampment at the harbor

Act I

After ten years of siege, the Greeks have departed from Troy, leaving behind a giant wooden horse as an offering to Pallas Athena. Only the prophetess Cassandra, daughter of the Trojan king Priam, wonders about the significance of their enemies' disappearance. In a vision, she has seen her dead brother Hector's ghost walking the ramparts. She has tried to warn her father of impending disaster and now urges her fiancé, Coroebus, to flee the city, but neither man will listen to her. When Coroebus begs her to join the peace celebrations, she tells him that she foresees death for both of them.

The Trojans offer thanks to the gods. Hector's widow Andromache brings her young son, the heir to the throne, before King Priam and Queen Hecuba. The warrior Aeneas arrives and reports that the priest Laocoön is dead. Suspecting the wooden horse to be some kind of a trick, Laocoön had thrown his spear at it and urged the crowd to set fire to it, when two giant sea serpents appeared and devoured him and his two sons. Priam and Aeneas order the horse to be brought into the city to beg pardon of Athena. Cassandra realizes that this will be the end of Troy.

Act II

Aeneas is visited by the ghost of Hector, who tells him to escape the city. His destiny, he says, is to found a new empire that someday will rule the world. As the ghost disappears, Aeneas's friend Panthus runs in with news that the Greek soldiers who emerged from the horse are destroying the city. Aeneas rushes off to lead the defense.

The Trojan women pray for deliverance from the invaders. Cassandra prophesizes that Aeneas and some of the Trojans will escape to Italy to build a city—a new Troy. Coroebus has fallen, and Cassandra prepares for her own death. She asks the women if they will submit to rape and enslavement. When Greek soldiers enter, the women collectively commit suicide. Aeneas and his men escape with the treasures of Troy.

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Act III

Carthage, North Africa. The people greet their queen, Dido. In the seven years since they fled their native Tyre following the murder of Dido's husband, they have built a flourishing new kingdom. Dido's sister Anna suggests that Carthage needs a king and assures her sister that she will love again. Visitors are announced who have narrowly escaped shipwreck in a recent storm—they are the remaining survivors of the Trojan army, with Aeneas among them. Dido welcomes them. When news arrives that the Numidian ruler, Iarbas, is about to attack Carthage, Aeneas identifies himself and offers to fight alongside the Carthaginians. Dido accepts, and Aeneas rallies the united forces of Carthage and Troy, entrusting his son, Ascanius, to the queen's care.

Act IV

Aeneas has returned victorious to Carthage. During a royal hunt, he and Dido seek shelter from a storm in a cave. They discover their love for each other.

It is several months later. Narbal, the queen's adviser, is worried that since Dido fell in love with Aeneas, she has been neglecting her duties. He fears that in welcoming the Trojan strangers, Carthage has invited its own doom. Dido enters with Aeneas and her court to watch an entertainment of singing and dancing. She asks Aeneas to tell her more about Troy's last days. When he talks about Andromache, Hector's widow, who married Pyrrhus, one of the enemy, Dido sees a parallel to her own situation. Alone, she and Aeneas again proclaim their love, as the god Mercury reminds Aeneas of his duty and destination—Italy.

Act V

At night in the Trojan camp by the harbor, a young sailor sings a homesick ballad. Panthus and the Trojan captains are worried about omens and apparitions that remind them of their failure to move on. Aeneas enters, torn between his love for Dido and his duty to leave Carthage. He makes up his mind to see the queen one last time. But when the ghosts of Priam, Hector, Coroebus, and Cassandra appear, urging him to leave, he orders his men to set sail before sunrise. Dido appears. Aeneas swears that he loves her but must leave her. She curses him. As dawn breaks, the queen asks her sister to persuade Aeneas to stay, but the Trojan ships are already on their way out to sea. Furious, Dido orders a pyre built to burn his gifts and remembrances of their love. Now resolved to end her life, she bids farewell to Carthage and everything she held dear.

The pyre has been set up. Priests pray for Dido, who predicts that her fate will be remembered: a future Carthaginian general, Hannibal, will avenge her against Italy one day. Then she stabs herself with Aeneas's sword. Dying, she has a vision of Carthage destroyed by eternal Rome. As the Roman Capitol is seen like an apparition in the distance, the Carthaginians curse Aeneas and his descendants.

In Focus

Hector Berlioz

Les Troyens

*Premiere: Paris, Théâtre Lyrique, 1863 (Acts III–V, as Les Troyens à Carthage)
Karlsruhe, Court Theater, 1890 (complete)*

A five-act grand opera of magnificent sweep, *Les Troyens* is the culmination of the extraordinary career of Hector Berlioz (according to the composer himself). The work includes large-scale choruses, ballets, complex ensembles, and gripping and insightful vocal solos, combined with a unique use of the orchestra, highlighted in a thrilling symphonic interlude. The subject is a series of key incidents from Virgil's epic *Aeneid*, the tale of Aeneas, a Prince of Troy and witness to the fall of that legendary city to the Greeks. Ordered by the gods to found a new Troy in Italy (which would become the city of Rome), Aeneas on his travels encounters and falls in love with Dido, the Queen of Carthage, before reluctantly completing his divinely ordained mission. Many ancient tales are set amid the aftermath of the Trojan War, sharing as their background the rise of a new order out of the downfall of the old. The *Aeneid* is one of the supreme foundation myths of European civilization, enshrining Rome as the culmination of human achievement in such powerful terms that its imagery remains potent and pervasive to this day. Berlioz's passionate devotion to the *Aeneid* was more than abstract: a self-conscious visionary seeking new directions in art and music, his devotion to the epic was deeply personal as well.

The Creators

Hector Berlioz (1803–1869), a French composer, conductor, music critic, and essayist, was a major figure of 19th-century musical life. More celebrated in his lifetime as a conductor and writer, his uninhibited reviews and articles make for lively reading even today, and his *Treatise on Instrumentation* (1844) has had a profound impact on later composers. His musical works were extravagantly praised and even more intensely vilified in his day, and it is only within the last few generations that his stature as a groundbreaking composer has been recognized and that several of his operas have entered the repertory.

The Setting

The first part of the opera is set around and inside the walled city of Troy, located in the modern nation of Turkey, at the time of its conquest at the end of the Trojan War, approximately 3,000 years ago. The second part takes place several months later, in and around the North African city of Carthage, whose ruins are now found in the state of Tunisia.

In Focus

The Music

The score of *Les Troyens* is notable for its dramatic originality, the diversity of its forms, its creative use of the orchestra, and its sheer beauty. The grand and the monumental alternate with moments of extreme austerity. Berlioz also developed convincing sounds to illustrate the imaginary: stopped horns and tremulous strings herald the appearance of ghosts; ringing percussion, woodwinds, and harps evoke ritual and quasi-Asiatic antiquity throughout. The extraordinary vocal solos never fail to reveal details of character or situation: the jagged quality of Cassandra's "Malheureux roi!" in Act I is appropriate to someone who is not understood by the common person; her lover Coroebus's subsequent melody is both consoling and more typically conventional. Aeneas's great narrative in Act V encompasses all the aspects of his character, from the conflicted to the resolute and heroic, to the melancholic section as he bids farewell to his beloved. Similarly, Dido's grand suicide scene encompasses an arc passing through melancholy and dejection and concluding in a magnificent operatic rage. The fourth act is one of opera's great monuments to love. The orchestral Royal Hunt and Storm that opens it depicts Dido and Aeneas consummating their love; the music is simultaneously mythic and erotic. The act continues with a beautiful pastoral song for the secondary tenor and an equally ravishing quintet that becomes a septet, before climaxing with an extended love duet. It's a perfect example of Berlioz's gift for suspending tension and delaying the inevitable. This happens again at the beginning of Act V, when the final, fatal break of Dido and Aeneas hangs in wait while a sailor sings a wrenchingly sad song recalling his lost homeland. Perhaps the most notable feature of the *Troyens* score is the relationship of its parts to the whole. The rousing Trojan March of Act I reappears in a bedraggled minor mode in Act III, contrasting with the joyful choruses of the Carthaginians in the same act. National themes are referenced in Act IV's magnificent love scene, adding complex dimensions to these characters, which are meant to be understood both as real flesh-and-blood people and as symbols of their respective empires.

Les Troyens at the Met

The opera premiered at the Met in 1973, in a production directed by Nathaniel Merrill and conducted by Rafael Kubelik. Jon Vickers was Aeneas and Shirley Verrett sang both Cassandra and Dido. In subsequent performances that season, Dido was sung by Christa Ludwig. James Levine conducted the opera for the Opening Night of the Met's centennial season in 1983, when the cast included Plácido Domingo as Aeneas, Tatiana Troyanos as Dido, and Jessye Norman as Cassandra, in her long-awaited Met debut. Maestro Levine was again on the podium for a 1993 revival featuring Gary Lakes (Aeneas), Françoise Pollet (Cassandra), Maria Ewing (Dido), Thomas Hampson (Coroebus), and Susan Graham in the role of Ascanius. The current production by Francesca Zambello premiered in February 2003, with Levine conducting Ben Heppner as Aeneas, Deborah Voigt as Cassandra, and Lorraine Hunt Lieberson as Dido, one of only two complete roles Lieberson sang at the Met.

Program Note

“**H**ow often, construing to my father the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, did I feel my heart swell and my voice falter and break!... When I reached the scene in which Dido expires on the funeral pyre, surrounded by the gifts and weapons of the perfidious Aeneas... and I had to pronounce the despairing utterances of the dying queen... my lips trembled and the words came with difficulty, indistinctly. At last, at the line ‘*Quaesivit coelo lucem ingemuitque reperta*,’ at that sublime image—as Dido ‘sought light from heaven and moaned at finding it’—I was seized with a nervous shuddering and stopped dead. My father, seeing how confused and embarrassed I was by such emotion, but pretending not to have noticed anything, rose abruptly and shut the book. ‘That will do, my boy,’ he said. ‘I’m tired.’ I rushed away, out of sight of everybody, to indulge my Virgilian grief.”

Thus vividly did Hector Berlioz, in his 1854 *Memoirs*, recall his early readings of the Latin epic that would inspire his greatest work. (The *Memoirs*, splendidly translated by David Cairns, are essential reading for understanding Berlioz, as is Cairns’s two-volume biography of the composer.) Later in the same book, he wrote: “For the last three years I have been tormented by the idea for a vast opera, for which I would write the words and the music... I am resisting the temptation to carry out this project and shall, I trust, resist to the end. To me the subject seems magnificent and deeply moving—sure proof that Parisians would think it flat and tedious.”

Such cynicism was the fruit of bitter experience. Opera in Paris under the bourgeois July monarchy had been dominated by the historical spectacles of Halévy and Meyerbeer, and the rhinestone glitter of the Second Empire promised little better. Having for years earned his living as a critic—and a sharp-tongued one—Berlioz was inevitably unpopular with the operatic establishment, as well as constitutionally incapable of currying bureaucratic favor. After the failure of *Benvenuto Cellini* (composed in 1834–37 for the Opéra, then revised for the Opéra Comique, where it was played in 1838), he worked half-heartedly at setting a libretto by the highly acceptable Eugène Scribe, *La Nonne Sanglante*, eventually abandoning it—and, apparently, the operatic stage—in 1847.

The subject that haunted Berlioz in 1854 was “a vast opera, on the Shakespearean plan, based on the second and fourth books of the *Aeneid*,” and two years later in Weimar, Liszt’s mistress, Princess Carolyne of Sayn-Wittgenstein, pressed him to undertake it: “Your passion for Shakespeare combined with this love of classical antiquity would be sure to produce something new and splendid.” Berlioz made objections, but “on my return to Paris I set to work to write the verses for my lyric poem.” The distractions of earning a living were formidable: “I rush about Paris from morning till night. And always these infernal articles to write—recitals by beginners of both sexes, revivals of antiquated operas, first performances of antiquated operas...” By July 1856 the poem was

complete, and composition had already begun in May; *Les Troyens* had assumed such urgency in Berlioz's life that the entire mammoth work, orchestration and all, was completed by April 7, 1858. "Whatever fate awaits it, I now feel nothing but happiness at having completed it."

But Virgil was not Berlioz's only inspiration, as both he and the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein recognized. His first encounters with Shakespeare, at the hands of an English theatrical troupe visiting Paris in 1827, had been inextricably intermingled with his passion for the actress Harriet Smithson, whom he later courted and married—unhappily, alas. To such French Romantics as Berlioz and Victor Hugo, Shakespeare seemed almost a modern author, whom they read in contemporary French translations. Regarding him against the background of France's more formal and classical traditions of tragedy, the Romantics celebrated him for his mixing of genres, his fluidity of time, place, and structure, and his verbal directness. And Berlioz's grand opera "on the Shakespearean plan" shows all those traits.

Drawing on his lifelong intimate knowledge of Virgil's epic, he culled ideas and phrases and episodes from throughout its course, often hewing closely to the original Latin text, and arranged them in a dramaturgy that flows convincingly from ceremony to intimacy to humor to passion and, inevitably, to tragedy. (However, the character of Cassandra, who dominates the episodes in *Troy*, is virtually his own invention, based on the merest hint in Virgil.) Shakespeare's own words find their way into the Act IV love duet for Dido and Aeneas, a transmutation of the love scene between Lorenzo and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* ("In such a night stood Dido with a willow in her hand...") This "Shakespearization" of Virgil is matched by a "Berliozation" of Gluck's classicism, imbuing its musical breadth and emotional power with Berlioz's own explosive romanticism. And as far as the mass effects beloved of grand opera were concerned, the composer's command of large musical forces was already proven by his *Requiem* and *Te Deum*.

The opera is filled, too, with a love of Italy—her landscapes, people, and art—that Berlioz acquired during his 15 months of residence there after winning the *Prix de Rome* in 1830. The famous sequence of quintet, septet with chorus, and love duet that ends the fourth act is suffused with the radiance of a Claude Lorrain sunset—a poignant valedictory to the great French classical tradition descended through Poussin, Watteau, and David, and in music through Lully, Rameau, Gluck, Cherubini, and Spontini. With its spare and concentrated style, deployed over a vast and varied canvas, *Les Troyens* represents a unique, highly personal blend of Gluckian *tragédie lyrique* and the panoply of 19th-century grand opera.

Whatever grim fate Berlioz anticipated for his work, the reality proved to be worse. In 1861, the notorious fiasco of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* seemed to improve the prospects of *Les Troyens* at the Opéra, but after keeping Berlioz dangling for three years the management finally turned it down, and he accepted an offer

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from the inadequate Théâtre Lyrique. Chief among numerous indignities was the demand that he divide his opera into two parts, of which only the second, comprising the last three acts and christened *Les Troyens à Carthage*, was eventually performed, on November 4, 1863. The reception was not unfavorable—enough to sustain 21 performances, in fact—but the cumulative mutilations practiced during the run outraged the composer, especially as they were also incorporated into the printed score. (One unexpected consolation emerged: the royalties were sufficient to let him resign from the treadmill of journalism). The first two acts, known as *La Prise de Troie* in the two-part version, were not performed in Berlioz' lifetime: "Oh my noble Cassandra, my heroic virgin, I must then resign myself: I shall never hear you—and I am like Coroebus, *insano Cassandrae incensus amore*." Only in 1890, two decades after the composer's death, an integral version, sung in German, was presented at Karlsruhe under the direction of Felix Mottl.

—David Hamilton