

Les Troyens premièred from 1863 onwards

HECTOR BERLIOZ (1803-1869)

Libretto by the composer from Vergil's Aeneid

Running times:

Act 1 in Troy [16th June] – 1 hours 30 minutes

Acts 2 & 3 in Carthage [21st July] – 2 hours 40 minutes

Metropolitan Opera, New York in 1984

Cassandra, Trojan Prophetess	<i>Jessye Norman</i>	Mezzo
Prince Corebus, Cassandra's fiancé	<i>Allan Monk</i>	Baritone
Aeneas, Trojan hero	<i>Plácido Domingo</i>	Tenor
Ascanius, Aeneas' young son	<i>Claudia Catania</i>	Soprano
Panthus, Trojan priest	<i>John Cheek</i>	Bass
Priam, King of Troy	<i>John Macurdy</i>	Bass
Hecuba, Queen of Troy	<i>Barbara Conrad</i>	Soprano
Ghost of Hector, Trojan hero	<i>Morley Meredith</i>	Bass
Helenus, Trojan priest	<i>Robert Nagy</i>	Tenor
Dido, Queen of Carthage	<i>Tatiana Troyanos</i>	Mezzo
Anna, Sister of Dido	<i>Jocelyne Taillon</i>	Contralto
Iopas, Poet at Dido's Court	<i>Douglas Ahlstedt</i>	Tenor
Narbal, Minister of Dido	<i>Paul Plishka</i>	Bass
Hylas, young Phrygian sailor	<i>Philip Creech</i>	Tenor
Mercury, messenger god	<i>Julien Robbins</i>	Bass/Bar
Stage Producer	<i>Fabrizio Melano</i>	
Conductor	<i>James Levine</i>	

Synopsis

[1] ACT 1 SCENE 1: the abandoned Greek camp outside the walls of Troy.

The Trojans – celebrating the end of a ten year siege – hurry to look at the huge wooden horse which the Greeks have left behind, presumably as an offering to the goddess Athene. King Priam's daughter Cassandra foresees that the Trojans – including her betrothed Corebus – will go blindly to their doom, led by her father their king. She rejects Corebus' soothing words, and as her vision crystallises Cassandra unsuccessfully urges him to leave Troy immediately. After Trojan leaders have laid thank offerings, Aeneas arrives to describe the appalling death of the priest Laocoon, who was devoured by sea serpents while inciting men to burn the wooden horse. Aeneas interprets this as Athene's response to sacrilege. Priam orders that the horse should be placed next to the goddess' temple, while Cassandra's warning cries are ignored. An approaching procession – which is dragging the wooden horse – suddenly halts when a sound like a clash of arms is heard inside the horse. However the Trojan crowd won't be distracted from their task.

[2] ACT 1 TABLEAU 1: A room in Aeneas' palace.

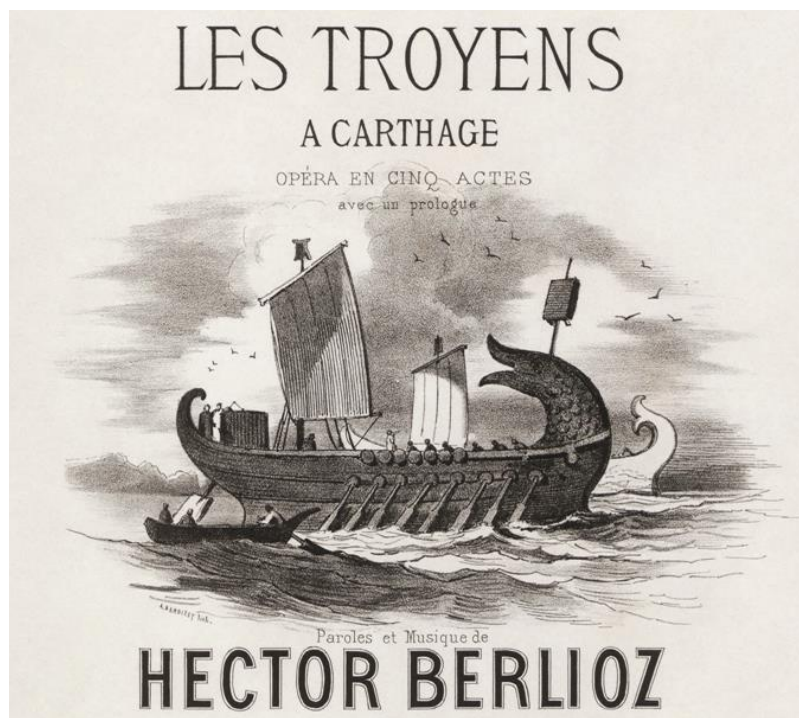
Aeneas is woken up by a commotion outside. Hector's ghost appears to tell him that he must escape to found a new Troy in Italy. Corebus then reports that the citadel is holding out, so they resolve to defend it to the death.



ACT 1 TABLEAU 2: A hall in Priam's palace.

Women pray to Vesta before an altar. Cassandra prophesies that Aeneas will found a new Troy in Italy. But Chorebus has died, and she'd prefer to take her own life rather than fall into the hands of the Greeks. Everyone who is willing vows to die with Cassandra. Greek soldiers then announce that Aeneas has escaped with Trojan treasure. With a final cry of 'Italie!' the women kill themselves, and fire engulfs the royal palace

[REFRESHMENTS AFTER ACT 1 ON 16TH JUNE]



[3] ACT 2 SCENE 1: A hall in Dido's Carthaginian palace.

Dido founded Carthage after fleeing from Tyre. The people celebrate their new capital and their queen, and promise to defend her against the local Numidian king. Alone with her sister Anna, Dido confesses to a mysterious sadness. She resists her sister's proposal that she should marry again. Iopas, a poet from Tyre, announces the arrival of an unknown fleet which has just been driven ashore by a storm. Dido gives an audience to the Trojan chiefs, and Aeneas' son Ascanius presents trophies from Troy. Panthus explains Aeneas' mission to found a new Troy in

Italy. Narbal rushes in with news that the Numidian king Iarbas has launched an attack. Aeneas – disguised until now – offers the dazzled queen an alliance, and leads their combined forces into battle.

[4] ACT 2 TABLEAU 1: Royal Hunt and Storm, in a forest near Carthage.

Naiads bathing in a stream take fright as huntsmen enter their clearing. When a storm breaks, Dido and Aeneas – separated from the others – take refuge in a cave. The storm passes while they fulfil their love for each other.

ACT 2 TABLEAU 2: Dido's seaside garden at night.

Anna and Narbal compare their conflicting views. She is optimistic, while he's full of foreboding. Dido, Aeneas and the court watch dances that celebrate victory over the Numidians. Iopas sings to soothe the queen's restless mood. Dido is startled to learn from Aeneas that Andromache has married Pyrrhus, who is the son of Achilles (who murdered Andromache's first husband Hector). Left alone, Dido and Aeneas pour out their love. As they leave, Mercury appears and calls 'Italie!' three times.

[INTERVAL ON 21ST JULY]

[5] ACT 3 TABLEAU 1: Carthage harbour at night.

Hylas, a young Phrygian sailor, sings of a longing for his native forests. Panthus and the Trojan chiefs agree that their Italian departure must not be delayed any longer. Aeneas enters determined to leave, but he's torn by love and remorse. Ghosts of dead Trojan heroes (Priam, Cassandra and Corebus) appear and urge him to be gone. Dido – distraught – confronts him while he rouses his sleeping army, but her entreaties and curses are equally ineffectual.

ACT 3 TABLEAU 2: A room in the royal palace.

The Trojan fleet is seen setting sail. Dido orders a pyre on which she'll burn all memorials of Aeneas. Alone she resolves on death, and prepares her farewell.

ACT 3 TABLEAU 3: A terrace overlooking the sea.

Narbal and Anna pronounce a ritual curse on Aeneas. Dido ascends the pyre. To the horror of all she stabs herself with Aeneas' sword. Before doing so, she prophesies the coming of an avenging conqueror – Hannibal – but her final vision is of Eternal Rome

Hector Berlioz

Opera was a central part of the composer's life, so it's initially surprising that this didn't become a more central part of his musical career. Although inspired by Beethoven, Symphony metamorphosed for Berlioz into a branch of dramatic music. *Roméo et Juliette* and *La damnation de Faust* are among the theatrical pieces that he conceived as concert works. He was more idealistic and demanding than most, and the low performance standards that he encountered as an opera critic may have helped to discourage his ambitions. Berlioz was regarded as a more risky commercial proposition in opera than Meyerbeer, Auber and Halévy, and he was arbitrarily pigeonholed as an eccentric symphonic composer.

<i>Dramatic Works</i>	<i>Composed</i>	<i>Form</i>
Benvenuto Cellini	1836-1838	Opera semi-seria
La damnation de Faust	1845-1846	Légende dramatique
Les Troyens	1856-1860	Grand opera
Béatrice et Bénédict	1860-1863	Opéra comique

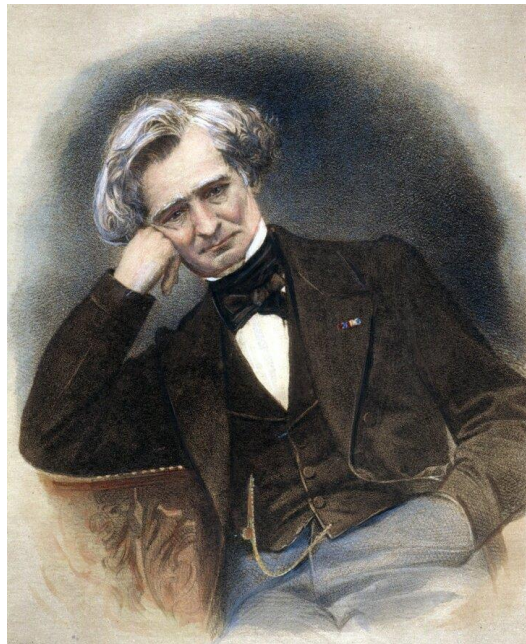
His early opera *Benvenuto Cellini* failed for a variety of reasons, including the extreme technical difficulty of the score. Four unsuccessful performances at the Opéra in 1838 effectively ended Berlioz's hopes of establishing himself as an opera composer in Paris. In the last 25 years of his

career Berlioz's involvement with the Opéra was restricted to secondary roles, such as consultant, orchestral arranger and recitative composer.

Each of his operatic works have very distinct characteristics. *Benvenuto Cellini* is an unconventional combination of comedy and grand opera, and it's a work of great musical originality.

Les Troyens harks back to classic tragédie lyrique and its pre-1820 grand opera successor, but it fuses these with Berlioz's expressive musical romanticism at its most highly charged and fully developed. It subsequently took the musical world at least one hundred years to realise that the work resulting from this idiosyncratic mixture is among the supreme operatic achievements of the 19th century!

Béatrice et Bénédict is outwardly a conventional opéra comique breaking no new ground. By this stage Berlioz was concentrating on opportunities abroad, including this commission to inaugurate a new opera house at the fashionable German spa town of Baden-Baden.



Les Troyens by Berlioz

Berlioz had been passionate about Virgil's Aeneid since boyhood, but it was not until the early 1850s that he began to seriously consider it as an operatic subject. He was initially daunted by the low chance that the Paris Opéra would accept and perform his work adequately. However prompted by the unexpected success of his *L'enfance du Christ* oratorio, and encouragement from Liszt's 'friend' Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, he completed an initial version in less than two years.

Although influenced by Gluck, *Les Troyens* also borrows important features from Parisian grand opera including spectacular crowd scenes, and large forces which includes a pivotal chorus. Shakespeare is another influence, not just in the Act 2 love duet inspired by the *Merchant of Venice*, but more generally in the mixture of genres – and juxtaposition of sharply contrasting scenes – and in the wide geographical scope of the action.

If his libretto includes some old fashioned elements, the music is Berlioz at his most audacious and richly expressive. Its grand scale may have unwittingly helped the opera to acquire a reputation as an exceptionally long opera, even before a note had been heard! When the Opéra made no attempt to stage *Les Troyens*, Berlioz accepted an initial offer from the Théâtre-Lyrique. However they then insisted that his work needed to be divided in two parts to make it manageable. Until the centenary of the composer's death there was a protracted reluctance to perform his complete work on a single evening. Here's a list of selected premières:

Les troyens à Carthage {Part 2}	1863	Théâtre-Lyrique, Paris
La prise de Troie {Trojans Part 1}	1890	Grossherzogliches Hoftheater, Karlsruhe
Les troyens {condensed}	1913	Königliches Hoftheater, Stuttgart
La prise de Troie {Trojans Part 1}	18 Mar 1935	Theatre Royal, Glasgow
Les troyens à Carthage {Part 2}	19 Mar 1935	Theatre Royal, Glasgow
Les troyens {condensed} in USA	1955	New England Opera Theater, Boston
Les troyens {with a few cuts}	1957	Royal Opera House, London
Les troyens {complete}	1969	King's Theatre, Glasgow
Les troyens {complete} in USA	1983	Metropolitan, New York

Berlioz is at great pains to unify the wealth of incident in his opera. This includes innumerable recurring motifs. Musically as well as verbally, the central idea of Roman destiny is a constant presence. This directly impacts the individual fates of two contrasted but complementary tragic heroines. Cassandra is virtually Berlioz's own creation, developed from a few glimpses in the Aeneid into the fiery protagonist of the Trojan scenes: she's the personification of Troy's doom, which she foresees but cannot prevent. The role of Dido is a tribute of extraordinary radiance, tenderness and expressive intensity to the mythical – but to Berlioz totally real person – who first possessed his imagination 40 years earlier.

Contrast is a fundamental principle governing the structure of this work...

- [1] Act 1 Scene 1: spacious and generally static
- [2] Act 1 Tableau 1-2: violent and highly compressed – a fatal final night in Troy
- [3] Act 2 Scene 1: an Arcadian picture of Carthage, with a martial finale
- [4] Act 2 Tableau 1-2: a sustained lyrical interlude (which also sets the scene for the last act)
- [5] Act 3: drawing together, and completing all the preceding scenes

Footnote

This wording of these notes aligns with a fairly eccentric decision by the New York Met to divide their 1984 production of *Les Troyens* into three acts, rather than the customary five. Hence *La prise de Troie* is usually two acts; and Met Act 2 is split into two Carthage acts.



Berlioz's first wife and muse

Berlioz based his final opera on *Much Ado About Nothing*, and in his Trojan opera he also tried to reinvent the *Aeneid* as a Shakespearean epic. He's also renowned for his infatuation with the Anglo-Irish actress Harriet Smithson (1800-1854). After some success in the British Isles, Smithson became a sensation by performing Ophelia and Juliet in Paris in 1827. She transformed expectations – particularly in France – using British acting techniques to become her characters, instead of simply portraying them. During previous decades female lines had been heavily cut, and tragedies focused on the male protagonists.

In 1831 she broke her leg, and subsequently had less chance to sustain her original success. Smithson became the figurehead of the French Romantic movement, inspiring many artistic tributes particularly Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. She ignored all his advances until 1832, when she discovered that she'd inspired his symphony and sent her congratulations. They were married in 1833, though Smithson soon became jealous of Berlioz's musical success.

Smithson gave her final performance in 1836 before her health deteriorated. The rest of her life was a sad contrast after the remarkable success that she'd enjoyed.

Selected Musical Biographies

CASSANDRA: JESSYE NORMAN (1945–2019) was an American opera singer and recitalist. She performed dramatic soprano roles, but didn't limit herself to this voice type. A commanding presence on operatic, concert and recital stages, Norman was associated with roles including Beethoven's Leonore; Wagner's Sieglinde and Kundry; *Cassandre* and *Didon* by Berlioz, and Bartók's *Judith*. Norman sang and recorded recitals of music by Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Ernest Chausson and Francis Poulenc among others.

AENEAS: JOSÉ PLÁCIDO DOMINGO (born 21 January 1941). He grew up working in his parents' Zarzuela company in Mexico, and has since regularly promoted these Spanish operettas. He's recorded more than one hundred complete operas, and performed over 150 roles in more than five different languages. From 1990, he performed as one of *The Three Tenors* with Luciano Pavarotti and José Carreras (and recorded the best-selling classical album of all time). In the early 2010s, he completed a transition from tenor repertoire to baritone parts (such as Simon Boccanegra). Increasingly he also conducts operas and concerts.

DIDO: TATIANA TROYANOS (1938–1993) was an American mezzo-soprano of Greek and German descent, remembered as one of the defining singers of her generation. Troyanos' performances covered the full range of operatic history in an international career of three decades which also produced a variety of memorable operatic recordings. After ten years based at the Hamburg State Opera, Troyanos became widely known from 1976 for her work with the Metropolitan Opera, with over 270 performances (several dozen of them broadcast or televised) encompassing twenty-two major roles.

CONDUCTOR: JAMES LEVINE (1943–2021) was an American conductor and pianist. He was music director of the Metropolitan Opera from 1976. Levine held leadership positions with the Ravinia Festival, the Munich Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In 1980 he started the Lindemann Young Artists Development Program, and trained singers, conductors, and musicians for professional careers. Levine made his Metropolitan Opera debut just before he turned 28 in 1971. After further appearances with the company, he was named its principal conductor in February 1972. He became the company's first artistic director in 1986, relinquishing this title in 2004. Following a series of injuries that began with a fall, Levine's health problems led to fewer Metropolitan Opera engagements, and he stepped down from his position as music director at the end of the 2015–16 season.