

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*
 Edited by Ian Kemp
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

1 *Les Troyens: mostly questions*

COLIN DAVIS

We count the beginning of our civilization from the destruction of a small walled city in Asia Minor. Now we face the destruction of that civilization, of the world perhaps. The Greeks with their superior technology bamboozled the Trojans with a wheeled, wooden horse. We have come beyond the wheel, and the horse: to what?

The destruction of Troy will never lose its fascination. Berlioz, in choosing the subject of the Trojans for his greatest work, has ensured that we can enjoy, or experience rather, the ritual in the opera house. For ritual it is: the characters are more than themselves, they are symbols:

Cassandra – to whom no one listens, for whom excruciating knowledge has shorn away all possibility of personal pleasure.

Coroebus – in love, and seeing only that, in reality, which reflects the infatuation he wishes to nourish.

Andromache – symbol of the silence born of unspeakable suffering.

Aeneas – the egomaniac Hero, chained to the mast of a great idea, for which he must sacrifice everything and everybody, typical of those deluded by calls from ‘Destiny’.

Dido – ‘widow Dido’, passionate, vulnerable queen, who, with Aeneas’s help saves her land and her honour from the exigent Iarbas, only to lose her heart and give her life for the Man of Destiny.

Hylas-Palinurus – the archetypal sleepwalker whose poetical mind is as far from reality as are the minds of most of us dreamers.

And over all the little flame of civilization, which so comfortably illumines all upon which it shines, threatened by forces beyond its control, particularly that which we now call nature, or evolution, embodied in Paris and the Three Women, Triple Hecate. A vision of the destruction and renewal brought about by history? And now – for us? After two world wars we have experienced no renewal. . .

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Les Troyens*

What is clear is that the opera must be performed in one evening. ‘Carthage’, relaxed and erotic, cannot stand alone without the equal and opposite aggressive and hysterical ‘Troy’.

La Prise de Troie is condensed to such an extent that nothing can be left out. *Les Troyens à Carthage* is, by comparison, leisurely, almost tropical in its sensuousness. Is the opening scene displaying Dido in all her glory not a little too long? And the ballet? Certainly royals of all time have had their entertainments; but Berlioz has not given us a realistic opera: one senses the demands of gestures and fashions of nineteenth-century Paris. And is not the garden scene over-extended? Too many *divertissements*, which add little to the atmosphere of intoxicated love that Berlioz has so masterfully established? Court custom fulfilled, impatiently waiting for the moment when ‘we’ may retire? But that raises the problem of the *Chasse royale et orage*: before the garden scene or after? Fore-play or after-play? The answer doesn’t help to present that wonderful tone poem in the theatre. A materialistic presentation? Naiads, dryads, fauns, rude old uncle Silenus, and all other acceptable representations of the *Erdgeist* rapturously applauding the goings-on-in-the-cave, which we have all heard about but perhaps never seen? Or an interlude in which the scene changes either to the garden or to the harbour?

And what to do with Narbal and Anna? Their duet has little effect in the theatre and appears only to delay that which we know is going to happen, without adding anything to the ritual.

The last question-mark is of course the final scene. Priests mumbling a forgotten rite, Anna and Narbal presiding, before Dido’s farewell and suicide (wonderful!) and then the vision of the foundation of Rome, triumph of the Hero and History and defeat of the human in the individual. ‘Fate’ appears to triumph even though we know that Aeneas must go down, as Napoleon and Hitler went down after him; the Hero ascends the mountain of corpses, once his friends, his family and his lovers, to his own execution. But how portray this? Are we not once more up against Berlioz’s Imagination, which prefers the freedom of the Dramatic Legend or Symphony to the material restrictions of the opera?

Yet is it not this same Imagination which gives Berlioz his eccentric power and *Les Troyens* its greatness?

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*
 Edited by Ian Kemp
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 *Biographical introduction*

IAN KEMP

Berlioz never heard *Les Troyens*. He never heard the work he knew was the culmination of his whole output, never knew that after a century of misunderstanding and maltreatment it would finally be performed as he had written it and vindicated as a towering work of art. It is difficult to think of any other work with a history so poignant.

In his early years he might have thought all this a little sentimental. Virgil, after all, had died before the *Aeneid* was even complete. What does it matter so long as a masterwork *exists*? Shortly before completing his own opera Berlioz wrote to a friend in a similar spirit: he didn't care whether it was produced or not; the main thing was that his 'musical and Virgilian passions' had been gratified. But the main thing was that it *should* be produced. He spent the next five years in a dignified but futile attempt to have it produced at the Paris Opéra, eventually accepting that the fruit of his passions would have to be cut in two and served up incomplete, and in an inadequate theatre. He made the last three acts into a separate, five-act opera, *Les Troyens à Carthage*; this was performed at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1863. He also made the first two acts into a separate, three-act opera, *La Prise de Troie*, which he never heard. But he resigned himself to this division, even referring to two operas in his will. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to his real feelings is to be seen on his manuscript. The title page of the autograph full score is proudly and lovingly written: *Les Troyens / Grand opéra en cinq actes / Paroles et musique / de / Hector Berlioz*. But it was altered, first to '1re Partie Des Troyens' and then to 'La Prise de Troie / Opéra en trois actes', both in strictly functional handwriting. The handwriting for the second title page, 'Les Troyens à Carthage / opéra en cinq actes / avec un prologue', is perfunctory, irritated. Berlioz was sixty, disillusioned, contemptuous of the vanities and cruelties of mankind. He had ceased composing. It is not overstating the case

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Les Troyens*

to say that the fate of *Les Troyens* broke him. Why did that Fate to which he had paid ample tribute in his opera play with him so wantonly? What had happened?

In the original final chapter of his *Memoirs*, written in 1854, Berlioz revealed that for three years he had been ‘tormented’ by the idea of an enormous opera, knowing all too well that unless he suppressed his intense creative excitement at the prospect of composing it he would lay untold miseries in store for himself. At that time he had good reason to believe that he would hold out, for he *had* resisted the temptation to write a fifth symphony. In one of the most moving passages in the *Memoirs* he pleads with his reader to forgive him for not having composed the symphony he heard in a dream – because the costs involved would have prevented him from supporting his paralysed, dying wife. That was in 1852. Two years later Harriet Smithson was in her grave, and Berlioz himself felt on the ‘steep slope that leads with ever-increasing swiftness to the end’. To attempt the opera would be as foolish as ever and would in any case leave him exposed ‘not only to the antagonism which my critical ideas have aroused but also to the equally violent opposition provoked by the style of my music’.

There was no denying that Berlioz’s music was exceedingly challenging, even if it could conveniently be pigeonholed as the product of a fevered imagination. But his *feuilletons* in the *Journal des Débats* – a newspaper whose liberal sympathies made it hardly the best platform from which to court the necessary presidential or imperial favour – were too elegant and sharply focused to be disregarded in this way. In print, Berlioz was surprisingly generous towards composers, especially young composers; his remarks about the management of opera houses could be less than prudent. In a review of Gounod’s *Sapho*, for example, of 7 January 1852, he commented that the times – and by implication, productions at the Opéra – were of ‘machineism, mannequinism (and of neologism) and industrialism more or less disguised under the pretext of art’.¹ Later that year he returned to this theme, when reprinting, as the ‘Ninth Evening’ of his book *Les Soirées de l’orchestre*, an earlier attack on the Opéra. Five years after that, by which time he was deep in the composition of *Les Troyens*, he could be so uncircumspect, in a review of Thomas’s *Psyché*, as to repeat the Ninth Evening’s chief findings and say of the one place for which his work was designed: ‘The Opéra mistrusts composers not in possession of a well-established reputation for mediocrity.’²

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: Les Troyens

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Biographical introduction*

5

Berlioz had been in an impossible position. He could not betray his artistic ideals; the practicalities, the politics, the taste of Parisian musical life at the time were diametrically opposed to him. Most of all, if he felt himself ‘burned up’, at the same time he was ‘still burning and filled with an energy that sometimes flares up with terrifying force’.

A hint of this energy can be observed in the main body of his reviews of *Sapho* (that in 1852 was the second; the first was on 22 April 1851). He was evidently so stirred to see the young Gounod in his first opera returning to classical subject matter and to the dramatic methods of Gluck that he was impelled to write at disproportionate length – providing Gounod with an extended composition lesson, here with unstinting praise, there with harsh criticism, everywhere with the enthusiasm of a composer at last in the company of another with whom he could discuss true artistic priorities. In fact *Sapho* is a pallid work. But might it have been the spark that lit up the creative fires of *Les Troyens*? By 1857, with *Sapho* and now even *Psyché* to support him, he could counter a friend’s objection to the unfashionable non-historical text of his opera by saying that ‘antique subjects have become new again’. Certainly Berlioz borrowed from *Sapho* the idea of a trio for two flutes and harp which he was to use in *L’Enfance du Christ* and it was this work, completed in July 1854 (having been left, in 1850, with only one of its eventual three parts, *La Fuite en Égypte*), that marked the recovery of his appetite for composing after a silent period of three years. At all events the *Memoirs* chapter gives the impression that however reasonable his objections to writing the opera, he protests too much, that he is beset by a kind of deadness in the face of so mammoth an enterprise, that he is waiting for his suppressed creative powers to erupt and overtake him.

The situation was not unpromising. He no longer had the emotional and financial burden of Harriet. In October 1854, seven months after her death, he had married Marie Recio, his mistress for over twelve years (‘it was my *duty*’³), and if she provided little of the feminine understanding he needed, she did create some domestic stability. His public career was proceeding tolerably well. Concert tours in Germany and England brought wide acclaim; the cabal against his first opera *Benvenuto Cellini* at Covent Garden in 1853 may have hardened his resolve not to write *Les Troyens*, but the ‘Berlioz Weeks’ promoted by Liszt in Weimar in 1852 and 1855, which included successful performances of the opera, must have weakened it; *L’Enfance du Christ* (which had proved that he could

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Les Troyens*

write his own librettos) and his *Tē Deum* also had successful first performances in 1854 and 1855 respectively. And in 1854 he had written his cantata *L'Impériale*, a gross attempt to curry favour with Napoleon III, which nevertheless indicated how desperate he was to prepare the ground. (In 1856 he got a gold medal from the Emperor for it.) All that Berlioz now needed was some sort of fillip and this came when for at least the second time he discussed his project, and his continuing reluctance to embark on it, with Liszt and his mistress, Princess Carolyn Sayn-Wittgenstein, during a third 'Berlioz Week' in Weimar in February 1856. The Princess threatened never to see him again unless he stopped playing the faint-heart and started straight away. 'Milder words than these would have been enough to decide me.' Berlioz began work on the opera in April 1856 and two years later libretto and music were complete – though he continued to make alterations until 1863.

The part played by the Princess in the composition of *Les Troyens* – encouraging, cajoling, supporting – was to be readily acknowledged by Berlioz, who found in her a kindred intelligence and the *confidante* he needed. He was probably unaware that her interest in his work was also an attempt to generate a challenge to Wagner (then writing *Der Ring des Nibelungen*), whom she mistrusted and whose influence on Liszt she resented.

The events leading up to its eventual 'performance' make for depressing and somewhat confusing reading. At first he was confident enough, marshalling his resources as on the eve of a successful military engagement. Even during composition he had given readings of his libretto to select audiences of potentially influential sympathizers, as well as to friends whose opinions he respected. He set great store by these readings, using them chiefly to promote the opera but also to test out the effect of his design and his text. In order to articulate correctly the emphases, inflections, silences, he at one time considered asking the famous actress Rachel to read passages for him, so seriously did he take his commitment to expressive fidelity. Rachel – her real name was Élisabeth Félix (she died in 1858 at the age of thirty-six, before Berlioz had finished his opera) – was the leading figure in the revival of the classical repertory and the classical style of acting in French theatre during the 1840s and 50s, and Berlioz's sympathy with this development could account for the most interesting of the surviving descriptions of his manner of delivery at readings – that of Wagner, who after one in 1858 wrote that it was 'curiously dry and theatrically affected'.⁴ (Wagner's aesthetic atti-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Biographical introduction*

7

tudes had of course diverged widely from Berlioz's by that time and his description also reflected his dismay at what he took to be the backward path Berlioz was following in the opera.) In general, reactions to the readings were encouraging. When he had finished the music Berlioz was ready to launch his assault on the fortress of the Opéra.

His plan was simple – to bypass the administration and make a direct approach to the Emperor. Berlioz hated soliciting in this way but he saw in it the only means by which he could overcome the opposition he encountered at the Opéra – from the director, Alphonse Royer, and the conductors there. In any case the Opéra was an imperial theatre or, as Berlioz put it, 'a kind of private theatre of the Emperor where the only new works performed are those by people *adroit* [his italics] at slipping in somehow or other'.⁵ He can be imagined hoping that Napoleon III would draw parallels between Berlioz reading *Les Troyens* to his Emperor and Virgil writing the *Aeneid* for Augustus. Accordingly, on 28 March 1858, he drafted a letter to the Emperor, explaining his position and requesting permission to read him the libretto. The letter is printed in his *Memoirs*. His first setback was a request by the Comte de Morny, the Emperor's half-brother, not to send it. (It should be remembered that Berlioz's election to the French Institute in 1856 gave him some sort of access to the Emperor and his entourage.) A few weeks later he met the Emperor at an official reception and was warmly invited to arrange what he thought would be a private audience, which finally took place in the autumn, in the company of forty-two others. Berlioz now presented his libretto, with the result that it was passed on to subordinates, who were expert at parrying his enquiries. Rumours circulated that *Les Troyens* lasted eight hours and required resources twice as large as those at the Opéra. Berlioz himself was perfectly well aware that his opera could not be scheduled quickly, not least because of casting difficulties. All he wanted was a commitment to it and a date. But he began to realize that his imperial strategy was not so *adroit*, and he now paid more attention to mobilizing public pressure, largely through his readings, which would keep the opera in the musical press and introduce new recruits to his band of influential sympathizers. Also, in August 1859, he arranged discreetly publicized performances of excerpts – on the 6th with piano, in the tiny Salle Beethoven in Paris (Cassandra's aria and the duet from Act I, the mezzo-soprano being his future Dido, Anne Charton-Demour), and on the 29th, with orchestra, in a concert at

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Les Troyens*

Baden-Baden (the items above and the duet from Act IV, the mezzo-soprano now being Pauline Viardot). All this served to bring Léon Carvalho into the picture – Carvalho the impresario at the Théâtre-Lyrique, who was eventually to mount *Les Troyens à Carthage*.

The astute Carvalho had in fact already, in the summer of 1859, invited Berlioz to prepare and supervise a new production of Gluck's *Orphée*, with Pauline Viardot in the title role, returning to the Paris stage for the first time since *Sapho* eight years earlier. Apart from the attraction of Gluck, and indeed of Viardot (her artistry and musicianship profoundly impressed Berlioz, and led not only to some valuable comments on *Les Troyens* and help in the revision of its piano score but also to a passionate, if short-lived attachment to her⁶), what this meant for Berlioz was that the unexpected and eventually legendary success of *Orphée*, first performed on 18 November 1859, put him firmly in the operatic limelight. It gave public proof of his artistic judgement and professionalism, and of the financial success of an opera based on a classical subject. For his part, Carvalho had needed no such evidence of Berlioz's worth, for in September 1859 he had proposed that *Les Troyens* should be the opera to mark the opening of his new Théâtre-Lyrique, then scheduled for the beginning of the 1861–2 season.

Under Baron Haussmann's schemes for the replanning of central Paris, the two principal theatres in the Boulevard du Temple, the Théâtre-Lyrique and the Cirque Imperial, were to be demolished and rebuilt in the Place du Châtelet⁷ (where they still are, under different names, the Théâtre de la Ville and the Théâtre du Châtelet). The Théâtre-Lyrique was privately financed and the order for its rebuilding was recognition of its vital status as the third 'French' opera house in Paris (the others being the Opéra and the Opéra Comique), as well as of the enterprise of its director and quality of its productions. Berlioz waited some months before responding to Carvalho, hoping that the success of *Orphée* would force the hand of the Opéra. But it did not and he eventually accepted Carvalho's proposal. He had sound reasons for doing so. Carvalho was enthusiastic about *Les Troyens*; the Opéra treated him with little less than contempt; Carvalho had shown himself to be a colleague Berlioz could respect, and he had also shown commercial acumen and artistic integrity by interlacing opéras-comiques with lavish and successful productions not only of Berlioz's beloved Gluck but also of Weber and Mozart (*Oberon* in 1857, *Les Noces de Figaro* in 1858 and *L'Enlèvement au sérail* in 1859) and of Gounod (the première of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*

Edited by Ian Kemp

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Biographical introduction*

9

Faust in 1859), as well as with less successful productions of *Euryanthe* (1857) and other Weber operas. Berlioz was still concerned about casting, though in Viardot he had a possible mezzo-soprano who could double as Cassandra and Dido. On 16 January 1860 he signed a contract with Carvalho⁸ and shortly afterwards it was officially announced that *Les Troyens* would open the new theatre. Then, on 1 April 1860, Carvalho resigned; his expensive productions had taken him to the brink of bankruptcy.

The new director, Charles Réty, although he mounted a *Fidelio* inherited from Carvalho (it was a failure and exposed Viardot's declining vocal talents) and although he did not entirely ignore the plans for *Les Troyens*, had other priorities. So, in a way, did Berlioz. In the autumn of 1860 he began writing the libretto and music for *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, commissioned for another new theatre, at Baden-Baden. This third opera, which occupied him until September 1862, would help keep his mind off *Les Troyens*.

Meanwhile the Opéra was involved in lavish preparations for a new production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. With its disastrous failure in March 1861 Berlioz was entitled to feel that it was now the turn of the older, French composer. And indeed it was, but only in the supremely ironic role of supervisor of his 1841 version of Weber's *Der Freischütz*, which the Opéra, following the lead of the Théâtre-Lyrique, hoped would with Berlioz's help restore their fortunes after the disaster of *Tannhäuser*. Berlioz in fact began rehearsals for *Der Freischütz*, but a month later that opera was abandoned in favour of *Alceste*, Berlioz being offered full author's rights for his work on the production. He needed the money, but he withdrew from the project when he discovered that he was supposed to adapt rather than restore Gluck. This was hardly the climate in which he could have expected a change of heart about his own opera but suddenly, in June 1861, he was told by Royer that *Les Troyens* was definitely accepted for production at the Opéra, on the authorisation of the Minister of State. Pressures from all sides seemed at last to have yielded their rewards. Réty at the Théâtre-Lyrique graciously withdrew his claim. There were only two drawbacks: Berlioz would have to cut a scene in Act I (that involving the Greek spy Sinon; see p. 52), which, in order to be accommodating, he did; and he would have to wait until two other new and as yet unwritten operas were produced, by Gounod and Gevaert. (Gounod's *La Reine de Saba* was a fiasco in February 1862 and Gevaert, a little-known Belgian composer, never had an opera performed at the Opéra.) He expected a delay of the best part

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34813-3 - Hector Berlioz: *Les Troyens*
Edited by Ian Kemp
Excerpt
[More information](#)

10 *Les Troyens*



The Paris Opéra and the Théâtre-Lyrique – respectively, where Berlioz wanted *Les Troyens* performed and where part of it, *Les Troyens à Carthage*, was performed.

- 1 The Paris Opéra (Académie Impériale de Musique, rue Le Peletier) in c.1850–60. A performance of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831)
- 2 The Théâtre-Lyrique in 1869. A performance of Ernest Boulanger's *Don Quichotte* (1869)

