

Les Troyens

Music and libretto by Hector Berlioz
Based on Virgil's *Aeneid*

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Les Troyens

Opera in five acts, sung in French with projected English titles

by Hector Berlioz

THE CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE)

La Prise de Troie (The Fall of Troy)

- Cassandra**, Trojan prophetess, daughter of PriamSoprano
- Chorebus**, young prince from Asia Baritone
- Aeneas**, Trojan heroTenor
- Priam**, King of TroyBass
- Panthus**, Trojan priest, friend of Aeneas Baritone
- Hecuba**, Queen of Troy Mezzo-soprano
- Helenus**, Trojan priest, son of PriamTenor
- Ascanius**, young son of Aeneas Mezzo-soprano
- Ghost of Hector**, Trojan hero, son of PriamBass-baritone
- Greek Soldier** Baritone
- Greek Captain**Bass

Les Troyens à Carthage (The Trojans at Carthage)

- Dido**, Queen of Carthage Mezzo-soprano
- Anna**, Dido's sister Contralto
- Ascanius**, young son of Aeneas Mezzo-soprano
- Panthus**, Trojan priest, friend of Aeneas Baritone
- Aeneas**, Trojan heroTenor
- Narbal**, minister to DidoBass
- Iopas**, Tyrian poet to Dido's courtTenor
- Hylas**, Phrygian sailorTenor
- First Sentry**Bass
- Second Sentry**Bass

Part 1: La Prise de Troie (The Fall of Troy)

SETTING

The city of Troy after ten years of siege

ACT I: The abandoned Greek camp outside the walls of Troy

The Trojans are ecstatic to discover that the Greeks have apparently abandoned the siege of their city and sailed away. A huge wooden horse has been left outside the city gates, and everyone assumes this is an offering the Greek army has made to Pallas Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom.

Cassandra, daughter of Troy's king, Priam, is suspicious that the horse represents some unknown evil. While everyone is off admiring the horse, she laments that her father and her people will not listen to her. Cassandra's betrothed, Chorebus, cannot convince her to join in the people's celebrations. She begs him to flee Troy, but he refuses.

A crowd appears, celebrating the Greeks' departure in the presence of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Everyone observes a respectful silence upon seeing Andromache, widow of the fallen hero Hector, and her young son. Suddenly another Trojan fighter, Aeneas, rushes in with awful news: the priest, Laocoön, believing the horse was some kind of trick, pierced it with his spear and urged the Trojans to burn it, but moments later two sea serpents devoured him. Thinking that the serpents are a sign of Pallas Athena's anger at Troy's rejection of her gift, Aeneas leads the people to bring the horse into the city, despite Cassandra's feelings of foreboding.

ACT II: The Palace of Aeneas and Palace of Priam

That night Hector's ghost urges the sleeping Aeneas to leave Troy for Italy. Aeneas awakes to the news that Greek soldiers have poured out of the wooden horse to take the city; he realizes that Troy is facing catastrophe and calls his men to its defense.

Cassandra asks the women surrounding her if they are ready to die, and those who say no are ordered away. Those remaining vow that they will die free, rather than be defiled by the Greeks. When enemy soldiers appear,

Cassandra and her companions kill themselves, knowing that Aeneas will escape and found a new Troy in Italy.

Part 2: The Trojans at Carthage

SETTING

The newly-built city of Carthage

ACT III: Dido's throne room at Carthage

The people of Carthage proclaim their devotion to Dido, their queen. She thanks them for their achievements in building a new city, while encouraging them to even greater efforts. In a private moment, Anna, Dido's sister, urges the reluctant queen, a widow, to fall in love again. A group of foreigners come to seek refuge in Carthage. At the same time

a neighboring king, Iarbas—who had expected to make Dido his wife—is storming her city. The leader of the foreigners reveals that he is Aeneas, and offers to help Dido defend her city. Leaving Ascanius, his son, in her care, he and his men go into battle alongside the Carthaginians.

ACT IV: The Royal Hunt and the Gardens of Dido

Having defeated Iarbas's army, Aeneas has remained in Carthage. He joins Dido in a royal hunt. The two find shelter in a cave during a storm.

Now that her sister and Aeneas are in love, Anna assumes that they will marry and rule Carthage together. Narbal, Dido's chief adviser, is concerned that the queen is neglecting her royal duties. He is also well aware that fate has other plans for Aeneas.

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c. Tobias Hoheisel

Anna has arranged an entertainment to delight the lovers, but Dido is restless and nothing pleases her. She asks Aeneas to finish telling the story of Troy's last days. Listening raptly, Dido fails to notice Ascanius pulling from her finger the ring given her by her late husband. Left alone under the night sky, Dido and Aeneas rejoice in their love.

ACT V

Scene 1: The harbor at Carthage

Hylas, a young Trojan sailor, longs for home and comfort. Aeneas's men are impatient to set sail for Italy. Their leader, although passionately in love, is determined to leave the next day, but he is horrified at the idea of leaving Dido. He is visited by the ghosts of Cassandra, Corebus, Hector, and Priam, who order him to depart and conquer.

Having heard of Aeneas's plans, Dido is enraged that he would think of leaving her. When Aeneas insists that although he loves her, he has no choice but to obey the gods, Dido curses him.

Scene 2: Dido's apartment

The next morning Dido, apparently calmer, asks that Aeneas be brought to her. Informed that the Trojans have already left Carthage, she orders a pyre built in order to burn the gifts she and Aeneas have shared since his arrival in Carthage. Once alone, Dido prepares for death and bids farewell to her city.

Scene 3: The palace gardens

The pyre is ready to be burned. In her despair, Dido prophesies the coming of a general from Carthage, Hannibal, who will one day take her revenge on Rome and Aeneas. Then to everyone's horror, Dido stabs herself. In her last moments she envisions Carthage being destroyed by Rome. She dies crying "Rome...Rome... eternal," as her people curse Aeneas and his descendants.

Synopsis written by Roger Pines, dramaturg at Lyric Opera of Chicago.



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c. Tobias Hoheisel

A composer's career is never easy, especially when associated with the catchphrase "ahead of one's time."

Superimpose an affinity for historical repertory (i.e., out-of-style), and you have recipe for commercial failure. Berlioz's career incorporated both: great achievements of artistic originality, paired with tragic failure in worldly measures. Few commissions came his way, forcing Berlioz into resourceful self-promotion. His greatest works were compelled by his imagination—and from a clear disregard for practicality. The *Symphonie fantastique*, *Roméo et Juliette* (dramatic symphony), and *La Damnation de Faust* (dramatic legend) all blurred the margins between symphony, opera, and choral fantasy, and all were for large, expensive performing forces, realized in concerts organized by the composer himself. None brought any real financial success. Throughout Berlioz's career, a regrettable combination of unprepared performers, critical rejection, and public disinterest coalesced to produce the archetypal Romantic artist: a fiercely individual genius, tragically unrecognized.

Berlioz's best chance for financial security was to write a successful opera. In pursuit of this goal, he completed five works for the musical stage but saw only two of them in full production. Although he never heard it performed, his opera *Les Troyens* (*The Trojans*) represents Berlioz's proudest achievement. Berlioz adapted his *poème lyrique* from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic Latin poem recounting the adventures of its namesake Aeneas, from the fall of Troy (to the Greeks hidden in the Trojan Horse) to his eventual founding of Rome. Berlioz translated Virgil's work and wrote his own libretto. Selecting two of twelve books of the *Aeneid*, Berlioz featured the stories of two heroines: Cassandra the Trojan prophetess, and Dido the Carthaginian queen, thus downplaying the swashbuckling heroism of the story to emphasize the tragic, human aspect of war. The title page of the autograph score (in the composer's hand) announces: "Les Troyens, Grand Opera in 5 Acts, Words and Music by Hector Berlioz." He had put pen to paper during the two-year period from 1856-1858, but the work had been simmering in his imagination for decades.

Berlioz was fascinated by Virgil's *Aeneid* from childhood. His music criticism and his *Mémoires* are liberally sprinkled with references to the epic poem. Recalling a youthful sojourn in Italy, Berlioz described his mind meld with Nature and Virgil:

Some passage from the *Aeneid*, dormant in my memory since childhood, came back to me ... Under the combined influence [of poetry, music, and landscape] I would work myself up into an incredible state of excitement ... I longed for those poetic days when the heroes, sons of the gods, walked the earth ... What madness, yes, but what happiness.



c. Tobias Hoheisel

A Subject Close to His Heart

In 1854, Berlioz admitted that the scheme of a grand opera “on a subject close to [his] heart” had been “tormenting” him for at least three years. After several trips to Weimar, where he visited Liszt, Berlioz received a letter from the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein (Liszt’s patron and lover):

You must write this opera, this lyric poem, or whatever you like to call it. You must tackle it and you must finish it ... If you are so feeble as to be afraid to face everything for Dido and Cassandra, then never come back here—I refuse to see you again.

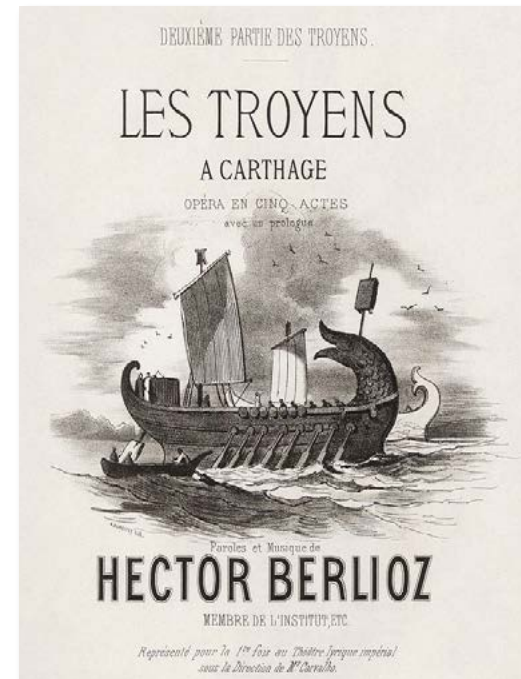
He began work on the libretto in March 1856, writing to Liszt that he was “crazy in love with my Carthaginian queen! I love this beautiful Dido to distraction!”

Berlioz was not the first to write an opera about the Aeneid’s beautiful queen, but he was several centuries after the popular trend. In addition to Purcell’s masterpiece *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), numerous works with the title *Didone abbandonata* (*Dido Abandoned*) and on the subject of Dido’s fleeing lover Aeneas had been written during the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, Berlioz’s grand opera owed more to the opera composer Gluck (1714-1787) than to Wagner, whose contemporary music dramas—both music and libretti—were also the product of a single, creative imagination. Classical Latin subjects were out of sync with current operatic tastes veering more toward historical/political plots with ordinary heroes and themes of religious fanaticism or rebellion. Nonetheless, Berlioz did follow hallowed traditions of the Paris Opéra, where he hoped to have his *Troyens* performed. In five acts, the opera includes numerous roles for solo singers, large orchestral and choral forces, the obligatory ballets, and spectacular scenic effects. It is nothing if not grand.

Les Troyens was not the last of the five operas written by Berlioz, but it was the most emotionally difficult for him, occupying the greater part of his creative energies during his final years. It would not see the stage of the Opéra during his lifetime. Snubbed by the institution’s administration, Berlioz wrote to Emperor Napoleon III (though the letter wasn’t sent) soliciting imperial support. Desperately hoping for a production, any production, Berlioz was convinced to “dismember” his score: Acts I and II became *La Prise de Troie* and Acts III-V were re-purposed as *Les Troyens à Carthage*. Part Two was premiered at the second-tier Théâtre-Lyrique Imperial, with still further cuts, in 1863. Contemporary reviews of *Les Troyens à Carthage*—some sympathetic, others

uncomprehending—comment on the passion of the drama and the novel instrumental effects of the score. One critic, Nestor Roqueplan of *Le Constitutionnel*, was more prescient than most:

When time has brought peace to our raging debates and profound injustices, there will be a conductor who clarifies Berlioz’s works, perfectly executing his grand creations, mysterious to us. Only then will the name and the works of this great French composer be truly appreciated.



Cover of the 1863 Choudens et Cie vocal score for *Les Troyens à Carthage*.



Hector Berlioz

b. December 11, 1803, La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France
d. March 8, 1869, Paris

Berlioz was the quintessential Romantic artist. Passionate, individualistic, and at odds with the status quo, he spent a lifetime defending his ideas as musician, poet, and critic. He was judged by contemporaries as either “bizarre” or “courageous,” but there was consensus that Berlioz was brilliant.

Ever the innovator, Berlioz did not let conventional boundaries of symphony, song, and opera limit his quest for dramatic expression. The full measure of his genius would not be recognized until well into the 20th century.

Born near the foothills of the Alps, Berlioz was the son of a prominent physician. Instead of attending a seminary with instruction by priests, young Hector was home schooled by his father, who was broadminded and well-read. The author of a respected medical treatise, Dr. Berlioz was the first (in 1810) to practice acupuncture in France. As with most schoolboys of his time, young Hector’s curriculum included Latin epic poetry. His early attempts to memorize Virgil were “the most painful effort,” but later—still as a child—he was so moved by the *Aeneid* as to be struck speechless and left trembling with emotion.

Berlioz taught himself to play the flageolet (a simple, end-blown flute), found at the back of a drawer. After paternal instruction on the flute, Berlioz included the instrument in his earliest compositions. He learned guitar and wrote guitar accompaniments for popular melodies of the day. Remarkably, Berlioz never learned to play the piano, contrary to what was—and still is—common for composers-in-training.

Persuaded to follow the family career path, Berlioz moved to Paris at age 19, with the imperative to study medicine. This did not last long. In his *Mémoires*, Berlioz recalled his profound disgust at seeing the dissecting room: “Such a feeling of revulsion possessed me that I leapt through the window ... and fled for home as though Death were at my heels.”

The Paris Opéra, on the other hand, held much greater appeal, and Berlioz attended as many performances as he could. He heard the great French tenor Alfred Nourrit in the prime of his career, and French premieres of works by Rossini. Much to his father’s disapproval and unsurprising retraction of financial support, Berlioz’s medical career lost out to music. He began composition lessons and formally enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire at age 23—late for most budding musicians. Considered talented but undisciplined in following the rules of music, Berlioz failed several times to win the prestigious Prix de Rome, which was the key to a successful musical career.

Even with major works in his portfolio, Berlioz could not get his music performed. He scraped by as a guitar teacher, vaudeville theater chorister, and proofreader. His first masterwork, *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), brought artistic recognition if not financial reward. Admired by Franz Liszt, Berlioz was suddenly at the forefront of the artistic avant-garde. But he knew public recognition and financial success were only accessible via the boards of the Paris Opéra, then the center of the universe for all serious dramatic music.

Several operatic projects came to nothing. His dramatic legend *The Damnation of Faust*, produced at the Opéra Comique, was an abject failure with only two performances to a half-empty house. Concerts abroad—conducted by Berlioz himself—enhanced his international reputation. Music criticism in the leading Parisian journals provided the bulk of Berlioz’s income; his *Grand traité d’instrumentation*, first serialized in the *Revue et gazette musicale*, became a standard text and remains so today. Ironically, though, Berlioz’s relative success as a writer and instrumental composer likely hindered his ambitions on the operatic stage.

Berlioz’s final compositions were operas, written though he had sworn off the stage for nearly ten years. He never achieved success at the Paris Opéra, but we are the beneficiaries of his tragic quest.



Example 1: Acte 1, scène 2: Recit et air de Cassandra

At the opening of the opera, the Trojan people sing and dance, celebrating the apparent retreat of the Greek army after a decade-long siege. The crowd's misplaced excitement resonates in Berlioz's careful orchestration: there are woodwinds, brass, and percussion in the score, but the strings are curiously absent. Suddenly, Cassandra appears among the crowd to forewarn of the military deception. Her cautions fall on deaf ears.

In this excerpt, you will hear the strings and woodwinds accompanying Cassandra's pleas to her father, the King of Troy. She repeats the words, "You don't hear me, you don't believe me" as the orchestra reiterates a series of rushing notes to emphasize the increasing degree of her frustration. Her tragic gift is to foretell the future without anyone hearing or believing her prophecies.

Example 2: Acte 1, scène 9: Marche Troyenne

In the finale to Act I, the conflict between Cassandra's warnings and the crowd's unfounded jubilation reaches a highpoint of intensity. The chorus sings praise to Athena, thinking that the enormous wooden horse in their midst is an offering to the goddess. Cassandra tells them to destroy it, but her warnings go unheeded.

Berlioz uses a diverse collection of instruments to underscore the separate realities of Cassandra and the Trojan people. Three offstage bands and an offstage chorus are designated in the score: Group 1 is "very distant," Group 2 is "off stage, but closer to the audience," and Group 3 is "in the corridors, closer to the audience than Group 2." The physical displacement of two brass bands and an assembly of 6-8 harps plus oboe (Group 3), in addition to the orchestra in the pit, emphasizes the distance between Cassandra's alarm and the people's incomprehension.

The memorable brass band theme of the "Marche Troyenne" returns several times throughout the opera. It is Cassandra's theme, but is also associated with Dido's moments of premonition, and eventually with the Trojans' predestined fate to become the founders of Rome.

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Example 3: Acte III, scène 2: Air de Didon, “Chers Tyriens”

Preceding Dido’s appearance, a massive chorus (Berlioz suggested 200 – 300 men, women, and children) has prepared the queen’s entrance aria. In this excerpt, Dido praises the work of her people building prosperity in their city. Noble and stately, her voice soars in a heroic and grand style accompanied by strings and woodwinds. The orchestra, scored as a chamber ensemble, accompanies Dido with a variant of Cassandra’s theme, in dotted (skipping) rhythms—long associated with royalty in French music.

Berlioz’s Dido was influenced by the great mezzo-soprano (and composer) Pauline Viardot (1821-1910). Viardot had retired from public performance before *Les Troyens* reached production but her letters to Berlioz offering compositional advice reveal her deep interest in the work. Viardot’s singing and acting were legendary, and the vocal ranges for both Cassandra and Dido were such that she might have sung both roles—though it would be a marathon performance for any one singer, even today. In this aria, we hear Viardot’s commanding musical presence in combination with Berlioz’s real affection for this “beautiful queen” whom he “loved to distraction.”

Example 4: Acte IV, scène 7: Duo Didon et Énée, “O nuit d’ivresse et d’extase”

Dido and Aeneas are alone together in the gardens of her palace. Deeply in love, they sing rapturously in celebration of their night together and of the sublime beauty of the sea before them. The lover’s voices soar while the orchestra plays a soothing pattern reminiscent of gently lapping waves. As the voices come together in unison at the end of the duet, pastoral sounds of offstage woodwinds assume the vocal line. Abruptly, the full orchestra interjects with Cassandra’s prophecy motif. Aeneas is brought back to the reality of his predestined mission. The god Mercury, heralded by the brass instruments, appears with the warning: “Italy!” He gestures toward the sea, then vanishes.

This duet represents the pinnacle of happiness shared by the two lovers, but Berlioz reintroduces motifs associated with Cassandra, whose frustration at her inability to change destiny led her to suicide. We know that the lovers’ ecstatic happiness is not to last.

Example 5: Acte V, scène 4: Énée, “Ah! Quand viendra l’instant des suprêmes adieux”

The Trojans have been in Carthage for several months. The troops have been visited by ghosts chanting “Italy.” Aeneas knows that he must set sail and leave Dido, but he is deeply conflicted. In his only extended solo in the opera, Aeneas sings of his “adored queen,” vowing that he will see her one last time to say goodbye. This is the classic operatic conflict—love versus duty—and Aeneas’s obligation to destiny prevails. We know that he will leave Dido devastated, but the anguish in Aeneas’s ascending vocal melody is accompanied by unstable rhythms in the orchestra. The music, as much as the text, reveals that Aeneas is a complex character, less a scoundrel than a victim of fate.

Example 6: Acte V, scène 10: Didon, “Adieu, fière cité”

Dido is in her palace, alone with her grief. She is past all anger and knows that death is imminent. She says farewell to all those she has loved, and to life itself. Dido’s monologue is a dark complement to Aeneas’s aria of heroic regret in the previous scene. Whereas Aeneas’s music is increasingly energetic, his melody stretching to a high C, Dido’s music portrays her descent into noble resignation and her diminishing will to live. Accompanied by pulsing sounds in the low strings, the pace of her aria becomes slower and slower. Dido sings a quotation from her ecstatic duet with Aeneas, only this time it is melancholy and her voice fades away to nothing. The orchestra must complete her thoughts. We are witness to the depths of Dido’s soul and the fateful consequence of her love.

Audio examples are from the 1965 EMI recording featuring Régine Crespin as both Cassandre and Didon, Guy Chauvet as Énée, Jean-Pierre Huteau as Mercure, and the orchestra and chorus of the Théâtre National de l’Opéra de Paris conducted by Georges Prêtre.

Warner Music Group the official education and promotional music provider of Lyric Opera of Chicago.

“Epic” is a substantiating adjective, as in “epic experience,” or “epic achievement.”

Along with “classic,” defined by the Urban Dictionary as “forever cool and worth mentioning on a regular basis,” Berlioz himself might thus have described Lyric’s production of his grand opera *Les Troyens*.

Queens and kings, swashbuckling heroes, pageants and prophecies, hundreds of singers, an orchestra of nearly 100, and powerfully evocative sets: *Les Troyens* is, indeed, epic. How to bring this story, first told 2,000 years ago, into the hearts and minds of modern audiences? Communicating its timeless message, according to Lyric’s designer Tobias Hoheisel, is the *raison d’être* of his art. Enduring themes of relentless fate, the devastation of never-ending warfare, human passion in conflict with obligation to moral authority—all continue to resonate. Hoheisel describes his work as bringing *epic* to resonate with each of us, individually and collectively, through the metaphoric nature of art.

Three characters provide the essential framework for *Les Troyens*. Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess, and Dido, the Queen of Carthage, represent the geopolitical distance travelled by Aeneas, the warrior-lover and eventual founder of Rome. Lyric’s production engages visual metaphor to communicate these characters’ emotions and dilemmas as universal human experience. Imagery from multiple periods blur any specificity of era. Without reference to a specific time, the audience is transported to the conceivable here and now.

Berlioz’s opera realizes two carefully selected episodes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, creating a symmetry between two strong women, Cassandra and Dido, both of whom are ultimately denied fulfillment of their lives’ purposes. Cassandra’s gift of prophecy is inextricably paired with the curse of not being heard. Futile warnings to her war-torn compatriots are so ignored that Cassandra is driven to suicide. In Part II of the opera, Queen Dido’s prosperous reign is derailed by the threat of war and by Aeneas’s arrival on her shores. *Folle d’amour*, she is ultimately driven to suicide by her lover’s choice to leave in fulfillment of his destiny.



If Troy represents physical ruin, Carthage stands for emotional devastation. Every costume for *Les Troyens* (in all, 435 of them) has its parallel in the two parts of the opera. They are dusty and rumpled at the beginning; clean and crisp at the dénouement. The grand lines of the set, too, reflect thematic parallels: what has been a protective enclosure (or the false promise of one) comes to symbolize the restriction of personal freedom, especially in confrontation with Fate. Through visual metaphor we, like Cassandra, are endowed with foresight and empathy to fully experience the tragedy of Dido’s heartbreak and, more importantly, the synchronicity between two cultures.

To learn more about *Les Troyens* and the music of Berlioz, the following books are recommended:

Berlioz, by D. Kern Holoman, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

An outstanding biography interspersed with chronological discussion of individual Berlioz works, this book is based on Holoman's extensive original research. Of special note is a comprehensive list of concerts held during the composer's lifetime.

Berlioz, by Hugh Macdonald, The Master Musicians Series, London: J.M. Dent, 1982.

A concise and readable book written by the author of the Berlioz entry in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Contains a helpful chronology of events and glossary of influential people during Berlioz's life.

Hector Berlioz: Les Troyens, edited by Ian Kemp, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Published in the series *Cambridge Opera Handbooks*, this volume contains essays by pre-eminent Berlioz scholars. Topics addressed include Berlioz and Virgil, *Les Troyens* as a grand opera, synopsis of Berlioz's compositional process, and performance history of the work. Some musical analysis, but much is user-friendly to the non-specialist.

The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, translated and edited by David Cairns, New York: Knopf, 1969.

The best English translation of Berlioz's *Mémoires*, originally published (posthumously) in 1870. Berlioz's autobiographical writings are not always chronologically accurate, but they contain valuable insights into his creative process, as well as on-the-ground perceptions of the composer's era.

Author Biography

Elinor Olin is a musicologist and a faculty member at Northern Illinois University. Dr. Olin's research interests include melodrama, 19th-century opera, and cultural nationalism in France. She has published articles in leading journals including *19th-Century Music* and *The Journal of Musicological Research*, and her study of Saint-Saëns and melodrama is included in the collection *Melodramatic Voices* (Ashgate Press). Dr. Olin has presented lectures and workshops for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Grant Park Music Festival, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Santa Fe Opera. She was the program annotator for the Chicago-based chamber music series *Music in the Loft*.



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