

Ari Connolly
CLAS 1640

Les Troyens & Reception Studies

Les Troyens

- Composed between 1856 and 1858 by Hector Berlioz (1803-1869); first full performance was in 1890 due to the scale and necessary stagecraft
- Five act opera that covers books 1, 2, and 4 of *The Aeneid*
 - Aeneas – Trojan, leads his people to Italy and founds the city that becomes Rome
 - Dido – Queen of Carthage, led her people to Africa and founded Carthage after her husband was killed
 - First half covers book 2: Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy
 - Second half covers books 1 and 4: Aeneas has left Troy with his men and his son Anchises. They sail to Carthage as refugees and Aeneas gains the favor of the queen Dido. Aeneas and Dido fall in love and marry, but Aeneas leaves Dido because it is his duty to found Rome. Dido is grief-stricken and kills herself on a funeral pyre with Aeneas' sword, predicting the future conflicts between Rome and Carthage as she dies
- Berlioz brought the text to the Emperor in 1858, “hoping that Napoleon III would draw parallels between Berlioz reading *Les Troyens* and Virgil writing the Aeneid for Augustus” (Kemp 7)

Aeneid

- Written in 19 BCE by Virgil
- Written after the three Punic Wars (264-164 BCE, ends in the destruction of Carthage) and the Battle of Actium (31 BCE, begins Roman Empire under Augustus)
- Virgil retroactively explains that the conflicts between Carthage and Rome were destined because Dido cursed Aeneas' people, Carthage was destined to be destroyed because Rome was favored by the gods, and that the Julio-Claudians were destined to become emperors because they are descended from Aeneas, who was destined to found Rome
- In conversation with the Homeric epic tradition as Virgil uses Aeneas to further his own agenda

Les Troyens as a Reception Study

Appropriation: taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices

19th century France saw itself as a successor to Rome both in culture and imperialism. By portraying the Carthaginians as inferior to the Trojans and eventual Romans, Berlioz makes a statement the contemporary French expansion into North Africa. Berlioz ends the opera with Dido's realization that Rome will conquer Carthage, and as its successor, so will France conquer Northern Africa.

- “*Les Troyens* as an artistic vehicle for embodying in music and drama the contemporary expansion of the French empire in North Africa” (Said 60)
- Berlioz's “insistent motif” of Trojans founding Rome is more prevalent here than in Aeneid, which links to contemporary idea of France being successor to Rome (Said 66)
- Conquest and empire in *Les Troyens*
 - A work about “war and conquest against inferior others, who are identified as people who fight for the sake of profit [Greeks]...[or] pleasure seekers without a real sense of national purpose [Carthaginians]” (Said 72)

- Dido and Carthaginians portrayed as “incapable of perceiving, much less understanding, the stern tasks imposed on a chosen people by history” because of their luxury/comfort (Said 72). Dido’s portrayal as driven by lust cements her as an “oriental woman” who cannot understand duty to empire over personal happiness and is therefore lesser.
- Dido and Carthage’s “Eternal hatred to the race of Aeneas” in A flat against the Trojan’s March in B flat (Said 76)
 - Dissonant at first (discordant sounds or a lack of harmony), suggestive of the conflicts that will ensure between Rome and Carthage in the Punic Wars
 - Behind Dido’s pyre is a representation of the Roman Capitol as the Trojan March plays. At this point, the Trojans have become Romans, and Dido is witnessing that Rome will conquer her people
 - This conquering is represented musically by the Carthaginians’ A flat resolving into the Trojan March as the opera ends
 - To its contemporary audience, this would also read as modern France conquering North Africa

Hybrid: a fusion of material from classical and other cultures and/or **Refiguration:** selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition

Berlioz brings in text from Shakespeare, a respected writer, to cement himself as part of the tradition using ancient texts in their works. He brings in Virgil’s other texts to show that he had read the classical author and knows about the classical tradition he is taking from.

- Text of “Nuit d’ivresse” is Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*
 - “In such a night / Stood Dido with a willow in her hand / Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love / To come again to Carthage” (Lee 155).
 - “In one such night, the son of Venus received coldly the tenderness intoxicating of the queen Dido” (trans. Castel 624)
- Berlioz includes Virgil’s other poems the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* in Iopas’ song at Dido’s court (Lee 156)
 - “Oh blond Ceres, when to our fields you bring their adornment of fresh greenery, what happiness you bring!” (trans. Castel 619)

Historical Background: What was going on in France during Berlioz’ lifetime?

- Starting in 1854, opera was run by the Minister of the State and of the Emperor’s Household instead of independent entrepreneurs (Said 60)
 - Between 1830 and 1870 operas had to navigate “questions of patriotism, democracy (participatory or not), and legitimacy” as the government “attempt[ed] to regulate public life during crises such as the 1830 and 1848 upheavals” (Said 60)
- Ingredients for a “grand opera” that can be shown under new regulations (Said 61)
 - A “grand opera” is an serious or tragic opera containing four or five acts. It is based on historical or pseudohistorical events and the libretto (text of an opera) is entirely sung
 - The opera must “somehow to contain and perhaps even neutralize conflicts...so that audiences could feel their interests represented, enacted, and reconciled for the general good of France.”

- Additionally, the opera must “inculcate a general feeling of the *patrimoine nationale*...and the need to reflect a sense of France’s own current grandeur.”
- French imperial expansion in Africa
 - Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798
 - French occupation of Algeria in 1830
 - Continued for decades as France “was engaged both in putting down one rebellion after another by decimating the local population and in gradually incorporating the territory into its imperial system by filling it with hundreds of colonists” (Said 66)
 - French pacification campaign in North Africa in 1840s under Marshal Bugeaud, “whose aim was *la conquête totale*” (total conquest) (Said 74)
 - French attack on Morocco in 1844
 - Guinea made into a French protectorate In 1849
- Napoleon himself “revived Roman customs and ambitions, especially in their conquest of the East” as he wished for France to be the successor to Rome, both in imperial conquests and in culture (Said 63)

Text comparison: “Nuit d’ivresse” duet

Aeneid: “And Dido and the Trojan leader made their way to the same cave. Earth herself and bridal Juno give the signal. Fires flash in the Sky, witness to their nuptials, and the Nymphs wail high on the mountaintop...For no longer is Dido swayed by appearances or her good name. Nor more does she contemplate a secret love. She calls it marriage, and with that word she cloaks her sin...Now they indulge themselves all winter long, neglecting their realms, slaves to shameful lust” (trans. Lombardo, Book 4 lines 188-197, 217-219).

Les Troyens: “Both: Night of rapture and ecstasy with no end! Blond Phoebe, great stars of her court, pour on us your light blessed; flowers of the skies, smile upon our immortal love!

Dido: In one such night, the son of Venus received coldly the tenderness intoxicating of the queen Dido.

Aeneas: And on the same night, alas, unjust queen, accusing her lover, obtained from him without trouble the most tender forgiveness” (trans. Castel, 623-24).

Musical Choices

“Nuit d’ivresse” duet

- Starts in G flat, modulates to a D major by end of piece; Mercury’s “Italie” finish Act 4 on 3 E minor chords
 - D major is triumphant key, whereas E minor is uneasy
 - Berlioz sets the call to Italy at “a distinctive remove from the historical foreground of the action, something outside time and hidden from ordinary perception, like an unconscious imperative that bends individuals and collectivities to a deeper immanent force” (Said 71). This remove from the historical foreground is shown in the music by the key change.
- Berlioz uses music to hint at Aeneas’ conflicted motives and that Aeneas’ and Dido’s romance will not last

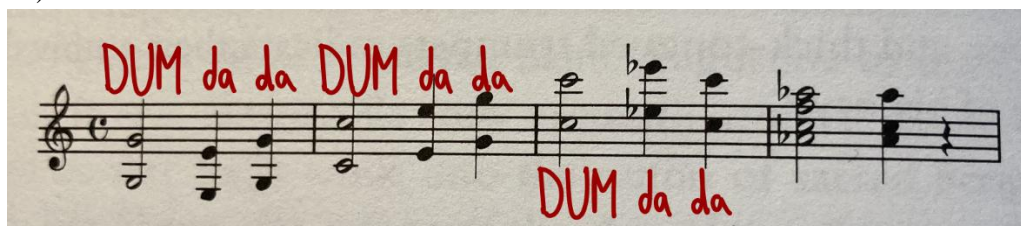
- Sounds like a “simple harmonic structure clustered around the tonic” with a “rocking barcarolle-like rhythm,” (aka that nothing is wrong and their love is peaceful), but “there are occasional flirtations with a more chromatic harmony as well as some almost imperceptible syncopations in the music’s otherwise exaggeratedly clam surface” (Said 70)
 - Tonic – first note of any major or minor scale, serves as focus for melodies (main recognizable tune) and harmonies (complementary notes to melodies)
 - Chromatic – notes that do not belong on the major or minor scale in which the music is being played

Opening of *Les Troyens*

- No strings for 66 measures, only brasses and woodwinds
- This was not standard for operas at the time and communicated an “otherness” to the audience
- The originality of this section takes the 19th century audiences “out of the habitual grand opera worlds into an exotic eastern world, doubly familiar as classic and oriental” (Said 63)
- Lee argues that Trojans are meant to be “tough warriors from an exotic, fallen city, charged with a civilizing mission they do not fully understand. They are grandly barbaric, like wolves” in *Les Troyens*, and the emphasis on the brass in the opening and the Trojan March is to “indicate their ambivalent sense of history” (153)

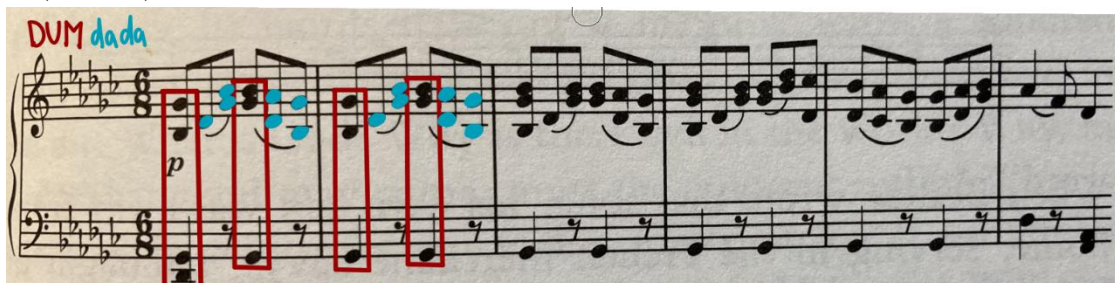
Dactylic hexameter and rhythm (sheet music excerpts are in *First Impressions*, annotations and explanation are my own)

- During the Trojan’s introduction, Berlioz matches his rhythm to Virgil’s dactylic hexameter (Lee 154)



(Berlioz creates dactylic hexameter (DUM da da) by having 1 long note and 2 short notes)

- The text of “Nuit d’ivresse” is borrowed from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. Berlioz accents his time so that Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter sounds like Virgil’s dactylic hexameter (Lee 155)



(Berlioz creates the dactylic hexameter (DUM da da) both the treble and bass clef instruments play the first note (DUM) and only the treble instruments play the next two (da da). The emphasis of DUM is created because the first note has a more full sound, not because the first note is longer.)

The version I watched and my thoughts

Les Troyens at the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía (Valencia), directed by Carlos Padrissa and conducted by Valery Gergiev, 2009. Recorded on YouTube [here](#) (French subtitles, I watched along with a separate [English libretto](#))

- Futurism/space setting
 - Seeing Aeneas and Dido being [lifted up in their silver space suits for their love duet](#) and then [Mercury flying by on a satellite did make me laugh out loud](#), which I don't think was the intent.
 - Costuming – The Trojans' armor is giving [Stormtrooper](#) meets a [Dick's Sporting Goods](#), and not in a good way. Putting a mostly white cast in dreadlock and afro wigs was certainly a choice, and [Dido's wig](#) was silly at best and distracting at worst.
 - I think the futurism elements are part of an interesting setting, but many of them were distracting and took away from the serious and tragic elements as a first-time consumer of *Les Troyens*.
- Orchestra did a great job! Objectively the best part of this production was the music. Leads put on generally strong performances so no complaints there.
- From reading reviews [Laocoön's death](#) as described by Aeneas is usually only sung and not acted, but I liked how they used the set design to have an actor mime out his death while Aeneas is singing.

Works Cited

- Castel, Nico. "Les Troyens." In *French Opera Libretti, Vol. 3*, 556-653. Leyerle Publications, 2005.
- Hardwick, Lorna. "From the Classical Tradition to Reception Studies." In *Reception Studies*, 1-11. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Kemp, Ian. "Biographical introduction." In *Hector Berlioz Les Troyens*, edited by Ian Kemp, 3-17. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Lee, Owen. "Unanswered Questions: *Les Troyens*." In *First Impressions: Twenty-One Great Operas Explored, Explained, and Brought to Life From the Met*, 149-157. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Said, Edward W. "*Les Troyens* and the Obligation to Empire." In *Said on Opera*, edited by Wouter Capitain, 55-76. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.
- Virgil, *Aeneid*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005.