

6 The operas and the dramatic legend

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“Berlioz ne fut jamais, à proprement parler, un musicien de théâtre” – “Berlioz was never, properly speaking, a musician of the theatre.”¹ This seems a strange judgment on a composer whose work is from beginning to end of intensely dramatic character, and who for most of his life was strongly interested in and closely connected with the musical stage. It is especially odd if one considers its source. Debussy when he made this remark (1893) was beginning work on his only complete opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Like Berlioz he considered and even began composition on other operatic projects. And Debussy’s operatic masterpiece, though it has had better luck staying in the repertory than Berlioz’s *Les Troyens*, has always been more admired by devotees than loved by the general public, something true of Berlioz’s great work as well. Debussy and Berlioz are surely greater composers than Massenet and Meyerbeer; but the latter were more successful stage composers in their own day.

Debussy is not alone in his opinion. Until quite recently critics tended toward the view, perhaps still current among music lovers in general, that Berlioz was more successful as dramatist in his symphonies than in his stage works. Why should this be so – the view, that is – when the reality, if the reader will accept my opinion as a definition of that undoubtedly slippery concept, is quite different? It began during the composer’s lifetime. Reviewers of *Benvenuto Cellini* and *Les Troyens* occasionally found that the dramatic brilliance of the orchestral writing in the symphonies did not transfer well, even detracted from the theatrical effectiveness of the operas. Thus Charles Merruau admonished Berlioz that he should have realized the difference between an opera and a symphony but instead wrote (in *Benvenuto Cellini*) a symphony to which voices were added like extra instruments. The English horn, says Merruau, is not a lover; but the lovers’ words as sung are merely heard, their expressive intent given to instruments which describe rather than express meaning.² Another reviewer of *Cellini* remarked more perceptively that Berlioz had dramatized the symphony to such an extent that these works (*Symphonie fantastique*, *Harold en Italie*) “may be considered true fragments of opera.”³ And Nestor Roqueplan, reviewing *Les Troyens*, compared Berlioz as musician to Beethoven, unrivaled as a symphonist but composer of an opera,

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Fidelio, “which will never be, truth to say, a real theatre piece.” Only Mozart, he says, succeeded in both genres.⁴

Much of this early comment is simply anti-Berlioz sentiment, fed by envy or desire to cut down to size the ambitious and, in his own critical writing, outspoken and often uncomplimentary composer. Berlioz had little to say in favor of Italian opera, even less for its French imitators, and critics who viewed these works with approval felt it only natural to attack him in turn.

Some but by no means all critics responded in this way. Perhaps an equal number, friends and steady supporters of Berlioz, praised the operas as triumphs, proof that the composer belonged at the center of French opera instead of the periphery to which indifference, timidity, and even hostility on the part of theatre directors had consigned him. Many critics took a middle ground, withholding complete approval but recognizing Berlioz’s talent, originality, and workmanship. Jacques-Germain Chaudes-Aigues, though troubled by what he saw as a compulsive need to be original at any cost on the part of Berlioz, deplored the vocal hostility with which parts of the audience greeted the first performance of *Benvenuto Cellini*, concluding that “despite the cabals to which M. Hector Berlioz has fallen victim, I do not hesitate to give the name of *chef-d’œuvre* to his score.”⁵

Almost all the contemporary reviews of the operas stress their difficulty and the need for repeated hearings and frequent performances to make the opera audience at home with Berlioz’s dramaturgy. Here there has been a continuing problem. Of the four works to be considered in what follows only *La Damnation de Faust*, operatic in many ways but not designed for the stage, has been performed often enough to become reasonably familiar to audiences. *Benvenuto Cellini*, *Les Troyens*, and *Béatrice et Bénédict* have never approached repertory status, especially in France. Good recordings, not in great abundance, do now exist for all the operas, and all have been edited with exemplary skill in the *New Berlioz Edition*.⁶ The operas have devoted admirers today as they did in Berlioz’s lifetime. Serious listeners in large numbers can now get to know the operas as well as the symphonies; when this has happened these operas will at last come into their own.

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From the time of his arrival in Paris as a music-loving young medical student Berlioz was attracted by musical theatre. Frequent visits to the opera were soon followed by intense study – not of medicine but of scores, chiefly those of Gluck, in the library of the Conservatoire. On a day of great importance for his future career (6 November 1822) Berlioz saw Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*.⁷ From this time on dreams of conquering

the operatic stage were never to leave him. At the end of 1822 Berlioz began a period of study with J.-F. Lesueur, one of the most successful opera composers in Paris at the turn of the century. Encouraged by Lesueur, Berlioz began several operatic projects, juvenilia which he later burnt. In 1824 he heard Weber's *Der Freischütz*, in a sadly adulterated version, and realized what the romantic spirit could do for opera; he was to remain a strong partisan for Weber, and an advocate for proper performance of his work, throughout his life.

Entering the Paris Conservatoire in 1826, Berlioz began to mature rapidly as a composer. Ideas for opera were ever-present, and Berlioz actually composed a good deal of music for *Les Francs-Juges*, a *Freischütz*-like libretto by his friend Humbert Ferrand, in 1825–1826.⁸ During these years he thought of operas on classical subjects (*La Mort d'Hercule*), English themes (*Richard en Palestine* [Scott]), *Robin Hood*, *Les Noces d'or d'Obéron et Titania* [Shakespeare]), and Chateaubriand (*Atala*). Later ideas included *Les Brigands* (Schiller), *Hamlet*, *Roméo et Juliette* (a full opera), *Cléopâtre* (all Shakespeare), and *Méphistophélès* (a full opera on Goethe's *Faust*).

Many nineteenth-century composers picked up and then abandoned opera subjects. Berlioz stands apart in that his ideas, for completed as well as abortive projects, were centered on a few authors. Just as his principal musical models for opera were few – Gluck, Spontini, Weber – so his literary interests centered on Shakespeare, Goethe, and Virgil. Musical influences he absorbed and blended into an operatic style of startling originality. Literary themes were also blended, either in an overt mix, such as the Shakespearean love scene in Act IV of *Les Troyens*, or in character blending (Cellini has some Faustian-Mephistophelean traits, Faust resembles Childe Harold in certain ways). So much did Berlioz love his chosen authors that he came increasingly to feel that only he could transfer them to the operatic stage; from *La Damnation de Faust* onwards he wrote his own librettos.

In Berlioz's time success in the field of opera was essential if a composer was to achieve any kind of reputation, and for all his idealism Berlioz was ambitious to succeed. But the operatic stage, and particularly the state-supported Opéra itself, was not easy of access to young and unproven composers. Individual concerts, however troublesome and financially risky, were easier. Partly for this reason, and of course in large measure because of his enthusiasm for the work of his idol in instrumental music, Beethoven, Berlioz turned for his first major works to the symphony and to religious music employing a large orchestra. The first three symphonies (the *Fantastique*, *Harold*, and *Roméo et Juliette*), concert music of intensely dramatic nature, certainly reflect Beethoven as

that composer's expressive message was understood by the *Jeune France* of the eighteen-thirties.⁹ They were considered in the composer's lifetime as verging on the operatic, a view encouraged by Berlioz's remark in the original program of the *Fantastique* that the program must be thought of "as the spoken text of an opera." The works feature protagonists; of these the artist of the *Fantastique* and *Harold* and, perhaps, even *Roméo*, have strong autobiographical traits. They do not have smoothly consecutive plots, but then neither do the operas. Procedure common to both genres in the hands of Berlioz is selection of episodes or scenes, all well suited for musical treatment, which form not a continuous narrative but rather an assemblage of characteristic musical portraits and landscapes, a kind of gallery devoted to the subject. This procedure is very clearly seen in the *Huit Scènes de Faust* of 1828–1829, and comes to fulfillment in the larger work derived from it, *La Damnation de Faust* of 1845–1846. It is no less important in the operas, and from the beginning. A good deal of nineteenth-century opera can be described in this way, but with Berlioz it is a consciously chosen and strongly emphasized feature of his work whether symphonic or operatic.

Excitement generated by performance of the symphonies led to demands for the composer to be called to the opera stage. After a "grand concert dramatique" on 9 December 1832, featuring the *Fantastique* with its sequel, *Le Retour à la vie*, the composer's friend Joseph d'Ortigue wrote, "Let the portals of Grand Opera be opened to Berlioz!"¹⁰ It would be nearly six years before those doors were opened to Berlioz's first opera.

Benvenuto Cellini

After his return from Italy in mid-1832 Berlioz was ready and willing to embark upon an opera. Various ideas, including that of approaching Victor Hugo for a libretto, were considered; at first nothing tangible resulted, and the composer, urged on by Paganini who wanted a viola concerto, turned to the orchestra and in 1834 wrote *Harold en Italie*. During this year more opera plans were considered. Alfred de Vigny suggested a libretto based on the autobiography of the sixteenth-century sculptor Benvenuto Cellini; Berlioz was struck by the idea and drafted a scenario which he submitted to the Opéra Comique. In the meantime Vigny got Léon de Wailly to agree to write the libretto, aided by Auguste Barbier, a friend of the composer from Roman days. The two-act libretto, which as an opéra comique was to have spoken dialogue, was rejected. Reconsidered as an *opéra semi-seria* (with sung recitatives), it was accepted by the Opéra and put on a list of works to be performed. Berlioz

all but finished the opera by the end of 1836; it was finally premiered in September of 1838 – by which time the *Requiem* had been composed and, after some delay, performed.

Cellini's autobiography, circulating in a new French translation, was talked about a good deal in Paris in the mid-eighteen-thirties. Its picaresque but hardly heroic protagonist and its episodic character, with few strongly profiled incidents, would not seem to promise much for dramatic treatment; but Berlioz liked it, and this is not surprising, for what it offered was a new set of "episodes in the life of an artist," with new opportunities for identification of the composer with that artist. Cellini was perhaps not alienated from society in the manner of a good romantic, but he certainly felt his talents to be undervalued. This, along with the sculptor's recklessness and brigand-like violence of behavior, surely appealed to Berlioz, who knew the problem of the battle for recognition and who remembered fondly his Italian wanderings, with their dreams of banditry and freedom from convention.¹¹

At times in the opera, notably in the second act when Cellini recounts his escape from the law after the violent fracas of the previous night's carnival, or later on when he sings an air dreaming of escape to a pastoral life ("Sur les monts les plus sauvages"), we get Berlioz-as-Cellini. The sculptor's defiant refusal to allow anyone else to cast his Perseus (Act II, sextet) and his decision to sacrifice all his treasured creations to supply enough metal to do the casting (Act II, finale) seem more aimed at depicting Cellini's actual character even though they have no textual basis in the *Autobiography*. The text for the love music, and in fact the whole Cellini–Teresa love story, are on the other hand conventional operatic stuff made up of whole cloth by the librettists without reference to Cellini as depicted by himself.

Benvenuto Cellini is a vibrant work full of first-class music. Its much-despised libretto provides a succession of scenes that Berlioz could justify himself in setting, with one, the Roman carnival, that is perhaps the most brilliant in the composer's whole operatic career. The work's basic plot, or rather plots, entwined stories of Cellini's love for Teresa and his triumphant fulfillment of the commission to cast an heroic Perseus-and-Medusa (the statue itself is real, and is now in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence), are comprehensible and well-rounded enough, though a careful reading of the libretto would certainly help one to follow the machinations of Cellini's rival Fieramosca and the complexities of the play-within-the-play in the Roman carnival scene.¹² The somewhat abrupt ending, with Teresa all but lost in the celebration of the successful casting of Perseus, reveals all too clearly the added-on nature of the love story. This oddity was, remarkably enough, not cited by the numerous

reviewers who criticized the libretto after the opera's première, but after the first performance the fourth tableau underwent more cuts and alterations than any other part of the work. As was to be the case with *Les Troyens*, Berlioz had trouble bringing the work to a convincing close.

Cellini was subjected to so many changes and substitutions as to remind one of the fate of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century operas for which no definitive version may be said to exist. The score Berlioz delivered to the Opéra (**Paris 1** in the *New Berlioz Edition*) was doctored up with new and substitute airs even before the first performance. **Paris 2** represents the score as affected by the changes, mostly cuts, made during the opera's 1838 run. Liszt, who revived the work for Weimar in 1852–1853, called for or himself made more changes, including a recasting of the work into three acts. The *New Berlioz Edition* score disentangles the various versions but requires close attention to follow. Listeners should be aware that the admirable Colin Davis recording of 1967 (to date the only one that is complete) not only restores the two-act version and the role of Pope Clement VII (altered to a Cardinal, before the première, at the behest of the censors) but presents the work with spoken dialogue in place of many of the recitatives, a version that was never performed in the nineteenth century.¹³

What did Berlioz offer expectant – pro and con – listeners in 1838? Those who loved the symphonies were not disappointed in the orchestral music, apart from and in conjunction with the voices, in *Cellini*. It is every bit as inventive, rich, and lively as they are, from the imposing overture to the final chorus. The choruses are also full of vigor and originality – like those of the composer's next work, the “dramatic symphony” *Roméo et Juliette* of 1839. The solo recitatives, airs, and ensembles show Berlioz in a genre hitherto represented only by scattered individual songs. Here was an opportunity for the composer's supporters to proclaim brilliant success, for his detractors to say he could not write singable melody. Both views were presented by the critics. The truth is that Berlioz wrote many striking vocal melodies, but none in the familiar language of the Italian opera of the period. This disappointed, even angered critics – and the listeners for whom they spoke – who wanted to hear Bellini or as close an imitation of Italian style as possible. Berlioz's friend d'Ortigue was later driven, in a review of *Les Troyens*, to this exasperated response:

What do we usually find in an Italian aria? Often only eight bars or so of melody; the rest is filler, commonplaces, nonsense, while in Berlioz [...] the phrase is free of these insipid and parasitical formulas used by certain composers to frame their melodic period in order to throw it into relief and make it the more striking, if at all possible, by the very poverty of its setting.¹⁴

Example 6.1 *Benvenuto Cellini*, Overture, Vn. 1, bars 42–64

Larghetto

The musical score is written for a single violin in treble clef, 3/4 time, and one sharp (F#). It is marked **Larghetto**. The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The second staff has a *poco dim.* marking. The third staff has a *cresc.* marking and includes hairpins. The fourth staff has a *pp* marking and includes hairpins.

In *Cellini* Berlioz made some effort to approach “normal” aria style; this is especially evident in Teresa’s first air, “Entre l’amour et le devoir,” with its cavatina-cabaletta structure, relatively symmetrical melodic line, and elaborate coloratura.¹⁵ But he could not force himself into the Italian mode he so much disliked, and in the later operas he did not try. Berlioz wanted recitative-and-air to be listened to as if it were a symphonic construction, its logic corresponding to and dictated by the text. Few listeners at the time could manage this. For us, with our experience of Wagner (who learned so much from Berlioz), it should be easier; but some effort is still required. “Listener-friendly” arias do exist in Berlioz’s work (that of Ascanio in the second act of *Cellini* is an example), but they are the exception rather than the rule.

A few details in the work may be noted here. In the overture there is a broad theme (see Ex. 6.1) reminiscent of the composer of *Harold en Italie* (and prophetic of *La Damnation de Faust*).

This asymmetrical melody, representative of everything Berlioz’s admirers loved and his detractors hated about his music, is based on the *Ariette d’Arlequin* in the puppet-play of the carnival scene, the finale of Act I. A chorus murmurs about Arlequin’s performance but the *ariette*, textless, is “sung” by an English horn impersonating, perhaps ironically, a “famous Roman tenor.” This must be the spot that moved the critic

Merruau to say that the English horn, while not a lover, gets to deliver the composer's expressive message. What Merruau probably did not know is that this melody was taken by Berlioz from a song, *Je crois en vous*, which he wrote in 1834, at the time of *Harold*, as a supplement to a fashionable magazine.¹⁶

The first tableau (there are two in each act) consists largely of Teresa's air (see above) and the wonderful duo-trio of Teresa and Cellini, spied upon by Fieramosca, opening with another memorable and characteristic melody ("O Teresa, vous que j'aime plus que ma vie"). In the second tableau a rather dutiful *romance* for Cellini (a piece added to satisfy the tenor of the 1838 performance), an amusing drinking chorus during which a hapless tavern-keeper tries to get his bill settled, and an obligatory air for Fieramosca precede the great Act I finale, *Le Carnaval*. Particularly notable in this superbly complex and dashing ensemble are the announcement of the puppet-play (to the music Berlioz was to reuse in the later *Roman Carnival Overture*), the *ariette* of Arlequin mentioned above and its companion piece, the absurd "cavatina" of Pasquerello, mocking Teresa's father Balducci, and the whirlwind of music accompanying Cellini's attempt to go off with Teresa, his murder of Pompeo, and his escape as the hapless Fieramosca is mistakenly caught by the crowd.

This is, literally, a hard act to follow. It has been said that the two tableaux of the second act are dramatically weak in comparison to what precedes them. I think this is less true than that they are unconvincingly related to Act I, being completely concerned with Cellini as sculptor and with the casting of Perseus. But there are good things here. The third tableau is chiefly given over to a long and dramatically vivid sextet in which Cellini confronts all his enemies, now including the Pope/Cardinal, who is demanding delivery of his statue on pain of death. In the fourth tableau there is Ascanio's air, a popular piece that was one of the opera's most successful numbers at the première. The finale is dramatically exciting if a little breathless, though the musical ending, a reprise of the drinking song of Cellini's assistants, seems a bit conventional.

The critics of the 1838 *Benvenuto Cellini*, puzzled by encountering a comic drama – at the Opéra, that temple of serious musical theatre – by the composer of the *Symphonie fantastique* and the *Requiem*, were divided on the work's merits. The most glowing praise of the composer and his first opera came from someone who had not seen the work (!) but who was to be important in its future: Franz Liszt, who in 1839 wrote an atmospheric essay dated from Florence, where he went at night to look at Cellini's Perseus and to muse on the sculptor's triumph and that of the new Cellini, Berlioz.¹⁷

La Damnation de Faust

Strictly speaking this work does not belong here since it is not actually a stage work. Berlioz referred to it as an “opéra de concert,” but his final choice for generic name was “légende dramatique.” The work has been staged, for example in Monte Carlo in 1893 (the occasion of Debussy’s critique mentioned at the beginning of this study) and by Beecham in London in 1933.¹⁸ And Berlioz after completing his score thought of turning it into an opera, with the Opéra librettist Eugène Scribe supplying enough text to do the job, for performance in London.¹⁹ In some respects the work is very much like an opera, in Berlioz’s understanding of the genre. Its four parts could, with some expansion of cast and incident, comprise four acts (Berlioz told Scribe that about forty-five additional minutes would be necessary to turn his completed score into an opera). Or one might consider the first part, with Faust as lone observer of peasant revels and the *Marche hongroise*, to be a prologue followed by three acts and an epilogue (Marguerite in heaven). There is no overture, but *Les Troyens* was also to begin without one. The role of the chorus is large but not disproportionately so for Berlioz. Faust, Mephistopheles, and Marguerite have operatically dramatic roles; only a second female role and perhaps one or two minor characters would need to be added.

There is plenty of colorful incident and correspondingly little of the introspective side of Goethe’s work (which so preoccupied Schumann in his contemporary *Szenen aus Goethes Faust*). Some scenes, such as Faust poking about Marguerite’s chamber and then hiding as she enters to sing “Le Roi de Thulé,” call out for staging. Others, Faust and Mephistopheles changing venue by sailing through the air, and especially their wild ride to hell in the fourth part, are certainly melodramatic but might be difficult to bring off on the stage (Berlioz thought that the operatic machinists in London could easily take care of this; he doesn’t say anything about the singers).

In the end the *Damnation* did not become an opera, nor should one try to make it into one. In this period of his life Berlioz was thinking not of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* but of musical-dramatic works that crossed and recrossed the border between the symphonic and the operatic. *Roméo et Juliette* belongs to this new genre as much as does the *Damnation*, the only real difference between them being the much greater role of the solo voice in the latter work. *La Damnation de Faust*, performed at the Opéra Comique (rented by the composer), though it was totally unlike what audiences there were used to, was a failure, surely in part because of what seemed its hybrid form. Berlioz thought of turning it into an opera not because he had conceived it thus but because only staged works had any

chance of success with the Parisian public of the time.²⁰ By another Berliozian irony the *Damnation* was to become one of his most popular works in the later nineteenth century.

Berlioz created the *Damnation* by cannibalizing his *Huit Scènes de Faust* of 1828–1829. All of the earlier work is used, including such famous numbers as Brander’s Song of the Rat, Mephistopheles’ Song of the Flea, and Marguerite’s two main arias. He kept most of what he had written more than fifteen years before, adding introductory, closing, and transitional material and enriching the accompanimental texture – a stunning example of a mature composer rethinking the work of his youth without in any way disavowing it. New episodes were created and the order of events rearranged to make a satisfying sequence of scenes if not a plot in the ordinary sense. One extraordinary added bit is the fugal Amen, a pseudo-religious blessing on the dead rat of Brander’s student song. The fugue, based on the song’s opening, is woodenly “correct.” The mocking humor of the piece is made more explicit with its coda of dozens of repeated syllabic Amens, but even so, contemporary listeners, especially in Germany, were not sure whether it was serious or comic in intent. Gallic wit does not always travel well.²¹

Aside from its richness of musical invention – like Mendelssohn in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music, Berlioz was able to create new material that matched the verve of his youthful scenes from *Faust* – one of the most striking features of the *Damnation* is its musical unity. Part of this is accomplished through melodic development and transformation. An example: the orchestral theme running through the work’s opening scene (see Ex. 6.2), a characteristic Berlioz melody (cf. Ex. 6.1), seems derived from the tune dominating the *Concert* [1828–1829] or *Chœur* [1845–1846] *de sylphes*; variants of it appear in several other prominent places in the score.

Berlioz also uses repeated motives for character identification (particularly that of Mephistopheles) or reference to events and situations, usually by citing a fragment of what is later to be a fully developed melody.²²

The richest and most satisfying character in the work, musically and dramatically, is Mephistopheles. This is hardly surprising for the composer of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Neither Marguerite nor Faust is equally interesting dramatically, and the latter doesn’t even get as much good music. I am inclined to think that Goethe is as much to blame for this as Berlioz, but it is true that the liveliest pages of this rarely dull score are those in which Mephistopheles is present. To twentieth-century sensibilities the final scene, Marguerite’s reception into heaven, can be anticlimactic after the hellish Pandemonium preceding it. Here in particular

Example 6.2 *La Damnation de Faust*, Part I, scene I, Vn. 1, bars 28–44

Andante placido, non troppo lento

The musical score is written for a violin in G major (one sharp) and 3/8 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second staff features a crescendo hairpin. The third staff includes dynamics of piano (*p*), *sfz*, *dim.*, and *pp*. The tempo/mood is indicated as "Andante placido, non troppo lento".

we must try to listen with nineteenth-century ears and be thankful that the music is not as saccharine as it might have been in other hands.

Berlioz dedicated the *Damnation* to Liszt. The close friendship between the two men gradually cooled, but in the eighteen-fifties Liszt was still an active promoter of Berlioz's music, performing both *Benvenuto Cellini* and *Faust* in Weimar. In 1857 Liszt's *Faust-Symphonie*, appropriately dedicated to Berlioz, was premiered.

Les Troyens

After dropping plans to turn *La Damnation de Faust* into an opera, Berlioz seemed finished with music for the theatre. He was called upon to supervise performances of the opera by his beloved Weber (he had written recitatives for *Der Freischütz* to enable it to be done at the Opéra) and would later supervise performances of operas by Gluck (*Orphée*, in 1859; *Alceste*, in 1861 and 1866), but no one seemed to want his own compositions. The next major work after the *Damnation*, the cantata or "trilogie sacrée" *L'Enfance du Christ*, was written in segments during the years 1850–1854. Performances of *Cellini* in Weimar (successful) and London (hissed by a hired claque) were not encouraging enough to make Berlioz want to write another opera. Yet ideas for a large work based on Virgil's *Aeneid* began to come to him as early as 1851. Urged on by the active and continuing interest of Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, Liszt's mistress, Berlioz took the plunge and early in 1856 began work on the libretto. Stopping to compose the first music for the new work, the

fourth-act duo of Dido and Aeneas (to become the most celebrated piece in the opera), he completed the libretto by summer and began composition in earnest. *Les Troyens* was completed, apart from numerous later additions and revisions, in April of 1858.

Cellini, planned as an opéra comique, was performed at the Opéra. In a peculiarly Berliozian ironic shift *Les Troyens*, conceived and written as grand opera on the scale of Meyerbeer's operatic triumphs, was denied access to the Opéra and was premiered – in truncated form – at the Théâtre Lyrique, a less imposing and less adequate venue, in November 1863. Berlioz went through a series of difficult negotiations, unfortunately typical of his whole career, in getting the work performed. *Les Troyens*, in five acts, as was usual for grand opera, was considered too long and too difficult to mount complete; the composer had to settle for splitting the work in two and seeing performed only the second half, Acts III–V of the original. This was done as *Les Troyens à Carthage*, with a hastily written prelude and narrative to fill in for the missing first two acts, now titled *La Prise de Troie* (Berlioz never heard this part of his great work). The performance was successful, met with respect by the audience and by most critics, with the usual extremes of admiring praise and damning criticism in the Parisian journals.²³ The work, incontestably Berlioz's masterpiece, was not performed whole until the twentieth century, and not without cuts until after the Second World War, when fine productions were mounted in the United Kingdom and later in the United States. Today, if not yet really popular, it is recognized as one of the greatest operas of the nineteenth century.

Les Troyens is sometimes thought of as a step backwards in Berlioz's compositional development, "classical" not only in subject but closer to Gluck and Spontini than to *La Damnation de Faust*, and certainly not in the spirit or technique of its great contemporary work, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Even some of Berlioz's admirers found much of the work cold, even monotonous. What they failed to see was one of the composer's most salient characteristics, faithfulness to the spirit of his literary source. Berlioz knew and loved Virgil's poetry from his youth, and tried to capture something of the dignity and epic grandeur of the *Aeneid* in the vocal music of his opera, varying this with the colorful and, as always, highly inventive orchestral marches and ballet music liberally strewn through the score. The "warmest" music in *Les Troyens*, the fourth-act duo "Nuit d'ivresse," is not only the first music Berlioz wrote for the opera – thus perhaps composed before he settled on the prevailing tone of the work – but is based on text drawn from Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*, V, 1) rather than Virgil.

The music given the central characters in *Les Troyens* is neither cold

Example 6.3 *Les Troyens*, Act III, Finale, bars 86–103; 123–136

Allegro assai ed agitato (♩ = 132)

ÉNÉE

Rei - ne! Je suis É - né - e! Ma flot - te sur vos

DIDON

bords par les vents en - traî - né - e J'ac - cepté a - vec or - gueil

u - ne tel - le al - li - an - ce É - née ar - mé pour ma dé - fen - se

nor monotonous but it does observe a kind of decorum that is deliberately imposed with results very different from the tone of *Cellini* or *Faust*. A few of Berlioz's contemporaries saw this and praised it, contrasting Berlioz's opera with run-of-the-mill Italianate works in which a waltz or barcarole suffices for every situation, every emotion, every character. But it does take getting used to; *Les Troyens* must be heard as one reads Virgil, recognizing that the personages of the epic drama are not free to behave like carousing students or young lovers. The finale of Act III, in which Aeneas steps forward to identify himself and Dido accepts his offer of military aid, is a good example of this epic decorum (see Ex. 6.3).

A feature of *Les Troyens* that has not been commented on enough is Berlioz's addition of exotic musical touches to mark the identities of Trojans and Carthaginians. He specifies a few ancient and oriental instruments in the score (for most of these modern substitutes are also indicated).²⁴ In addition there are touches of exotic color in the music itself, first of all the ballet music, notably the wonderful dances of Act IV, but also the *entrées* of the Carthaginian workers and sailors in Act III and the *combat* of the Trojan boxers in Act I. To this might be added the Trojan *Hymne* of Act I, with its odd major-minor mix; the "Phrygian" scale used by Cassandra and her attendants at the close of Act II; the *Marche troyenne* (*dans le mode triste*), with its unusual turns toward the flat side, first heard in Act III, and then used repeatedly; and perhaps the hunting call of the *Chasse royale* opening Act IV, with its curious "blue note" in the saxhorn solo (see Ex. 6.4).

Musical and literary exoticisms were not rare in nineteenth-century

Example 6.4 *Les Troyens*, Act IV, No. 29, *Chasse royale et orage*, E-flat saxhorn, bars 45–52

Allegretto (♩. = 112)

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the E-flat saxhorn, starting with a forte (f) dynamic. The middle staff is for Violins (Vns.) and the bottom staff is for Violas (Vlcs.). The tempo is marked 'Allegretto' with a quarter note equal to 112 beats. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

France. In the eighteen-forties Berlioz performed and spoke admiringly of Félicien David's "oriental" *Le Désert*. While waiting for the first performance of *Les Troyens* he read and admired Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862); he may well have anticipated a bit of the exotic Carthaginian detail abounding in that work.

Les Troyens is a magnificent work, in several senses of the word. Its subject-matter – the fall of Troy, the rise of Carthage, the tragic love between Dido and Aeneas, the inexorable call of Italy to the Trojans – is of genuine grandeur, put into words by the composer with taste and skill. It calls for resplendent sets and costumes. Here its not having become a repertory staple is an advantage; so far no enterprising director has set *Les Troyens* in nineteen-twenties Chicago or with Beckett-like sparseness. The major roles – Cassandra, Dido, Aeneas – are in every way commanding while at the same time enabled, through the words and music Berlioz has given them, to preserve their humanity. And the music is glowing throughout, reaching in the fourth act, especially the incomparable septet and the following duo, an incandescence elsewhere rarely attained.

Béatrice et Bénédict

As he was finishing *Les Troyens* Berlioz was approached with a commission to write an opera for the opening of a new theatre in Baden-Baden. Full of compositional energy, he quickly settled on an old idea, first bruited about in the early eighteen-thirties: an opera based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. As he had for *Les Troyens*, Berlioz wrote the two-act libretto himself, drawing out the comic love story of Beatrice and Benedick and discarding almost all the rest of Shakespeare's play while adding Somarone, a farcical character of his own invention (but in part based, a bit unkindly, on Spontini), in place of Shakespeare's Dogberry and Verges.

Berlioz was a passionate reader of Shakespeare all his life. Quotations from the plays fill his letters and his *Mémoires*, and are to be found in his scores as well (notably in the *Huit Scènes de Faust*). At various times he contemplated operas on Shakespeare plays. Completed works on Shakespearean themes include *La Mort de Cléopâtre* (the 1829 Rome Prize cantata), the *Ouverture de La Tempête* (1830; later included in *Lélio*); the *Grande Ouverture du Roi Lear* (1831), *La Mort d'Ophélie* (1842; a scene for chorus and orchestra); and a *Marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d'Hamlet* (1844). And of course there is the Shakespearean symphony *Roméo et Juliette* of 1839. All serious subjects, but in the end Berlioz, like Verdi, turned to comedy, and this time he wrote a genuine opéra comique, full of spoken dialogue on the whole translated or paraphrased from Shakespeare's text.

Béatrice et Bénédict is a perfectly rounded work, balancing witty elegance with charmingly half-serious sentiment, mixing the style if not the intensity of *Les Troyens* (the duo of Hero and Ursula ending the first act) with reminiscences of Weber (Hero's "Je vais le voir" in Act I) and even Mozart (the first-act duo of Beatrice and Benedict). Aside from the overture, the chief piece of instrumental music is a wonderful *sicilienne*, full of syncopations and colorful pitch inflections, heard early in the first act and again as an entr'acte.²⁵

Like Shakespeare's play, the opera varies its witty language with broad farce: Somarone's "chef d'œuvre" chorus in Act I, his drinking song in Act II, and the *enseigne* memorializing Benedick as married man, heard first in the trio of Act I and again near the end of Act II, when porters bring on signboards with a mock epitaph: "Ici l'on voit Bénédict, l'homme marié" – "Here you see Benedick, the married man." The work is formally symmetrical as well. Beatrice and Benedick each have a single aria; there is a duet for the two in each act; a male trio in Act I is balanced by a female trio in Act II; the quicksilver opening of the overture uses the beginning of the duo that closes the work. Berlioz, after composing what seems like a businesslike ending for *Cellini* and a perhaps overly terse ending for *Les Troyens* (where Dido's revenge, Hannibal's ascent, and Rome's eventual victory are closely telescoped), finally found a perfect ending, for a work that brought his career as operatic composer to a perfect close.