Berlioz

Les Troyens/The Trojans

Susan Graham (Dido), Anna Caterina Antonacci (Cassandre), Renata Pokupić (Anna), Gregory Kunde (Enée), Ludovic Tézier (Chorèbe), Nicolas Testé (Panthée), Laurent Naouri (Narbal/Le Grand Prêtre), Mark Padmore (Iopas), René Schirrer (Priam/Mercure).

Monteverdi Choir
Choeur du Théâtre du Châtelet
Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique
Sir John Eliot Gardiner *cond*.
Yannis Kokkos, stage director, set and costume designer
Patrice Trottier, lighting designer
Richild Springer, choreography

BBC Opus Arte OA 0900 D 2004 (3 DVD set: true surround sound)
Extra features
Sung in French with English, French, German and Spanish subtitles.

Of all the productions of *Les Troyens* in Berlioz's bicentenary year, the version recorded here attracted most attention: and rightly, as it took place in Paris, for which the work was intended, and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique plays on period instruments. Probably the latter make less difference than they would on an audio CD, where the balance will tend to favour the voices somewhat less, and our concentration is not distracted by vision; but the incidental advantage to the DVD is that we get an occasional look at the period saxhorns. And although this production was not given by the Paris Opéra, where Berlioz hoped it would be done, neither its modern home at the Bastille nor indeed the Palais Garnier were open in Berlioz's time. Instead it was at the Châtelet, twin to the building that housed the Théâtre Lyrique, in which the last three acts were performed in 1863 as *Les Troyens à Carthage* (Berlioz never saw the first two acts).

So far, so authentic. But *Les Troyens* was meant to be a lavish stage spectacle, and while many things here work interestingly or well, some passages simply lack the visible correlative they deserve, or even require. With stage works, viewing the gestures of the maestro is surely the lowest priority, and it was a great pity that some of Berlioz's most enthralling music, at the start of Act II – representing the death of Priam and the fall of Troy – was unaccompanied by any other representation: a dark screen would be better, or a fire, however stylized. Worse, no serious attempt was made to stage the Royal Hunt and Storm that opens Act IV. One does not expect Berlioz's instructions to be followed to the letter, but I have seen a production (in Lisbon) in which real water was splashed around, and real animals appeared, projected as silhouettes; this had both a beauty and a sense of menace entirely missing here, as the camera flits from one orchestral soloist to the next: no better than that curiously amphibian genre, the video of symphonic music. Aeneas and Dido are briefly seen apart, then together; but their love is exactly what this wonderful nature music,

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peaceable, then stormily dispersing the hunting party, is not about; it comes, like the weather, from the gods, climaxing in cries of 'Italie' to remind Aeneas of his destiny.

One might argue that the reduction in stage magic allows a better focus on human feelings, but surely these desirables are not incompatible. Hector's ghost, after a promising blue vision has cleared, is too obviously a living singer: that scene may have worked better in the theatre, but at least Hector was once a living person. Unlike his predecessors in *tragédie lyrique*, Berlioz only wanted a glimpse of the god Mercury, but the effects of the gods' involvement in human triumph and tragedy is an essential element in the epic. Otherwise the staging verges on excellence. One might sigh at the tediously fashionable 'relevance' when guns are carried, rather than swords and spears, but the military scenes are blessedly short. No punches are pulled when Act II ends, the stage filled with bodies; Cassandra and Dido kill themselves with daggers, and the appearance of real violence. But was it punch-pulling to change to what the index incorrectly calls the 'original ending'? Berlioz's final, and as far as we know preferred, version, has the Trojan March dominating the impotent anger of the doomed Carthaginians, while in the background Imperial Rome rises above Dido's pyre; she has seen into the future, and knows that Rome will conquer. In this version Dido's last articulate words invoke the triumphs of Hannibal, although she still dies alone with a look of despair. The Carthaginians have a little space to themselves: a sententious speech for a high priest (but visibly it is Narbal), and a choral imprecation. A quick transition brings Clio, muse of history, represented here by Cassandra (a good idea), proclaiming 'Fuit Troja, stat Roma'. Mercifully the original finale is then truncated; its procession of Roman worthies (as Berlioz may have realized) would bore any audience to distraction, given that, apart from the necessary reprise of the Trojan March, the music is among the thinnest in Berlioz's output. While certainly a less eccentric performer's decision than Gardiner's changes to Act IV of *Figaro*, there seems little dramatic or musical advantage to this version.

After Act V comes a 50-minute documentary by Reiner E. Moritz, a commentary on the opera by the conductor, director, and members of the cast: often engaging, but not illuminating much that was not clear from the performance. Spontaneity presumably disallowed correcting slips of the tongue that might have annoyed Berlioz (Nerissa for Jessica, a conflation of Achilles and his son Pyrrhus). Kokkos clearly knows little of Berlioz's relationships with living women; but his view that women are sympathetically understood in the opera is strongly supported by Susan Graham. While I am nit-picking, someone should have edited the subtitles: 'let us leave this portentous shore' is unfortunate, 'tiresome struggles' is a poor rendering of 'pénibles travaux', and 'éclair' is not 'lightening' but lightning.

Compared with what one can see from a seat in the theatre, there is clear gain in mixing remote and close-up shots, allowing, nay compelling, attention to the text and the emotions of the dramatis personae. This applies just as much to the minor characters –Testé a dark grained Panthus, Padmore's Iopas gentle but impulsive, Naouri's Narbal sturdy but (rightly) suspicious of the Trojans, Pokupić's Anna open and naïve, d'Oustrac's lively Ascanius an easily embarrassed teenager, making faces. Topi Lehtipuu sings Hylas's song nicely, but I wish the production had responded in some way to the breaking wave in the second strophe. But what makes, rather than breaks, this production is the strong casting in the chief roles which, except in Davis's second recording, have

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been a problem with *Les Troyens* on CD. Tézier makes the most of his opportunity as Choroebus, a baritone role virtually extinguished half-way through Act I. One of Berlioz's achievements is to make us sympathize with Aeneas, although we sympathize still more with Dido; he is seen amid the disaster of Troy, before being betrayed by his feelings and finally by the gods. The role could hardly be better done; Kunde has power for the heroic passages and wonderfully delicacy in the love scene where the voices mingle and overlap – and where more brazen tenors cannot cope (in the documentary he pays tribute to Graham for this scene, but he deserves at least equal credit).

Cassandra, a character especially close to Berlioz's heart, I believe because he drew upon sources other than Virgil to complete her portrait, is represented by Caterina Antonacci in torment, love, and ferocious defiance: admirable, beautiful, moving. The same can be said of the still more varied role of perplexed Dido, whose dignity in Act III is broken by loneliness, turning to irresponsible eroticism in Act IV, then fury and noble resignation. One critic suggests that Susan Graham's delivery of the music slipped a little in the final act; I do not agree, for any harsh sounds derive from the words, the situation, and the music. The best Didos of my theatre experience, Janet Baker and Yvonne Minton, have here at least an equal. Indeed, Graham's and Gardiner's contributions to the musical performance are the chief of many reasons to treasure this set, despite the conductor's tendency, which not all will appreciate, to move swiftly through some lovely passages rather than disturb the larger flow by lingering on details. I found this less of a problem in the lyrical fourth act, however, than in Aeneas's cantabile aria in the fifth.

Is the staging and filming worthy of this splendid cast? Mostly, yes: in blocking crowds and expressing character, certainly. The mirror and stairs which seem to double the number of people milling around are effective, but I could have wished for more overviews of the *mise-en-scène*, notably at the end where the staging is minimal: Gardiner in the documentary says 'we see the goddess Iris', but we don't, only Dido's feet; Rome is a distant echo, invisible, our vision still centred on Dido, the sacrificial victim. The music, surely, requires a more brilliant visual response; the spirit of Grand Opéra seems to have expired with Dido. Nevertheless the balance between close and distant images is often imaginatively handled, as in the quintet, where due attention is paid to the antics of Ascanius, who does not sing but plays a crucial role by stealing Dido's ring (which he tosses up and catches, as if d'Oustrac were practising for Mélisande). The mute roles in Act I are not neglected, although the musical beauty of the scene for Andromache extends beyond what the director can fill with appropriately slow actions. The scintillating third ballet in Act IV has an excellent black dancer but the long G major numbers which precede it seem insufficiently contrasted, being filled out by agreeable tumbling tricks, suggestive of performing artistes rather than slaves: another punch pulled, after all, for this opera is about Imperialism as well as love and war.

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