

***La Mort de Cléopâtre* (The Death of Cleopatra)**

LOUIS HECTOR BERLIOZ

B. December 11, 1803; La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France

D. March 8, 1869; Paris

Not published until 1903, the cantata was never performed in Berlioz's lifetime.

Scored for solo mezzo-soprano, two flutes doubling piccolo, two oboes, clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. (approx. 21 minutes).

French composer Hector Berlioz is the exemplar of the Romantic period in music, especially his *Symphonie fantastique* of 1830. *La mort de Cléopâtre*, or the Death of Cleopatra, reveals the same *fantastic* compositional imagination. The cantata was written in 1829 explicitly for *Prix de Rome* competition of the French Académie des Beaux-Arts. Winning composers received a modest income and spent two years in Italy studying classical art and composing. Berlioz's radical imagination ran counter to the traditional impulse of the competition, however, and he won only on his fifth attempt. For the second round of the competition, contestants were required to compose in just four or five weeks a cantata or *scène lyrique* based on a text provided by the competition committee. Berlioz composed four such works, including *La mort d'Orphée* of 1827 and *Herminie*, of 1828 for which he won second prize. Typically, the winner of the second prize was awarded the grand prize the following year, yet Berlioz's 1829 entry, *La mort de Cléopâtre*, so enraged the judges with its experimentation, that no prize was awarded that year and Berlioz's award was delayed until 1830 when he entered the suitably conservative *La mort de Sardanapale*.

Berlioz's 1829 entry draws upon the Shakespearean story of Cleopatra's suicide after the Battle of Actium. Berlioz was fascinated by the mental state of Cleopatra after Marc Antony has died in her arms. The queen takes poison and appeals to spirits of the Pharaohs to receive her in the afterworld before dying, wracked by dramatic convulsions. Berlioz, known to have a penchant for classic tragedy, was certain that the piece would secure the first prize in the competition. Unfortunately, the jury responded in bewilderment, at a loss to evaluate its bold harmonies and unconventional rhythms for the time. Although the cantata did not win the competition, Cleopatra has become recognized over the years together with Cassandra, Dido, and Juliet as one of Berlioz's great heroines.

The listener is immediately pulled into the dramatic themes of this piece as the strings introduce the *Allegro Vivace con Impeto*. One can immediately gain a sense of how startled a 19th-century *Prix de Rome* jury must have been during the midpoint of this section, where Cleopatra's pleas to the Pharaohs are foreshadowed by an intense eruption of strings following a brief silent pause. Such rapid shifts of dynamics and pitch are thoroughly developed in the *Meditation* and ensuing movement. Throughout the piece, Berlioz plays with rhythm and meter in an animated manner, while capturing the heart-rending drama of the storyline by means of his expressive treatment of sonorities and

instrumentation. The piece comes to an extraordinary end as both Cleopatra's life and by extension the orchestra die away as instrument after instrument ceases to play. The quiet end mimics the fading pulse of a heartbeat, which is then silenced by the soft descending tones of the cellos.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Berlioz's *The Death of Cleopatra*.

Program note by Aja Wood, an ethnomusicology graduate student at the University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre & Dance.
