

Berlioz's *Les Troyens* - A Survey of the Discography

by Ralph Moore

In over a hundred years of recording history, there have been no more than forty recordings of Berlioz' epic masterpiece in any form – excerpts, complete, in French, English and several other languages – and there are reasons for that comparative paucity of output. Of those, only two are complete studio recordings in French, as Scherchen's 1952 set is just Part 2, *Les Troyens à Carthage*. There are, however, also a couple of complete, live, modern recordings in French, whose digital sound is virtually as good as the studio versions; otherwise, despite individual gems, the catalogue offers a limited choice if you apply the reasonable criteria of wanting a complete performance in good sound performed in French by first-rate singers. Fortunately, we are not bereft of worthy accounts: those remaining options are generally attractive and there is also a range of excellent supplementary recordings.

Les Troyens is challenging to stage as well as sing; it essentially combines two operas running for a total of four hours and as such a stage production is at least the equivalent of mounting *Götterdämmerung* - and you need two prima donnas, not just one. I am of the not especially controversial opinion that the best music is in the second half of an opera, which is why that was first performed. The Trojan first part is necessarily more jagged and violent apart from interludes such as the lovely duet between Cassandre and Chorèbe, whereas the Carthage action contains more which is lyrical or reflective. The opera is sometimes presented in those two halves over two evenings but it's surely best to hear the whole thing in its entire sweep. Opportunities to see it in the opera house are rare; even Berlioz himself never got to see it staged in its entirety, only the last three Acts, as *Les Troyens à Carthage* - and those were still cut. I was fortunate to see the 1984 Met production with Jessye Norman doubling the roles of Cassandre and Didon but most people will at best see it in concert, as Colin Davis conducted it at the Barbican and John Nelson in Strasbourg. For example, the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, struggled to assemble a cast for their last production in 2012 and had not previously mounted the opera in four decades.

Berlioz conceived *Les Troyens* as a French Grand Opera and it is diminished by any notions of performing it in "chamber style" with smaller-voiced singers. Berlioz surely had a tenor of the Georges Thill type in mind for Aeneas, a special category of voice called "lyric-dramatic"; seek out his vintage recordings if you want to hear the ideal voice-type in this role, both virile and refined - his final top B in "Inutiles regrets" is stunning. Neither Jon Vickers nor, at the other end of the spectrum, Nicolai Gedda or Michael Spyres, has those vocal characteristics; probably Ben Heppner is the best modern equivalent of what is required, but his voice is nowhere near as bright in timbre and often, if the voice is big enough the murderously high tessitura and top notes cause the singer difficulties. Of course *Les Troyens* has its lyrical moments – as does the *Ring* – and the tenor must be able to sing softly, but it needs to be performed by heroic voices and maintain a sense of epic scale. I also think it must be sung in French if the rhythms of Berlioz' own libretto, based on his reading of Virgil, are to be properly embedded within his music. As always, Italian is a possibility, as per Kubelik's 1960 recording below, as almost anything can be sung in that euphonious language, but English doesn't work that well and German is...well, just wrong.

I consider below thirteen recordings - complete, cut and excerpts - from which it should be possible for the Berlioz enthusiast or novice to select one or two according to taste. I am a self-confessed Berlioz devotee and am proud of the contribution British musicians such as Beecham, Colin Davis, Alexander Gibson and Janet Baker have made to reviving and presenting his music to a grateful public but resist that influencing my responses.

The Recordings

Thomas Beecham – 1947 (studio; mono) Malibran; Somm

Orchestra - Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - BBC Theatre Chorus

Enée - Jean Giraudeau

Chorèbe - Charles Cambon

Panthée - Charles Paul

Narbal - Charles Cambon

Ascagne - Irène Joachim

Cassandre - Marisa Ferrer

Didon - Marisa Ferrer

Anna - Yvonne Corke

Hylas - Colin Cunningham

Priam - Scott Joynt

Hécube - Yvonne Corke

Iopas - Frans Vroons

Helenus - Colin Cunningham

Un chef grec - Dennis Dowling

Un soldat troyen - Dennis Dowling

1re sentinelle - Ernest Frank

2e sentinelle - Scott Joynt

L'Ombre d'Hector - Ernest Frank

Le spectre de Cassandre - Yvonne Corke

Le spectre d'Priam - Scott Joynt

Le spectre de Chorèbe - Charles Cambon

Mercure - Stearn Scott

Beecham was long a champion of Berlioz and this recording made in the BBC studios over two evenings with a francophone cast, an excellent chorus and a crack orchestra in the RPO, is testament to his enthusiasm for the music. The sound, remastered by SOMM from 78-rpm acetates (I have not heard the Malibran release), is really very good for its era, with minimal distortion. It is almost complete at three and three-quarter hours; there are a few cuts such as in Aeneas' big, final aria "Inutiles regrets!" but the ballet music is performed complete except for the wrestlers' dance, No. 5 *Combat de ceste – Pas de lutteurs*. A point of interest is Beecham's inclusion of the prelude that Berlioz wrote in 1863 for Part 2, *Les Troyens à Carthage* and the only oddity the placement of the *Royal Hunt and Storm* after the love duet to open the second part of an opera, a practice often followed if the opera is to be performed over two evenings. You may read more about this in my MWI colleague [John Sheppard's review](#).

It is a pleasure to hear experienced and genuinely stylish, francophone principal singers in this music when too often we have to be content with standard "international French". The best and probably best-remembered singer here is bass Charles Cambon, who doubles as Chorebus and Narbal; he has a beautiful, expressive, smooth voice ideally suited to Berlioz' long lines. The rest of the cast are also veterans in this music without necessarily being ideal: Marissa Ferrer had previously sung both Dido and Cassandre as long ago as 1929 (at the Paris Opéra with Germaine Lubin as Cassandra and Georges Thill as Aeneas) and 1939 respectively, and is clearly under the skin of the roles. Her voice is relatively light and sometimes a bit edgy but sufficiently powerful to cope and she has all the notes; I enjoy her very much. Irène Joachim, whom collectors will know as Mélisande in the 1941 recording conducted by Désormière, is good in the relatively small role of Ascagne. The surprise here – possibly a shock – is the very light, strange, rather throaty tenor of Jean Giraudeau, who had already performed Aeneas and went on to record the role again for Scherchen (see below). Those like me habituated to heroic voices like those of Richard Cassilly, Mario Del Monaco, Ben Heppner and Jon Vickers will have to take

a deep breath; his squeezed timbre is trying and his supposedly climactic “la belle Cressida” in the love duet is so weedy as to make me lose all patience. Nonetheless, he is inside the role and was apparently good enough for Sir Thomas, so maybe we should just put up with him, even though to my ears he sounds like a comprimario tenor suitable only for operetta and comic opera. I complain below about Michael Spyres sounding too light for John Nelson but, compared with Giraudeau, Spyres sounds like Melchior. The supporting cast is obviously mostly drawn from British stalwarts and they are more than acceptable; Yvonne Corke is especially fine in three roles. Dutch tenor Frans Vroons and one Colin Cunningham sings Iopas’ and Hylas’ arias respectively very pleasantly.

For many, however, the main attraction here will be hearing how Beecham handles this music he loved in typically flamboyant and energised fashion. Nothing drags except, oddly, the love duet, which I find too leisurely, such that it loses the erotic pulse which is so deftly captured by Davis. Otherwise, he generates real thrills at climactic points without letting the opera disintegrate into a succession of highlights – there is a real sense of a sweeping command of Berlioz’ conception.

Limitations of sound and the peculiarity of the casting of the Aeneas prevent this from being a prime recommendation but devotees of this opera will want to hear what Beecham does with it.

Hermann Scherchen – 1952 (studio; mono) only Part 2, *Les Troyens à Carthage*; Tahra; Cantus Classics
 Orchestra - Orchestre des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris
 Chorus - Ensemble Vocal de Paris
 Enée - Jean Giraudeau
 Narbal - Xavier Depraz
 Ascagne - Micheline Rolle
 Didon - Arda Mandikian
 Anna - Jeannine Collard
 Hylas - Bernard Gallet
 Iopas - Bernard Gallet
 Le spectre de Chorèbe - Georges Abdoun,
 Mercure - André Dran

This is only two and a half hours of music on two CDs as it is only Part 2. It is nobly conducted by Scherchen in a stately fashion which lacks Beecham’s élan, but the clean mono sound is very much better than Beecham was given. Voices are recorded closely and Arda Mandikian is similar in timbre to her predecessor for Beecham, rather bright and shallow but powerful, and she sounds authentically French even though she was in fact Greek-Armenian and a friend of Callas from their Athens Conservatory days. The whole recording, in fact, is very French, as all the forces except the conductor are francophone and this was recorded in Paris. Jeannine Collard is a pleasing Anna. Collectors might know the Narbal from the superb 1953 recording of *Les pêcheurs de perles*. However, having heard him in Beecham’s recording five years earlier, my heart sank at the prospect of a repeat performance of Aeneas from Jean Giraudeau, whose small, tight tenor surely approximates to no-one’s idea of the martial hero. He is of course the same here; his voice-type is fixed and that’s it. This has more of an intimate than an epic atmosphere, which perhaps has more to do with the recording balances here; for example, the exchanges between Dido and Anna have a touching immediacy, even though orchestral details are rather recessed.

This is only half the opera but it’s well done – if only I could stomach an Aeneas who sounds like Monostatos; everyone else is fine. What were they thinking of?

Robert Lawrence - 1959/60 (live composite; mono - cut) VAI Audio; The Opera Lovers

Orchestra - American Opera Society
Chorus - American Opera Society
Enée - Richard Cassilly
Chorèbe - Martial Singher
Panthée - Kenneth Smith
Narbal - John Dennison
Ascagne - Frances Wyatt
Cassandre - Eleanor Steber
Didon - Regina Resnik
Anna - Regina Sarfaty
Hylas - Glade Peterson
Priam - Chester Watson
Hécube - Regina Sarfaty
Iopas - William Lewis
Helenus - Glade Peterson
Un soldat troyen - Kenneth Smith
L'Ombre d'Hector - Chester Watson
Le spectre de Chorèbe - Chester Watson
Mercure - Chester Watson

From CLOR: "Recording of a concert performance in the Carnegie Hall. According to James Calvert, Thomas Beecham was to have conducted this performance but was ill, and so his assistant, Robert Lawrence, who had conducted at the rehearsals, took over."

The booklet tells us that the American Opera Society had engaged Sir Thomas Beecham to conduct the complete work in two parts, with separate performances of *La prise de Troie* and *Les Troyens à Carthage* scheduled in New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC during December 1959 and January 1960.

Sir Thomas clearly didn't want to have much to do with what evidently seemed to him to be an ad hoc, substandard undertaking; as a result, rehearsals with him were limited, but there is plenty of drive and energy to the singing and playing. In the end, he absented himself from several performances with the excuse of illness and had to be substituted by Lawrence, who, had in any case, done most of the preparation. These are the New York performances from 29 December 1959 and 12 January 1960; the Philadelphia performances were cancelled.

The sound is boxy mono and the soloists are often quite distant in the aural picture but not damagingly so. The first part, *La prise de Troie*, is intact but in *Les Troyens à Carthage* just over half an hour of music is cut from the processions and the ballets, ten minutes of Dido's music in the second *tableau* of Act 5 and the sentries' duet in its entirety. These are no great losses and all of the best remains, which is just as well, as the main reason to hear this resides in the presence of three great singers: Eleanor Steber, Regina Resnik and Richard Cassilly.

Steber arrests the listener's attention straight away with her vibrant, secure sound; she has a gleaming top, a firm centre and a surprisingly trenchant lower register – this is a complete voice and I haven't heard Cassandre better sung - in good French, too. Her voice soars above the others in the ensembles and her two top Bs at the end of her duet with her *amant* Chorèbe are stunners. He is sung by Martial Singher; his vibrato is rather pronounced, but he has the authentic baryton-martin sound, even if he no Robert Massard. Cassilly similarly pins back our ears with his first entrance narrating the death of Laocoön; his light, bright, powerful tenor must surely be what Berlioz had in mind and he sounds like the direct heir to Georges Thill, even if his French is occasionally flawed and, sadly, he goes flat at the beginning of, and intermittently during, the famous love duet "Nuit d'ivresse". However, he makes a

great job of his final aria "Inutiles regrets" and earns a deserved ovation. Resnik has a naturally regal, imposing mezzo-soprano, with quite a heavy vibrato but ample tone and power and she sings a grandly-scaled Didon.

The supporting cast is good: Chester Watson sings no fewer than three roles very well; William Lewis sings Iopas' pastoral poem neatly, if rather strenuously, nailing the top C but without the dreamy, ethereal delicacy it really requires – and his French vowels are suspect; Glade Peterson sings Hylas' homesick song beautifully in better French. The orchestral set pieces like the famous "Royal Hunt and Storm" are delivered con gusto – the brass and chorus have a ball, even if ensemble could be crisper. Kudos to Lawrence for imbibing some of Beecham's gift for animating the music he conducted.

Sonic limitations and cuts notwithstanding, this is a bravura performance which really embraces the spirit of Berlioz' epic vision and is remarkably successful considering its chaotic genesis.

Rafael Kubelik – 1960 (live; mono -cut) in Italian; Myto

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Enée - Mario Del Monaco

Chorèbe - Lino Puglisi

Panthée - Agostino Ferrin

Narbal - Nicola Zaccaria

Ascagne - Fiorenza Cossotto

Cassandre - Nell Rankin

Didon - Giulietta Simionato

Anna - Adriana Lazzarini

Hylas - Piero De Palma

Priam - Giuseppe Morresi

Iopas - Regolo Romani

Helenus - Regolo Romani

L'Ombre d'Hector - Antonio Cassinelli

Le spectre de Cassandre - Nell Rankin

Le spectre de Chorèbe - Lino Puglisi

Having been underwhelmed by the more recent, complete recording conducted by John Nelson, I turned to this live, 1960 radio broadcast from La Scala to hear this masterwork performed in true, heroic style by singers of the power and calibre to do it justice.

Admittedly, there are a number of strikes against it, not least the cutting of the score by 40 minutes. Act 1 loses a few bits, including some of Cassandra's warnings, and the opening of Act 3 is shorn of the parade of the various Carthaginian occupations and their praise of the queen. In Act 4, scenes and events are confusingly re-arranged: the opening Royal Hunt and Storm sequence is postponed to the end of the Act, thus taking place after the famous love duet, and the exchange between Anna and Narbal is lost. Most unforgivably, Iopas' "O blonde Cérés" is cut. Act 2 survives intact but the opera is here presented in three Acts rather than five and of course it is in an Italian translation which doesn't always sit comfortably with the rhythms of Berlioz' music, so carefully contrived to marry with his own French libretto derived from the "Aeneid". The mono sound is reasonable for its vintage age and provenance, without many drop-outs and a good balance between voices and orchestra, but hi-fi it ain't. Applause is tepid; perhaps understandably, as the audience doesn't seem to know either the opera or what to make of it. Finally, the Corebo (Chorèbe) is pretty bad, with a windy, unpleasant tone and shouted top notes; Peter Glossop and Peter Mattei are models of elegant legato by comparison.

But that's the bad news over; the virtues of this performance are abundant. Del Monaco is a suitably heroic Aeneas, virile but not stentorian, his voice well under control and capable of some subtlety. He

is matched by a foursome of stellar mezzo-sopranos, beginning with Giulietta Simionato's rich, expressive Dido, then Adriana Lazzarini's similarly warm, vibrant Anna, followed by a young Fiorenza Cossotto making her mark as Ascanio - the quality of that voice is immediately unmistakable. The surprise for some will be the lovely and - appropriately - hysterical Cassandra of Nell Rankin, a proper dramatic (mezzo-)soprano. There are some famous names in the supporting cast, like Nicola Zaccaria as Narbal. In compensation for the loss of Iopas' aria, the Hylas is that prince among comprimarii, Piero De Palma, singing beautifully.

Kubelik's direction is superb. He had already brought this work to Covent Garden three years earlier in English and clearly both loves and understands it. The orchestra is rather good, some blatty brass apart, and the chorus well drilled and lusty.

This cannot be a first recording recommendation but it will be prized by lovers of this opera who want to hear it performed with energy, commitment and in the necessary large-scale conception.

Georges Prêtre – 1965 (studio excerpts; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - L'Opéra de Paris

Chorus - L'Opéra de Paris

Enée - Guy Chauvet

Panthée - Jean-Pierre Hurteau

Narbal - Lucien Vernet

Ascagne - Jane Berbié

Cassandre - Régine Crespin

Didon - Régine Crespin

Anna - Marie-Luce Bellary

Iopas - Gérard Dunan

Unlike his live performance in Rome in 1969, Prêtre's tempi here are moderate; his account of the *Royal Hunt and Storm* is thrilling and I suspect that on occasion Crespin fixed him with her gimlet eye and dug her heels in, so, for example, the love duet goes at the right, flowing pace, only marginally faster than Davis' ideal speed in his studio recording, relaxing and breathing in the right places. It is helped by Crespin's partnership with French tenor Guy Chauvet, whose timbre is remarkably similar to that of Nicolai Gedda but with more steel and heft – which I like, as I find Gedda's tone too tight and light. Chauvet in fact successfully sang Heldentenor roles and you can hear how he easily copes with the tessitura of "Inutiles regrets", despatching the top notes very creditably.

My problem, as ever, is with what I sometimes hear as a gritty, scratchy edge in the higher regions of Crespin's soprano. I realise that will sound like an absurd and scandalous complaint to her legion admirers, but there it is. She has the right amplitude and mezzo depth; after all, she was a celebrated dramatic soprano who sang Wagner, and her diction is exemplary, too. She sings both principal soprano roles here, with equal facility with great care for the text, especially in her delivery of Cassandre's doom-laden prophecy which is her first aria, "Malheureux Roi!" – even though her scream at the end of Scene 9 is ill-advised and hammy. She sings Dido's suicide aria with intensity and feeling, too, if without the animation that Baker and Verrett bring to it and her soft singing is beautifully controlled. She has all the manner of the diva and is partnered with first-rate, all-French co-singers which gives this an authentic flavour. If you are more of an admirer of Crespin than I, this is an excellent disc of extended excerpts, very well filled at nearly eighty minutes, with a fine chorus and orchestra and Prêtre on best behaviour.

Alexander Gibson – 1968 (studio excerpts; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus
Narbal - Gwynne Howell
Didon - Janet Baker
Anna - Bernadette Greevy
Iopas - Keith Erwen

Perhaps it's stretching my brief somewhat to include an excerpts disc offering only the final 25 minutes of this opera, but the performance is of such quality that I must at least draw attention to its existence. We have no complete, studio recording of one of Janet Baker's greatest roles; good as Josephine Veasey is on Colin Davis' 1969, Baker's absence is one of the great missed opportunities in recording history and her the live recording with her singing in English while the rest of the cast sing in French is in poor sound and not a satisfactory substitute.

Everything about this is perfect: Gibson's alternately fluid, sensitive and impassioned conducting, lovely playing from the LSO, the excellent supporting singers, including the best Narbal from sterling Welsh bass Gwynne Howell (wrongly designated as a baritone) and the fine Irish contralto Bernadette Greevy, warm, well-balanced stereo sound and, above all, Janet Baker's miraculous singing, suffused with a myriad colours and deep emotion; she is the abandoned queen incarnate and only the greatest singers such as Shirley Verrett, begin to approach her in the role. Her French is very good and her voice in absolute prime condition. The pathos and delicacy of her singing when she recalls her halcyon days with Aeneas are deeply moving, surpassed in effect and impact only by her thrilling cries of "Hannibal! Hannibal!"

The other items on this well-filled recital are equally valuable testimony to Baker's supremacy in Berlioz: *Les nuits d'été* and *La mort de Cléopâtre*; you must hear this if you are a Berlioz devotee.

Colin Davis – 1969 (live; stereo) in French and English (Janet Baker); Opera Depot

Orchestra - Covent Garden
Chorus - Covent Garden
Enée - Jon Vickers
Chorèbe - Peter Glossop
Panthée - Anthony Raffell
Narbal - Michael Langdon
Ascagne - Anne Howells
Cassandre - Anja Silja
Didon - Janet Baker
Anna - Heather Begg
Hylas - Ryland Davies
Priam - David Kelly
Hécube - Elizabeth Bainbridge
Iopas - Ian Partridge
Helenus - Edgar Evans
Un chef grec - Eric Garrett
Un soldat troyen - Hugh Sheehan
1re sentinelle - Michael Rippon
2e sentinelle - Dennis Wicks
L'Ombre d'Hector - Dennis Wicks
Le spectre de Cassandre - Margaret Williams
Le spectre d'Priam - David Kelly
Le spectre de Chorèbe - Peter Glossop
Mercure - William Clothier

In a production which was a dry run for the eventual studio recording, Janet Baker was parachuted in to replace an indisposed Josephine Veasey, having learned Dido in English, which makes for an odd mismatch. Unfortunately, the sound is poor, too, with lots of static interference. Apart from the pleasure of hearing Janet Baker, pretty much everything that is good about this performance may be heard in the studio recording of the same year with some of the same cast as here, but with Josephine Veasey as Didon and Berit Lindholm, rather than Anna Silja, as Cassandre; some find Silja's performance superior. Baker's peerless Didon can also be heard in the extended excerpts recorded the year before and conducted by Sir Alexander Gibson, so I cannot see the point of recommending this.

Georges Prêtre – 1969 (live; stereo - cut) Opera d'Oro; Opera Depot

Orchestra - RAI Roma

Chorus - RAI Roma

Enée - Nicolai Gedda

Chorèbe - Robert Massard

Panthée - Robert Amis El Hage

Narbal - Boris Carmeli

Ascagne - Rosina Cavicchiola

Cassandre - Marilyn Horne

Didon - Shirley Verrett

Anna - Giovanna Fioroni

Hylas - Carlo Gaifa

Priam - Plinio Clabassi

Hécube - Giovanna Fioroni

Iopas - Veriano Luchetti

This is a typically driven live, concert performance from Georges Prêtre; he launches into proceedings at an insane lick which is both exciting and disconcerting. Nobody else conducts it this fast and sometimes he gets away with it, but just occasionally you'll be envisaging Georges looking at his watch in case he misses the last train. At least the Italian audience were given no chance to become bored with what was probably unfamiliar music.

Speeding up proceedings even further, about forty-five minutes of music are cut – mostly the orchestral numbers like the ballets, except, of course, for the *Royal Hunt and Storm* - but all the vocal numbers are intact. I never warmed to Nicolai Gedda, whose tenor I always found rather bleating in timbre, but I recognise that he makes a fine job of the role of Aeneas, especially in his final big aria, coping easily and admirably with the high tessitura. He was good for Davis as Benvenuto Cellini but here his tone is thin compared with the ideal "heroic-lyric" sound Thill brought to the role of Aeneas and his voice is certainly smaller than the likes of Cassilly, Vickers or Heppner. Nonetheless, he comes through clearly, has his moments, especially when despatching top notes, and is clearly preferable to such as Giraudeau. The fact remains that he still does not have the visceral, heroic ring I want and sounds more like Hylas or Iopas than Aeneas.

Otherwise, the principals here are as starry a cast as can be found anywhere, and include my favourite French baritone, Robert Massard, whose beautiful voice has always moved me. Marilyn Horne's undertaking of Cassandre is unexpected but her dark, rounded tones and thrilling top make her a formidable exponent of the role. She displays a complete command of its demands. That extraordinarily versatile and aristocratically-voiced artist Shirley Verrett is more of a natural choice for Didon; as a French review once said of her, she possessed "une voix qui peut pratiquement tout faire". Her dusky sound with its solid lower register and shining top brings regal glamour to the role. Her final scene is a real tour de force of both singing and vocal acting; her control, especially of soft singing, is admirable, and her expression is deeply moving.

Nobody except Massard has an especially Gallic timbre and that's hardly surprising as he is the only francophone in the cast and all the supporting roles are filled by Italian singers, including Veriano Luchetti who sings beautifully but verismo-style like Turiddu and in Fritalian, at the gallop dictated by the conductor, without a shred of poetry; Prêtre gives his Hylas the same treatment and his nostalgic reverie becomes a jolly folk song in 4/4. Others are hardly any more idiomatic: the Shade of Hector and Narbal are both lumpy and also sing in bad French, and Giovanna Fioroni's Anna is wobbly and matronly. By contrast and as a relief, Rosina Cavicchiola sings a charming Ascagne.

The orchestra plays with enthusiasm but, like the singers, is harried by Prêtre and the brass can turn ugly, untidy and slip-strewn, especially the trumpets during the more frenetic passages in *La prise de Troie*. Even the famous love duet "Nuit d'ivresse" trots along; Prêtre never lets his singers indulge in expanding into Berlioz' long phrases and the effect is frustrating. For some reason, the *Royal Hunt and Storm* comes after that duet instead of before and that's music that can withstand Prêtre's headlong rush and emerge as thrilling.

The sound is excellent – narrow stereo, and judging by the occasional bout of faint background "twitter", this was a taped radio broadcast in front of an audience clearly under orders to keep quiet and not applaud until the end – which they do, vociferously; before that, there are just a few stray coughs.

Horne's and Verrett's performances are treasurable and something lovers of this work will want to hear, but for all its virtues, for me, this recording is scuppered by a cumulative combination of faults: the conductor's haste; the absence of Gallic authenticity and charm and the lack of a truly heroic tenor. For some, the cuts will be troublesome, too, but I consider that to be the least of its drawbacks.

Colin Davis – 1969 (studio; stereo) Philips

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - Covent Garden

Enée - Jon Vickers

Chorèbe - Peter Glossop

Panthée - Anthony Raffell

Narbal - Roger Soyer

Ascagne - Anne Howells

Cassandre - Berit Lindholm

Didon - Josephine Veasey

Anna - Heather Begg

Hylas - Ryland Davies

Priam - Pierre Thau

Hécube - Elizabeth Bainbridge

Iopas - Ian Partridge

Helenus - David Lennox

Un chef grec - Dennis Wicks

Un soldat troyen - Pierre Thau

1re sentinelle - Raimund Herincx

2e sentinelle - Dennis Wicks

L'Ombre d'Hector - Roger Soyer

Le spectre de Cassandre - Elizabeth Bainbridge

Le spectre d'Priam - Raimund Herincx

Le spectre de Chorèbe - Peter Glossop

Mercure - Pierre Thau

This classic recording has stood the test of time as the go-to account whereby most lovers of this opera came to know it. That results in the risk of being indelibly imprinted by it and resisting other accounts.

Nor is it flawless; criticism has mainly centred on Berit Lindholm's *Cassandra* but the passage of time inclines us to be more forgiving of her faults, chief among which is a rather droopy, plaintive tone, and more appreciative of her virtues, which include a big, creamy voice and plenty of baleful temperament. Peter Glossop provides a sturdy *Chorebus* and the LSO plays wonderfully. Vickers clearly struggles with the highest notes but the contrast between his robust tenor and smaller, lighter voices such as Gedda, Spyres and, worst of all, Giraudeau, is almost comical and I prefer his grand, big-scale sound to a drawing-room *Aeneas* – yet his soft singing, too, as in “*O lumière de Troie*”, is seductive. There are some distinguished British names among the supporting roles and among them I particularly enjoy Ian Partridge's poetic delivery of “*O blonde Cérés*”, Ryland Davies plangent “*O vallon sonore*” and the smooth bass of Roger Soyer doubling roles as *Narbal* and *Hector's Ghost*. The only other francophone, Pierre Thau, sings no fewer than three roles; he is a bit gruff but acceptable. As was Covent Garden's custom, everyone has been well coached to try to ensure that the French does not offend.

I have occasionally been astonished to read denigratory remarks about Josephine Veasey, whom I have always considered to be an under-rated and under-valued artist. She had an important international career, excelling in Wagnerian roles and of course Berlioz, as here; Solti, Karajan and Davis made extensive use of her talents. She's not the equal of Janet Baker as *Dido* – nobody is – but she has an expressive, flexible mezzo-soprano and sings with real heart. I like her warm timbre with its slight warble; she blends beautifully with Heather Begg as her sister *Anna*, and has the vocal heft to match Vickers, too. She is certainly one of my favourite *Didos*.

Davis' energy and attack are apparent from the first chorus and his love of the music constantly animates it. I find his choice of tempi to be ideal, especially in key passages such as the love duet, where too many conductors are either rushed (*Prêtre*) or lugubrious (Beecham – surprisingly). The Covent Garden chorus is among the best I have heard, free of wobble and rhythmically sharp.

The analogue stereo sound is still excellent, especially for a recording fifty years old.

Charles Dutoit – 1993 (studio; digital) Decca
 Orchestra - Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal
 Chorus - Choeur de l'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal
 Enée - Gary Lakes
 Chorèbe - Gino Quilico
 Panthée - Michel Philippe
 Narbal - Jean-Philippe Courtis
 Ascagne - Catherine Dubosc
 Cassandra - Deborah Voigt
 Didon - Françoise Pollet
 Anna - Hélène Perraguin
 Hylas - John Mark Ainsley
 Priam - René Schirrer
 Hécube - Claudine Carlson
 Iopas - Jean-Luc Maurette
 Un chef grec - Marc Belleau
 1re sentinelle - René Schirrer
 2e sentinelle - Marc Belleau
 L'Ombre d'Hector - Marc Belleau
 Le spectre de Cassandra - Deborah Voigt
 Le spectre d'Priam - René Schirrer
 Le spectre de Chorèbe - Gino Quilico
 Mercure - Michel Beauchemin
 Sinon - Gregory Cross

If a complete studio recording is required, this is the only alternative to Colin Davis' pioneering set – super-complete in fact, as Dutoit even restores the six-minute scene from Act I that had been cut by Berlioz in 1861, where Sinon, a Greek spy, convinces the Trojans that the wooden horse must be brought inside the city; he also restores, just as Beecham did in 1947, the sombre prelude to Act 3, composed for the 1863 performance of *Les Troyens à Carthage*.

The first major solo voice we hear is Voigt's *Cassandre*. She sings beautifully but sounds tentative compared with her assumption of the role for Levine live at the Met in 2003. She is partnered by the elegant Canadian baritone Gino Quilico as *Chorèbe*, who sounds authentically French and sustains a smooth legato in his grateful music. Gary Lakes also sings good French and attacks the role of *Aeneas* *con gusto* but under pressure he does not have an especially attractive tone and is sometimes under strain in alt. He improves as the recording proceeds and makes a fine job of the first half of “*Ah! quand viendra l'instant des suprêmes adieux*” which is slow and gentle, but his tone hardens again in the *stretto* conclusion and he fluffs the top notes. Françoise Pollet has a pleasant, smoky-toned soprano of no special distinction with a serviceable lower register; her vibrato is quite pronounced but not objectionably so and she makes a rather mature *Dido*. Somehow, her comfortable, womanly sound does not much move me the way Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Shirley Verrett or Janet Baker do, but the Act 3 duet, “*Sa voix fait naître dans mon sein*” sung by Héléne Perraguin, with her sister Anna, is tenderly and sensitively sung and Lakes softens his tone nicely for the famous love duet which is, I think, the finest thing in this recording. She cannot, however, rise to greatness in her death scene; both she and Dutoit are too low-key.

None of the other supporting singers is very impressive: Catherine Dubosc is too shrill, girly and wobbly as *Ascagne*, the *Panthée* is another wobbler, the *Mercure* has the wrong voice and Jean-Philippe Courtis' cloudy bass is a disappointment as *Narbal*. Jean-Luc Maurette is hard-toned and bleaty in *Iopas'* lovely pastoral aria, not a patch on Ian Partridge or Kenneth Tarver and I was expecting much better of *Hylas'* aria from John Mark Ainsley; his tone is sweet but his vibrato is rather intrusive.

The chorus and orchestral playing are fine but not very energised. I find Dutoit's conducting to be efficient but largely uninvolved and there is correspondingly little excitement in this account of what should come across as a volatile, even chaotic score punctured by moments of serenity – and neither of those two desirable extremes is touched upon here; in fact, I would go as far as to say that it is a bit dull. *Gramophone* welcomed this as “a thrilling set” and another review describes it as “a fervent reading of great propulsion” which is precisely what I find it is not. Everything is in good taste and it's an advantage to have a largely francophone cast but I am not swept along as I should be, which is probably as much the fault of Dutoit's cool conducting as of the lack of truly charismatic, vocally superlative lead singers.

Colin Davis – 2000 (live composite; digital) LSO Live

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - London Symphony Chorus

Enée - Ben Heppner

Chorèbe - Peter Mattei

Panthée - Tigran Martirosian

Narbal - Stephen Milling

Ascagne - Isabelle Cals

Cassandre - Petra Lang

Didon - Michelle DeYoung

Anna - Sara Mingardo

Hylas - Toby Spence

Priam - Alan Ewing

Hécube - Guang Yang

Iopas - Kenneth Tarver

Helenus - Bülent Bezdüz
 Un chef grec - Marc Stone
 Un soldat troyen - Leigh Melrose
 1re sentinelle - Andrew Greenan
 2e sentinelle - Roderick Earle
 L'Ombre d'Hector - Orlin Anastassov
 Le spectre de Cassandre - Petra Lang
 Le spectre d'Priam - Alan Ewing
 Le spectre de Chorèbe - Peter Mattei
 Mercure - Leigh Melrose

A lot of the singing here is performed with such conviction and so much else is superlative that it would seem churlish to find fault. Nonetheless, as good as the principals are, they are not necessarily a match for some illustrious predecessors. Michelle de Young, in particular, impassioned and involved though she is, does not have a truly distinguished, "queenly" voice of the kind Janet Baker and Josephine Veasey brought to this role and her vibrato tends to become obtrusive. Occasionally her French vowels become too dark and occluded where clarity and incisiveness are required; nonetheless, she really comes alive in the dramatic recitative "Dieux immortels" just before her lament "Je vais mourir" where she rises to the moment despite the occasional passing uncertainty in pitch. Her timbre is perhaps too similar to that of the Cassandre, Petra Lang, who doesn't have a very full, steady or even attractive tone and struggles to maintain pitch but is very expressive and clearly sings her heart out; apparently, she was a late substitution for Olga Borodina, who was due to sing Didon but fell ill, so Young stepped up to Didon and Lang sang Cassandre. To be fair, Davis' Cassandre in the 1969 studio recording, Berit Lindholm, wasn't flawless either.

Ben Heppner almost makes light of the vicious tessitura of the role of Aeneas and as such ironically strips it of some of the heroic striving that fellow-Canadian Jon Vickers' more effortful delivery brought to it but as singing his account is terrific and he, too, comes alive in the scene where the ghosts exhort him to abandon Dido and head for Rome.

Some of the secondary roles are especially well sung, in particular Peter Mattei's elegant and incisive Chorèbe and Sara Mingardo's Anna - indeed the latter, with her full, dark steady production, sounds like a potential Dido herself if she could manage the tessitura. Both Kenneth Tarver and Toby Spence make much of their beautiful tenor solos. Stephen Milling's Narbal is imposing but a bit lumpy compared with Gwynne Howell in the superb extracts conducted by Sir Alexander Gibson with a cast headed by Janet Baker.

The choir sounds a bit small but they are energetic. There is a case for naming the LSO as the stars of this recording; their playing is everything you could wish. Davis's conducting is taut and dramatic in the extreme - and we don't hear too much of his vocalising which became such an intrusive mannerism in his later years.

Was there ever a more varied and inventive orchestrator than Berlioz? Davis makes us aware of how there is always something new and enticing going on in instrumentally under the vocal lines and the orchestral set pieces are stunning. The sound is good, if inevitably a little dry, this being the Barbican, with excellent balance and clarity, and hardly any audience noise.

My ultimate allegiance is still with Davis' older recording but this bargain LSO Live set is still artistically excellent and I am glad to have both.

James Levine – 2003 (live; digital) The Metropolitan Opera
 Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
 Chorus - Metropolitan Opera
 Enée - Ben Heppner
 Chorèbe – Dwayne Croft
 Panthée - Tigran Martirosian
 Narbal - Robert Lloyd
 Ascagne - Jossie Pérez
 Cassandre – Deborah Voigt
 Didon – Lorraine Hunt Lieberson
 Anna – Elena Zaremba
 Hylas - Gregory Turay
 Priam - Julien Robbins
 Hécube - Jane Bunnell
 Iopas - Matthew Polenzani
 Helenus - Ronald Naldi
 Un soldat troyen - Brian Davis
 1re sentinelle – Patrick Carfizzi
 2e sentinelle - James Courtney
 L'Ombre d'Hector - Peter Volpe
 Mercure - Morris Robinson

This live performance from 2003 was mounted to mark the Berlioz bicentennial and released to celebrate James Levine's forty years at the Met. It is rather coarsely and too closely recorded at too high a volume, and that there is indeed quite a lot of stage noise, but I still cannot withhold praise for such a triumphantly vibrant account, so well conducted and so majestically sung by the three protagonists.

Berlioz has always suited James Levine's gifts and temperament and he vies with Colin Davis all the way in bringing this mammoth work to life. The performance crackles with energy and the Met orchestra play with extraordinary gusto - I nearly dropped off my perch at the fortissimo orchestral crash which introduces the ghost of Hector. Not all the minor parts are as impressively sung as Cassandra, Aeneas and Dido but by and large they are satisfactory. Voigt is in fine form, powerful and moving, only occasionally a little shrill, Heppner is in best, heroic, pre-cracking voice, even if he does duck the high C in "Inutiles regrets" – but many will want this very reasonably priced set simply because it is the last Met performance of the great Lorraine Hunt Lieberson before her lamentably premature death. Her rich, velvety mezzo-soprano is ideally sensuous and she has surprising reserves of power. Dwayne Croft as Chorèbe has a rather ploggy baritone which lacks youthful gleam but he is a fine, sturdy singer; veteran British bass Robert Lloyd is once again sonorous and imposing as Narbal; the two lovely tenor solos from Iopas and Hylas are most seductively sung by Matthew Polenzani and Gregory Turay respectively, if not quite as hypnotically beautifully as by predecessors such as Ian Partridge and Ryland Davies (Davis Mark I) and Kenneth Tarver and Toby Spence (Davis Mark II). Nonetheless, Polenzani earns a generous and well-deserved round of applause for his poised singing of his pastoral aria. Elena Zaremba's Anna wobbles - a blot on the set. The chorus are really committed and the big ensembles such as the lament over the death of Laocoön really pack a punch but there are also some wobblers who cannot sustain accurate intonation.

As much as I treasure Sir Colin Davis's recordings - both the studio and live LSO accounts - and indeed prize the scenes Janet Baker recorded with Sir Alexander Gibson, I think Heppner here surpasses even his earlier Aeneas for Davis in London in the year 2000 and I could easily recommend as first choice this live performance, slightly compromised sound notwithstanding, for its sheer, visceral thrill.

The French throughout is rather good - better than the standard "international"; no libretto is provided but there is a synopsis and it is attractively packaged in a cardboard, fold-out format. Unfortunately, I am not sure how to obtain this in the UK; it is not available from the usual suppliers and I can find it only on Amazon US at absurd prices or via the Met's own website on subscription.

John Nelson – 2017 (live composite; digital) Erato

Orchestra - Orchestre philharmonique de Strasbourg

Chorus - Badischer Staatsopernchor/Choeur de l'Opéra national du Rhin/Choeur philharmonique de Strasbourg

Enée - Michael Spyres

Chorèbe - Stéphane Degout

Panthée - Philippe Sly

Narbal - Nicolas Courjal

Ascagne - Marianne Crebassa

Cassandre - Marie-Nicole Lemieux

Didon - Joyce DiDonato

Anna - Hanna Hipp

Hylas - Stanislas de Barbeyrac

Priam - Bertrand Grunenwald

Hécube - Agnieszka Slawinska

Iopas - Cyrille Dubois

Helenus - Stanislas de Barbeyrac

1re sentinelle - Jérôme Varnier

2e sentinelle - Frédéric Caton

L'Ombre d'Hector - Jean Teitgen

Mercure - Jean Teitgen

This is the complete score – not with the spy scene or the Act 3 Prelude included by Dutoit but as Berlioz himself eventually left the Five Act version.

I am a great admirer of veteran Berlioz conductor John Nelson and was delighted, when this recording was issued, to see that Berlioz' rare and neglected masterwork had been performed in Strasbourg by a mostly francophone cast with only the two principal singers being American.

Unfortunately, while it would undoubtedly have been a pleasure to attend either of the two concert performances from which this composite live recording is derived, it does not stand up to comparison with previous releases as a recording to live with. I often read in other reviews that the last release of this opera was the excellent Colin Davis live LSO recording from the Barbican in 2001 but that is not the case; even better, from a performance point of view, but rather coarsely recorded, is James Levine's live performance from the Met 2003, with a superb cast, reviewed above. Not all the other parts are ideally taken there but both the LSO and Met casts are decidedly superior in quality overall to this latest one.

Of course, there is always Davis' classic, 1969 studio recording, too, with the most imposing and heroic Aeneas in Jon Vickers and a big-voiced, impassioned Dido in the under-rated Josephine Veasey, who almost matches Janet Baker in warmth and intensity. My point is that these predecessors make Joyce DiDonato and, especially, Michael Spyres sound under-powered. My reaction is no doubt reinforced by the fact that Spyres sounds similar to Nicolai Gedda, and I do not especially like Gedda as Aeneas, but Spyres' voice is yet smaller and more squeezed than Gedda's and he sounds like Count Almaviva. This is a heroic, large-scale opera and needs corresponding voices, not bel canto specialists; parts of the love duet come close to being crooned and I wonder if Nelson rather overdoes the pulling about of tempi there, too. I have read elsewhere the complaint that DiDonato sings Berlioz like Rossini, which is an exaggeration but a pardonable one, as it points to the problem. I do find the flutter in her voice

irksome, too; that, in conjunction with her "little girlie" timbre makes Dido sound winsome rather than regal, more soubrette than soprano Falcon. The dark-voiced Cassandre, Marie-Nicole Lemieux has weight and power, but I find her vibrato excessively wide; you may hear a Cassandre of that voice-type infinitely better sung by Marilyn Horne.

There is hardly a major voice to be heard here among the secondary cast-members with the notable exception of Stéphane Degout as Chorèbe, who is a stand-out; he has superb French diction and a beautiful baritone which sounds uncannily like Peter Glossop in the earlier Davis recording. Philippe Sly makes a neat, tidy-voiced Panthée but some of the other supporting roles are very indifferently sung: the Anna, Hanna Hipp is an awful wobbler, horribly matched with the equally unsteady and woolly Nicolas Courjal; their duet "De quels revers menaces-tu Carthage" can be a highlight but here it is a trial. The Iopas is constricted and nasal in the bad Gallic tradition, with little of the distinction that predecessors Ian Partridge, Kenneth Tarver or Matthew Polenzani bring to that small but delightful cameo role. Hylas' aria is much better sung by Stanislas de Barbeyrac but there is little character in his voice.

Nelson's conducting is urgent and flexible and the orchestra very good, if hardly as virtuosic as the LSO at its best, being somewhat thin when it comes to depth of string sound and sheer amplitude – but the sound engineering is first class.

The music-critic of "The Guardian", with whom I almost invariably disagree, opined that, "this is now unquestionably the version of Berlioz's masterpiece to have at home." If you like a rather tremulous Dido, a tweety tenor at least one size too small for the role of Aeneas, a similarly constricted Iopas, a woofy Narbal, a wobbly Anna and a good few more indifferent voices, then you'll agree both with him and the Gramophone that "Nelson's cast is simply to die for" – which baffles me. Otherwise, you'd do better to stick with either of the Davis recordings or Levine's, despite its patchy sound.

Recommendations:

Excerpts: Gibson 1968

Live, mono, cut: Lawrence 1959/60

Studio, complete, stereo: Davis 1969

Live, complete, digital: Levine 2003

Ralph Moore