

## HECTOR BERLIOZ

### *La mort de Cléopâtre - Scène lyrique*

**Born:** La Côte-Saint-André, near Grenoble, France, December 11, 1803

**Died:** Paris, March 8, 1869

**Work composed:** 1829

**World premiere:** This music was not heard during Berlioz's lifetime and was published only in 1903. There is no record of its first performance.

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Cleopatra's soliloquy begins as a *recitative*, a style of vocal writing that mimics speech. An aria follows, as the queen recalls happier times, and Berlioz uses both *recitative* and lyric singing throughout the cantata.

The heart of the work begins with a quiet rhythmic tattoo and solemn chords from the brass as the queen invokes the spirits of the pharaohs. Berlioz called the scene "terrifying," likening it to Shakespeare's Juliet alone in the Capulet tomb.

Avoiding the cliché of a noisily dramatic conclusion, Berlioz gives the death scene a quiet and chilling intensity.

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"It is done. My shame is assured. ... There is nothing more for me but eternal night."

So declares Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, in a poetic rendering by the French writer Pierre-Angé Vieillard, as she chooses freedom through death over the shame of defeat and capture. The tragic end of Egypt's famously beautiful monarch was for centuries a source of inspiration for poets and other artists. The Roman poet Horace memorialized her demise in verse, and Shakespeare rendered it affectingly in the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was a standard subject for painters from the Renaissance through the 19th century. And it prompted music from several composers, most notably Hector Berlioz, whose cantata *La mort de Cléopâtre* uses verses of a poem of the same title by the aforementioned Monsieur Vieillard.

Berlioz wrote this work in 1829 as partial fulfillment of the *Prix de Rome* competition, a contest for young composers held annually by the Paris Conservatoire. Its text imagines Cleopatra just after the battle of Actium, in which forces commanded by her lover, Antony, have suffered defeat by those of the Roman general Octavian. With Antony vanquished, the queen realizes that she faces an ignominious fate as Octavian's prisoner. So she implores the spirits of the Pharaohs to receive her and, in the final moments of the piece, clasps a poisonous serpent to her breast.

For Berlioz, who deeply loved Shakespeare and classical tragedy, the death of the legendary Queen of Egypt provided a moving subject, and he rendered it in striking harmonies and instrumental colors. The result was predictable. "I don't say your work isn't good," one member of the jury told the young composer, "but how can I judge what I don't understand? ... You refuse to write like everyone else. Even your rhythms are new." Needless to say, *La mort de Cléopâtre* failed to bring Berlioz the *Prix de Rome*. The composer could barely contain his exasperation. "If we are supposed to write music for pastry cooks and dress makers," he angrily asked a friend, "why do they give us a text involving the passions of the Queen of Egypt and her solemn meditations upon death?" Of course, *La mort de Cléopâtre* commands our attention today precisely for those original qualities that disconcerted the Conservatoire's faculty in 1829.

*Scored for mezzo-soprano; 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings.*