

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Phaedra

Dramatic cantata for mezzo-soprano and
small orchestra

Op. 93

Words from a verse translation of Racine's Phèdre

by

ROBERT LOWELL

FULL SCORE

FABER *ff* MUSIC

Phaedra was first performed by Janet Baker and the
English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Steuart Bedford (harpsichord)
at the Maltings, Snape on 16 June 1976
as part of the 29th Aldeburgh Festival

Phaedra is recorded by Decca on SXL 6847

ORCHESTRA

Strings
Timpani
Percussion (2 players)
Bell (A)
Cymbals
Gong
Tenor Drum
Bass Drum
Harpsichord

Duration approximately 15 minutes

Phaedra

PROLOGUE

In May,
in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day,
I turned aside for shelter from the smile
of Theseus. Death was frowning in an aisle –
Hippolytus! I saw his face, turned white!

RECITATIVE

My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night,
capricious burnings flickered through my bleak
abandoned flesh. I could not breathe or speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,
Aphrodite, my mother's murderer:
I tried to calm her wrath by flowers and praise,
I built her a temple, fretted months and days
on decoration.

Alas, my hungry open mouth,
thirsting with adoration, tasted drouth –
Venus resigned her altar to my new lord.

PRESTO

(to Hippolytus)

You monster! You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there, speechless, petrified,
polite! My mind whirls. What have I to hide?
Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
I love you! Fool, I love you, I adore you!
Do not imagine that my mind approved
my first defection, Prince, or that I loved
your youth light-heartedly, and fed my treason
with cowardly compliance, till I lost my reason.
Alas, my violence to resist you made
my face inhuman, hateful. I was afraid
to kiss my husband lest I love his son.
I made you fear me (this was easily done);
you loathed me more, I ached for you no less.
Misfortune magnified your loveliness.
The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus!
See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
for her execution, will not flinch.
I want your sword's spasmodic final inch.

RECITATIVE

(to Oenone)

Oh Gods of wrath,
how far I've travelled on my dangerous path!
I go to meet my husband; at his side
will stand Hippolytus. How shall I hide
my thick adulterous passion for this youth,
who has rejected me, and knows the truth?
Will he not draw his sword and strike me dead?
Suppose he spares me? What if nothing's said?
Can I kiss Theseus with dissembled poise?
The very dust rises to disabuse
my husband – to defame me and accuse!
Oenone, I want to die. Death will give
me freedom; oh it's nothing not to live;
death to the unhappy's no catastrophe!

ADAGIO

(to Theseus)

My time's too short, your highness. It was I,
who lusted for your son with my hot eye.
The flames of Aphrodite maddened me.
Then Oenone's tears,
troubled my mind; she played upon my fears,
until her pleading forced me to declare
I loved your son.
Theseus, I stand before you to absolve
your noble son. Sire, only this resolve
upheld me, and made me throw down my knife.
I've chosen a slower way to end my life –
Medea's poison; chills already dart
along my boiling veins and squeeze my heart.
A cold composure I have never known
gives me a moment's poise. I stand alone
and seem to see my outraged husband fade
and waver into death's dissolving shade.
My eyes at last give up their light, and see
the day they've soiled resume its purity.

PHAEDRA

Words from ROBERT LOWELL'S
translation of Racine's *Phèdre*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Op.93

PROLOGUE

Broadly flowing (♩. = 54)

Timpani (wooden sticks) *mf*

Percussion 1 Tubular Bell *f*

Percussion 2 Cymbals (always clashed) *dry* *mf*

Voice

Harpischord

Violins 1 div. last 2 or 3 players *f* (non div.) *fp*

Violins 2 div. last 2 or 3 players *p*

Violas div. last 2 or 3 players *f* *p*

Cellos div. (solo with tutti) last 2 or 3 players *f* *p*

Double Bases *p*

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1

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. The top staves are for Timp. (Tympani) and Perc. (Percussion). The Timp. part has a dynamic marking of *p* and a *repeat sim.* instruction. The Perc. part includes a Cym. (Cymbal) part with a *p* dynamic and a Bell part with a *f* dynamic. The Voice part is for PHAEDRA, with the instruction *freely* and a tempo marking $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ approx. of orchestra. The lyrics are: "In May, in bril - liant A - thens, on my mar - riage day. —". The string section includes Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vla. (Viola), Vc. (Violoncello), and Db. (Double Bass). The Vln. 1 and Vln. 2 parts have dynamic markings of *f* and *fp*. The Vla. part has a dynamic marking of *f*. The Vc. part has a dynamic marking of *p* and a *(nat.)* marking. The Db. part has a dynamic marking of *p*. A large blue watermark "Preview File Only" is overlaid diagonally across the score.

1
Timp. Cym.
Perc. 1 2

Voice

(♩ = ♩)

f I turned a - side for shel - ter from the smile _____ of The-seus.

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

2

Timp. *mf* *p* *dying away*

Cym. *f*

Perc. 1 *mf* *p* *dying away*

Bell *f*

Voice *f* (*d. = d.*) *p*

Death — was frowning in an aisle — Hi - po-ly-tus! I

Vln. 1 *f* *pizz.* *p* *dim.*

Vln. 2 *f* *pizz.* *p* *dim.*

Vla. *f* *pizz.* *p* *dim.*

Vc. *f* *pizz.* *p* *dim.*

Db. *p* *dim.*

* arrows indicate approximate cut-off points for the strings in relation to the voice

RECITATIVE

3 (agitated crotchets) (♩=80)

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral layout. At the top, the title "RECITATIVE" is centered, followed by a box containing the number "3" and the instruction "(agitated crotchets) (♩=80)". The score includes the following parts:

- Timp.**: Timpani part, mostly rests.
- Perc.**: Percussion part, including a cymbal ("Cym.") in the first measure.
- Voice**: The vocal line with lyrics: "saw his face, turned white! My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night, capricious burnings". Dynamics include *pp* and *mf*. There are two first endings marked with "(A)".
- Hps.**: Harpsichord part, starting with *p cresc.* and moving to *mf*.
- Solo Cello**: Solo cello part, starting with *pp cresc.* and moving to *mf*. It includes markings for *arco*, *pizz.*, and *arco*.
- Vln. 1**, **Vln. 2**, **Vla.**, **Vc.**, and **Db.**: String parts, mostly playing sustained notes or rests.

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Voice (4) (4) (4) *p*
 flick-ered through my bleak - a-ban-doned flesh. I could not breathe or - speak.

Hps. *mf* *f heavy*

Solo Cello *mf* *arco* *mf* *f heavy*

Voice (6) (3) (6) *f*
 I faced my flam-ing ex - e-cu-tion-er, A - phro-di - te, my mother's murderer!

Hps. *always f* *ff* *ff*

Solo Cello *f* *pizz.* *arco*

Voice (5) *p* (4) *ppp* *smooth*
 I tried to calm her wrath by flowers and praise, I built her a tem-ple fret-ted months and days on

Hps. *mf cresc.* *p* *mf* *p*

Solo Cello *mf cresc.* *pizz.* *p* *arco* *ppp*