

Phaedra

Music, Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Lyrics, Robert Lowell (1917-1977)

Adapted from the play *Phaedra* by Jean Racine (1639-1699)

Written for and premiered by British mezzo soprano Janet Baker, this monodrama was the last solo vocal composition by Benjamin Britten before his death in 1976. Written in 1975 and performed at the 1976 Aldeburgh Festival in 1976, *Phaedra* tells a story from the point of view of a woman driven mad by her love for her soon-to-be stepson. This version of the story is an adaptation by Jean Racine of Roman playwright Seneca's *Phaedra*.

Composed originally for orchestra, including harpsichord, the piece is sixteen minutes of intense musical drama. With thematic elements woven throughout the score, Britten brings the heightened emotions of Phaedra's demise to a spectacular climax and a quick end.

Phaedra, a Cretan princess, is married to Theseus, king of Athens. During the wedding ceremony, she lays her eyes upon Hippolytus and falls madly in love. Phaedra, after many months of suffering alone, is convinced by Oenone (pronounced "ee-noh-nee") to admit her love for her stepson. Oenone convinces Phaedra to confess her love to Hippolytus, but when she does so, he rejects her. In this work, a poem translated and adapted by poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977), Phaedra feels so much shame that she wants to end her life with a dagger to the heart. She instead decides to poison herself and dies at the feet of her husband, after having "purified the day she spoiled."

In Lowell's poetic version of the story, we do not get the full plot of the Racine play or the full Greek story. Lowell focuses solely on Phaedra's experience and removes those parts of the plot that she would not be witness to.

This dramatic work contains a mix of recitative and long vocal passages consisting of four scenes:

- I. Prologue: The Wedding of Phaedra and Theseus, where she first sees Hippolytus.
- II. To Hippolytus: Phaedra professes her love to Hippolytus. He rejects her.
- III. To Oenone: Phaedra confesses to Oenone her desire to die after Hippolytus' rejection.
- IV. To Theseus: In Theseus' court where, after poisoning herself, Phaedra collapses and dies.

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.