

The daughter of a carpenter and a midwife, African-American soprano Leontyne Price (born Mary Violet) studied piano and singing with the assistance of a local family that recognized her innate talents. After earning her degree from College of Education and Industrial Arts at Wilberforce, OH (where she studied with Catherine Van Buren), Price was awarded a scholarship to attend the Juilliard School of Music where she continued vocal training with Florence Page Kimball. Upon hearing her there, Virgil Thomson invited her to sing Saint Cecilia in the 1952 revival of his Four Saints in Three Acts. She then toured the United States and Europe as Bess in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess (1952-1955); on this tour she met and married bass-baritone William Warfield who was singing the role of Porgy.

In October 1953, Price sang the premiere of Samuel Barber's Hermit Songs at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and she gave her first New York recital in November 1954; in December of the same year she sang Barber's Prayers of Kierkegaard with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Her appearances in Tosca, Die Zauberflöte, Dialogues des Carmelites, and Don Giovanni on television brought her to wide attention for both her outstanding singing, and for being the first African American leading soprano of note.

In the following seasons, she made her debuts at San Francisco, Chicago, Vienna, London, and Milan. This culminated in her first appearance at the Metropolitan Opera House as Leonore in Il trovatore, an evening that garnered a front page review in The New York Times. The Metropolitan would soon become her favored opera house; she sang most of her wide repertoire there, including Aida, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Leonore in La Forza del Destino, Ernani, Amelia in Un ballo in maschera, Donna Anna (Don Giovanni), Pamina (Die Zauberflöte), Fiorgiligi (Cosi), Ariadne (Ariadne auf Naxos), and Tatiana in Eugene Onegin. She sang her last operatic performance there in 1985 as Aida.

Price was known as much for her concert and recital appearances as for those in opera. Besides performances of common repertory works, such as Beethoven's Missa Solemnis and the Verdi Requiem, she also undertook Honegger's rather obscure Jeanne d'Arc (with the New York Philharmonic) and Bruckner's Te Deum (at Salzburg). Her solo concerts often featured lesser-known arias and excerpts, including the "Awakening of Helen" from Strauss' Egyptian Helen, selections from Barber's Anthony and Cleopatra and The Songs of the Rose of Sharon by John La Montaine.

She gave annual recitals throughout North America and was also heard regularly in Europe, being a special favorite at the Salzburg Festival. Her recital repertoire was extensive, ranging from the songs of Poulenc, Hahn, and Marx, to traditional spirituals; her final encore was often "This little light of mine" -- one of her mother's favorite pieces.

Leontyne Price's voice was a spinto soprano of great beauty. She had a wonderful feeling for the sweep of the long phrases of Verdi and her technique allowed her to encompass all of the difficulties of Donna Anna (Don Giovanni) and Elvira (Ernani). Her lower register had a quality often described as "dusky" which many listeners found quite sensual. Most of her important operatic roles were recorded by RCA, but only a small fraction of her recital repertoire found its way onto disc. Leontyne Price will always be remembered as one of the greatest Verdi sopranos of the twentieth century.

Berlioz - Les Nuits D'Été

Liszt - Mephisto Waltz

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Leontyne Price, soprano
Fritz Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra

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This is a cycle of six settings of poems written by Théophile Gautier. Though their subjects have little direct connection, each possesses the sultry, scented charm implied by Berlioz's title. The songs were composed in 1832 and published in 1841. Except for "Absence," which was orchestrated in 1843, the orchestral versions of the remaining songs were completed in 1856.

Aside from their immediate appeal, they suggest that, before the rise of a new school of composers such as Fauré, Duparc, Debussy, and Ravel, Berlioz was reacting to a demand for songs of a distinctively French character, compared with the then-widely popular German lied. However, the American musicologist Alfred Einstein's assertion that Berlioz "sowed the seeds for the entire musical lyricism of the nineteenth century in the French language" is surely an exaggeration: he was too much an admirer of German music to do such a thing. Indeed, the first song "Villanelle" is almost strophic, only the third stanza showing any real harmonic or melodic changes in the vocal line, a device which makes it reminiscent of Schubert.

Singers tend to pick and choose among the songs performed but, since all easily stand on their own merits, this does not matter a great deal. "Absence," a call for the return of the beloved, would, for example, make an impressive opening to the cycle. "Le spectre de la rose" (I am the ghost of the rose you wore at the ball) is operatic in character and avoids the obvious waltz rhythms used in the ballet music that was also inspired by this poem. "Sur la lagunes," a lament for a dead lover, was also set by Fauré under the title *Chanson de pêcheur*. Berlioz makes it into a *barcarolle*, with a flowing accompaniment and echoes of Spain and Italy. "Au cimetiere" (the churchyard where the beloved lies) is a lament, with the added dimension of modern-sounding semitone changes and enharmonic modulations -- evidence of Berlioz's constant search for ways to distance himself from conventional tonality. The final song, "L'île inconnue," a light serenade, (where will you go, fair one in my magic boat) is -- apart from one rather awkward cadence just before the lady replies -- similarly progressive in its tonality. The tenderly expressive qualities of these settings makes one wish that Berlioz had continued his dedication to French poetry.

Though Goethe's magnum opus informs and overshadows them all, several towering apprehensions of the legend are testimony that Faust loomed larger -- a living, if elusive, presence in the Romantic imagination -- than any single poet or composer could encompass. It was a heady mix of magic and Byronism (not least in Byron's drama *Manfred*) whose eponymous hero becomes, in the episodic 1836 Faust drama of Nikolaus Lenau, interchangeable with that other enduring legend, Don Juan. At their first meeting, the day before the December 5, 1830, premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique*, Berlioz had introduced Liszt to Part I of Goethe's Faust, sparking a potent recognition of that "something in the air" that would eventually issue in several of Liszt's most ambitious, enduring, and popular works. The Piano Sonata (1853) is plausibly thought to embody a Faustian program, while the character portraits of Faust, Gretchen, and Mephistopheles make up the sprawling *Eine Faust Symphonie* (1854) -- Liszt's single greatest work -- seem to pronounce a last word on the subject. But through 1860 Liszt composed and orchestrated -- with dazzling virtuosity -- the *Episodes* (2) from Lenau's Faust. Curiously, the score order, however satisfying in following the slowly paced, evocative first episode with one of exhilarating animation, reverses the order of events in Lenau's play -- the first episode depicting Faust's remorse after encountering the pitiful, begging *Hannchen*, the girl he seduced on her wedding day, made pregnant, and abandoned, followed by the "Dance in the Village Inn," the stunning realization of the seduction itself. Faust and Mephisto enter as wedding festivities are in progress and Mephisto seizes a rustic fiddler's instrument to conjure demonic revelry -- a scene not unlike the "Lisztomania" provoked by the composer himself in his "Glanzzeit" -- in which Faust and the bride dance into the fields where they "sink into the sea of their ecstasy." What scholar and critic E.M. Butler noted of Lenau's verse is true a fortiori of Liszt's music -- "The wildness, the sweetness, the intoxicating and insidious glamour are there in the words, in the rhymes, in the headlong and heady rhythm, inciting, urging, compelling Faust to his first ruthless downward step into swirling sensuality." From the opening fanfare-like trial of the open strings, the crackle of excited élan relentlessly coruscates through the hectic dance, amoroso flirtation, and orgasmic explosiveness, to subside at last as a nightingale's call is heard. Liszt conducted the first performance of *Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke* with the Weimar Court Orchestra on March 8, 1861.

Berlioz - Les Nuits D'Été

Liszt - Mephisto Waltz

Leontyne Price, soprano

Fritz Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Berlioz Les Nuits D'Été Op.7	5 Au Cimetiere 6:09
1 Villanelle 2:12	6 L'Île Inconnue 3:48
2 La Spectre De La Rose 7:06	7 Liszt Mephisto Waltz 11:17
3 Sur Les Langunes 6:49	Total Time: 42:28
4 L'Absence 5:07	

Berlioz released by RCA 1964 Liszt released by RCA 1958

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