

## February 3, 2022 – Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*

On this week's Thursday Night Opera House I'm presenting Samuel Barber's 1975 revision of his *Antony and Cleopatra*, the opera that opened the brand-new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1966. Based on Shakespeare's play of the same name, producer Franco Zeffirelli, together with Barber, devised a neatly compact libretto using only Shakespeare's words, radically cut and rearranged, with Shakespeare's five acts and 41 scenes becoming three acts and 16 scenes. The opera premiered on September 16, 1966, with **Justino Diaz** and **Leontyne Price** in the title roles.

In the Prologue, the chorus condemns Antony's (bass-baritone **Jeffrey Wells**) life of luxury in Egypt. Later, in Act I, Antony realizes that life with Cleopatra (soprano **Esther Hines**) is enervating him and he reluctantly takes his leave. Back in Rome, the Senate welcomes Antony but Caesar (tenor **Robert Grayson**) is angry that Antony ignored his request for troops and suspects the general of treason. Senator Agrippa (bass **Charles Damsel**) suggests that peace be restored by having Antony marry Caesar's sister Octavia.

In the meantime, Cleopatra pines for Antony. When news arrives of his marriage to Octavia, the Egyptian queen is so angry that she has the messenger flogged. Dolabella (bass **David Hamilton**) remarks that now that Antony is married, he'll have to give up Cleopatra, but Antony's friend Enobarbus (bass **Eric Halfvarson**) doubts that, recalling the general's first encounter with the queen. A vision of Cleopatra appears to Antony, and he swears to return to her.

Caesar tells the Senate that since Antony has given Cyprus, Lydia and lower Syria to Cleopatra, Rome must prepare for war against Egypt. Charmian (mezzo-soprano **Kathryn Cowdrick**) and Iras (mezzo-soprano **Jane Bunnell**) tease Cleopatra's attendant Alexas (baritone **Dale Stine**). The Soothsayer (bass-baritone **Philip Skinner**) promises that Charmian and Iras will outlive their mistress. Antony's and Cleopatra's professions of love are interrupted by Enobarbus with news of Caesar's conquests. Cleopatra intends to accompany Antony's army, but Enobarbus warns her that she distracts Antony too much. Antony's guards hear unearthly music in the camp, which they take to be an evil omen. Antony reluctantly disengages himself from Cleopatra's embrace and prepares for the coming battle.

In the middle of the battle, Cleopatra sails for home. The Egyptian army is demoralized and defeated. Cleopatra is humiliated by the surrender terms offered by Caesar's ambassador, Thidias (baritone **Kent Weaver**). She hurries off to her monument and orders Alexas to tell Antony that she has committed suicide. Believing that Cleopatra is dead, Antony begs his shield bearer Eros (tenor **David Hickox**) to kill him too. When Eros refuses and kills himself instead, Antony falls on his own sword. At this point, he learns that Cleopatra is still alive and is taken to her, where he dies.

Grief-stricken, Cleopatra recounts a dream in which she saw Antony as Emperor of Rome. Caesar arrives and assures Cleopatra of his friendship. She promises obedience

and Caesar laments Antony's passing. Dolabella confesses to Cleopatra that Caesar intends to parade her before his chariot in his triumphal entry into Rome. Unwilling to be further humiliated, she, Iras and Charmian all commit suicide. Cleopatra's body is borne away to be buried with Antony.

**Christian Badea** conducts the Spoleto Festival Orchestra and the Westminster Choir in this 1983 recording.

**Leontyne Price**, the original Cleopatra at the premiere, sings her Act III aria "Give me my robe": <https://youtu.be/FVs3jDLvBU8>.

As a bonus, we'll hear highlights from George Friderich Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (*Julius Caesar in Egypt*), with **Marijana Mijanović** as Caesar and **Magdalena Kožená** as Cleopatra.