

REF 782 .1 PEN
The Penguin opera guide /
70047030 430

THE PENGUIN OPERA GUIDE

EDITED BY AMANDA HOLDEN

with NICHOLAS KENYON

and STEPHEN WALSH

Preface by SIR COLIN DAVIS

EARL HAIG LIBRARY
100 PRINCESS AVENUE
NORTH YORK, ONT. M2N 3R7



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Viking as *The Viking Opera Guide* 1993

This abridged edition, with revisions, first published by Viking as

The Penguin Opera Guide 1995

Published in Penguin Books 1997

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Amanda Holden, 1993, 1995

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

nary richness of musical invention; something all the more surprising from a composer who constantly complained that advancing age was sapping his creative powers. As in many of the best *fin-de-siècle* operas, there is in *Turandot* a riot of competing musical colours, each primarily associated with an element of the drama: the heroic prince, the proud princess, the pathetic slave girl, the bizarre ministers, even the hapless Persian suitor – all create their own musical atmosphere during the course of Act I, and thus discretely dominate sections of the drama. These ‘colours’ are not restricted to individual characters: there are several distinct sides to the exotic ambience, for example, not merely a blanket characterization of all things ‘Eastern’. There is also an unusually large system of recurring motifs and melodies: one thinks immediately of the motif that regularly accompanies Turandot’s entrances, or the choruses that welcome the emperor. These are hardly ever used in a developmental way, and almost invariably return in exact repetition and within the same broad musical context. They thus serve to articulate the various contrasting blocks of colour rather than to create connections between them. And all this musical variety is wrapped in an orchestral texture whose richness and invention Puccini had not previously equalled.

Other operas: *Le villi*, 1884; *Edgar*, 1889

E.H./R.P.

HENRY PURCELL

b 1658 or 1659, London; d 21 November 1695, London

Purcell is generally regarded as the greatest English opera composer before the 20th century, yet he wrote only one true opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. A pupil of Matthew Locke and John Blow, he also endeavoured to emulate the new French and Italian styles, though his music remained conservative and distinctively English in its predilection for dissonant counterpoint. Purcell is particularly admired for his genius at setting the English language.

Purcell was appointed composer-in-ordinary (that is, with salary) for the King’s Violins in 1677 and co-organist of the Chapel Royal in 1682, having already succeeded Blow as organist of Westminster Abbey in 1678, and his early career was naturally centred on the court. He served four monarchs – Charles II (to 1685), James II (1685–88) and William and Mary (1689–95) – during the turbulent years of the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution. His earliest public works are anthems for the Chapel Royal and royal welcome songs. During these formative years he also composed much instrumental music, including the fantasias for viol consort – contrapuntal *tours de force* and the last of their kind – and trio sonatas, supposedly in imitation of the new Italian style but in reality continuing to explore the same English vein as the fantasias.

Purcell’s first contribution to the professional stage was the incidental music for Nathaniel Lee’s tragedy

Theodosius of 1680. The songs and choruses are modelled on the music of his teacher Locke, who had dominated the London musical theatre until his death in 1677. The *Theodosius* pieces are rather stiff and awkward in comparison to the highly sophisticated instrumental music Purcell was composing at the same time, and give little indication of his later achievement in dramatic song. The political upheavals and management crises of the London theatres during the 1680s afforded him few other opportunities to write for the stage, his output being restricted to anthems, coronation music and festive odes, most notably those associated with the recently established London St Cecilia’s Day celebrations.

In the last five years of his life, Purcell’s career turned decisively towards the theatre, largely in consequence of William and Mary’s drastic curtailment of the Royal Musick, which forced Purcell and many of his colleagues to seek employment outside the court. In 1690 he composed the music for *The Prophetess, or The History of Dioclesian*, adapted by the actor Thomas Betterton from a Jacobean tragi-comedy. *Dioclesian* (as it became known) is a semi-opera, that is, a play with substantial musical episodes or masques which are sung and danced by minor characters – spirits, soldiers, priests, fairies and the like; the main characters do not sing. The choice of Purcell as composer of *Dioclesian*, which proved a great financial and artistic success, was probably influenced by the amateur performance in 1689 of *Dido and Aeneas* at a girls’ boarding school in Chelsea. The libretto was written by Nahum Tate, soon to become poet laureate, and the school was run by Josias Priest, a choreographer at the Theatre Royal; both were men of considerable influence in the London theatrical world.

Dioclesian attracted the attention of John Dryden, who offered Purcell the libretto of his semi-opera *King Arthur*, which was produced in 1691, another great success for the Theatre Royal. Because it was conceived as a semi-opera rather than being adapted from an old play, *King Arthur* is much more cohesive than *Dioclesian*, and here Purcell came close to matching the quality of *Dido*; two numbers, the so-called frost scene and the nostalgic song ‘Fairest Isle’, have achieved immortality.

Purcell’s next semi-opera, *The Fairy-Queen* of 1692, was to be the grandest and most lavish of all such works. Adapted anonymously from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it includes Purcell’s finest and most sophisticated dramatic music, all of which is collected into four self-contained masques; a fifth was added to a revival in 1693. But *The Fairy-Queen*, which proved as popular as Purcell’s previous works, nearly bankrupted the Theatre Royal because of the expense of the scenes, music and dances. No new semi-opera was planned for 1694, and Purcell concentrated instead on writing orchestral incidental music (collected in the posthumous *Ayres for the Theatre* of 1697) and songs for plays. In the latter genre he was eclipsed in popularity by his younger contemporary John Eccles, whose simple and highly dramatic songs were better suited to the actor-singers (such as the celebrated Anne Bracegirdle) than was Purcell’s more difficult, highly decorated vocal music.

In early 1695 Purcell's theatrical career suffered another setback when Betterton was given permission to set up a rival theatre in a converted tennis court in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Not only did the old actor persuade most of his colleagues to follow him, but Eccles and virtually all of the professional stage singers also joined the renegades, leaving Purcell with a handful of young and inexperienced singers. He nevertheless composed a great deal of theatre music during the last year of his life, including masques and entertainments for *Timon of Athens*, *The Libertine*, *Bonduca*, a song or two for *The Tempest*, and his last semi-opera, *The Indian Queen*. He did not live to complete this score, and his younger brother, Daniel, was called down from Oxford to compose the final masque.

Purcell's only opera thus came at the beginning of his brief theatre career. Because *Dido and Aeneas* is through-composed and seems to conform to the 19th-century ideal of musical tragedy, it has assumed a central position in Purcell's *oeuvre*. Yet there is no evidence that he was dissatisfied with semi-opera as a genre or frustrated at not having the opportunity to write another all-sung opera. One needs to understand the conventions of semi-opera to appreciate how much better a composer Purcell became after *Dido and Aeneas*.

Dido and Aeneas

Tragic opera in three acts (1h)

Libretto by Nahum Tate, after his tragedy *Brutus of Alba* (1678) and Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*

PREMIERES spring 1689, Josias Priest's boarding school for girls, Chelsea; US: 13 January 1924, New York, Town Hall (concert); 18 February 1932, Juilliard School, New York

CAST Dido *s*, Belinda *s*, Second Woman *s*, Sorceress *ms* or *b-bar*, First Witch *s*, Second Witch *s*, Spirit *ms*, Aeneas *t*, Sailor *s*; *saitb* chorus of courtiers, witches, sailors and cupids

The circumstances behind the composition and performance of *Dido and Aeneas* are unknown. According to the sole surviving copy of the libretto of the Chelsea production, the opera was performed 'by young gentlemen', presumably the girls of Priest's boarding school. It was modelled very closely on John Blow's opera *Venus and Adonis*, which had also been performed by an all-female cast at Priest's school in April 1684. That *Dido* was also a spring production is suggested by a couplet of Thomas Durfey's spoken epilogue: 'Like nimble fawns, and birds that bless the spring / Unscarr'd by turning times we dance and sing.' The opera originally included a prologue (music lost) which alludes to William and Mary and welcomes the arrival of spring; so *Dido* may have formed part of the celebrations of their joint coronation on 11 April 1689. Like *Venus and Adonis*, *Dido* is highly unusual for baroque opera in having a tragic ending. Tate based the plot on Virgil's account of Aeneas at Carthage, the main difference being that in the opera the Trojan prince, rather than being prompted by the gods to sail on to Italy, is tricked into leaving Dido by an evil sorceress, Tate's invention.

SYNOPSIS

Act I After escaping from the sack of Troy, Prince Aeneas sets sail for Italy, where he is destined to found Rome. Blown off course to Carthage, he is welcomed by Queen Dido who, being burdened by affairs of state and unspoken grief ('Ah! Belinda'), is reluctant to reveal a growing love for her guest. Urged on by her confidante Belinda and her attendants ('Fear no danger'), Dido tacitly succumbs to Aeneas, and the court rejoices ('To the hills and the vales').

Act II Scene 1: With the playing of a sombre prelude, the scene changes to a cave, where a sorceress and her witches plot Queen Dido's downfall ('Wayward sisters'). Hoping to trick Aeneas into leaving Dido by reminding him of his destiny in Italy, they prepare the charm in an echo chorus ('In our deep vaulted cell'). Scene 2 is set in a grove where Dido and Aeneas, having consummated their love during the previous night, are entertained by Belinda and an attendant ('Thanks to these lonesome vales' . . . 'Oft she visits this lone mountain'). The sorceress (unseen) conjures up a thunderstorm which sends the courtiers running for shelter ('Haste, haste to town'), while Aeneas lags behind to hear a spirit disguised as Mercury order him to leave Carthage ('Stay, Prince, and hear'). He agonizes over his decision to comply with the command.

Act III On the quayside, Aeneas' men are preparing to weigh anchor ('Come away, fellow sailors'). The sorceress and witches reappear to gloat over the impending tragedy ('Destruction's our delight'). The scene shifts back to court, where Dido, having got wind of Aeneas' decision to leave, seeks Belinda's advice ('Your counsel all is urg'd in vain') before bitterly confronting the cowardly Aeneas, who offers to stay but then ignominiously departs. Dido realizes that she cannot live without him. Inconsolable ('Thy hand, Belinda'), she sings her great lament ('When I am laid in earth'), dies, and is mourned by a chorus of cupids ('With drooping wings').

Dido is remarkable for the swift concision of action, its widely contrasting moods (including the comic relief of the sailors' scene) and a deeply tragic ending. For most of these features and a carefully controlled key scheme Purcell was indebted to Blow's *Venus and Adonis*. But *Dido* is much more structured; each scene is built up of units of recitative (or declamatory song), arioso, aria, chorus and dance. Purcell was thus following the formal model offered by Lully's tragédies en musique, but his chief innovation, inspired by contemporary Venetian opera, was to concentrate the greatest musical interest in the arias. Dido's are placed at the beginning and end of the opera and both are constructed over ostinato basses: 'Ah! Belinda!' in Act I also displays a da-capo structure, while the famous lament is built over a repeated chromatically descending five-bar bass, also common in Italian opera of the time.

Purcell's recitatives, which have been called the finest in the English language, are regularly measured but with great flexibility of rhythm to reflect the slightest nuance of speech; important words are often decorated with elaborate melismas. The sorceress's

part, which Purcell may have conceived for bass-baritone rather than mezzo-soprano as usually heard today, is notable for being set almost entirely in recitative accompanied by four-part strings.

Perhaps because of the involvement of Josias Priest, a professional choreographer, dance dominates the score; key pieces are the triumphing dance (another ground) at the end of Act I, the witches' echo dance (in the style of a French furies' dance) in Act II, Scene 2, and the sailors' dance in Act III, each being radically different in character one from another. And in its brief, sharply contrasting sections, the final witches' dance, which included Jack o' Lantern, resembles a Jacobean antimasque. The opera was even supposed to end with a cupids' dance, which has not survived.

The earliest score of *Dido and Aeneas* dates from nearly a century after the Chelsea performance and differs from Tate's original libretto in several significant ways. Besides the missing prologue mentioned above, the score lacks a dance and chorus of witches at the end of Act II. Many modern producers have therefore felt the need to add music between Aeneas' soliloquy and the beginning of Act III, perhaps the most successful being that arranged by Benjamin Britten from other Purcell works. The original music for this scene, along with the prologue and final cupids' dance, may have been cut from the first public production of *Dido* at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, London, in 1700, when the opera was reordered and inserted into an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.