

Liner notes from a CD recording by William Christie
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Since the end of the eighteenth century, Henry Purcell and Nahum Tate's *Dido and Aeneas* has been regarded as one of the staples of Baroque musical drama. Coming from a period whose stage works do not often translate well to modern theaters or tastes, *Dido* is unique among the corpus of English seventeenth-century opera in that it is performed on a regular basis and is well-known to modern audiences, both in the English-speaking world and beyond. A number of factors may account for the work's enduring popularity and its appeal to modern sensibilities. One is the story's timelessness, its concern for issues that transcend the narrow boundaries of its original historical context. Although slightly less than an hour in length, this miniature chamber opera rivals many of the great works of later centuries in its pathos, its sense of tragic inevitability, and its deeply personal, profoundly sensitive treatment of human problems. Audiences are often struck by the intensely psychological nature of the story, which probes both the underlying complexities of the relationship between the lovers *Dido and Aeneas* and the capacity of the seemingly gratuitous hate of the witches for creating private and public chaos. In its exploration of these themes, the opera represents a profound statement about human interaction and tragic momentum, and thereby readily conforms to twentieth-century ideas about the function and purpose of high art. Moreover, because it deals primarily with the folly and weakness of mortals caught up in a tragedy of their own making, *Dido* appeals to a Romantic idea of what literature should do: that it should be a mirror to human activity, while at the same time transcending reality, so as to serve as an escape from the world around us. The popular reception of *Dido* has been further established by Henry Purcell's own reputation as the greatest composer of his age. Not only was he recognized in his own day as the "British Orpheus", but modern audiences, who may have little broad familiarity with the music of Restoration England (1660- 88) and the years that followed, have generally heard of Purcell and may even be familiar with his music. Finally, we must take into account the fact that *Dido*, as it has come down to us,

appears to conform in many ways to a "modern" conception of what opera, and operatic drama, should be. To opera lovers raised on the works of Handel, Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner (or even Monteverdi or Lully), most Restoration "operas" are barely recognizable, consisting not of continuous music, but of alternating musical and dramatic episodes. *Dido*, however, is through-composed, dramatically compact and direct, and uses music as a means to further the aims of the text - and thus readily suits our modern notion of what opera "is". *Dido and Aeneas* has only one clear model among its English contemporaries: the court masque *Venus and Adonis*, composed by Purcell's teacher and mentor John Blow in about 1682. The similarities between these two works - in length, scope, and dramatic structure - are striking, although the earlier piece (whose librettist is unknown) is simpler, and lacks the depth and pathos that informs Tate and Purcell's opera. The equally remarkable differences, however, have led to a perception of *Dido* as largely *sui generis*, which may go some way toward explaining the work's pre-eminent place in the history of English opera, to the exclusion of most other works of the period, many of which have until very recently lain almost entirely neglected. Yet despite its overwhelming popularity in our own day, *Dido and Aeneas* was far less famous during Purcell's lifetime than his more ambitious operatic projects for the public theatres, including *Dioclesian* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691), and *The Fairy Queen* (1692). While *Dido* appeared briefly on the public stage in 1700 as a series of musical vignettes (presented out of their original order) within a larger play, and again in 1704 as an afterpiece, it was originally written to be performed in a more intimate setting than any of Purcell's other dramatic works. What this means, unfortunately, is that the origins of the opera, and the circumstances of its first performance, are shrouded in obscurity. The earliest surviving source for the work is a single copy of an 8-page printed libretto, the title page of which is reproduced on p. 16. This booklet was prepared for a performance of *Dido* at a boarding school for young ladies run by the well-known dancing-master Josias Priest in Chelsea, a fashionable suburb of London. The performance took place in 1689, shortly after the political upheaval known as the "Glorious Revolution" ousted the Catholic king James II and brought the Protestants William and Mary to the English throne. This piece of evidence was long thought to indicate that *Dido* was composed expressly for performance at Priest's school. However, the recent discovery of another printed libretto, this time for a production of Blow's *Venus and Adonis* at the same school in 1684 (the title page of which appears on p. 17), would seem to suggest at least the

possibility that, like Venus, Dido was not new when it appeared in Chelsea in 1689. Students of Tate and Purcell's work are now generally agreed that *Dido* was probably first performed in a court setting, and that it is therefore not truly an "opera" in the seventeenth-century sense of the word, but rather a "court masque", a stylized, allegorical entertainment created specifically for a royal audience. The 1689 production of *Dido* by Priest's young girls would thus have been a revival, made possible through the dancing master's connections at court and by the fact that court masques were regarded as disposable entertainments, usually intended for a single or limited number of performances. *Dido*'s status as a court masque would seem to explain one of the more striking aspects of the work: the central role played by dancing in the structure of the drama. The main body of the work consists of eleven dances; six more are called for in the allegorical prologue, whose music is not extant. Although the degree as to which dance is an important element of the work is necessarily lost in the context of a recording (and is often disregarded even in modern staged performances), it is important to bear in mind how the extensive appropriation of dance plays a crucial role *Dido*'s assumption of the trappings of high art. With the rejection of the traditional date and performance circumstances of the work has come an intense debate among scholars as to the actual occasion of its première. One school of thought has it that *Dido* was presented in 1684 at the court of Charles II (1660-85); another that it can be dated to about 1687, and that it was written as an entertainment for James II (1685-88), whose overt Catholicism and anti-constitutional policies sparked the revolt that drove him from the throne shortly thereafter. Although the 1684 date has been fiercely defended by its proponents, 1687 seems more likely for a number of reasons, including the possible allegorical meaning of the text. In either case, we must now be prepared to view *Dido* in an entirely new light, both due to its apparent court origins and because it seems to have been written prior to, rather than after, the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-89, an important turning point in English history. The problems presented by the paucity of surviving source material do not only affect our knowledge of *Dido*'s première; they have also caused the work to come down to us in a corrupt and incomplete form. Apart from the 1689 libretto already mentioned, no significant source for *Dido* survives from before 1775, more than eighty-five years after the work's composition. Moreover, these surviving musical sources contain several significant omissions, with the resulting problem that *Dido* has come down to us only in a

fragmentary form, and thus cannot today be realized as a complete work. Two of these gaps in our knowledge of the opera are particularly important: from the 1689 printed libretto, we know that *Dido* originally began with what was essentially another act: an allegorical prologue in praise of a reigning monarch (represented as Phoebus) and his consort (Venus), with a lengthy series of references to the coming of Spring. Unfortunately, although the text is of some interest as an example of the courtly rhetoric prevalent at the time, there is no trace of Purcell's music for this portion of the work, and thus it is not normally included in modern performances. We also lack Purcell's music for the closing lines of Act II, in which the Sorceress and her hags briefly re-enter to celebrate the success of their evil plan, and their victory over Aeneas and Dido. In order to redress this omission, modern scholars have composed music in the style of Purcell to be used in a "complete" performance of the work; a new reconstruction of the music for this scene by Bruce Wood is featured on the present recording. Despite the many problems that *Dido and Aeneas* presents, it remains a perennial favorite with audiences and performers alike, one whose popularity is unlikely to be diminished, even as it continues to be shrouded in ambiguity and scholarly controversy. *Dido* is a work of intense dramatic power and psychological complexity, in which individual suffering and despair are raised to the level of high drama, and in which the commingling of the inexorable progress of fate and the active malevolence of Tate's "wayward sisters" provides a reminder of the uncertainties of our own world, of the potency of desire, betrayal, and unconquerable love.

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