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Dido and Aeneas.

Tragic opera in three acts by **HENRY PURCELL** to a libretto by **NAHUM TATE** after the same poet's play *Brutus of Alba* and **VIRGIL**'s *Aeneid*; first known performance at a girls' boarding school at Chelsea, before December 1689.

Dido <i>Queen of Carthage</i>	soprano
Belinda <i>her confidante</i>	soprano
Aeneas <i>a Trojan prince</i>	baritone
Sorceress	baritone/mezzo-soprano
Spirit <i>in form of Mercury</i>	alto
Sailor	soprano
Choruses of courtiers, witches, sailors and cupids	
<i>Setting</i> Dido's palace at Carthage; a nearby cave; a grove; the quayside	

The only known performance during Purcell's lifetime was at Chelsea, in a boarding school run by Josias Priest, a famous dancer and choreographer. This took place some time before December 1689, when Thomas D'Urfey's spoken epilogue was published in his collection of *New Poems*. Allusions in both the prologue and epilogue suggest that the première probably happened in springtime, but the year is uncertain. On stylistic grounds, the opera could have been composed by 1685 or perhaps even earlier.

Nahum Tate based the libretto on his five-act tragedy *Brutus of Alba, or The Enchanted Lovers* (1678), which he had originally called 'Dido and Aeneas', and various translations of the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The libretto is highly condensed and elliptical; certain key events, such as the manner of Dido's death, are unspecified or (as in the case of the lovers' debauched night in the cave) discreetly glossed over.

The opera was obviously written in response to John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (c1683), on which Tate and Purcell relied for broad structure (three-act tragedy with allegorical prologue, in imitation of *tragédie lyrique*) and details of dramatic form: both works use dance to articulate the story; in each the chorus plays several different roles (courtiers, huntsmen, cupids, witches, sailors etc.); and Purcell largely adopted Blow's style of arioso recitative and even alluded to his teacher's opera in Act 2 scene ii (the grove) where Aeneas displays a boar's head trophy impaled upon his spear (Adonis was killed by the Aedalian boar).

The early performance history of the two operas may have similar parallels. *Venus and Adonis* was composed for the private entertainment of Charles II and then adapted for the girls of Priest's school in April 1684, with the part of Adonis (originally a baritone) being transposed up an octave and sung by Priest's daughter. Following this pattern, *Dido and Aeneas* too may have been written for a court performance and later arranged for schoolgirls. This hypothesis would help explain several discrepancies between the libretto printed for the Chelsea amateur production ('perform'd by young gentlewomen') and the earliest surviving score, which includes a baritone Aeneas as well as countertenor, tenor and bass chorus parts which could hardly have been executed by Priest's young pupils. Furthermore, the fairly elaborate stage directions in the Chelsea libretto ('*Phoebus Rises in the Chariot*'; '*Venus Descends in her Chariot*'; '*Cupids appear in the Clouds o'er [Dido's] Tomb*') would probably have been unrealizable by a boarding school and may therefore relate to an earlier professional or court performance.

Allusions in the libretto itself offer several hints at the occasion for which *Dido and Aeneas* may have been composed, but none is sufficiently topical to be taken as hard evidence of one date or another. The prologue (the music of which is lost) seems to refer to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, with Phoebus and Venus representing William and Mary, the new political order; the Act 1 chorus 'When monarchs unite, how happy their state, / They triumph at once o'er their foes and their fate' would also appear to compliment the new king and queen. But the opera itself, in which the prince deserts his queen with tragic consequence, would have been offensive during any part of the reign of William and Mary. In a poem of about 1686 Tate himself alluded to James II as Aeneas, who is misled by the evil machinations of the Sorceress and her witches (representing Roman Catholicism, a common metaphor at the time) into abandoning Dido, who symbolizes the British people. The same symbolism may apply to the opera, but the poem brings us no closer to the date of the première.

The style of the music suggests a date closer to 1685 than to 1689. It is generally simpler than that of the music Purcell is known to have composed around 1690. (Of course, that could be taken as evidence that *Dido* was written for a school performance.) The airs are only moderately decorated; the choruses are brief and not developed contrapuntally; there is a heavy reliance on ground basses; and there are passages of peculiar voice spacing and modal part-writing. None of these characteristics are often found in Purcell's later music. But, because *Dido* is Purcell's only true opera, it is difficult to find suitable pieces with which to compare it, so the stylistic evidence too is inevitably inconclusive.

There is no other recorded performance of the opera during Purcell's lifetime and it seems to have attracted no contemporaneous comment, unless Dryden's remark of about 1695 – that the story of Aeneas at Carthage is too big a subject even for an opera – is a veiled criticism. The first piece from the opera to be published was Dido's aria 'Ah! Belinda' (in *Orpheus britannicus*, 1698), transposed up a tone from C to D minor. In 1700 the opera was incorporated into an adaptation of *Measure for Measure* given by Thomas Betterton's troupe at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Apparently arranged by John Eccles (who wrote the act music for the play), the prologue was transformed into the finale and the second scene of Act 2 was enlarged. On this occasion, the Sorceress was sung by a Mr Wiltshire, a bass-baritone, who also impersonated the sailor at the beginning of Act 3. This casting may reflect Purcell's conception of the role of the Sorceress as a baritone, since on the Restoration stage witches and sorceresses were almost always acted by men. *Dido and Aeneas* was revived in 1704 in conjunction with other plays and then disappeared until being rediscovered in the late 18th century and adapted as a concert piece.

The earliest score (the Tenbury College manuscript now in the Bodleian Library) dates from after 1777 and differs from the Chelsea and 1700 *Measure for Measure* librettos in several important ways: the score lacks the prologue and the end of the second act; the acts and scenes are somewhat differently disposed, though the running order is the same as in the Chelsea libretto and that described below; the Sorceress is a mezzo-soprano; several dances, including the final Cupids' Dance, are omitted. This manuscript may have been copied from a score used for a performance after 1700 and is likely to be several stages removed from Purcell's lost autograph. Though unquestionably a masterpiece and one of the greatest of all musical tragedies, *Dido and Aeneas*, as it has come down to us, is a mutilated fragment of Purcell's original. There is no reason to believe, however, that the basic musical text lacks authority; the complex and subtle rhythms of the vocal lines, the frequent dissonances (especially false relations) and meticulous word underlay are all perfectly characteristic. Even the notation of the manuscript – time and key signatures, the use of accidentals etc. – is unmodernized and typical of late 17th-century practice.

ACT 1 *The palace* Dido, the widowed Queen of Carthage, has been entertaining Prince Aeneas after his escape from the sack of Troy. Though encouraged by her confidante Belinda and other courtiers, she is reluctant to express her love for Aeneas, but whether she hesitates out of respect for her late husband or duty to the State is not made clear by the libretto. Aeneas presses his suit and, after token resistance, Dido gives in, as her courtiers celebrate the prospect of a royal union. The exceptionally severe C minor overture is in the French style, except that the opening slow section is not repeated and leads without pause into a nervous canzona built on an obsessively oscillating motif of a 3rd. The act opens with Belinda's arietta 'Shake the cloud from off your brow', which is joined to the chorus 'Banish sorrow, banish care', in the same style but to different music. This pairing of air and chorus is the basic dramatic unit of the opera. The first substantial piece is Dido's aria, 'Ah! Belinda, I am press'd'. Built over a three-bar ground bass, it is actually a miniature da capo aria, complete with an opening declamatory passage (the aria proper begins at the third line 'Peace and I am strangers grown'), modulation to the minor dominant, reprise and orchestral postlude. The act continues swiftly in *arioso* with frequent choral interjections. The recitative, modelled on the declamatory airs of Henry Lawes, Matthew Locke and especially the very similar passages in Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, is characterized by plastic vocal lines invariably set in duple metre over bass lines which begin in long notes and then move on in measured crotchets and quavers. Significant words are highly decorated, but never so artificially that one loses sight of the human drama that the recitatives convey. With an unerring sense of pace and the need for contrast, Purcell punctuates the emotional exchanges with formal set pieces, such as 'Fear no danger to ensue', a carefree triple-metre duet and chorus in the French style. Aeneas's first appearance (in recitative) is brusque and perfunctory, the real conquest being conveyed by the exquisitely dissonant E minor chorus 'Cupid only throws the dart', the only piece in the first act which is not in the key of C minor or major. Dido's submission is unvoiced but, as Belinda remarks, 'her eyes confess the flame her tongue denies'. The act concludes with a rejoicing chorus, 'To the hills and the vales', and the Triumphant Dance, another ground.

ACT 2.i *The cave* In sharpest contrast to the formal, courtly rejoicing at the end of the first act, the second finds the Sorceress with her coven of witches (or 'enchantresses', as Tate called them), plotting Dido's death. Their hatred is without motive and unexplained, the Sorceress's malevolence replacing Aeneas's destiny as the engine of the impending tragedy. She is nevertheless an imposing character, who sings only in recitative accompanied by four-part strings, her evil utterances being answered by cackling acolytes in 'Ho, ho, ho!' choruses. When the Sorceress imagines the royal couple hunting, the strings flourish D major arpeggios which are both vivid and eerie. The Sorceress unfolds a plot: she will conjure a storm to ruin the hunt and drive the royal party back to Carthage; one of her witches will then appear to Aeneas in the shape of Mercury and command him to sail away. The scene continues with the noble (and therefore slightly incongruous) chorus 'In our deep vaulted cell', cast in the then popular form of a series of echoes; Purcell's original touch is to contrive false echoes which are altered in subtle and weird detail. The same is true of the much more boisterous Echo Dance of Furies which concludes the scene.

2.ii *The grove* In the only moment of repose in the taut drama, Dido and Aeneas are entertained after the hunt (and their first night together) by Belinda and the chorus in the languid 'Thanks to these lonesome vales', then by the Second Woman who sings

another piece on a ground bass, 'Oft she visits this lone mountain'. The latter recounts the tale of Actaeon, who was killed by his own hounds – an ominous foreshadowing. The moment of tranquillity is shattered when Aeneas displays the head of the wild boar he has just killed and the Sorceress's storm breaks out. The courtiers are sent running for cover, singing the difficult contrapuntal chorus 'Haste, haste to town'. Left behind, Aeneas is confronted by the false Mercury, who orders him to sail that night. He responds in a recitative, 'Jove's commands shall be obey'd', his only substantial solo, in which he dreads having to break the news to Dido. While the recitative expresses true anguish, Aeneas remains the least developed of the main characters, a gullible, perfidious weakling, though Purcell manages to find some sympathy for his predicament. In the libretto the second scene of Act 2 concludes with a chorus and dance of witches gloating over their deception, though no music survives. The act thus ends abruptly and in a different key from that in which it began, which is unusual for Purcell.

Act 3.i *The ships* In an ironic juxtaposition, Aeneas's men are preparing to set sail, having heard of his decision to leave even before Dido has been told. They will 'take a boozy short leave' of their nymphs as Aeneas has resolved to abandon his queen. Though the air and chorus 'Come away, fellow sailors' is a jolly sea shanty, it cynically presages the descending chromatic tetrachord through which Dido will later die. The Sorceress and the witches demonically celebrate the success of their plot in a series of ariettas, duets and a chorus ('Destruction's our delight, delight our greatest sorrow') in the same vein as before. The scene concludes with a freakish Witches' Dance, its piecemeal construction and rapid changes of mood being reminiscent of Jacobean antimasque dances: 'Jack of the Lanthorn leads the Spaniards out of their way among the Inchantresses'. The exact meaning of this choreography is unclear, but one should appreciate the balletic aspect of the opera, in which dance is used both to entertain and to advance the plot.

3.ii *The palace* The final meeting of Dido and Aeneas takes place in a remarkable recitative, 'Your counsel all is urg'd in vain', in which Dido mocks Aeneas's hollow protestations of fidelity and then dismisses him after the two have joined in a brief, bitter duet. But she realizes that 'death must come when he is gone', and time seems to ebb away during the deceptively brief chorus 'Great minds against themselves conspire'. The most famous piece in the opera, the lament 'When I am laid in earth', is built on a five-bar ground bass, a descending chromatic tetrachord, a cliché Purcell borrowed from contemporary Venetian opera. But with the soft, four-part string accompaniment, the miraculous avoidance of cadences in expected places, Dido's impassioned yet plaintive cries of 'Remember me' and the final ritornello during which she dies, Purcell achieved one of the great moments in opera, a tragic love-death, pathos without sentimentality. During the final chorus, 'With drooping wings', cupids appear in the clouds and scatter roses on Dido's tomb.

Tate's libretto has been criticized for extreme compression of the story, under-development of the character of Aeneas and poor poetry ('Our plot has took/The queen's forsook'). But the pace and concision of the drama are manifest and the short, irregular and sometimes unscanning lines (which Dryden advocated as being ideal for opera) obviously appealed to Purcell, whose flexible phrases always capture the meaning of the words and touch the passions. The reliance on Blow's *Venus and Adonis* should not be underestimated, for in that brilliantly original work Tate and Purcell found a model which they followed faithfully. But what distinguishes *Dido* from its predecessor is that *Venus and Adonis* has practically no arias, whereas in *Dido* the drama gravitates towards them – quite apart, that is, from the quality of the music and the human scale of the tragedy it conveys.

Curtis Price