

Novel into *Opera*

1. How Opera Works



Thursday, September 22, 2022

How Opera Works

WHEN OPERA first came into being in the early 1600s, its composers were already in possession of most of the necessary building blocks. They had experience writing songs, choral madrigals, and dances; they devised masques to entertain the court. What was new was the development of a sung equivalent of speech that might carry dialogue, accompany action, and advance the plot. 18th-century composers would solve this problem in the simplest possible way, with dry recitative accompanied only by the harpsichord, but the pioneers of the 17th century had more inventive solutions. We shall look at Henry Purcell's setting of an English-language text in *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), and then watch the entire opera in a modern production. But the problems that Purcell solved so magnificently are inherent in the operatic art form of all periods. It thus forms a good introduction even to a course featuring works from the last 150 years.

A. Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*

Henry Purcell (1659–95) wrote a good number of works for the stage—incidental music for spoken plays, masques inserted into plays, and masques that could stand on their own—but *Dido and Aeneas* is his only opera as we think of the form today. Yet the circumstances of its creation are obscure, even modest. We know that it was performed in 1689 at **Josiah Priest's** school for girls' in Chelsea. There may have been an earlier performance, and some scholars argue that it was written for the Court.

The librettist, **Nahum Tate**, took his subject from Book IV of **Virgil's Aeneid**. A royal prince, **Aeneas** has escaped from Troy with his aged father Anchises and his young son Ascanius. But, much as in Homer's *Odyssey*, and due to the machinations of the gods, he spends some

time wandering in the Mediterranean. Eventually, he comes to Carthage in North Africa, where he falls in love with **Queen Dido**. He would be prepared to stay, but Jupiter sends Mercury to remind him that his destination is Italy, where he is destined to found the great city of Rome. He leaves clandestinely by night, and Dido stabs herself with his sword upon her funeral pyre.

Tate's libretto is admirably compact. His principal innovation is to invent an antagonistic force in the person of the **Sorceress** and her attendant Witches; their scenes may be intended partly for comic effect. It is also possible that the opera originally had a symbolic significance, with the witches representing Catholicism.

B. Arias and Sung Speech

As the separate **handout** will show, *Dido and Aeneas* is made up of over 50 short units, comprising arias, choruses, dances and other musical numbers, interlaced with **recitatives**. These recitatives are what I describe in the title as "sung speech." They are accompanied, not by the full orchestra, but by a small **continuo** group of players who improvise an accompaniment above a bass line, taking their cue from the singers. They proceed in more-or-less normal clock time.

But when writing expressive music for emotional effect, a composer cannot be bound by the clock. Tragic moods need a slow tempo, panic or excitement needs a fast one. So a composer—*any* composer—must periodically stop the clock, suspending the normal pace of dialogue and drama in favor of music at a tempo that he controls.

We shall look at two examples of such clock control in *Dido and Aeneas*: Dido's death scene (a very slow aria on a ground bass), and a moment of panic earlier. We shall also sample two recitatives, to hear Purcell's personal approach to sung speech.

C. Watching the Opera

ACT ONE is set in **Dido's** court. The Queen confesses to her confidant **Belinda** that she is heart-struck by Aeneas, but (whether out of pride or self-protection) cannot bring herself to accept him. Belinda and a

Second Woman persuade her to relax her fears, and when Aeneas adds his own pleas, she eventually relents. The courtiers leave for a grand hunt in the woods.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE introduces the **Sorceress**, who summons her two attendant Witches (and the chorus) to create a storm to break up the royal hunt and give her the opportunity to send a spirit purporting to come from Mercury, to order him to leave for Italy. The scene ends in an "echo chorus" and similar dance.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO begins as a pastoral idyll, a respite during the royal hunt. Belinda and the Second Woman sing songs referring to the myth of Diana and Actaeon. But then the storm breaks out and the courtiers flee, leaving Aeneas alone to hear the **Spirit**.

ACT THREE, SCENE ONE is set in the harbor, where a **Sailor** tells his companions to leave their female companions and set sail. The Witches burst in, celebrating the success of their scheme.

ACT THREE, SCENE TWO takes us back to the palace. In four pages of pure recitative, Aeneas makes his farewell, only to be mocked by Dido and then rejected when he offers to stay. Left alone, Dido commends herself to Belinda before her death. Her courtiers mourn.

The opera is heard complete in a 2009 performance from the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**: Sarah Connolly (Dido), Lucy Crowe (Belinda), Lucas Meachem (Aeneas), Sara Fulgoni (Sorceress); Wayne McGregor (dir), Christopher Hogwood (cond).

Other performances include:

- **Recital by Eva Zaïcik** and *Le Consort*, 2016
- **BBC film, 1995**. Maria Ewing and Karl Daymond
- **Aix-en-Provence, 2018**. Anaik Morel and Toby Lee Greenhalgh
- **Concert by L'Arpeggiata**, Christine Pluhar (cond), Utrecht 2015

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

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