Class 1: How Opera Works

A. Stopping the Clock

1. Title Slide 1 (Death of Dido)

One of the relatively minor sections of my CV is my work as a **librettist**, the person responsibility for devising the scenario for an opera and writing the words to be sung. This course is to be about that process, mostly in greater hands than mine. Specifically, we shall watch operas derived from some literary source, and look at what is involved in turning the one into the other. But our ultimate aim is to better understand the *music*. The librettist's function is to guide and even inspire the composer, but the composer can always override him or her, and once the music has been written, the librettist retires modestly to the background. So while it may start with words, this course is mostly about music.

2. *The Turn of the Screw* covers

Later in the course, we shall take two weeks to look at *The Turn of the Screw*, the 1954 adaptation by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–96) of the novella by **Henry James** (1843–1916), to a libretto by **Mfanwy Piper** (1911–97). So far as I know, this is the only operatic adaptation, but there have been countless others for the stage and television; the one shown here by **Rebecca Lenkiewicz** is only one of many. But I put it in the middle of my slide to ask a question: what is the difference between an adaptation for the stage that is *spoken* and one that is to be *sung*? Both adapters face the same problem: they probably have to cut a lot, and they must replace the author's descriptions with dialogue and action. The main difference between the two media is how each handles time. This is something of a technical matter, but it is so basic to everything else that I am devoting the whole of this first class to exploring it. The libretto is by Nahum Tate (1652–1715), based on episodes from **Virgil's** *Aeneid*.

3. *Dido and Aeneas* DVD cover

To do this, I am going to repeat a class I gave a couple of years ago in Baltimore; if any of you happened to catch it then on Zoom, I apologize; just about everything else is new. We are going to look at a very early opera—in fact the first English opera as we know it—*Dido and Aeneas* (1689) by **Henry Purcell** (1659–95). I chose it because it is short (under an hour long), and because it is in English, so we don't have to worry about translation. But I would not have you write it off because it is so early. Although Purcell had his own way of handling the problems inherent in writing an opera, many of those problems apply from Purcell's day to the present. The issue I am going to raise now—what I call **Stopping the Clock**—may be the single most important thing I have to give you all semester. I want you to start by listening to a very short phrase played by a bass instrument; I'll play it twice. [Incidentally, I include the printed music of some of these examples for those of you who are able to read it, but there is abolutely no need to do so; just listen to the music, and follow the words in the later examples.]

4. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, ground bass to Dido's Lament (audio only; play twice)

This is the accompaniment to the most famous number in the opera, Dido's Lament, in which the dying queen bids farewell to her handmaid Belinda and others of her court. It is called a **ground bass**, because it is repeated identically under Dido's aria, nine times in all, or eleven if you include the postlude. I will play the scene in a staged production later, but for now I want you to hear it in concert by a French group that is small enough for you to hear what is going on; the singer is **Eva Zaïcik**. As you listen, I want you to think what this music does to your sense of *time*.

5. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, Dido's Lament in concert (Eva Zaïcik)
6. Death of Dido (image as in title slide)

The music is obviously tragic; it is slow and in a minor key, although these do not automatically convey the emotion. But leaving these aside, what does this repeated bass do to your pulse, to your sense of time passing? You might think that repeating the same thing again and again would negate any sense of drama. But Purcell wants to draw this moment out for as long as he can; he wants to *stop* the clock. He can work up the emotion just fine by having the voice get higher and higher. And notice that very little of this has to do with the words; there are only 22 of them, though they are repeated many times.

The point I am making is that the composer controls time; he needs to—tempo is one of his main tools in creating emotion. And it is not just a matter of stopping the clock, or slowing it down. Some moods need a tempo that is much quicker than our everday pulse. One example, also from *Dido and Aeneas*, is when the court's picnic is disturbed by an approaching storm. There are even fewer words here, only 14, but when they are sung with this kind of urgency first by Belinda and then by the chorus, the effect is one of immediate panic. Again, I'll show you a staging later; for now I just want you to listen.

7. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, "Haste, haste to town!" (audio only)

So the composer needs to take control of the clock, often slowing it down but occasionally speeding it up; let's refer to this as **Music-Time**. But opera is also drama, and for the drama to work, we have to understand what is said and recognize what is going on. So dialogue and scenes of action must take place more or less in normal clock time; we'll call it **Drama-Time**. To see how this works, let's watch the action that immediately precedes Dido's suicide, her last meeting with Aeneas, in which she drives him off even after he offers to stay. It is all in **recitative**, a musical mode in which the performers control the tempo, not the conductor; I'll explain more in a minute. Meanwhile, just enjoy the scene in this modern-dress production from Aix-en-Provence; I have overwritten the French titles with the English text. As you watch, ask yourselves what is happening with the clock? Is it running at more or less natural speed?

8. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, final Dido/Aeneas scene (Aix-en-Provence)
9. Score of this scene, page 1

So what about the clock? The performers take some lines fast and some lines slow, but the variation is no more than you would get in, say, a good Shakespeare performance. Let's look at the score, which is an example of Purcell's recitative. You will see that the voice is accompanied only by a single bass line. This is a guide for the **continuo**, a very small goup of musicians that accompanies the singers in non-

orchestral passages. In Handel or Mozart, the continuo would be played by the harpsichord alone, but here in the 17th century you would expect a cello or other bass instrument and probably something plucked like a lute as well. Essentially, they improvise, filling in the harmonies according to well-established rules; the occasional figures below the line are to clear up any ambiguities. The point is that the continuo group is small and flexible enough to follow the singers directly, without the need for a conductor. *In short, Purcell sets the rhythms, but the singers determine the speed.* Let's listen to a bit of this again with the score in front of us. It is from a different performance, and the singers' tempo choices are quite different; recitative allows for that.

10. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, final Dido/Aeneas scene (Arpeggiata)

So why am I spending so much time on this? Partly to help you better enjoy the complete performance I shall be playing in a minute. But also because this dilemma is not confined to Purcell. In that opera is a dramatic medium, some parts of it must proceed at clock speed, or *Drama-Time*. But in that it is a musical medium, and music works through its control of speed, there must be many passages where the clock is stopped and the composer takes over, moving faster or slower according to the emotion of the situation, that is in *Music-Time*. You can see this clearly in **Handel** and **Mozart**, and even in **Verdi** and **Puccini**. It is not so obvious with modern composers, but the issue is still there, and anyone writing a libretto for an opera must take account of it.

B. The Opera, Act One

11. Title slide for Covent Garden production

It is almost time for a complete performance of the opera, which we shall watch in a performance from the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet, directed by the choreographer **Wayne McGregor**. I shall play Act One before the break, and the rest after. But first, I want to give you an idea of the many small building-blocks that Purcell uses to construct his larger structures.

12. Chart of Act One of the opera

I sent you a breakdown chart for the entire opera, but I only want to look in detail at Act One. It is just over 16 minutes long. Fully a quarter of this time is taken up by Dido's opening aria, "Ah, Belinda, I am press'd with torment." This is another aria on a ground-bass, and it occupies the symmetrical place to her final aria that we have already heard. There, she was devastated by the loss of love; here she is tormented by a love she is too proud to confess. These are the only two stuctures large enough for me to call them arias, but you will see that the whole act is punctuated by little bits of ***arioso***—by which I mean snatches of melody in a regular meter—mainly for Belinda, though one involving another woman.

13. Arias and ariosi in Act One
14. Chart of Act I (repeat)

Two other things you will see contributing to the pattern of this act are the choruses in green and the recitatives in orange. The **Chorus** plays a large part in this opera; they have 15 numbers in all. They follow the mode of a Greek chorus (which was one of the original models for opera, after all), but their commentary is directed less at the audience than at one or other of the characters; note how they put pressure on Dido throughout this scene to accept Aeneas.

15. Dido's recitative, "Whence could so much virtue spring?" (score)

We have already looked at one of Purcell's recitatives. But they are surprisingly varied. You note that I have marked two of them as "**power recitatives**." The term is my own; it refers to a kind of recitative that is still accompanied by continuo rather than orchestra, but coloring the text with expressive vocal decorations, or putting many notes to a single syllable (this is known as **melisma**), often popping in and out of snappy rhythm, though always at the discretion of the singer. Here is a particularly clear example. Dido is confessing what she sees in Aeneas. Listen to what she does with phrases like "What storms" and "Anchises' valour," and the contrast in "How soft in peace, and yet how fierce in arms!"

16. Dido's recitative, "Whence could so much virtue spring?"

So finally to the opera itself. I chose the Royal Opera staging because it is the simplest of the many productions I know, and because it has English titles. You will notice that, although he keeps the singers more or less in period, McGregor treats the dancers in a contrasting modern style. See if you like it.

17. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, Act One
18. Class title 2 (Dido and Aeneas embrace)

C. Act Two

19. Chart of Act Two of the Opera (scene 1)

Purcell probably intended *Dido and Aeneas* to be performed without interruption, so the division into acts is purely arbitrary. He uses the word "Act" for each separate scene, but here I am following common practice in combining the second and third scenes as Act Two, and the fourth and fifth as Act Three. I shall stop between the two scenes of Act Two to give you some more musical landmarks, and again before playing the last Act complete.

This act brings in Dido's nemesis, the **Sorceress**. You will note that I label her music "Incantation," rather than recitative or some kind of arioso. It is one of the ways that Purcell characterizes her. Her text looks very much like simple recitative, with one note per syllable, and more or less in normal speech rhythm. But it is not accompanied by continuo; rather the full orchestra continues under her, in the same key and rhythm as the spooky prelude.

It's not clear if Purcell intended us to take the Witches entirely seriously. A lot of their words are simply manic laughter, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!" And Wayne Mc Gregor has fun with the Sorceress's two

acolytes, making them into mismatched Siamese twins! Their music adds another color to Purcell's palette. They have a real duet, to a snappy rhythm in strict time—but they are not accompanied by the orchestra, only by the continuo instruments, here for once coming under the beat of the conductor.

One other thing to note, because it may be hard to hear in this performance, is that both the final chorus of the scene and the dance that follows it involve an echo, in which each phrase onstage is echoed by invisible voices or instruments offstage. It is an especially spooky effect.

20. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, Act Two, scene one
21. Chart of Act Two of the Opera (scene 2)

Act One ended with the chorus singing "To the hills and the vales, to the rocks and the mountains, to the musical groves, and the cool shady fountains." The third scene of the opera takes us there, on a royal picnic, a pleasant break in a hunt for deer or boar. It is a pleasant break in the opera too, a little pastoral divertissement before the tragic action resumes. The music is correspondingly light and charming, framed by orchestral ***ritornelles***, or little musical introductions, and consisting of songs for each of Dido's two women, a chorus, and a dance, all for pure entertainment.

22. Laurent de la Hyre: *Diana and her Nymphs* (1644, Getty Museum)

Virgil (whose *Aeneid* is ultimately the source of this story), describes the hunt in detail. This kind of pastoral scene was to become a favorite with renaissance and baroque poets, painters, and composers, often associated with Diana and her nymphs, as in this painting by **Laurent de la Hyre**. Belinda, in her song, points out that the setting would please even the goddess. But the Second Woman takes up the theme rather unfortunately, referring to the legend of **Actaeon**, a huntsman who inadvertently comes upon Diana bathing, and is punished by being turned into a stag and devoured by his own hounds. **Titian** painted a couple of scenes from the story late in his career.

23. Titian: *Actaeon and Diana* (1556) and *The Death of Actaeon* (1559, London NG)
24. Chart of Act Two of the Opera (scene 2)

Aeneas, in this production, presents Dido with what I take to be a boar's tooth, to prove that he can protect her from anything. But then the storm breaks out (as we have already heard), and Aeneas is visited by the Spirit (unseen in this production) who orders him to leave. Aeneas' closing recitative is so expressive as to be almost an aria, although it is unmetered and accompanied only by continuo. Tell me what you think of it.

25. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, Act Two, scene two

Isn't that remarkable? You get something of the kind in Monteverdi, Lully, and other 17th-century opera, but it is almost unknown in the 18th century and much of the 19th. This production rounds off the scene with a repeat of the opening *ritornelle*, but that is not in the score, and it is more effective, I think, to go straight into the next scene with a bang,

D. Act Three

26. Words to “Come away, fellow sailors”

For the scene of the Sailors at the dockside preparing to depart suddenly shows Purcell in his pop-music vein (yes, he could do that too). As the words make clear, the sexual habits of sailors are very well known. The Sailor’s song repeats a pattern that has occurred three times before, though I have not commented on it as such: a song that is begun by one or more of the soloists and immediately taken up and expanded by the chorus. It’s great fun, anyhow.

27. Chart of Act Three of the Opera

We more or less know where we are from here on out. The Witches come back, in much the same mode as before, although the Sorceress now has something that could almost be called an aria. They have a rather wild, deliberately shapeless dance, and then we are plunged into the desolation of Dido. It is a brilliant stroke, I think, to start this last scene without any prologue, without any orchestra at all, treating the dramatic crux of the work in four astonishing pages of recitative, much of which we have heard already. Sung speech, indeed!

I mentioned that Purcell uses the ground bass in Dido’s last aria to draw the moment out to tragic scale. Actually, he does more. From the moment the orchestra enters with the chorus, “Great minds against themselves conspire,” through Dido’s next recitative, through her long aria, through the chorus of mourning that follows it and the orchestral postlude that repeats its music exactly, Purcell remains in the same key (G minor) and the same slow tempo. Twelve minutes of a 60-minute show, 20% of the whole, are thus devoted to music that essentially remains still. Talk of stopping the clock!

28. Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas*, Act Three
29. Class title 3 (Sarah Connolly)

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