

# DIDO AND AENEAS



OPÉRA in one prologue and three acts by Henry Purcell

Libretto by Nahum Tate. First known representation in december 1689 in the Boarding School for Girls, London

## BACKGROUND

The emergence of opera in Europe dates from the 17th century. As a combination of the various art forms performed at court festivities, operas were shown to townspeople at real tennis courts converted into theatres. The promoters of this new entertainment filled it with ancient references. Its mixed nature - half-drama half-music - was presented as a revival of Greek tragedy. By invoking the myth of Orpheus, which embodies the original union of poetry and music, the authors drew their themes from mythology. As a common cultural heritage, it gave a large public access to a complex dramatic form. Within that broad corpus, the Trojan War as recounted by Homer and Virgil is rich with moving episodes and figures used by the baroque rhetoric of passions. The then two great operatic traditions, Italian and French, were often inspired by it, followed by English and German composers.

Virgil wrote his *Aeneid* under Augustus in the first century BC. His goal was both literary - to surpass Homer in the epic genre - and political - to endow Rome with a founding tale with Trojan origins. During the voyage undertaken by Aeneas - the Trojan prince destined by the gods to found Rome - his love for Dido is but an episode from Book IV. Yet the hero's feats cannot outshine the charm of the Phoenician princess who founded Carthage.

The librettists were obviously less interested in Dido's wise political achievement than in Aeneas's betrayal which leads to her suicide. No doubt this owed much to Venetian Pier Francesco Cavalli. As soon as 1641 the successor to Monteverdi at the Teatro San Cassiano produced a passionate and hurt *Didone*. He mainly composed a lament for her that became a model in the genre. Half a century later, the tragic side of the

same destiny successively inspired Henry Purcell in London in the 1680s, Henri Desmaret in Paris in 1693 and Christoph Graupner in Hamburg in 1707. Then, famous poet Metastasio picked up the story in 1724. His libretto *Didone abbandonata* led to more than seventy operas in the 18th century! With its continuous score, opera proved a great success by the late 17th century in Italy and France but not in England. Since the reopening of English theatres in 1660 - after eighteen years of civil war followed by a Puritan dictatorship - composite performances had enjoyed much popularity. In such performances, like William Davenant's precursory *The Siege of Rhodes*, premiered at the composer's place in 1656, incidental music was intermittent in the form of overtures, interludes and entertainments called masques. Usually, several composers contributed such productions.

Prompted by King Charles II, John Blow premiered the first true English opera, *Venus and Adonis*, at the royal court around 1683. No doubt Purcell, who was his pupil, his friend and successor as organist at Westminster Abbey, also dreamed of tackling this ambitious genre. The brilliant musician already displayed his art of vocal expression on English lyrics in distinct airs, odes and motets, as well as his sense of drama in incidental music. The libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* was written by Nahum Tate. This clever man of letters had already been inspired by the same episode of the *Aeneid* in his first dramatic success, *Brutus of Alba*, in 1678. Dido's unfortunate passion provided him with a subject both poetic and concise, making it possible to exhibit a wide range of characters. Among them, the witch, already present in *Brutus of Alba*, had been an essential element in English drama since Shakespeare, adding a fantastic touch that was

entertaining rather than frightening. In his score, Purcell could try his hand at Lully-like tragedy, a model shown in the French-style overture and the great care with which he integrated entertainments and choruses into the dramatic plot.

But how did he come to write such a work if one assumes that a musician so much in demand both at court and in the city was unable to embark on such a huge composition without fulfilling a commission?

The score disappeared after Purcell's early death in 1695. However, this major opera was reconstructed from a 1775 copy (the Tenbury manuscript from the Bodleian Library in Oxford) and the libretto for a performance at a Chelsea girls' boarding school in 1689. It has long been claimed that the commissioner of the work was Josias Priest, a renowned ballet master and director of the boarding school in which education included theatrical and musical activities, as was the case everywhere at the time. Priest, who presented the work in December 1689, possibly imitated the French Saint-Cyr private school for girls, where the premiere of Racine's *Esther* with incidental music by Jean-Baptiste Moreau had made a great fuss earlier that year. Such claim seems to be confirmed by the number of feminine parts and the subject's moral aspect.

Yet the prologue to the libretto, whose music is lost, suggests that the work has more royal origins: either Dido and Aeneas refer to the reigning couple or Dido alludes to England and the Sorceress to Papacy, feared by the Anglicans - and rightly as Charles II, converted the night of his death, was succeeded by his brother James II, a Roman Catholic. These thematic correspondences confirm musicological investigations. Within Purcell's output, *Dido and Aeneas* is closer to the scores written in the early 1680s than those after 1690. Moreover, Purcell's opera is structurally and vocally related to Blow's - implying common performers - and to contemporary works by French composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier, whose scores were circulating in London. In which case, *Dido and Aeneas* would have been designed for the court of Charles II around 1684.

Even though the mystery is not thoroughly solved, and if *Dido and Aeneas* is not, strictly speaking, the very first English opera, it is however an outstanding work considering the historical significance of Purcell's output. Being Purcell's only opera, it could have pioneered a brilliant English

operatic tradition had Purcell lived as long as André Campra, his contemporary.

## SYNOPSIS

### Context

The Trojan War brought into conflict the kingdoms of Greece and the city of Troy in Asia Minor. Trojan Prince Aeneas saw his city sacked and lost nearly all of his family. This valiant warrior, the son of Venus and Anchises, leaves Asia Minor to found Troy anew on a more auspicious shore of the Mediterranean (it will be Rome, destined to rule over the ancient world). But his ship is wrecked by a storm on the African coast. Dido, the founder and Queen of Carthage, welcomes Aeneas all the better since, being a widow, her authority is challenged by the neighboring kingdom. The hero stands forth, gleaming in the clear light, godlike in face and shoulders, for Venus herself endowed him with a radiant beauty. While listening to Aeneas relate his adventures, Dido drinks the poison of a lasting love.

### Act I

In her palace, Dido is unable to conceal her torments. Her sister Belinda urges that she loves Aeneas without understanding that Dido fears the will of the gods and does not want to betray the memory of her former husband. Belinda heartens Dido to accept her feelings toward Aeneas. Such a marriage would ensure the prosperity of Carthage, the queen's honor as well as Aeneas's happiness. Belinda's encouragements are joined by those of the second lady-in-waiting and of the attendants. All urge Dido to give free expression to her desires for the benefit of her people. Aeneas enters and declares his love to the queen. She weakly tries to turn him down while Aeneas is ready to tempt fate, live with her and serve Carthage. Belinda and the chorus encourage Love to overcome Dido's reluctance. She eventually gives way to her passion.

## **Act II**

### **Scene 1**

The next morning, Dido and Aeneas are celebrating their union with a great hunting party. But the Sorceress gathers her witches in a cave in order to stir up the destruction of Carthage. Horror-stricken by happiness, she has decided to ruin Dido's plans and hasten the end of the Trojan hero. She will disrupt the hunt with a storm then an evil Spirit will appear to Aeneas disguised as Mercury who will order him to leave Carthage on the spot.

### **Scene 2**

In a grove, Dido and Aeneas are taking a rest. The courtiers entertain them with dancing and singing in praise of Diana. A thunderstorm breaks out and Belinda prompts all to return to the city. Aeneas, who has stayed behind, encounters the evil Spirit in the guise of Mercury. He commands Aeneas to obey Jove, leave Dido and get under way to Italy with his warriors. Aeneas consents but blames the gods for compelling him to betrayal.

## **Act III**

### **Scene 1**

In the harbor of Carthage, the Trojan sailors are preparing to go to sea in a lighthearted mood with no regret for the women they leave behind. The Sorceress and her witches are delighted at the queen's impending distress, which will lead to the fall of Carthage. Now they devise to unleash a storm that will swallow up Aeneas's ship and their joy will be complete.

### **Scene 2**

At the palace, Dido rages against her ill fortune. When Aeneas comes to tell her of the divine order, she accuses him of having deceived her. Aeneas protests and tells her he will defy Jupiter's command. Beside herself with anger, Dido rejects him. After his departure, attended by Belinda and the court, Dido takes a fatal poison.