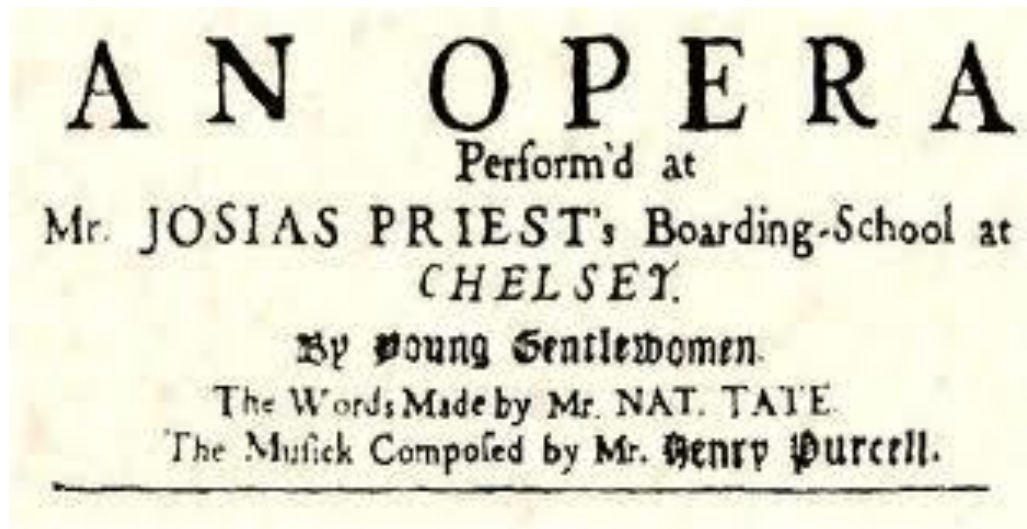


Dido and Aeneas

Composed by Henry Purcell to a libretto by Nahum Tate



Dido and Aeneas was first performed in 1689 at a boarding school for Young Gentlewomen run by Mr Josias Priest, an accomplished dancer and choreographer. This was a time when acting, singing and dancing were considered to be important aspects of education. Given Priest's background it is no surprise that Purcell wrote several dances for *Dido*, although sadly some have been lost. It is also noticeable that all the songs and choruses, regardless of tempo, have a dance-like feel.

The male vocal parts were probably taken either by lay-clerks from Westminster Abbey, where Purcell was organist, or by professionals from the theatre, where Nahum Tate frequently worked. While it is possible that girls took some of the male solo roles, the use of male voices in the choruses is so idiomatic and integral to the music it is difficult to imagine a performance without them. Even so, we can only surmise what happened since no score in Purcell's hand has survived: the best 'copy of a copy' is incomplete and dates from 1760.

The plot of *Dido* is based on a story from the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* and is essentially very simple: the Trojan Prince Aeneas and his crew fled to Carthage after their defeat in the Trojan War, and Aeneas has fallen in love with Queen Dido. When he is summoned to Italy by a mysterious spirit, Dido cannot bear his departure and wills herself to die. Nahum Tate's inclusion of a sorceress, witches and dancing furies may have been adding to the work's political symbolism: King James II as Aeneas is led astray by a sorceress and her witches (in those days, a metaphor for Roman Catholicism) into abandoning Dido, the British people. This would fit contemporary Protestant views of the 'Glorious Revolution' which had deposed James II just a few months earlier. Indeed, it is possible that *Dido* was first performed around the time of William and Mary's coronation in the Spring of 1689. On the other hand, Tate may just have been spicing up the story to make it more interesting for his young performers!

Although the opera is a tragedy, there are several lighter scenes, such as the First Sailor's song: *Take a boozy short leave of your nymphs on the shore, and silence their mourning with vows of returning, though never intending to visit them more.* No doubt this was intended as a warning to the young ladies! Also, the action sweeps along at a good pace – Purcell, unlike some composers, does not test his audience's patience.

Musically, *Dido and Aeneas* displays certain influences from France and Italy – the Overture, for example, is in the French style – but the importance given to the chorus, instrumental music and 'weird and fantastic creatures' reflects the English masque tradition. Italian influence is seen in Purcell's masterly use of the ground bass (a recurring tune in the lowest part of a composition). *Ah, Ah, Belinda, Oft she visits* and *When I am laid in earth* all employ this technique.

It is a measure of the stature of Purcell and Tate's achievement, that *Dido and Aeneas* is still regularly performed throughout the world, and that Dido's lament, *When I am laid in earth*, is considered one of the finest moments in all opera, regardless of period or country of origin.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)



Henry Purcell was born at Westminster to a musical family. Both his father and uncle were Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (singers in the musical service of Charles II) and when his father died, the five-year-old Henry was placed in the care of his uncle. At around eight years old he became one of the 12 Children (choristers) of the Chapel Royal and was soon writing music of his own. We know for certain that at 11 he wrote an Ode for King Charles II's birthday. Purcell studied under John Blow, Organist at Westminster Abbey, and at the age of 20 took over the post from his teacher.

Alongside organist duties at Westminster, Purcell held court appointments with Charles II, James II, and William and Mary. The coronation of the latter was the cause of some friction with the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey when the 'enterprising' Purcell tried to sell tickets for spectators to join him in the organ loft! Under William and Mary, the court required less music than under previous monarchs, so Purcell increased his work for the theatre. This included incidental music for plays, masques (or semi-operas) and his one true opera, *Dido and Aeneas*.

Purcell, like other composers of the period, wrote what was required of him and his output is enormously varied. To his church and theatre music he added ceremonial odes, chamber music, keyboard music and even some rather rude drinking songs. His ability to set the English language to music has rarely been equalled, let alone surpassed. Why didn't he write more true operas? Quite

simply, there was no demand. Had he lived another ten or twenty years (Handel produced his first opera for London in 1711) he might have acted differently. As for *Dido and Aeneas*, there would be no other opera of comparable quality from a native English composer until Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* – over 250 years later!

Purcell was extremely well regarded in his lifetime, and history has judged him to be one of the greatest composers of his day and certainly by far the best in England. When he died in 1695, he was accorded the honour of a burial, without cost to his family, near the organ in the north aisle of Westminster Abbey. The music Purcell composed for the funeral of Queen Mary a year earlier was repeated at his own service. His epitaph reads:

*Here lyes Henry Purcell Esq., who left this life and is gone to that blessed place
where only his harmony can be exceeded.*

Nahum Tate (1652-1715)

Nahum Teate was born in Dublin the son of an Irish clergyman. After attending Trinity College, Dublin, he moved to London in 1676 to pursue a literary career. A year later he adopted the spelling *Tate* for his surname. He became well known as a poet, hymn writer and lyricist, rising to become Poet Laureate in 1692. The latter post entitled him to an annual supply of 'Canary wine'.



One of Tate's most successful enterprises was a collaboration with Rev. Nicholas Brady on *The New Version of the Psalms of David* (1696), which was adopted by the Church of England. A supplement published in 1700 includes his most widely known hymn, *While shepherds watched their flocks by night*.

Tate wrote regularly for the stage, including some adaptations of Elizabethan plays. Most famously (or infamously) he reworked the Shakespeare tragedy *King Lear* in order to give it a happy ending: Lear survives to regain his throne and Cordelia, who should have died, gets married to the hero! Tate's version was more popular than Shakespeare's well into the 19th Century.

Tate based the libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* on his earlier play *Brutus of Alba, or The Enchanted Lovers*. In doing so he laid the foundations for the greatest English opera of the age. Five years later he collaborated with Purcell on the splendid Birthday Ode, *Come Ye Sons of Art*.

Sadly, Tate struggled with money problems throughout his life and died within the precincts of the Mint at Southwark, where he had taken refuge from his creditors.

Dido and Aeneas: Synopsis

Act I

The opera opens with Dido, the widowed Queen of Carthage, with her handmaiden Belinda and her courtiers. Dido is unhappy and Belinda guesses this may be because she loves Aeneas, the Trojan prince who found refuge in her court after the burning of Troy. Belinda suggests marriage to Aeneas, but Dido is not sure. When Aeneas enters, Dido receives him coldly, but eventually accepts his proposal of marriage. Amid celebrations, the court leaves to go hunting.

Act II

Scene 1

The Sorceress and her witches plot the downfall of the queen and the destruction of Carthage. She plans to send a Spirit-elf, disguised as the god Mercury, to tell Aeneas to leave for Italy where he is destined to found a new city. To hasten the moment, the witches suggest causing a storm to spoil the hunting trip. They gloat over their plan.

Scene II

Meanwhile, Dido, Aeneas and the rest of the hunting party are resting in a grove while a lady-in waiting tells the story of the hunter, Actaeon, who was changed into a stag and killed by his own hounds. Threatening skies cause the entertainment to be cut short, and they hurry back to Carthage. Aeneas is the last to leave and is waylaid by the Spirit who, disguised as Mercury and pretending to speak for Jupiter, orders Aeneas to fulfil his destiny and go to Italy. Aeneas is torn between obeying what he believes is the will of Jupiter and his love for Dido, but resolves to obey the god. The Sorceress and witches, who have been listening, enjoy the success of their ruse.

Act III

The departure of Aeneas's fleet is imminent and a Trojan sailor tells his companions to say goodbye to the Carthaginian girls. The Sorceress and witches rejoice over the queen's misfortune (here Dido is called Elissa) and plot the death of Aeneas in a storm they will create during his voyage to Italy.



Dido is distraught at Aeneas's disappearance and Belinda tries to comfort her. Suddenly Aeneas appears and says he must depart at once. Dido is outraged that Aeneas ever thought of leaving her, and even after he says he will defy the gods and stay in Carthage, she orders him to go. After this, Dido is inconsolable and dies of a broken heart. The Carthaginians mourn their beloved queen.

The picture shows Sarah Connelly and Lucy Crowe in the 2009 Royal Opera production of Dido and Aeneas.