

# PURCELL DIDO AND AENEAS (1689)

# by Isabelle and Sedralynn Taye

# Reviewed by Lynette Morgan

BA, DipEd(Syd), AMusA(Piano and Piano Accompaniment), LMusA, TMusA(with Distinction)

These notes refer to the Dover Publication, Inc edition "Dido and Aeneas in Full Score" edited by William H. Cummings

# **PURCELL: DIDO AND AENEAS (1689)**

Dido and Aeneas was performed in 1689 although there are suggestions that it may have been performed earlier. This opera belongs to a tradition of domestic masques (like Blow's *Venus and Adonis* 1682). Blow was Purcell's teacher and was also interested in writing brief English *opera seria* (nothing is spoken). Similarities between the two composers include:

- Prologue (now lost)
- French style overture
- Three acts
- Soprano and baritone protagonists with extended passages of expressive declamatory dialogue
- The chorus has a prominent role and is required to dance (1689 version of the score mentions 17 dances)
- Both works end with situations of great pathos, set to heart-rending music
- Same distinctive tone created by the brevity of the movements and speed of action
- Duration of approximately one hour

#### **HISTORY**

- Written by Purcell (music) and Nathan Tate (libretto) with the first recorded performance at Josiah Priest's Boarding School for Young Ladies
- The cast was originally female however there are suggestions that later productions used male voices
- Josiah Priest was a dancing teacher so dances were included
- Purcell was fond of the French rondeau form (ABACA or AABACAA) in dance-songs, such as 'Fear no danger to ensue'. The slower first part (A) features dotted rhythms whilst the second part (B) moves at a faster pace

#### **PLOT**

Tragic love story of Dido (Queen of Carthage) and Aeneas (Trojan Prince) with 'narration' by Belinda.

Act I	Dido's Palace	Belinda and the Court urge Dido to express her feelings for Aeneas; he reciprocates.
	The Cave	The Sorceress and witches lay out their plots to ruin Dido and Aeneas.
Act II	The Grove	Dido, Aeneas and court celebrate the union, then hurry to town when a storm breaks up the hunting party.
		Aeneas is confronted by the Sorceress' elf.
Act III	The Dock	Aeneas' sailors are preparing to leave with excitement.
	The Cave	The Sorceress and witches celebrate and plan to create storms to sink Aeneas' fleet.
	Dido's Palace	The lovers part followed by Dido's death.

#### **ORDER OF SONGS**

Act Title

Act I – Overture

Dido's Palace

Shake the clouds Ah Belinda Grief increases

When monarchs unite

Whence could so much virtue spring

Fear no danger

See, see your royal guest appears

Cupid only throws the dart
If not for mine, for empire's sake
Pursue thy conquest, love
To the hills and the vales
Triumphing dance

Act I – Prelude / Wayward sisters

Cave Harms our delight

The Queen of Carthage

Ho ho ho

Ruined ere the set of sun

Ho ho ho

But ere we this perform In our deep vaulted cell

Echo dance

Act II – Ritornelle

Grove Thanks to these lonesome vales

Oft she visits

Behold upon my bended spear

Haste, haste Stay! Prince

Act III – Prelude / Come away fellow sailors

Docks Sailors dance

See the flags and streamers

Our next motion

Destruction's our delight

Witches dance

Act III – Your counsel all is urg'd

Palace But death, alas

Great minds against themselves conspire

Thy hand, Belinda When I am laid With drooping wings

## **INSTRUMENTS AND PERFORMERS**

Soloists: Dido, Belinda, Aeneas, Sorceress, 2 witches, Elf, 1st Sailor

Chorus: SATB for witches, court and sailors

Instruments: Violins (1 and 2), viola, bass, Harpsichord continuo

#### **TIME SIGNATURES**

- Most pieces are in 3/4 or 4/4 however the following are exceptions:
  - o 3/8 Ho ho ho
  - o 3/2 When I am laid
  - o 2/2 Sailors dance and Destruction's our delight
  - $\circ$  4/4 3/4 4/4 Witches dance

#### INSTRUMENTATION

- Recitatives are secco (sparsely accompanied) by bass and harpsichord
  - See, see your royal guest appears
  - Grief increases
- Recitatives may also include strings for contrast and to add dramatic tension
  - o Behold upon my bended spear
  - Wayward sisters
  - o Ruin'd ere the set of the sun
- Strings will follow the unison chorus or the voice parts in canon
  - When monarchs unite (unison)
  - Cupid only throws the dart (vocal canon)
- Da Capo arias may be accompanied by bass and harpsichord or by the full orchestra
  - Oft she visits (bass and harpsichord)
  - When I am laid (full orchestra)
- Duets possess a canonic quality
  - Fear no danger
  - But ere we this perform

#### **GROUND BASS**

- Purcell adds extra dimension by articulating the drama with four ground bass airs:
  - o Ah Belinda
  - Triumphing dance
  - Oft she visits
  - When I am laid aka Dido's Lament set to a chromatic version of the passacaglia bass
- These create a sense of unity and inevitability through the constant use of V-I
- Allows melodic phrases of different lengths to be used, creating contrast
- Differences in melody and harmony create "typically English" dissonances that add to the atmosphere When I am laid

#### **KEYS AND TONALITY**

#### **Chromaticism**

Used throughout the opera for the impending sense of doom, especially in Dido's Lament

# **Major Keys**

Used for happy and positive emotions

Fear no danger C majorTo the hills and vales C major

o Ho ho ho C major and F major

Destruction's our delight
 B flat major

## **Minor Keys**

Used for sadness and the Witches' introduction

Shake the Clouds
 Wayward Sisters
 Ah Belinda!
 When I am Laid
 C minor
 G minor

# **FOREIGN INFLUENCES**

• Strong French influence (Lully) is shown through the opening 2-part overture that moves from dotted rhythms to running quavers

• The syncopation in the French styled duet *Fear no danger* also shows a familiarity with Lully's work

### **DANCE MOVEMENTS**

Dances are used to introduce or end scenes:

Triumphing dance precedes the Cave scene

Echo dance of the Furies precedes the transition to Act II in The Grove

Ritornelle indicates the beginning of Act II
 Prelude indicates the beginning of Act III
 Sailors dance precedes the transition to the Cave
 Witches dance precedes the return to Dido's Palace

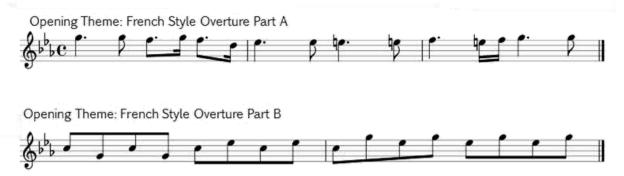
#### **DEVICES FOR WORD PAINTING**

- 'Shake', 'Languish', 'Storm'
- Recitatives are used to further the plot
- Chorus provides commentary
- Ground Bass is used to imply movement and inevitability i.e. Oft she visits
- Echo Chorus i.e. *In our deep vaulted cell* (side note: it is believed that in the original production, Purcell actually used a hidden chorus to add to the atmosphere of the work and enhance the sense of drama)
- Dotted rhythms used to create tension i.e. 'laid', 'prest'
- Semiquavers imply movement i.e. 'storm' and in Haste, haste
- Minor phrases i.e. 'cool shady fountains' in otherwise major keys



# **MUSICAL QUOTES**

# **French Style Overture**



# Onomatopoiea



# **Dotted Rhythms and Melismas**





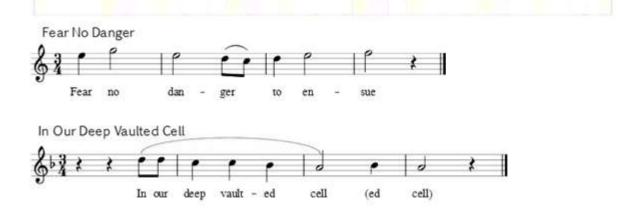
When I Am Laid



# **Ground Bass**



# **Syncopation**



Note the use of the echo chorus as shown by the smaller notes in In our deep vaulted cell