

Charles II of England's restoration to the throne in 1660 made Henry Purcell's career possible. During the Commonwealth, the musical landscape was bleak: although Oliver Cromwell kept a small band of musicians for his own entertainment, the Puritans dissolved the cathedral choirs and banned instrumental music in churches, allowing only the singing of Psalms and biblical cantatas. John Hingeston, the leader of Cromwell's band of musicians, bemoaned the fate of music in 1656:

By reason of the late dissolution of the Quires in the Cathedralls where the study & practice of the Science of Musick was especially cherished, Many of [its] skilfull Professors . . . have during the laste Warrs and troubles dyed in want and there being now noe preferrment or Encouragement in the way of Musick, Noe man will breed his Child in it, soe that it needes bee that the Science itself must dye in this Nacion . . . or at least it will degenerate much from the perfeccion it lately attained unto.

Despite Hingeston's dire predictions, the situation was about to undergo a radical change. In the cultural regeneration following the drought of the Commonwealth, music was a potent force – and it was used with a vengeance. Although political matters commanded the bulk of Charles II's attention, he was heavily invested in establishing the legitimacy of the Restoration, and music – a vibrant part of the continental courts the king had encountered during his exile – was key. Charles had been quite taken with the *Vingt-quatre violons du Roy* at the court of Louis XIV, and he immediately created its English counterpart. He also reinstated music in institutions like Westminster Abbey, as well as in his own Chapel Royal. As a composer at the courts of Charles II, James II, and William and Mary, as well as the organist for Westminster Abbey, Henry Purcell ultimately became the figurehead of this newly reclaimed musical world. By his death in 1695 at the age of 36 Purcell had firmly established himself as the “Orpheus of England.”

Welcome to all the Pleasures

As part of the burgeoning musical culture of London, a group of gentlemen calling themselves “The Musical Society” began holding “Musick Feasts” each November 22 to celebrate the “Festival of St. Cecilia, a great patroness of music.” While an anthem composed for the occasion and a sermon in defense of music in churches were part of the festivities, the high point of the evening was a formal work in praise of St. Cecilia. In 1683, at age 24, Henry Purcell became the first composer invited to participate. Purcell's setting of Christopher Fishburn's ode *Welcome to all the Pleasures* is relatively restrained, relying on the intermingling of string, solo, and choral textures to create a sense of drama. While the piece is by no means an opera, traces of operatic elements can be heard – particularly the distinction between declamatory music, in which the rhythms of the text are the primary concern, and songs, in which melody takes center stage.

Music from *Timon of Athens*

The Restoration encompassed not only music, but theater as well. After 18 years of relative silence on the English stage, in 1660 Charles II granted patents to two English theater companies and ushered in the age of Restoration drama. While works by Elizabethan dramatists didn't disappear from the theatrical landscape, the practice of rewriting Shakespeare's works in order to "improve" them began during this time. Thomas Shadwell's 1678 adaptation of *Timon of Athens*, renamed *This History of Timon of Athens, the Manhater*, is a good illustration. At the same time that Shadwell praised "the inimitable hand of Shakespeare," he dramatically transformed the play, changing many of the characters, speeches, and ideas and adding others in order to make the work more "noble." Purcell composed music for a 1694 production of Shadwell's creation, including several instrumental works, songs, and an interpolated "Masque of Cupid and Bacchus."

Dido and Aeneas

Dido and Aeneas has assumed monumental proportions in music history—not only because of its exquisite music, but because it is the only through-sung opera from 17th-century England. Although England provided less than fertile ground for the growth of opera, a phenomenon that historians have related to everything from the superiority of English drama (with Shakespeare, who needs opera?) to a lack of talent among English composers, the work may not be quite as anomalous as it seems. In her monograph devoted to *Dido and Aeneas*, musicologist Ellen Harris cites other masques that display unified plots and musically continuous sections (John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* and Matthew Locke's *Cupid and Death*, for example), suggesting that *Dido and Aeneas* was actually "the culminating point in a lively, if undernourished, tradition."

If we can trace the paths that led to its creation, *Dido* is in other ways an enigma. The circumstances surrounding its initial performance, for example, are shrouded in mystery. Until recently, it had been assumed that the work was composed in 1689 for a girls' school in Chelsea. The printed libretto offers the strongest support for this theory, boldly stating that the work was "Perform'd at Mr. Josias Priest's Boarding-School at Chelsey. By Young Gentlewomen." Its abbreviated length and small proportions also suggest a more modest production; Purcell's dramatic music often incorporates wind and brass instruments for added color, but *Dido and Aeneas* is scored for strings and continuo alone. In recent years, however, a vigorous debate among Purcell scholars has led to a new theory: although *Dido* was indeed performed at the boarding school, this performance was actually a revival, while the premiere of the work was given in 1685 by professionals at the court of Charles II. While the issue is unresolved, the theory is compelling, particularly since *Dido and Aeneas'* predecessor works all originated in English courts.

Written by Nahum Tate, the libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* is based on Virgil's *Aeneid*. In the original story, Aeneas, who was fated to establish a kingdom in Rome, falls in love with Dido, the Queen of Carthage. Although she loves her suitor, Dido initially shuns him. After a storm forces them to take refuge together in a cave, however, the couple

consummates their relationship. While his feelings for Dido are overwhelming, Aeneas is unable to escape his fate, and he leaves for Italy. Despondent, Dido falls upon Aeneas's sword, killing herself.

In his adaptation of the story, Tate makes several significant changes. Dido's sister Anna is transformed into her sympathetic confidant Belinda; the two lovers consummate their relationship well before the storm scene; trickery, rather than fate, lures Aeneas from Carthage; and in accordance with English dramatic tradition, all of the gods and goddesses are replaced by witches. Finally, rather than committing suicide, Dido perishes of grief. The reasons for Tate's changes have invited various interpretations. Assuming that *Dido and Aeneas* was written in 1689, scholars John Buttrey and Curtis Price argue that Tate was eager to avoid a comparison with the monarchs William and Mary—any implication that a queen could find herself alone because of the machinations of an invisible fate would certainly be unwelcome. Ellen Harris, on the other hand, reads Tate's rewriting of the tale as a morality play: an unchaste unmarried woman would doubtless be unhappy.

Although *Dido and Aeneas* fits the definition of an opera, it does not rely upon the strict alternation of recitative and aria most characteristic of the genre. Rather, two main types of song—both native to England—are used to dramatize the story of the ill-fated lovers. Descriptions of unity, harmony, or joyful emotions are often set to “tuneful airs,” or songs with marked dance-like rhythms and strongly profiled melodies. (“Shake the cloud,” “Fear no danger”.) Declamatory airs, or songs with speech-like rhythms and melodies that sound almost improvised, are used to evoke heightened emotion (“See your royal guest appears,” “When I am laid in rest”).