

Two paths to one tragedy

Two versions of *Dido and Aeneas*, Purcell's greatly loved Baroque opera, can be seen in Brussels this month. **Marie Dumont** sees them as a study in contrast

On a balmy spring afternoon in 1689, a group of young women attending Josias Priest's fashionable dance school in Chelsea donned costumes evoking Ancient times and prepared to present a new chamber opera by 30-year-old composer Henry Purcell. The show probably took place in the school's grounds, beside the River Thames, with Purcell himself conducting from the harpsichord. The girls' nerves may have been on edge because it was rumoured that the newly crowned Queen Mary was in the audience. Not for a moment could they have suspected that the representation of the Dido and Aeneas myth they were about to perform would become a milestone in the history of classical music.

Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* is today one of the best loved and most frequently performed Baroque operas. Countless recordings have been made, and it has inspired stage productions ranging from the historically accurate to the wildly imaginative.

A memorable version produced for La Monnaie/De Munt in 1989 by the American choreographer Mark Morris, who played the part of Queen Dido, had all the dancers adopt curious angular poses like those of painted figures on Etruscan pottery.

Two recent productions will be staged in Belgium later this month. One, by Sasha Waltz, a favourite on the German contemporary dance scene, premièred at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin in 2005 and features the celebrated Akademie für alte Musik Berlin under the baton of Daniel Reuss. The other is a reprise of the 2006 production by Belgian director Jan Decorte and the young ensemble B'Rock conducted by Briton Richard Egarr.

DANNY WILLEMS



Back in Restoration England, the opera went almost unnoticed. Only a handful of people attended the Chelsea production, and the work was shelved for years. The next we hear of it is in 1700, four years after Purcell's death, when it was drastically altered by being broken up into separate scenes that were spliced together in a different order and shown between acts of a revised version of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. More performances followed.

Purcell's *Dido* was a minimalist oddity in an age of pomp and excess, when theatre-goers expected florid, lengthy spectacles with elaborate,

mechanised sets and lavish music which, while plentiful, was usually relegated to interludes in the spoken plot. England was still resisting the invasion of all-sung opera from the continent. "Experience hath taught us," wrote Pierre Motteux, a famous journalist and translator of the time, "that our English Genius will not relish that perpetual singing."

Dido lasts under an hour, and its plot is carried entirely by the music: there is no spoken dialogue. The arias are simple and haunting and, except for the harpsichord, requires only stringed instruments, used to suggest now a hunting horn, now a menacing storm.