



(LEMS 8057)

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PURCELL Dido and Aeneas **Ama Deus Baroque Ensemble**

Valentin Radu, Conductor
Julianne Baird, Dido
Timothy Bentch, Aeneas
Andrea Brown, Belinda
Tatyana Rashkovsky, The Sorceress
Patricia Conrad, The Second Woman
Jennifer Graf, First Witch
Kemper Lecroy Florin, Second Witch
Dennis Kalup, First Soldier
Fran Bjerneby Kraemer, Spirit of the Sorceress

PROGRAM NOTES by John Ostendorf

Dido and Aeneas is a chamber opera by British composer Henry Purcell, written at the request of Josias Priest, a professor of dancing who kept a boarding school for young gentlewomen in Chelsea, where the opera was first performed in the spring of 1689. It is often considered the first genuine English opera, although that distinction is usually accorded to John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*. Based on the story from the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Tate's plot line is simple: the Trojan prince Aeneas and his crew have been shipwrecked in Carthage; he has fallen in love with Queen Dido. When Aeneas is summoned to Rome by the appearance of a mysterious spirit, Dido cannot bear his departure and wills herself to die. No score in Purcell's hand survives. The only 17th

century source is a libretto, possibly from the original performances. Later musical sources do not follow the division of acts of this libretto, and much of the music—indeed, an entire prologue and many small choruses and dance movements—are lost. For Dido's libretto, Tate based, or at least borrowed, from earlier works of his own. A Tate poem of 1686 makes reference to the English King James II as "Aeneas" who is misled by the machinations of a sorceress and her witches—a popular metaphor of the day representing Roman Catholicism—into abandoning Dido, whom Tate used as a symbol for the British people. This lofty poetic license may account for the crucial addition of a plot element not included in Virgil's story—or Tate may have simply been spicing up an adult love situation to make it more palatable for a girls' school performance—by inserting a witch with a wierd accent, dancing goblins and other spooky characters. Dido's first scena "Ah Belinda" was published separately in *Orpheus Britannicus*, followed soon after by the printing of the work's most celebrated aria, Dido's lament, "When I am laid in earth." Both are accompanied by simple ground bass line, here augmented by harpsichord and other continuo instruments. The original instrumentation—beyond the continuo part—for the rest of the work is unclear, though strings are implied. For this recording, the participation of multiple celli along with violone, theorbo, baroque guitar and harpsichord are in keeping with Purcell's emphasis on the continuo-based nature of the writing. He undoubtedly felt the influence of Italian opera, Venetian in particular. Italian composers were in London during his time: Purcell almost certainly heard a performance of Calisto's *Erismene* in London the decade before *Dido and Aeneas*. As Mr. Priest was a balletmaster as well as a headmaster, there are many short dances in *Dido and Aeneas*. In the sources that are available, one sees tenor and bass lines for the heavily involved chorus. Aeneas and the First Sailor are given to male voices as well. The implication is that the cast for Josias Priest's boarding school performance included some imported performers—young men joining forces with those "young Gentlewomen." Even allowing for the limitations of youthful performers and lost musical material, *Dido and Aeneas* moves through its scenes at break-neck speed: sister Belinda is offered only bits and pieces to sing—a shame here, given the substantial vocal gifts of soprano Andrea Brown—and Aeneas, who has no aria, is likewise an barely-realized character. The exotic Sorceress and her fellow cronies have more to sink their teeth into. But it is, of course, Dido and that haunting lament that are the measure of Purcell's great work. One is always grateful for tradition in keeping a work such as this before the musical public, but it is odd that a role, indeed an aria, composed for a schoolgirl, has evolved into the signature assignment for mature dramatic soprano. Kirsten Flagstad, Jessye Norman and other great modern-day Wagnerian divas have held personal patents on Dido's Lament. Purcell's tune calls for the cleanest, simple soprano singing. Julianne Baird, who possesses such a sound, but also the passion and musical taste to delve into the depths of Dido's agony, seems ideal casting here. Throughout this recording, Maestro Radu attempts to balance the transparent beauty of the writing here with the grotesqueries and fun of snarling witches, Halloween goblins, boozy sailors and lamenting attendants. The

Midsummer Night's Suite heard here is one (of two) pastiches, drawn from Purcell's lovely *The Fairy Queen*, itself a masque or "semi-opera" after Shakespeare's delightful play of a century earlier. It followed *Dido and Aeneas* by three years and its choreographer was again Dido's own Josias Priest. The brief dance movements, are

scored for strings and, like Dido, feature a wonderful bass line.

TRACKS

1. Overture - 1:44

Act I

2. Air: "Shake the cloud" - 1:21

3. Air: "Ah, Belinda" - 7:57

4. "See, see your royal guest appears" - 1:42

5. "Pursue thy conquest, Love" - 2:38

Act II Scene I

6. "Wayward sisters" - 7:51

Act II Scene II

7. "Thanks to these lonesome vales" - 3:52

8. Air: "Oft she visits" - 2:48

9. "Behold, upon my bending spear" - 1:22

10. "Stay, Prince, and hear" - 2:59

Act III

11. "Come away, fellow sailors" - 2:15

12. "See, see the flags" - 3:40

13. "Your counsel all" - 4:42

14. Chorus: "Great Minds" - 0:45

15. Air: "Thy hand, Belinda" - 4:04

16. Chorus: "With drooping wings" - 4:34

A Midsummernight's Dream Suite

17. Prelude - 1:33

18. Hornpipe - 0:56

19. Overture - 1:12

20. Air - 0:49

21. Rondeau - 0:58

22. Prelude - 0:36

23. Entry Dance - 0:38

24. Hornpipe - 0:56

25. Dance for the Fairies - 0:45

26. Chaconne - 2:49



The Lyrichord Early Music Series

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station

New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291

email: nick@lyrichord.com Web: www.lyrichord.com

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