

A few practical notes on “Dido and Aeneas”

John Beasley, September 2011

These notes reflect informal runs-through of Purcell’s “Dido and Aeneas” in 1981, 2001, and 2009, and in particular they address two minor practical problems: the treatment of the hunting-call triplets in the Witches’ scene in Act II, and the music apparently lost from the end of this act. They won’t contain much that has not already been adopted or suggested by others, but one or two ideas may be mildly new and they are offered forward for what they may be worth.

These sessions were just for the pleasure of doing the music, with no stage set, no acting apart from some impromptu hamming it up by the Jolly Sailor, and no audience apart from those taking part. We used the Laurie/Dart edition (vocal score 1966/1974, full score 1979), with a one-to-a-part string orchestra and a little four-octave virginal (Morley, c. 1970, completely refurbished and rejacked by Tania Staite a few years ago) which proved quite strong enough for the job in hand.

Notes on the music (page numbers refer to the vocal score).

- Pages 30-31, also 33-34 and 59-60. In 1981, one of the singers suggested singing “Ha ha ha” instead of “ho ho ho”, and this was enthusiastically adopted as being much more vicious. We did the same on the later occasions.
- Page 32. There is a note at the bottom of the printed page that the triplet semiquavers are better played as quavers, and in the 1979 full score they are written out accordingly. We followed the full score, and supplied the singers with a paste-in replacement sheet matching it. In this, bars 9 and 10 of the vocal score were stretched out to six crotchets each and renotated as three four-crotchet bars, and bar 12 of the vocal score was stretched out to eight crotchets (the opening crotchet rest becoming a minim rest) and renotated as two four-crotchet bars.
- Pages 36-37. In 2009, we did the echoes with singers alone, no orchestra.
- Bottom of page 53. I agree with Laurie and Dart regarding the insertion of their 28a and 28b (pages 104-106) to replace the music apparently lost and in both 1981 and 2009 we did this, but to get a better lead-in we also slotted in two further instrumental pieces by Purcell: the first ten bars of Sonata 1 in B minor (Eulenburg edition 1362) transposed to A minor (strings in three parts only, no viola) and the D minor air which is number 33 in the 1971 Laurie edition of “King Arthur”. The singers were supplied with a clip-in page containing these extra pieces, though only the orchestra was actually involved in them. The sequence at the end of Act II was therefore page 53 as printed, new clip-in page (orchestra only), pages 104-105 (chorus), page 106 (orchestra), and then back to page 54 for Act III.
- Pages 73-75. Given that the run-through in 2009 was primarily for the pleasure of the singers, we did the final chorus unaccompanied, and then stopped at bar 30 with no orchestral postlude (those of the orchestra who also sang were invited to join in). I wouldn’t want to do this for a stage performance, but in the circumstances it seemed to work well. We have in fact occasionally sung Dido’s Lament and the final chorus as an unaccompanied piece, the singers humming or vocalising the orchestral accompaniment to the Lament. The tenors have to negotiate a high B flat in bars 38-39, but falsetto is allowed and it’s glorious stuff to sing.