



Henry Purcell (ca. 1659-1695)

Purcell was one of the finest composers of England. He was a pupil of Blow, served as organist of Westminster Abbey from 1679 and held other posts in the official musical establishments of London. In addition to many odes for chorus and orchestra, cantatas, songs, anthems, Services, chamber sonatas and keyboard works, he wrote incidental music for forty-nine plays, the largest and most important part of this theatre music being composed during the last five years of his life.

The opera *Dido and Aeneas* was written for a girls' boarding school at Chelsea, on the libretto by Nahmun Tatem, which, although crude in poetic details, dramatized the familiar story from Vergil's *Aeneid* in a fashion satisfactory for word setting. His score is a masterpiece of opera in miniature; the orchestra consists of strings and continuo, there are only four principle roles, and the three acts, including dances and choruses, take only about an hour to perform. The music shows Purcell was able to incorporate in his style both the achievements of the English school of the 17th century and the influences from continental sources.

The overture is French, and the homophonic choruses in the dance rhythm suggest the choruses of Lully. The minuet rhythm:



of the chorus "Fear no danger to ensue" beginning in alternate iambs and troches:



is reminiscent of French models.

Unfortunately for English music no composer appeared after Purcell who had sufficient stature to maintain the national tradition against the overwhelming popular preferences of Italian operas. For two hundred years English opera stepped aside for the more popular French, Italian and German productions.

A brief history of English opera:

Opera in England had a short career in the second half of the 17th century. During the reigns of James I (reg. 1603-25) and Charles I (reg. 1625-49) an aristocratic entertainment flourished which was similar to French court ballet. English opera begun in a modest way under the Commonwealth, not because the English composers or public audiences wanted operas, but because although stage plays were banned, a play set to music could be called a 'concert' and so this was away around the ban. After the Reformation this pretext was no longer needed, and thus nearly all of the English so-called operas of the 17th century are really plays with a large proportion of solos, ensembles, choruses and instrumental music of all kinds. The only important exception were John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (1684-1685) and Henry Pucell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), both of which were sung throughout.