

## 6. Henry Purcell: How do I accompany a singer?

Text is an important part of score preparation. You need to understand not only the meaning of the text, but the articulation in order to accompany a singer appropriately. The English composer Henry Purcell (1659-1695) is widely regarded as a master at setting the English language to music. Purcell is discussed here because his work is in English. If you are working with an Italian, French, Spanish or German text, you must acquire a translation of the text and hear the text spoken in order to provide a sensitive accompaniment.

Purcell's interest in operatic form was fairly novel. The first true opera performed in England, *The Siege of Rhodes*, was presented in 1656, nearly fifty years after the first opera was presented in Italy (See **Chapter 7. Claudio Monteverdi: What was expected from the harp?**) *The Siege of Rhodes* was written by Sir William Davenant (1606-1668) and featured the music of several contemporary English composers.<sup>58</sup> Due to the complete lack of success of *The Siege of Rhodes*, England's second opera was not presented until 1674: *Ariane, ou le Mariage de Bacchus*, with a libretto by Pierre Perrin (c.1620-1675) and music by Louis Grabu (flourished 1665-1694).<sup>59</sup> Although England had a strong tradition of spoken drama, the European interest in opera did not find firm footing in England until Purcell began experimenting with the genre.

Purcell composed four musical dramas: *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), *Dioclesian* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691), and *The Fairy Queen* (1692). *Dioclesian*, *King Arthur* and *The Fairy Queen* are considered semi-operas, while *Dido and Aeneas* is a true, albeit chamber, opera. Purcell

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<sup>58</sup> Jack A. Westrup, *Purcell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 106.

<sup>59</sup> Westrup, 108.

experimented with combining four dramatic and musical elements in his compositions:

England's traditional spoken drama, the popular masque, the Italian madrigal and recitative, and the French overture and dance music. *Dido and Aeneas*, Purcell's first foray into musical drama and his only true opera, demonstrates the use of all four elements. Unfortunately, the opera was not publicly performed during Purcell's lifetime and was therefore not as influential as his three semi-operas. The popularity of these semi-operas ignited the English audience's interest in the operatic form and set the stage for the tremendous success of G.F. Händel and Italian opera just a few years after Purcell's death in 1695.

*Dido and Aeneas* is loosely modeled after the French **tragédie lyrique**. Purcell and librettist Nahum Tate (1652-1715) tell the tale of the tragic romance between Dido, the queen of Carthage, and the Greek hero Aeneas. The opera includes an allegorical prologue and three acts, versus the French standard of five for a tragédie lyrique. The opera was first performed privately at "Mr. Josias Priest's Boarding School at Chelsey. By Young Gentlewomen"<sup>60</sup> in 1689. (For arguments suggesting an earlier performance date of 1684, see the articles in **Suggested Readings** below, from *Early Music*, August 1992.) *Dido and Aeneas* was not publicly performed until 1700, five years after the composer's death. It was presented at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theater as a masque inserted into William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) *Measure for Measure* (1604). It received two more revivals in 1704, both in

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<sup>60</sup> Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, ed. William H. Cummings (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), v.

conjunction with spoken plays.<sup>61</sup> The earliest surviving sources of *Dido and Aeneas* are posthumous, after 1741, and are probably not accurate representations of Purcell's intentions. Most modern editions of the opera are based on the incomplete Tenbury manuscript, which is currently housed at the Bodleian Library.

The strong English tradition of spoken drama required that Tate's libretto be of the highest quality and that Purcell's setting of this text be exquisite in order for the opera to succeed. Fortunately for Tate, Purcell's music exalts the poetry. In order to appease the English audience, Purcell's setting of the libretto could in no way obscure the text. Although Purcell's recitative is modeled after the Italian style recitative, English is considered to be a more difficult language to set to music than Italian. To compensate for this, Purcell relies heavily on **recitativo secco** (or **recitativo semplice**).

Soprano *pp*  
Thy hand, Be-lin - da; dark - ness shades me: On thy bo - som let me

Basso *pp*  
rest: More I would, but Death in-vades me: Death is now a wel - come guest.

Fingerings for Basso: b, b7, b, b9 8 7 6, b6 b3, b6 7 5 b3, 7, b, 6, 5 6 7 6 #

<sup>61</sup> Richard Lockett, program notes to Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, performed by The Academy of Ancient Music, Christopher Hogwood conducting (London: The Decca Record Company Limited, L'Oiseau-Lyre 436 992-2, 1994), 8.

Figure 52. Recitativo secco as demonstrated in *Thy hand, Belinda*.<sup>62</sup> Reprinted, by permission, from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), page 84.

The slow harmonic motion and sparse realization of this style allow the vocalist to present dramatic text clearly over an accompaniment. The rhythms of the vocal text follow the natural inflections of speech, and the accompaniment follows the vocal line. Although the vocal rhythms presented are strict, the tempo is very flexible. These two factors blend to present a clearly enunciated text with the sense of impassioned singing.

The **recitativo arioso** manner of setting text, a lyrical, rather florid technique, draws the audience's attention away from the drama of the opera and did not find much success in England until Händel. Purcell dabbled with melismatic text painting in his music, but primarily used this more elaborate recitative technique as a dramatic vehicle. He did, however, use arioso technique extensively in solo passages.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Purcell, 84.

<sup>63</sup> Bruce Wood and Andrew Pinnock, "Unscarr'd by turning times? The dating of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*," in *Early Music* Vol. 20, No. 3 (August 1992), 381.



Soprano *f*

Whence could so much vir-tue spring? What storms, what bat-tles did he

Basso *f*

*p*

sing? An-chi-ses' va-lour mixt with Ve-nus' charms, How soft, how

*p* *pp*

*cresc.*

soft in peace, and yet how fierce, how fierce in arms?

Figure 53. Recitativo arioso as demonstrated in *Whence could so much virtue spring?*<sup>64</sup> Reprinted, by permission, from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), page 12.

The third style of recitative, **recitativo accompagnato**, employs an obligato orchestral accompaniment and, as a result, is somewhat stricter in terms of tempo.

<sup>64</sup> Purcell, 12.

Violin I *p*

Violin II *p*

Viola *p*

*p* The Queen of Car - thage, whom we hate, As we do

Basso *p*

6 - 5  
3 4 3

all in— pros - p'rous state, Ere sun - set, shall most wretch - ed

6 - 7  
5 4 4 43

6 7

Figure 54 shows a musical score for a recitativo accompagnato. It features five staves. The top two staves are for the right hand of a keyboard instrument, the middle two for the left hand, and the bottom for a vocal line. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: "prove, De-priv'd of fame, of life and—". The bottom staff shows figured bass notation: ♭, ♭6/4, 5/♭3.

Figure 54. Recitativo accompagnato as demonstrated in *The Queen of Carthage, whom we hate*.<sup>65</sup> Reprinted, by permission, from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), page 36.

The second component Purcell utilized was the incorporation of the English masque. The masque or mask was extremely popular in England throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The word masque originally referred to masked revelers who would interrupt a private party with songs, dances, poetry and skits. The term later came to describe an evening of court entertainment involving all of the above. Masques were popular in England, France and Italy. The English ultimately inserted masque diversions into presentations of spoken drama. *Dido and Aeneas* was used as just such a masque entertainment for its first public performances in 1700. The lively dance numbers, numerous chorus pieces, and colorful characters provide plentiful material for a masque.

<sup>65</sup> Purcell, 36.

Certainly the allegorical prelude and mythological subject matter were considered standard masque material.

Purcell's third component includes the influence of Italian music. The Italians had established something of a tradition for the ground bass lament, one of the most memorable being Monteverdi's *Lamento della ninfa* (1638), which is scored for solo soprano over a ground bass. A male chorus comments on the nymph's plight. Purcell, despite his English heritage, composed one of the most glorious Italian style laments in the history of Western music, "When I am laid in earth." In Purcell's g minor lament, the vocal line does not coincide with the repetitions of the bass and the lyrical line of the aria is incredibly expressive as a result. Descending lines with dotted rhythms and descending intervals, including a tritone, accentuate Dido's despair. The poignant vocal silence between her pleas, "Remember me," has the effect of a sigh or a sob, while the violins dutifully continue with the line. Purcell's chromaticism and free treatment of dissonance are truly anguished.

**Larghetto**

The musical score is for Purcell's "When I am laid in earth." It is in G minor, 3/2 time, and marked *Larghetto*. The score includes five parts: Violino 1, Violino 2, Viola, Soprano, and Basso. The first four measures of each part are marked with a long dash, indicating they are not shown. The vocal line (Soprano) begins in the fifth measure with the lyrics "When I am". The Basso part features a ground bass line starting in the first measure. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo) for the strings and *p* (piano) for the vocal line.



laid, — am laid — — — in earth, may my wrongs — cre -

6 4 7 6 6 7 6 6 6 5  
5 2 # 5 4 #

ate No trou - ble, no trou-ble in thy breast;

6 7 6 6 7 6 6 7 6 6 6 5  
5 5 2 3 # 5 4 #

When I am laid, — am laid — in earth, may my

6 5      4 2      7 6      6      7 #      6

wrongs — cre - ate No trou - ble, no trou-ble in thy breast;

6 5      6 4      5 #      6      7 6      6      7 6      6      7 #      6

Re-mem-ber me, re - mem-ber me, but

6 6 5 6 7 6 7 - 6 7 6 6  
5 4 # 5 - 3 4 3 4 3 # 6

ah! for - get my fate. Re - mem-ber me, but ah!

6 6 7 5 7 8 6 6 7 6 6 7 6 6  
4 4 # 3 6 - 6 6 5 2 6 5 - 6  
- 4 -  
2 -





This anguished aria is followed by the heart wrenching, Italian-style madrigal

“With Drooping Wings ye Cupids Come.”

With drooping wings, ye Cupids come,  
And scatter roses on her tomb,  
Soft, soft and gentle as her heart,  
Keep here, here your watch, and never part.<sup>67</sup>

This is a four-part madrigal with an obbligato accompaniment for two violins, viola and bass, which double the voices. The singers serve the dramatic function of a Greek chorus, commenting on events that have taken place on the stage. In this case, the chorus laments Dido’s death. The text of the first line of “With Drooping Wings” is set in imitation and is therefore obscured. Purcell’s setting is such, however, that key words are made prominent in the texture and are accentuated by the music. The chorus comes together rhythmically for the second line, and resumes some imitation for the beginning of the third line. Again, Purcell brings key words to the fore of the texture. The chorus sings in rhythmic unison for “as her heart.” The final line, which is sung in near rhythmic unison, pleads clearly to love’s Cupids to watch over Dido in death, as they could not in life.

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<sup>67</sup> Purcell, 87-89.



The musical score consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a vocal line. The second system includes a grand staff and a vocal line. The lyrics are written below the vocal lines.

Lyrics:

- ing\_wings, with droop - ing wings, with droop -  
 - ing wings, ye Cu - pids\_ come, with droop - ing  
 droop - ing, droop-ing wings, with droop-ing wings, with droop-ing wings, with  
 with droop - ing wings ye Cu - pids come, —

6 6 6 6 6 6 7 6  
 4 4 # 4

- ing wings ye Cu - pids come, And scat - ter - ro - ses, scat - ter, scat - ter— *cresc.*  
 wings ye Cu - pids come, And scat - ter - ro - ses, scat - ter, scat - ter— *cresc.*  
 droop-ing wings ye Cu - pids come, And scat - ter, scat - ter— *cresc.*  
 — ye Cu - pids come, And scat - ter - ro - ses, scat - ter—

7 # 6 7 # 7 5 6 9 7  
 # 4 #



Musical score for page 112, featuring piano accompaniment and vocal lines. The score is in G minor (one flat) and 3/4 time. The piano part consists of two systems of three staves each. The vocal part consists of four systems of two staves each. The lyrics are:

ro - ses on her tomb, Soft, *pp*  
 ro - ses on her tomb, *pp* Soft, soft and gen - tle as her  
 ro - ses on her tomb, *pp* Soft, soft, soft and gen - tle  
 ro - ses on her tomb, *pp* Soft, soft

Fingerings for the piano part are indicated below the bottom staff:

5 6 - 6 4 3 # 6 7 6  
 5 -

soft — and gen - tle, soft, — soft, — soft, — soft — and —

heart, — gen - tle as her heart, soft, — soft, — soft and gen - tle, —

as her heart, soft, — soft — and —

— and gen - tle, soft, — soft, — soft, — soft, — soft — and

6 6 6 6 5 6 6 6 # # 6 7 6

4 3 2 4

gen - tle — as her heart, Keep here, here your watch, keep here, here, keep

gen - tle — as her heart, Keep here, here your — watch, keep here, here, keep

gen - tle — as her heart, Keep here, here your watch, keep here, here, keep

gen - tle as her heart, Keep here, here your watch, keep here, here, keep

9 6 7 6 5  
7 4 # 4 # #  
5 6 9 6  
3 7

here— your— watch, and nev - er, nev - er, nev - er part, and

here your watch, and nev - er, nev - er, nev - er part, and

here— your— watch, and nev - er, nev - er, nev - er part, and

here your watch, and nev - er, nev - er, nev - er part, and

6 4     - 3 7     ♯6     ♯ 6 7 4 5     ♯



nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er part. With droop-part.  
 nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er part. part.  
 nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er part. With part.  
 nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er part. part.

6      9 8      7      5  
       7 6      #      #

Figure 56. *With drooping wings, ye Cupids come.*<sup>68</sup> Reprinted, by permission, from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), pages 87-89.

Finally, Purcell contrasts these serious dramatic Italian elements by incorporating an uplifting French influence. Lully heavily influenced Purcell's opening Overture, and numerous French influenced dances dot the opera like a **ballet de cour**. These contrasting pieces provide a beautiful balance to the dramatic tragedy of the opera.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

But “how do I accompany a singer?” When accompanying a vocalist on the harp, be mindful of Purcell’s objective to project the text. Do not ornament in recitative sections, and avoid obscuring the text with heavy ornamentation in arias. Avoid realizing your accompaniment in the same range as the singer for the same reason. Breathe with the singer and be attentive to the pronunciation of the text. In your music, indicate the singer’s breaths with an apostrophe and indicate any silence or space required by the text with a muffle sign. A chord should be placed on the main vowel of a word, not on the introductory consonants. For example, the word spring requires a chord on the “ing.” By placing the accompanying chord the “spr,” you obscure the singer’s articulation and the text cannot be projected to the audience.

The vocal line rules the structure of recitative sections. Ignore any indicated bar lines and strive to accentuate the natural inflections of the text with your accompaniment. During long sustained harmonies, you may need to restrike the harp to create a sustained effect. Choose a logical place to restrike a chord according to both the text inflections and the meaning. Accent syllables by arpeggiating chords, and play unbroken chords for unaccented syllables. If the text is based on poetic meter, the appropriate accompaniment may be rather regular and straightforward. Use short, unbroken chords to create rhythm. In addition to the rhythmic structure of the piece, strive to enhance the drama of the text. A tender moment may indicate a slow rolled chord. Anger may require a sharp, unbroken chord. And muffling a chord with key words or gestures can provide tremendous effect.

Belinda

Soprano

Basso

See, see, your Roy - al guest ap - pears; How God - like is the form he

Æneas

bears! When, when, Roy - al fair, shall I be blest, With cares — of —

Dido

Æneas

love and — state — dis - trest? Fate for - bids what you pur - sue. Æ - ne - as has no

fate but you! Let Di - do smile and I'll de - fy The fee - ble stroke of des - ti - ny.

Figure 57. *See, see, your Royal guest appears.*<sup>69</sup> Reprinted, by permission, from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), page 19.

More unconventional accompanying techniques include arpeggiating a chord from the top down, arpeggiating up and down with a quick turn at the top, or even a bisbigliando or tremolo, which are particularly effective on multi-row harps. Imitate the strum of a guitar

<sup>69</sup> Purcell, 19.

by muffling notes outside of the chord and strumming the remaining open strings.

Whatever your approach, do not roll all of the chords in a nineteenth century style. An arpeggiated chord is considered to be ornamented. When in doubt, play a chord unbroken.

If you are accompanying a singer alone, you will need to provide enough of the chord indicated to fully support the singer's line. Play more than the single bass note written with the left hand to create a rich realization. Expect dissonance to occur between the vocal line and accompaniment when realizing Baroque recitative. Do not alter your part to avoid this. Dissonance was considered to be expressive in this genre, and it is essential to the music.

In general, your accompaniment can be more elaborate when the singer is resting. Try to provide some interest by utilizing varied range, articulation and dynamics. Be creative with repeated sections by altering your accompaniment to fit the new text. Incorporate material from the vocal line into your accompaniment. When appropriate use related material for points of imitation.

### **Suggested Readings:**

Goldie, Mark. "The earliest notice of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*." *Early Music* Vol. 20, No. 3 (August 1992): 393-400.

Price, Curtis, ed. *Purcell Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Wood, Bruce and Andrew Pinnock. "'Unscarr'd by turning times'? The dating of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*." *Early Music* Vol. 20, No. 3 (August 1992): 373-390.