

Opera Matters

By Robert Vineberg,

Opera Matters explores the background to the operas produced by the Manitoba Opera and what was happening in the world and in Winnipeg at the time of those operas.

Dido and Aeneas

The story of *Dido and Aeneas* comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Aeneas is the Trojan hero, who had to flee his homeland, following the Greek capture and sack of Troy. On his way to his destiny (founding Rome) he was storm-tossed onto the shores of Carthage. The opera is a classic "boy meets girl" love story, except that the girl happens to be the Queen of Carthage and it ends sadly, not because one dies in a duel or the other dies of consumption; but because the Gods remind Aeneas of his sacred task of founding the empire that, ironically, would eventually destroy Carthage and he leaves Dido.

Dido and Aeneas is considered the first great dramatic music composed in England. Henry Purcell, at 30, was at the height his powers when he composed the opera to a libretto penned by Nahum Tate, at the time England's poet laureate.

Baroque Opera

"Baroque opera" refers to opera from the Baroque period of music, when music was expanding exponentially from Renaissance music, becoming more complex, more florid, and a total abandonment of the restraint and simplicity of the Renaissance. But, perhaps more importantly, Baroque Opera was the beginning of opera in the Western world.

The Baroque Opera website (<http://www.baroqueopera.com>) describes the Baroque Era in this way:

The baroque era (and for this we are taking the period from around 1600 to the death of Handel in 1759) saw both the birth of opera as a musical form and its growth into perhaps the most enduring musical genre.

Of the thousands of operas which were known to have been written in those 150 years, only a small percentage survive, notably those of such composers as Scarlatti, Handel, Pergolesi, Hasse and Gluck. Written initially to celebrate specific events (usually royal or vice-regal) this role was taken over by the *serenata* and the developing larger *cantata* forms and the operas became entities in themselves, drawing large audiences at the many theatres which appeared, creating an almost 'popular culture' with the Europe-wide distribution of new works, and importantly for the later development of singing, creating a need for virtuoso performers which was fulfilled by singers like Farinelli, La Romanina, Bordoni, Cuzzoni, Senesino, Cafarelli, Carestini and those who followed.

In literature some of the greatest writers of the day were creating *libretti* for the composers to set to music, and one libretto would often be set by up to a dozen composers. One of the greatest and most influential (even until Mozart's time) was Abbate Pietro Metastasio. His complex and often riveting stories (e.g., *Didone abbandonata*, *L'Olimpiade* & *Attilio regolo*) were set to music by most of the great baroque opera composers.

The refining of *recitativo accompagnato* and *secco*, the development of the *aria* as a form, subject matter historical or mythological, pathetic or comic and above all the music, the singing and the spectacle made baroque opera a pinnacle of musical achievement.

To modern audiences, however, more familiar with the massive musical forces of Romantic Opera, Baroque Opera seems restrained and subdued. Early Baroque Opera can pale in comparison to works of the late Baroque Era, such as those of Handel, whose death, as noted above, brought the era to a close. It also seems to be very stylized, conforming to the conventions of the time. We need to sit back, relax, and find the consummate beauty in the music of Purcell and his contemporaries that amazed and delighted his audiences.

England in Purcell's Time

England in Purcell's time was a period of extraordinary turmoil, especially religious and political. Purcell, born in 1659, was born into the dying years of the Cromwell's Protectorate. The monarchy was restored with the return of King Charles II in 1660. The King had to accept to rule a Protestant country, but his sympathies were still Roman Catholic. Parliament, therefore, kept a close watch on him. When Purcell was about seven years old, London suffered the "Great Plague" that killed some 100,000 people, perhaps 20% of the city's population. Then just as the plague was dying down, the city was swept by the "Great Fire of London" that destroyed some 15,000 buildings, including St. Paul's Cathedral and 87 parish churches, and raged for five days.

As London was rebuilt, the political-religious strains that were handled fairly well by Charles II, grew to a full-blown crisis on the ascension of his son, James II, in 1685. The result was the "Glorious Revolution of 1688" when William of Orange invaded from Holland, with the support of the majority in the English Parliament. He was crowned as King William as James attempted to regain the crown. However, William defeated James' forces totally at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. William was accepted as monarch by Parliament, not just because he was Protestant, but because he was willing to accept restraints on the royal prerogative. These restraints, embodied in the English *Bill of Rights*, marked the first steps in the development of responsible government in the Parliamentary system.

Purcell died, like Mozart, in his mid-thirties, just as the power of England and the glory of English music were both manifesting themselves.

Canada in Purcell's Time

Canada or New France, was a French colony in the 17th Century, bordered to the south by British colonies. In Europe, King James had been supported by France and King William led a broad coalition against France on the continent, while suppressing the uprising, led by James, in Ireland. This "War of the Grand Coalition" went on for nine years. North America was not immune and the conflict between France and England in North America was known as King William's War. The major engagement on Canadian soil was the British/American siege of Quebec. A force, led by Sir William Phipps, arrived below the ramparts of Quebec City in October, 1690. Phipps sent an envoy to the French Governor, Frontenac, demanding that he surrender and that he reply within the hour. He famously responded:

"Non, je n'ai point de réponse à faire à votre général que par la bouche de mes canons..."

("No, I make no reply to your general except from the mouths of my cannon...").

Despite being outnumbered, Frontenac's leadership and determination led to Phipps's defeat and retreat. Quebec would remain a French colony for another 70 years.
