

## **Virgil's Wayward Sisters: From Purcell To Berlioz**

***A paper given to the Virgil Society on 9 December 1995***

In this paper I shall endeavour to illustrate the range of ways in which operatic composers have reacted to Virgil's *Aeneid*. Ian Martin has recently told the Society much about Berlioz' *Les Troyens*,<sup>1</sup> but there have been many other composers from the seventeenth century onwards who have written operas based on the *Aeneid*, or on various parts of it.

There are two main reasons why I feel justified in discussing Virgil and his operatic followers in further detail. Firstly, because the most prestigious literary genre in Augustan Rome was surely epic poetry. One could well argue that epic poetry was the art form (not merely literary genre) which had the highest status. And one might well argue that opera has a similarly high status in modern Western culture. Thus it is interesting to compare opera with Latin epic poetry, of which Virgil's *Aeneid* was the undisputed high point, because they were regarded as having equally high value by their respective cultures. Secondly, and more importantly, I believe that comparing and contrasting the two might be a fruitful approach to increasing our understanding both of the Virgilian original and of the operatic version. An opera based on the *Aeneid* might be likened to a commentary—it is one man's reading of the text.<sup>2</sup> It will be a reading which is concerned, above all, with the emotions suggested by that text. It may not be a particularly scholarly reading of that text, but it may well cause us to think about the *Aeneid* itself, and in particular the feelings and emotions of its main protagonists, in new ways which scholars may have missed.

The *Aeneid* has provided a wide selection of librettists and a huge range of composers with their plot and theme. Some parts of the work have proved more popular than others: the second half of the epic has

JANE FISHER-HUNT

proved much less popular than the first, although we do know of two operas which deal with Books 7–12, Pascal Collasse's *Enée et Lavinie*,<sup>3</sup> and Pietra Alessandro Guglielmi's *Enea e Lavinia*.<sup>4</sup> Most composers, however, have found themselves more inspired by the first half of the *Aeneid*, the Dido episode being, perhaps predictably, the most popular of all. Jasper Griffin says that 'Dido's utterances are like a series of arias for an unhappy operatic heroine'<sup>5</sup> and versions of these unhappy utterances have certainly been turned into many operatic arias. Franz Stieger's *Opernlexicon* of 1975<sup>6</sup> lists 113 operas based on *Aeneid* 4 alone. The first composer to have written an opera on the subject was Cavalli, whose *Didone* appeared in 1641, his librettist being Busenello. This opera deals with the events in Troy as well as those in Carthage, i.e. those portrayed in *Aeneid* Book 2 as well as Book 4.<sup>7</sup> The most recent version seems to be *Dido, Gründerin von Karthago* by Ferdinand Hummel, the librettist being Alois Außener, which was premiered in the Stadtstheater in Salzburg in 1912.

In one single paper I cannot hope to cover all the possible material and so I shall concentrate, in the main, on three operas which set the events in Book 4: *Dido and Aeneas*, by Henry Purcell (1659–95), *La Didone Abbandonata* by Leonardo Vinci (c. 1696–1730) and Hector Berlioz' (1803–69) *Les Troyens*.

*Dido and Aeneas*, the libretto of which was written by Nahum Tate, later to become Poet Laureate, is an opera whose première is the subject of much scholarly debate. It was performed by the girls of Mr Josias Priest's school in Chelsea in 1689 or perhaps 1690, with Mr Priest himself taking the part of Aeneas, and this performance may have been the work's première. However, the earliest score that we have is written for SATB, and thus it could not have been performed by a girls school unless the tenors and basses were brought in from outside.<sup>8</sup> This has led some scholars to posit the existence of a version for SSA which is now lost. We do not know whether the extant SATB version or the hypothetical SSA version came first. The first performance of the SATB version—probably performed as a Court Masque for William and Mary—may have preceded the school production, but no definite chronology can be posited with the limited evidence we have at present.

The libretto which proved to be the most popular version of the events in *Aeneid* 4 was not that by Tate, but one written by Metastasio, probably the most important eighteenth-century opera librettist, whose

*Didone Abbandonata* was set by at least 80 composers, the first being Domenico Sarri in February 1724.<sup>9</sup> Leonardo Vinci set the work again shortly after Sarri, in a slightly altered form: the première of his setting was at the *Teatro Alibert o delle Dame* in Rome on 14 January 1726. Brown, in his preface to Vinci's work, comments: 'Vinci is closely identified with the beginnings of Metastasian opera since he was a friend of the poet, and they apparently worked together on several occasions during the 1720s, just when the poet was beginning his career as a dramatist... Metastasio evidently valued the composer's merits highly.'<sup>10</sup> Although Vinci's music is largely unknown today, eighteenth-century commentators and modern historians of opera agree that he was one of the best and most important composers of music in Naples during the 1720s. His reputation seems to have been as high in the Naples of his time as was that of Purcell in London some thirty years before.

Berlioz, however, unlike Vinci and Purcell, was not successful as a theatrical composer, as far as his contemporaries were concerned. Only one of his complete operas was performed in Paris during his lifetime. This was *Benvenuto Cellini*, first performed in 1838 at the Paris Opéra. He had lofty but unfashionable ideas about the theatre, not suitable for the tastes of Parisian theatre-goers of the Second Empire. To his contemporaries, *Les Troyens*, for which he wrote his own libretto, would have seemed static and untheatrical, even though nowadays many people consider it to be a masterpiece. In his memoirs he describes his graphic attempts to get it staged: he did not succeed even when he split it into two, as *La Prise de Troie* and *Les Troyens à Carthage*. The score was begun in 1856, and was published in 1861. In 1863 the first two acts were performed (albeit with cuts) as *Les Troyens à Carthage* at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris. *La Prise de Troie* was not staged until 1890, although concert performances were given in Paris in 1879. The first staged performance of the whole opera was given in Karlsruhe in 1890: the performance took place over two evenings and was sung in German. During the centenary of Berlioz' death, in 1969, the first complete and uncut performance of *Les Troyens* took place, in English, in Glasgow, by Scottish Opera. And finally, in that same year, Covent Garden performed the work in its entirety and in its original language.

The second part, *Les Troyens à Carthage*, can stand on its own as an opera, and has often thus been performed. That is, for the most part, how we shall now consider it. It deals with the events of *Aeneid* Book 4.

These operas which grew out of the fourth book of the *Aeneid* are fascinating to consider as they deal with the same subject matter but, as we shall see, in such radically different ways. I shall concentrate on three main areas: firstly, the plot differences, secondly, the portrayal of Dido's sister Anna, who might be considered, albeit slightly unfairly, as one 'wayward sister' of my title, and thirdly, the forces which conspire against Dido and cause her downfall—in Purcell's opera these are the witches, the true 'wayward sisters' of my title. And by considering these three main areas, which will illustrate the overall shape of these operas, the techniques of characterisation adopted by the composers, and the ways in which they deal with the non-human elements of the story, I hope to be able to assess which version is the truest to the Virgilian original.

Let us firstly consider the minutiae of the plot in each of these three operas. They all take *Aeneid* 4 as their essential storyline, but do vary somewhat.

Purcell's version follows the basic plot of the Virgilian original—Dido and Aeneas fall in love but he has to leave her as he is called to Italy, and she dies of grief—but the gods are replaced, in the main, by witches.

*Act 1:* We see Dido at the start having already fallen for Aeneas, but not wanting to admit this. She and Belinda—Tate's name for Anna—discuss Aeneas' virtues; Aeneas arrives and convinces her that their love should be mutual.

*Act 2.1:* Here we meet the Sorceress and witches, who decide to destroy Dido by making Aeneas desert her, merely because she is a successful queen and because, therefore, they hate her. They intend to send a spirit in the form of Mercury to Aeneas to tell him to go to Italy.

*Act 2.2:* The hunting scene: Belinda describes the charms of the place but the Second woman, sensing that all may not be well, sings of the fate of Actaeon who was pursued and killed by his own hounds. Thunder now starts and they all flee, at Belinda's instigation. The Spirit sent by the Sorceress tells Aeneas (momentarily left alone) that Jupiter has told him to leave now for Italy. Aeneas is distraught: he is torn between love and duty and knows that he must depart, but cannot decide how to break the news to Dido.

*Act 3.1:* At the harbour, the sailors sing of their departure; the witches are delighted at the success of their plans, and think how they can now drown Aeneas and thus cause further suffering.

Act 3.2: Back at the palace, Dido is telling Belinda how she must die, now that she has gathered what has happened (Aeneas, evidently, does not break the news of his departure to her before she finds out the news herself). Aeneas enters to try and explain: he promises to stay, but she spurns him. He leaves. She says she must die: 'Remember me, but ah, forget my fate.' The opera ends with a chorus lamenting her death; the libretto however does not make it quite clear whether Dido is actually dead or not at the end of the opera, or how she dies.

Why did Tate make these changes to Virgil's story-line? Firstly, the question as to whether Dido is dead or not: there is absolutely no doubt in Virgil. E. Harris<sup>11</sup> is sure that she is dead, as the plot would then follow the plot of *Brutus of Alba*, one of Tate's earlier plays, on which much of *Dido and Aeneas* was based. Curtis Price is not quite so sure,<sup>12</sup> but I tend to favour following Harris. We will discuss the use of witches rather than gods later on.

Now let us turn to *La Didone Abbandonata*. Metastasio's setting is even further away from Virgil's storyline, in that he complicates the plot by having Anna—who is called Selene<sup>13</sup>—in love with Aeneas as well. Iarbas appears as a more prominent character in this version. Metastasio follows Ovid, who tells of how Iarbas seized Carthage after Dido's death, and suggests (as Metastasio construed it) that Anna was secretly in love with Aeneas.<sup>14</sup> In Metastasio's libretto there are two new characters, Araspe, Iarbas' confidant, in love with Selene, and Osmida, Dido's (male) confidant—also in love with Dido.

*Act 1:* The story starts with Aeneas, who has come to Carthage, and has fallen in love with Dido. He now has to tell Selene that he must depart for Italy. Iarbas, king of the Moors, wants to marry Dido, and (disguised as his own ambassador Arbace) threatens war when she refuses his hand. Iarbas sends his confidant, Araspe, to kill Aeneas, but Araspe refuses as that would not be noble. Araspe falls in love with Selene, who is already in love with Aeneas, as is her sister. Araspe stops Iarbas from killing Aeneas, but the circumstances of the attempt mean that Araspe gets the blame and is arrested. Iarbas reveals his true identity and is given into the custody of Osmida.

*Act 2:* Araspe tells Selene of his love for her; she apologetically admits that she is in love with someone else. Dido wishes Iarbas to be killed; Aeneas does not let her. Aeneas acts nobly, which Iarbas cannot understand. Dido asks Aeneas whether she should die or marry Iarbas; he



JANE FISHER-HUNT

advises the latter, but cannot bear it, so departs. Dido declares her hatred for Iarbas, who swears that he will take revenge.

*Act 3:* Aeneas and the Trojans are attacked by the Moors, but defeat them. Osmida tries to betray Aeneas but is unsuccessful. Selene finally confesses to Aeneas that she is in love with him, but he departs for Rome. Carthage begins to burn, now that Iarbas' forces are destroying it. Selene confesses her love for Aeneas to Dido. Osmida confesses his treachery to Dido, and Iarbas offers her marriage again. Dido refuses to marry Iarbas; she curses the gods for giving her an unfaithful sister, lover and confidant. Osmida is shocked by such a curse and abandons her. Left alone, she laments her fate before throwing herself into the flames of burning Carthage.

So this is an extremely complex version of the story, with extra characters, and other characters taking a more prominent role than they did in the Virgilian original. Such complexity is a stock-in-trade of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century libretti on classical subjects: for example, Rameau's version of Hippolytus, entitled *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733) depicts both Phèdre and another character, Aricie, in love with Hippolyte. Rameau's version of events follows Racine's plot rather than Euripides' in this respect.

Let us now turn to *Les Troyens à Carthage*. Berlioz' version of events is far closer to Virgil's as far as the basic plot is concerned, although there are a few extended scenes that do not appear in the original poem. There are a few new characters: Narbal (a minister of Dido), and the Ghosts of Priam, Choroebus, Cassandra, and Hector.

*Act 1* (III of the whole opera): All the Carthaginians are gathered to honour Dido; she in turn thanks them for their support, and honours various of her countrymen. Alone with Anna (who finally has the name given to her by Virgil), Dido confesses that she is sad; Anna clearly thinks that she needs to find a new husband. The Trojans arrive, and Dido allows them shelter in Carthage. Iarbas and the Numidians attack, and Aeneas offers to fight alongside the Carthaginians. Dido accepts.

*Act 2* (IV): This starts with a symphonic representation of the<sup>8</sup> royal hunt and the storm. In the following scene Anna and Narbal discuss Dido and Aeneas' love for each other—Dido is delighted but Narbal is worried. A great banquet now takes place, at which there is much dance and song. Towards the end of the act, Dido and Aeneas are left alone and

sing a romantic duet. As they finally leave the stage, the figure of Mercury appears and intones the word 'Italie' three times.

*Act 3 (V)*: Hylas, the sailor, sings nostalgically of his homeland. The chieftains resolve to leave that morning, but Aeneas is in torment at the thought of having to leave Dido. The ghosts of Priam, Cassandra, Hecuba and Choroebus command him to delay no longer and to leave. And so he does; neither Dido nor Anna can make him change his mind. Dido, realising that his departure is immediate, calls on the gods of the underworld to fill her with hatred and orders a sacrifice to them, a huge pyre, on which her gifts to Aeneas and those he gave her will all perish in the flames. Narbal, Anna and all the Carthaginians do as she asks. In a trance, Dido asks that the sacrifice be completed, pulls Aeneas' sword from its scabbard and stabs herself. As she dies, she prophesies that Carthage will be destroyed by Rome. Her last words are 'Rome... immortelle'. The Carthaginians move to the front of the stage and curse the race of Aeneas.

Thus we can see that Berlioz is more concerned to present the plot of *Aeneid* 4 roughly as Virgil does, or at any rate far more so than our other two composers. He adds a few extra scenes not in Virgil, for example the scene at the harbour, and Anna's discussion with Narbal, but none of these scenes seems contrary to the spirit of the *Aeneid*. However, the end of the opera, with the Carthaginians loudly cursing Rome to the triumphant strains of the Trojan theme-tune march, is quite unlike the end of Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, which ends in a gentle way, with Iris being sent by Juno to put an end to Dido's sufferings. This is more akin to the Purcellian ending, with its gentle chorus 'With drooping wings ye Cupids come and scatter roses on her tomb.'

We have already observed how a musical version of a text will be concerned, above all, with the emotions suggested by that text. But the extent to which these composers are keen to set the scene and change the mood with orchestral introductions and interludes varies: Vinci makes very little use of solely orchestral music except the overture at the very beginning, and thus relies heavily on the words themselves to tell the story. But both Berlioz and Purcell make a good deal of use of music which has no words—dances, hunt scenes etc, which add further depth to the emotions aroused by the text itself.<sup>15</sup>

These three operas are very different in scale: *Dido and Aeneas* lasts no more than an hour, and, as has already been observed, may well first

have been performed as a Court masque, possibly as part of an evening's entertainment, not as a whole theatrical event in itself. The work was closely modelled on John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*<sup>16</sup> (Blow being Purcell's teacher), which was also in three acts, lasting about 45 minutes in total.<sup>17</sup> If, however, we are to believe that *Dido and Aeneas* was premièred at Mr Priest's school, then a short setting would have suited the capacities of its young performers. Tate did not choose to represent all the events in *Aeneid* 4, for the type of work he was writing did not permit such length.

However, Vinci's opera is considerably longer—it would probably run for 2 or 2½ hours. Vinci has simply more time to go into more of the details of the Virgilian original—and adds others of his own.<sup>18</sup>

Berlioz' opera *Les Troyens* in its entirety lasts for about 4½ hours,<sup>19</sup> and the section with which we are concerned lasts for about 2½ or 3. He thus has ample time (more time than either Purcell or Vinci) to give us a representation of most of the events in *Aeneid* 4—for example, the rituals carried out by Dido, which are dealt with at some length in his opera, are completely ignored by Tate and Metastasio. Tate's portrayal of Dido is almost entirely positive and biased towards her; perhaps he simply did not want to represent his noble Queen as a Bacchant-like figure resorting to witchcraft. Metastasio decided simply to have the palace burn down; as spectacular stage effects were a vitally important part of theatrical performance during his time, he may have chosen the most spectacular ending for Dido that he could. He too, perhaps did not want to go into the more disturbing side of Dido's behaviour, as does Berlioz. Berlioz is more concerned to portray all the sides of Dido's personality, as was Virgil.

Perhaps Berlioz—unlike, in all probability, either Tate or Metastasio—felt that Dido was a 'wayward sister'. This observation brings me on to the second area of discussion, that of the presentation of the character of Anna.

It is clear to many commentators that Anna is an important character in Virgil's presentation of the events in Book 4.<sup>20</sup> The first person to whom Dido turns to discuss Aeneas is Anna, who is described as 'the sister whose heart was one with hers' (West's translation), *unanimam... sororem* (4.8). Anna's reply (4.31–54) shows several things: her love for Dido, and her wish for Dido to cheer up and to have a happy life (4.31–3). She is shown to be a down-to-earth and sensible character, as she cannot believe that a dead man can really care about a promise such as that



Dido had made to remain faithful to him (4.34). Perhaps she is a little *too* down-to-earth to be able to understand Dido properly. She is shown to be practical: she realises that they are on their own in Africa and thus need allies (4.35–43); Aeneas might be able to help them even against Pygmalion, she realises (4.43–4). She is clearly pious, in that she sees the situation as being one in which the gods are playing an active role: she believes that Juno is supporting the union (4.45–6). This, of course, is true; unfortunately, she does not realise the part that Fate has to play. She advocates pious actions: she advises Dido to pray and to sacrifice to the gods for their favour (4.50). She is shown to be ambitious, possibly even a little self-centred: she knows how good it will be for her and the rest of Carthage if her sister marries Aeneas (4.47–8). She is evidently intelligent: she knows that what affects Carthage will be important for her sister, and thus she lays emphasis on how Carthage is affected by such matters (4.49–50). She can be devious: she recommends that Dido make up reasons to make Aeneas stay with her, if necessary (4.51). She is clearly influential over her sister, who largely follows all her advice (4.54–5)—she gives her new hopes and breaks down her scruples. Later on, Dido blames Anna for leading her on, thus admitting that Anna is influential over her (4.448–9). When Dido asks Anna to go and plead with Aeneas on her behalf, she makes it clear that Aeneas had been impressed by Anna and took her seriously (4.421–2). Dido says that Anna knows how to approach Aeneas tactfully (4.423), so we may assume Anna to be intelligent, sympathetic and tactful. Anna's loyalty and bravery is clear from the fact that she does indeed go and talk to Aeneas (4.437–8). She is not strong enough to make him change his mind, but we can hardly castigate her for that. Later on, Anna is hoodwinked by her sister into taking part in her magic rituals (4.500–2); either Anna is not very bright or she is simply far more law-abiding than Dido and simply cannot imagine that Dido is prepared to resort to villainy. She is not as passionate as her sister and cannot imagine so violent a passion as Dido is experiencing (4.501–2). However, when Anna hears that Dido has stabbed herself she is described as *exanimis*: her reactions show that she has feelings which can be just as strong as those of her sister (4.672–4). Her final speech to Dido is reproachful, as Dido has deserted her and unwittingly made her the cause of Dido's death (4.675–85). She feels that Dido has destroyed her too, and the whole city (4.682)—she thus sees things in far-reaching terms and does not merely think in terms of

the present. Her bravery is again shown when she climbs the pyre and tries to save Dido (4.685). She sees herself practically as part of her sister; clearly she does not think much of herself on her own account.

Anna is thus used by Virgil very much as a foil or contrast with Dido, and it is interesting to see how our three librettists—and composers—handle this particular piece of characterisation.

The status of the character of Belinda in Tate's libretto is a little uncertain. The earliest edition of the libretto seems to imply that she is a confidante, or even a maid-servant, rather than a sister: 'See, Madam' is not a very sisterly way of addressing Dido, even if she is the Queen. Later editions have these words changed to 'See, Sister'; later editors clearly thought that Belinda was to be identified wholly with Anna (one late eighteenth-century version even names her as Anna<sup>21</sup>). But whether she is a confidante or a sister does not really alter her status when compared to Dido; Dido is portrayed as being a more important individual than Belinda, but Belinda is clearly of a sufficiently high status to give advice to her sister/mistress, and to make extremely personal suggestions about Dido's emotions and love.

Whether sister or confidante, Belinda is a sensible, cheerful character. At the start she tells her sister not to be miserable as she has so many blessings. She presses Dido to admit that she has fallen for Aeneas; she realises the danger of keeping emotions bottled up. She advises Dido not to hold back from her love for Aeneas as she is sure it is mutual. When Aeneas comes in she encourages him, too—she is clearly self-confident. We next see Belinda at the start of the hunting scene; she introduces us to the delights of the *locus amoenus* in which they find themselves. When the storm appears she tells everyone to go home—she clearly likes keeping everyone in order. And in the last act she still maintains that Aeneas loves Dido. We realise that her advice of the first act was not wise—but Dido does not blame her in any way, unlike in the Virgilian original. Dido clearly loves Belinda deeply—she needs her support, both mental and physical—to the end. 'Thy hand Belinda, darkness shades me, On thy bosom let me rest.'

Musically, Belinda is contrasted well with Dido. Her part seems to demand a fairly light, soubrettish voice, to deal with all the light and bouncy passages such as *Haste, haste to town* and *Pursue thy conquest, love*. This is very much in contrast with the darker, richer voice necessary for Dido's arias especially the Lament; Dido is often given to

a mezzo-soprano<sup>22</sup> or a dramatic soprano.<sup>23</sup> So, in musical terms, in *Dido and Aeneas*, Belinda is portrayed in the classic role of a light and flighty *seconda donna*, whereas Dido gets more sustained, dark and melancholic passages.<sup>24</sup>

Belinda has quite a lot to sing; she is more prominent in Purcell's version than is Anna in the Virgilian original. How does she compare with Anna in other ways? She does not seem so involved with Dido's situation—her love for Dido is not as strong and evident as a motivating force for her behaviour as Anna's. She is, however, again a down-to-earth and sensible character, certainly influential over her sister. She is more bossy, more self-confident than her Virgilian counterpart. She mentions the gods from time to time, but her actions do not really seem to show her as being particularly pious—unlike Anna. She is not drawn in such detail, but is clearly meant to provide a contrast with Dido.

Selene, the Anna figure in Metastasio's libretto, has quite a different role to play in this opera compared to Anna's role in the *Aeneid*, as she is also in love with Aeneas. Thus she is on a more similar footing when compared with her sister, than is the case with Anna in the *Aeneid* (or Belinda in *Dido and Aeneas*). The fact that she is in love with Aeneas makes her feelings about her various actions in the plot (actions fundamentally the same as those in the *Aeneid*, i.e. counselling her sister and acting as a go-between for Dido and Aeneas) rather different. She clearly does not love Dido in the same simple unmuddled way that Anna (or Belinda) loves Dido; Anna (and Belinda) is completely on Dido's side, but we never get that sense with Selene. She makes her love for Aeneas clear to the audience from the start, and this love and her difficulty in keeping it a secret provides the main interest in her role. In the first scene, she makes it clear to Aeneas that he is welcome to stay in Carthage—she almost confesses her love, but just manages to keep herself in control of her feelings. And when she stops Iarbas from stabbing Aeneas, she has very particular and personal reasons for not wanting him to die. She is far from stupid: she realises that she is foolish to behave as she does, but she also realises that love is stronger than she is. When she finally admits her love to Aeneas he reacts to the news in a far from friendly way which does not endear us to him. That has the effect of making us feel sorry for her and indeed for Dido; he is not presented as a man who will make either of them happy.

Selene in Metastasio's libretto is thus almost completely different

JANE FISHER-HUNT

from Anna in the *Aeneid*. Love for Dido is not a chief motivation for her actions, but rather, love for Aeneas. She is not drawn in much detail; her love for Aeneas is really the main facet of her portrayal. One could argue that she understands Dido better than does Anna in the *Aeneid*, as she is undergoing the same emotions. She does not seem to be as influential over her sister as is Anna. She is certainly not loyal to her as is Anna, and is more self-centred as a character. She does not provide a neat contrast to Dido as is the case with Anna, or, for that matter, Belinda.

And in Vinci's setting of the libretto, the roles of Dido and Selene seem to ask for fairly similar voice types. They are both important characters, and are treated slightly more as equals, perhaps, being both in love with Aeneas. They both have similar emotions about which to sing. Dido is the more important character, and has six arias whereas Selene has only three, and Dido's musical role is perhaps more dramatic (she has more in common in that respect with Purcell's Dido than with his Belinda) but then so is her fate.

In Berlioz' version of the story we first meet Anna during a conversation with Dido before Aeneas appears. She cannot understand why Dido is not happy, and thinks that Dido is sighing for love even though Dido denies this. Dido will not accept the idea of love as she wishes to remain true to Sychaeus; Anna points out that love is the greatest gift of the gods, and that Carthage needs a king. Anna is practical if sentimental: she points out that Venus is stronger than Dido—even if Dido made a vow not to be or fall in love, Venus could easily overturn it. She cannot really believe that Dido can mean such a vow; she is less 'noble', and perhaps more human than her sister as a result. Anna is devout and all too aware of the power of the gods.

The second main conversation that Anna has is her scene with Narbal after Aeneas has defeated Iarbas. Narbal is worried about what may happen; he senses that Aeneas may cause harm to Dido. Anna cannot understand this; she perceives that Dido and Aeneas are very much in love and is optimistic about the outcome. She realises that Aeneas may be torn between love and duty but she thinks that Love is the most powerful god and thus will overcome his sense of duty. This is her main mistake: she underestimates the power of Fate—after Aeneas' departure, she realises her error.

Dido then asks her to go and ask Aeneas to stay a few more days. Anna is extremely upset: she blames herself for having encouraged the

union. At last she realises the truth: 'Peut-on lutter contre les dieux? Son départ est inévitable.' However, she realises that Aeneas still loves Dido—'Et pourtant il vous aime.'

At the end of the scene where Narbal advises Anna not to leave Dido, we are reminded that Dido is the powerful queen and Anna is her inferior as she orders Anna out of her sight.<sup>25</sup> Anna takes a full part in all the rituals; she (and Narbal) curse Aeneas, begging that he may have an ignominious death. Both Anna and Narbal realise what would be the absolute worst for Aeneas, and wish to take vengeance on him if possible. Anna truly shares her sister's feelings in this respect.

In Berlioz we have a different musical contrast between Anna and Dido compared to that in the other two versions, in that Anna is a contralto, whereas Dido is a soprano, albeit quite a dramatic one. As she has a lower voice type one is inclined to think of her as older than Dido, though not necessarily wiser. Anna is certainly far from having the flighty, jolly side to her character that Belinda or (to a lesser extent) Selene have. Anna seems more like a nurse, confidante-like figure; she has more in common with a character such as the Nurse in *Choephoroi* or *Medea* than with a sister-figure. Anna certainly has far less to sing than Dido: Anna has two short arias, two duets and some ensemble work, whereas Dido is on stage, singing and taking an active role, in much of the action.

Anna's love for Dido is clear, and she, like her Virgilian counterpart, is a down-to-earth and sensible character. She is very pious. She is intelligent, sympathetic and tactful, loyal and brave. She is influential over her sister, but not as passionate. She sees the world in simpler terms than Dido and thus is well contrasted with her. Berlioz' Anna is drawn perhaps in the most depth of the three operatic versions, and Anna's portrayal in Berlioz is the most akin to Virgil's.

It now seems fair to say that no-one could possibly describe Anna in Berlioz as wayward, although Belinda in Purcell might have inclinations that way, and Selene in Vinci definitely does. Let us now consider the real 'wayward sisters' of my title, the dark forces acting against Dido.

The forces ranged against Dido, i.e. the gods, spirits and people that cause her to take her own life at the end of Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, are several. The most powerful is Fate, which is generally equated with the will of Jupiter.<sup>26</sup> Fate decrees that Aeneas must leave Dido and go off to found Rome, and thus Fate is not in Dido's favour. As for the gods, none



is actively hostile towards Dido, but none can save her. Jupiter is not actively opposed to her, but Aeneas' founding of Rome is more important to him than is Dido's happiness—or, indeed, Aeneas'. Juno is thoroughly pro-Carthage, but she cannot save Dido; all she can do is make her death less painful at the very end by sending down Iris to cut short her agony. Both Juno and Venus encourage Dido to fall for Aeneas without any thought of the harm it might cause her; both goddesses know perfectly well that Aeneas will have to go to Rome and therefore that Dido may get hurt, but they do not do anything to stop Dido's becoming entangled with Aeneas—indeed, they promote the union at all costs.

Rumour is an evil spirit who is out to do her as much harm as possible, but then Rumour always causes as much harm as possible to everyone so she is no more hostile to Dido than to anyone else. Rumour lets Iarbas know about the liaison between Dido and Aeneas; Iarbas is outraged and calls upon Jupiter, who is thus reminded of Aeneas' duty to go to Italy. Jupiter thus sends Mercury to Aeneas, and Dido is thereafter doomed. Rumour later on tells Dido herself of Aeneas' impending departure.

As for human beings, Aeneas is the one who causes Dido's downfall more than any other, but he does not cause her any deliberate harm. He does not want to leave her, but leave her he must, for so to do is the lesser of two evils. He must go to Italy for otherwise he is letting down his people, his father's memory and his son. Aeneas' best quality—his *pietas*—is what kills Dido.<sup>27</sup> Anna does not actively help her sister, as she encourages her to fall in love with Aeneas, but we cannot really blame her for this as recommending marriage to Aeneas seems by far the most sensible course of action to take—she, after all, is not privy to the machinations of Fate. Dido does not have to kill herself; she could have got over Aeneas, *or* she could have gone with him to Italy. However, her emotions are too strong for her, and so she kills herself. She is, in a way, her own worst enemy.

Thus in the *Aeneid* no-one, man, spirit or god, is out to harm Dido deliberately and to the exclusion of anyone else. Fate is just against her finding happiness, and thus she has to take her own life.

Is this the way the forces against Dido are portrayed in the operatic versions? Let us consider *Dido and Aeneas*.

The most fundamental difference between Virgil and Tate's libretto is that the main cause of Aeneas' departure and thus of Dido's demise is

not fate but a coven of malevolent witches. Fate, it is made clear, dictates that Aeneas does indeed have to go to Italy, witches or no witches, (as the Sorceress admits, 'The Trojan Prince you know by fate is bound to seek Italian ground') but the witches are the catalyst to make Aeneas leave Dido when he does. We do not get any sense of any other deities being involved in the matter; for example, there is no sense that Venus and Juno have deliberately caused Dido to fall for Aeneas. It is still true that Aeneas' best quality—his *pietas*—is what kills Dido, for he is reminded of his duty to go off to Italy, albeit by a false messenger, and his duty overrides his love for her. It is also still true that Belinda does not actively help her sister and that Dido is her own worst enemy.

But in Purcell's opera, there are forces *deliberately* ranged against Dido, unlike in the Virgilian original. The witches are even more malevolent than Rumour in the *Aeneid*. The Sorceress says that Dido is 'The Queen of Carthage, whom we hate | As we do all in prosperous state,' thus suggesting that they have nothing in particular against Dido, but that she is merely a successful human being and therefore they oppose her on principle. Dido has done nothing in particular to them. So the witches cause intentional harm to Dido, but the important fact to remember is that though their harm is intentional it is not particularly important to them who gets caught in the crossfire of their evil activities. Dido is an unfortunate and undeserving victim. Aeneas is another. It could be argued, in a way, that Purcell's witches are similar to Virgil's gods; Juno and Venus in Virgil, one feels, are playing with human beings, in an extremely witch-like manner.

Why did Tate choose to use witches? *Brutus of Alba*, his earlier play on which *Dido and Aeneas* was based, as has been mentioned, had told the story of *Dido and Aeneas*, although making a few changes such as using witches rather than gods, and had substituted the names of a different set of mythico-historical characters for the Virgilian ones. Thus the decision to use witches rather than gods had occurred in his earlier play. Why had it been done then? Firstly, witches were popular figures in British theatre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the witches in *Macbeth* (1609) are just one of many examples.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, there could well be a religio-political message behind their use, as Price and Buttrey have both argued, even though not all commentators agree:<sup>29</sup> witchcraft had connotations of Roman Catholic ritual, and as *Dido and Aeneas* was premièred only one or two years after the Glorious Revolution

JANE FISHER-HUNT

of 1688, in which the Catholic James II was replaced by the Protestant William and Mary, the evil witches could here symbolise the dangers which Catholicism could pose.<sup>30</sup>

Let us now turn to *La Didone Abbandonata*. The forces ranged against Dido in Metastasio's libretto are more similar to those in the *Aeneid* than those in Purcell's opera. No-one, man, spirit or god, is out to harm Dido deliberately. Fate is shown to be the overriding force taking Aeneas away from Dido in the very first scene; Destiny ordains that he should go and Aeneas clearly feels misused—'E son si sventurato, che sembra colpa mia quella del fato.' It is also made clear in this first scene that the gods demand Aeneas' departure—'Riposo ancor no mi concede il Celo.' Just which gods are meant, however, is not made clear. In general, Vinci is more concerned with the human element than with the divine.

Aeneas' reverence for his father is one cause of his departure; his father's ghost has appeared in a dream to him, telling him he must go to Carthage. It is fair to say however that Aeneas' desire for personal glory is more important as a force acting against Dido. His personal desire for renown seems more important than is the case in the *Aeneid*. Oddly enough, Selene does not seem to be a force which causes Dido any harm in this opera, although they are in love with the same man. That is, she never advises Dido to take any courses of action which turn out to be unwise. Iarbas is a force against Dido, as he literally destroys her in that his troops cause the fire which kills her. However, she could have escaped with the others; she commits suicide to all intents and purposes. Dido is, again, her own worst enemy, as in the *Aeneid*.

In Berlioz' version of events, again, as in Virgil and Vinci, but not as in Purcell, no-one is out to harm Dido deliberately. In Berlioz' version, however, fate and the gods are more active and prominent forces than they are in the other two operas. Religion is stressed throughout Berlioz' opera, with many prayers, sacrifices, and the appearances of Mercury.<sup>31</sup> Berlioz is the most deeply concerned with fate; Cairns points out that Aeneas' fate, in the form of his destiny to found a city in Italy, is constantly stressed.<sup>32</sup> Again, as is the case in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' best quality—his *pietas*—is what kills Dido. Perhaps Dido should have taken heed of Aeneas' ominous words to his son: 'D'autres t'enseigneront, enfant, l'art d'être heureux: je ne t'apprendrai, moi, que la vertu guerrière et le respect des dieux.' Pantheus, the Trojan chieftain, says: 'Enée, en vain, voit avec désespoir l'angoisse de la reine; la gloire et le devoir

sauront briser sa chaîne, et son coeur sera fort au moment des adieux.' Aeneas' future career is shown to be very important in Berlioz, as is made clear by the constant references to Italy. Aeneas realises that he must leave after he has seen the dreadful portents and has heard the ghosts. Anna does not actively help her sister, as is the case in the *Aeneid*, and indeed partly blames herself for Dido's misfortune, but Dido is certainly her own worst enemy. Berlioz is the only composer who chooses to portray the dark, witch-like side to Dido.

A fundamental difference between Virgil and perhaps all of his operatic followers apart from Berlioz is that Virgil makes Dido and Aeneas almost equally sympathetic, whereas this is clearly not the case in Purcell—here Aeneas has very little to do or say and we hardly get to know him as a character at all, except perhaps in the scene after the advent of the Spirit. Vinci gives Aeneas more prominence as far as emotions are concerned and thus he comes across as a character with whom we can sympathise if not empathise. Berlioz treats Aeneas if anything more sympathetically than does Virgil. This makes Dido's plight all the more poignant; losing this Aeneas really does seem terrible, whereas losing the rather self-centred character in Vinci's version, or the rather distant figure who appears in Purcell, does not seem so dreadful.

Thus it is that the forces opposing Dido are portrayed far more graphically in Purcell than they are in Vinci and more so than in Berlioz. But Berlioz perhaps makes Dido's fate the most wretched, as what she has lost is seen to have been so valuable.

I hope to have shown that there is a wide range of ways in which these composers have reacted to Virgil's *Aeneid*. But which of the three of these composers is fundamentally the most Virgilian?

It seems fair to say that Vinci is the least Virgilian of all; he is creating a melodrama which happens to have Dido and Aeneas in it, and their part of the story goes roughly as Virgil told it, but there the similarities basically end. Charles Burney said that according to Count Algarotti, 'Virgil himself would have been pleased to hear a composition so animated and so terrible, in which the heart and soul were at once assailed by all the powers of Music.'<sup>33</sup> It seems perfectly possible that Virgil would have enjoyed it; whether he would have recognised much of his own work in it, is perhaps another matter. The pacing of the Purcell and Berlioz versions is more similar to the Virgilian original than that in

Vinci; in Purcell's and Berlioz' scores emotionally demanding sections are interspersed with more descriptive, less demanding sections (such as the hunt scene), whereas in Vinci, the emotional intensity seems to be at a fairly even level throughout.

Is Purcell's opera Virgilian? Purcell is particularly interested in the dreadful effect that non-human powers have upon Dido, who may be a queen in Carthage, but is subject to the Sorceress' power; this is not particularly Virgilian. However, what does seem more Virgilian is the way in which Purcell's score (as opposed to Tate's libretto) succeeds in putting across the other forces at work: how Aeneas has his duty, but wants to enjoy his love, or how Dido delights in her love, but ultimately it causes her pain. Techniques such as sinister-sounding ground basses underneath apparently cheerful tunes such as the Second woman's aria about Actaeon are a good example; we get a suggestion of the Virgilian sense of the clash between love and duty in such ways. Nahum Tate also often uses imagery which is like Virgil's; there is much imagery about flames and wounds, as is the case in the *Aeneid*.<sup>34</sup> This imagery is done on a smaller scale than Virgil's but the ideas are similar. For example, Dido is compared to a mortally wounded deer at 4.68–73, and the second woman in *Dido and Aeneas* sings of the fate of Actaeon who died as a result of 'mortal wounds discovered too, too late'.<sup>35</sup> Belinda had mentioned Diana (Artemis), but the Second Women evidently wants to show how that goddess—and hence how hunting—can have its sinister side. It was Artemis who had turned Actaeon into a stag, thus causing him to be killed by the hounds.

Another link between Purcell and Virgil is their extreme care with the construction of their work. It has often been noted that each act in Purcell is in one single key or in a closely related key—Act 1 is in C minor/major, Act 2.1. is in F minor/major, Act 2.2. is in D minor/A minor and the last act begins in B flat and ends in the relative minor, G.

Perhaps one could see Purcell and Tate as dwelling more on the Hellenistic aspects of Virgil, i.e. the interest in personal emotions, and the delight in the elegance of construction of his work, whereas Berlioz' version is more Homeric in scale and grandeur.

However, it seems to be reasonable to suggest that only Berlioz, of the three composers considered in any detail, was deliberately trying to make a faithful, albeit operatic version of Virgil's work. David Cairns<sup>36</sup> recognises that Berlioz was an extremely keen student of Virgil: 'The



work was the distillation of long familiarity with Virgil's epic, and with Virgil himself.' Berlioz dedicated the opera 'To the Divine Virgil', *DIVO VIRGILIO* (*sic*).

Thus, by considering the overall shape of these operas, the techniques of characterisation adopted by the composers, and the ways in which they deal with the non-human elements of the story, I hope to have shown which version is the truest to the Virgilian original. I hope to have shown too that comparing Book 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid* with these three operatic versions can help to increase our enjoyment, as well as our understanding, of both the Virgilian original and the operatic versions. Operatic versions of this text will cause us to think, above all, of the emotions portrayed in that text, rather than the intellectual challenges presented by it, but it does us no harm from time to time to consider *Aeneid* 4 in terms of the emotions described in it.

So it can be seen that there is an extremely wide range of approaches to Virgil adopted by the various composers who have attempted to set his works to music. Different elements in his works appeal to different composers. Virgil was surely the greatest Roman poet. And certainly his works have inspired composers who number among the very greatest in our culture to write some of their greatest music.

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#### Notes

1. See p. 23.
2. Sadly, I have not found any Virgilian operas written by women.
3. Collasse lived from 1649–1709. This opera was first performed at the Paris Opéra on 16 December 1690. The librettist was Fontenelle.
4. Guglielmi lived from 1728–1804. This opera was first performed at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples on 4 November 1785. The librettist was either V. de Stefano or G. Sertor: the evidence is unclear as to which one it was.
5. *Virgil* 1986, p. 85.
6. This is a comprehensive listing of operas written and performed before that date.
7. The ending, however, is somewhat un-Virgilian, in that Dido does not kill herself at the end, but agrees to marry Iarbas.
8. This derives from the Tenbury MS of 1776. Purcell's autograph score is lost.
9. Of these 80, 9 operas were written in the seventeenth century, 55 in the eighteenth, 13 in the nineteenth and 3 in the twentieth.
10. H.M. Brown (New York 1977) preface p. 2.
11. *Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas* p. 20 (Oxford 1987).

JANE FISHER-HUNT

12. *Henry Purcell and the London Stage* p. 262 (Cambridge 1984).

13. Possibly Metastasio changed the name as he realised that he was taking distinct liberties with the character as Virgil had portrayed her. We will consider Tate's earlier avoidance of the name Anna later on.

14. At *Fasti* 3.552 ff. A similar tale is told by Silius Italicus at *Punica* 8.176.

15. It has often been pointed out that Josias Priest, in whose school *Dido and Aeneas* may well have been first performed, was a dancing master. And thus if he had commissioned the work from Purcell, he would undoubtedly have encouraged the inclusion of many dance numbers.

16. This was first performed c. 1683, as a masque for Charles II.

17. It also tells of an 'ill-fated relationship between a dominant, imperious woman and a vain, foolish man', as Price puts it in his sleeve note to Pinnock's 1989 Archiv recording of *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 9.

18. Or rather, of Metastasio and/or Ovid.

19. Dent, in his preface to the translation of Berlioz' libretto, notes: 'Berlioz' passion for the colossal style goes back to the previous century and the musical conceptions of his teacher Le Sueur', p. ix (Oxford 1957).

20. This is pointed out by, inter alios, Austin at comm. on *Aen.* 4, p. xi.

21. see Harris, op. cit., p. 127–8.

22. Anne Sophie von Otter, for example, has made a notable recording of the role.

23. Jessye Norman has made another.

24. In musical terms, when considering *Dido and Belinda*, one is reminded of the relationship—both musical and otherwise—of Susanna and the Countess in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, even though it is of course anachronistic so to do as Figaro was not premièred until a century later. But the musical conventions which Mozart was following were well entrenched in Purcell's time.

25. The fact that Anna does not *tutoye* her sister adds to this effect.

26. Gransden, *Virgil* (1990) p. 99. As Gransden points out, Fate is mentioned 120 times in the course of the *Aeneid*. 'If there is a single organising concept which controls the entire discourse, it is this concept of *fatum*'. *Virgil* (1990) p. 45.

27. As Anderson says: 'Virgil intends us to feel the tension between the creative functions represented by pious Aeneas at his best and the destructive acts to which he seems forced by that same *pietas*.' *The Art of the Aeneid* (1969) p. 22.

28. This is pointed out by Harris (op. cit., p. 22). Other examples include Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1614) and Thomas Shadwell's *The Lancashire Witches* (1681).

29. John Buttrey's 'Dating Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*', *PRMA* civ (1967–8) pp. 51–62. Price, op. cit.

30. Tate may have chosen not to use the name Anna for religio-political reasons; Queen Anne did not ascend to the throne until 1702 but she was the heir to the throne after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, as William and Mary had no children and she was Mary's sister. She was a Protestant and supported them rather than James II, the Catholic. Logically, one might have supposed that Tate would have kept the name Anna as this would be a further symbol of virtuous Protestantism against evil Catholicism as represented by the witches, but perhaps the issue was simply too dangerous and thus Tate played it safe by choosing a new name entirely.

31. Mercury's calls sound rather like those of the Commendatore's ghost in *Don*

*Giovanni*; this overtone of sinisterness and imminent death is unsettling, to say the least. The Ghosts of the various Trojans have a rather similar effect.

32. Cairns: 'Berlioz and Virgil' in *Les Troyens*, ed. Kemp (Cambridge 1988) p. 81. We must, of course, not forget that *Les Troyens à Carthage* is only the second half of an opera; the first half was concerned with the destruction of the old Troy, and the second half points towards the foundation of a new one. As Narbal says: 'Mais le destin impérieux appelle Enée en Italie.'

33. In the *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio* (London 1796).

34. As pointed out by Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

35. Harris, *ibid.*

36. *op. cit.* p. 76 ff.

