the mood of each scene is established with the utmost economy (the opera takes only an hour to perform), with only a few main characters but ample choral singing and dancing.

Dido and Aeneas is based on an episode in Virgil’s Aeneid, the ancient Roman epic that traces the adventures of the hero Aeneas after the fall of Troy. Since Baroque audiences knew this Virgil classic, librettist Nahum Tate could compress the plot and suggest rather than fill in the details. Aeneas and his men are shipwrecked at Carthage on the northern shore of Africa. Dido, the Carthaginian queen, falls in love with him, and he returns her affection. But Aeneas cannot forget that the gods have commanded him to continue his journey until he reaches Italy, as he is destined to be the founder of Rome. Much as he hates to hurt the queen, he knows that he must depart.

In her grief, Dido decides her fate—death—in the moving recitative “Thy hand, Belinda,” and the heartrending lament that is the culminating point of the opera, “When I am laid in earth.” (For the text, see Listening Guide 17.) In Virgil’s poem, Dido mounts the funeral pyre, whose flames light the way for Aeneas’s ships as they sail out of the harbor. Dido’s Lament unfolds over a five-measure ground bass, or ostinato (a repeated idea), that descends along the chromatic scale, always symbolic of grief in Baroque music. The opera closes with an emotional chorus mourning Dido’s fate. Cupids appear in the clouds and scatter roses over her tomb, while careful word painting, including “sighing” motives, emphasizes the depth of sorrow.

In Dido and Aeneas, Purcell discovered the true tone of lyric drama. Yet this masterpiece did not inspire similar efforts in England until two centuries later. It remained as unique a phenomenon in history as its composer, whom his contemporaries called “the British Orpheus.”

Listening Guide

Purcell: Dido and Aeneas, Act III, Dido’s Lament and Chorus

DATE OF WORK: 1689
GENRE: Opera, English
BASIS: Roman epic The Aeneid, by Virgil
CHARACTERS: Dido, queen of Carthage (soprano)
Aeneas, adventuring hero (baritone)
Belinda, Dido’s serving maid (soprano)
Sorceress, Spirit, Witches

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:
Free-flowing recitative (“Thy hand, Belinda”), with much chromaticism and half-step movement (sigh motive).
Descending chromatic line as a repeated ground bass in triple meter; heard before aria begins and throughout aria (11 statements).
Emotional, slow-moving aria in 2 sections, each repeated (A-A-B-B).
B section begins “Remember me.”
Silvery, transparent sounds of Baroque-period string instruments.
Recitative: “Thy hand, Belinda,” sung by Dido  
Introduces lament aria; accompanied by continuo only  

TEXT  
Thy hand, Belinda, darkness shades me.  
On thy bosom let me rest.  
More I would, but Death invades me;  
Death is now a welcome guest.

Aria: “When I am laid in earth,” Dido’s Lament  
 Basis: Ground bass, 5-measure pattern in slow triple meter, descending chromatic scale, repeated 11 times  
 Opening of aria, with 2 statements of the ground bass (first statement shaded):  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUND BASS STATEMENT NO.</th>
<th>TEXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Instrumental introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>When I am laid . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>no trouble . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Remember me, remember me, but ah, forget my fate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Remember me . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>forget my fate . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Instrumental closing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Instrumental closing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>(Shorter recordings stop here.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Shorter recordings stop here.)
Chorus: "With dropping wings"

TEXT: Quatrain (rhyme scheme a-a-b-b)

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Polyphonic texture in imitation between the voices.
   Falling melisma on "drooping wings."
   Repeated melodic "sigh" on word "soft."
   Rhetorical pauses in last line, with repeated words for emphasis.
   Entire chorus sung twice.

Opening with imitative entries (in order S, T, B, A); falling melisma on "drooping wings."

Sighing motive (interval of falling second) on word "soft" in all voices:

TEXT
With drooping wings you Cupids come.
To scatter Roses on her Tomb.
Soft and gentle as her heart.
Keep her watch and never part.

Entire chorus repeated.

DESCRIPTION
Imitative polyphony, falling line.
Paired voices (SA/TB).
Sighing motive.
Homorhythmic, with pauses.