

Opera review: Overwhelming aria takes Purcell to higher plane

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A surprise twist at the end of a thriller can leave you astonished with the contortion of logic. But dramatic art also can overwhelm you with an unexpected emotional moment, one you didn't see coming, or one arriving after you were lulled into thinking the play, film or opera wouldn't delve so deeply.

The Human voice has the ability to create instant bonds with one's sentiments can make the strategy quite effective, none more so than in "Dido & Aeneas."

The opera's plot, even with a marvelous co-production by Chatham Baroque and the Renaissance & Baroque Society Saturday night, seems rather silly. Queen Dido of Carthage (soprano Julianne Baird) is so fickle and overly sensitive in her interaction with her lover, the Trojan prince Aeneas (bass Curtis Streetman), that the opera's more a parody of Restoration English court protocol than reality. And to the modern audience at Synod Hall in Oakland, the antiquated affectations and period dancing have less meaning, even when buoyed by Purcell's gorgeous music.

But then, just as you are done laughing at the mean-spirited sorceress (contralto Daphne Alderson) and the drunken sailor (tenor Robert Frankenberry), and ready to write the opera off as light entertainment, Purcell hits you with the "Lament." A sorrowful chord progression that gives the blues a run for its money, its odd structure, chromaticism and haunting melody touch the listener in a way impossible to explain. Perhaps we finally have pity on this odd character, or perhaps her childlike self-centeredness resonates with a part of us we try to ignore as adults. In any case, Baird's voice was the equivalent of lips trembling and holding back tears -- her pure timbre awash with resignation. In one aria, she turned the entire action of the opera inward and rendered it profound.

Also of note, Streetman's booming bass and expert inflection simultaneously lent Aeneas airs of royalty and humanity.

"Dido" was only half the evening, however. The concert began with a suave performance of John Blow's three-act "Venus & Adonis." Similar in structure and style, Blow composed it a few years before Purcell's, around 1683, and with more consistent dramatic treatment. Venus (Baird) begins singing the name of Adonis (Streetman) and echoes it in Act III.

Streetman and Baird displayed good chemistry, both in vocal give-and-take and in acting. Heimes, now Cupid, sang with an appropriately childlike bell tone and pranced mischievously.