

Errollyn Wallen: Dido's Ghost

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 90 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Ludwig van Beethoven Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*

Errollyn Wallen *Dido's Ghost** (world premiere, staged concert performance)

Henry Purcell *Dido and Aeneas*

Tonight is the world premiere of Errollyn Wallen's opera Dido's Ghost, which picks up the story of Dido and Aeneas where Purcell left off. The composer offers some insight into how a new opera is born in the 21st century.

Ideas for operas drop in my email inbox on a weekly basis and I, myself am always dreaming about possibilities for all kinds of dramatic setting.

It is one thing to have a great idea, but quite another to realise that idea to its full potential. Some notions seem so captivating initially but in the cold light of investigation they simply wither away.

As anyone who has ever created any aspect of any opera, knows, it is a life-shortening exercise – and a task that is never quite over. At each reading, listening, rehearsal and production there is so much more to discover, so much more to adapt for the performer or performing situation. Yet opera is such an addictive artform, not least for the illuminations which collaboration offers.

In December 2019, Paul Keene, then Classical Music Programmer at the Barbican, gave us the green light to turn a ten year old hunch into reality. Wesley Stace (in Philadelphia) and I (in the Scottish Highlands), have spent the last eighteen months hungrily walking back and forth in time, with Virgil, Ovid, Purcell, Tate and Ursula LeGuin by our side – shaking awake the dead until they revealed their secrets. As a composer I am used to interrogating composers long gone (for me that is the essence of composing) but these particular encounters with the past have led us to understand anew the stories which endure across cultures and time.

There has been no better group of people to work with than the team who have brought Dido's Ghost to life – of all the previous (nineteen) operas I've composed I never knew it could be this good. To have had the imagination, support and patience of such remarkable people has opened a door to new possibilities. Together, Wesley Stace, John Butt, Frederic Wake-Walker and I have made a little bit of history.

You will hear echoes and pre-echoes in the libretto, music and instrumentation which blur the demarcation between antiquity, eighteenth and twenty-first sensibilities. You will witness the wildest combination of music styles and performance practice from different cultures. You will hear and feel blistering emotion alongside icy detachment. You will apprehend the work of two pairs of librettists and composers with three centuries between them. But all you really have to remember is this: four creators have toiled in the service of commemorating what it is to be human – and what it is to love.

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barbican

Synopsis

Eighteen months after Aeneas's arrival in Italy.

Overture

There is a storm.

Aeneas meets Dido in the underworld. He beckons to her but she turns away without word.

Act 1 – The Shore, Troia Nova

Aeneas and his son Ascanius are walking by the shore where they find a woman, narrowly escaped from drowning. Aeneas mistakes her for Dido, but it is her sister Anna who explains how she has come to wash up on their shore, a refugee.

Aeneas offers her the comfort of his palace and sends Ascanius on with news of their imminent arrival.

Act 2 – The Palace, Lavinium

The court welcomes Anna. The chorus sings of the founding of the new kingdom in Italy, and introduce Lavinia, Aeneas's wife. Aeneas asks his queen to welcome Anna as a sister, but Lavinia is wary, knowing Dido's hold on her husband's heart.

At the banquet, talk turns to the past. Aeneas tells of the mythic world to which he and Anna belonged. His was a divine mission; now the Gods are silent and there is nothing left for him.

Lavinia is disquieted. As rumour flies around the table, Juno possesses her with jealousy as Anna tells the true story of Dido's death. Lavinia presents an entertainment: a performance of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas that soon exercises a supernatural hold over its audience.

Belinda (the Spirit of the Theatre) beckons Anna onstage to assume the role of "Dido". When Aeneas becomes "Aeneas", they act out their love story, a manifestation of Lavinia's greatest fears that she is condemned to watch from the audience. As her thoughts turn murderous, she plots with Elymas, her spy.

Encouraged by the Sorceress, who directs his performance exclusively to Lavinia, goading her on, the Queen herself steps into the drama as the Spirit of the Sorceress to give Aeneas his instructions to leave Dido. Aeneas is left alone onstage as performance and real life melt into each other. The sailors enter to bring him back to his senses, to persuade him to leave on his mission.

As Anna sleeps, the Sorceress, the Spirit and witches revel in her destruction and exit triumphant. Anna wakes with a start: she dreamed that her sister's ghost commanded her to flee or face death at the hands of Lavinia. She takes flight.

Dido's Ghost appears to a terrified Aeneas, who assumes she is there for revenge on him. But the ghost tells Aeneas she is there only to save her sister, who has run to the river Numicus. If he assures Anna's safe passage, she will lift her curse on the Trojan race. Aeneas begs the Ghost to stay, but she leaves him. He has one final mission.

There is a disturbance: Lavinia and her henchmen discover that Anna has fled. Guards leave to hunt her down, but Aeneas breaks Lavinia's spell, explaining that she has been possessed by jealousy just as Dido was once possessed by love.

The chase is on.

Act 3 – The River Numicus

Anna's footprints disappear by the river. Has she drowned? Aeneas assumes she has tried to swim across and, commanding the guards to return to the palace, prays for a sign to reveal her fate.

At this, the river stops flowing. Anna, reunited with Dido, rises from its depths. The river Numicus has offered them safe harbour in its sacred stream. They are Gods now, eternally entwined as one, immortal.

Aeneas is left alone onstage; the curse on the Trojan race is lifted, but facing the past has cost him everything.

Performers

Isabelle Peters Dido / Anna

Matthew Brook Aeneas

Nardus Williams Belinda

Allison Cook Lavinia / Spirit

Henry Waddington Elymas / Sorcerer

David Lee Ascanius

Jessica Leary Second Woman

Lucy Goddard First Witch

Judy Louie Brown Second Witch

Dunedin Consort

John Butt conductor

Wesley Stace libretto

Frederic Wake-Walker direction

Developed in partnership with Mahogany Opera

*Co-commissioned by the Barbican, Buxton International Festival, Dunedin Consort & Mahogany Opera



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