

Music Review | 'The Dido Project'

Mythology Inc.: Carthage on Wall Street

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Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas" is an opera an opera hater can love. It's in English, and it runs less than an hour. Its libretto, drawn from Virgil, is fantastical but not idiotic, and Purcell's music brings it to life magnificently. The vocal writing vividly describes each character, from the regal Dido to the comically malevolent Sorceress, and it tends to be dramatically and emotionally pointed rather than merely showy. The equally rich instrumental scoring is the zenith of the French-leaning English Baroque style. It is in every way the antithesis of a Bellini, Donizetti or Verdi opera.

It is also surprisingly malleable. In "The Dido Project" the young musicians of the Sybarite Chamber Players and Pat Diamond, an inventive director with a sense of humor, have moved "Dido and Aeneas" from ancient Carthage to present-day Wall Street. And in a free performance on Thursday evening at the Samsung Experience (at the Time Warner Center), there was less tension between the score and the new setting than you often find in updated productions.

In Mr. Diamond's Peter Sellars-like vision, Dido is the chief executive of the Dido Media Corporation; Belinda and the Second Woman are her assistants. Two large television monitors on either side of Dido's office (the only set) show CNN-style reports — complete with a news crawl and stock prices — about a prospective merger between Dido's successful company and Aeneas' failing Troy Venture Capital.

The Sorceress and the Witches are corporate spies; as they sing of their intention to "conjure for a storm," they hack into Dido's computer. When the Spirit disguised as Mercury (here a corporate executive) tells Aeneas that Jove has commanded him to leave immediately for Italy, she hands him a cellphone for confirmation. The monitors show Dido's stock plummeting as the merger comes undone.

Blythe Gaissert was a dignified, vocally assured Dido, who contributed some stylish ornamentation and sang her closing Lament movingly. Elena O'Connor, as Belinda, and Alex Loustion, as the Second Woman, countered Ms. Gaissert's sober portrayal with a conspiratorial girliness, and sang solidly as well.

David Adam Moore's suave Aeneas was firmly sung, with deadpan humor and an ear for embellishment that matched Ms. Gaissert's. And the Sorceress (Jessica Medoff Bunchman) and her cohort, Sarah Heltzel and Annie Pennies, sang their roles with an alluring mischievousness.

The Sybarite Chamber Players are committed to this kind of updating. Their chamber music programs have juxtaposed arrangements of Led Zeppelin and Radiohead songs with standard repertory works. Here the instrumental ensemble was a string quintet,

conducted from the harpsichord by William Hobbs, whose tempos were slow but by no means lethargic.

The production used an unusual form of electronic enhancement: the choruses were heard on recording — not ideal, but a compromise that apparently makes it possible for the group to add “Dido” to its active repertory.