

Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*: A Strategy for Historically-Informed Role-Allocation in the Twenty-First Century

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From the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1970s, *Dido and Aeneas* was generally accepted by scholars and performers as a girls' school work with eight female roles and one male role. From this supposition a performance culture grew up based on twentieth-century perceptions of suitable vocal ranges, with mezzo-soprano Didos and Sorceresses and baritone Aeneas, often accompanied by a treble or tenor Sailor. Since the late 1970s, scholars have questioned the absolute authority of the Tenbury Manuscript upon which most modern performances are based, and have unearthed different textual and musical sources that challenge the normally accepted voice-type-to-role allocation. [1] To this date, however, neither the old nor the new suggestions can categorically be proved correct. Out of this confusion came a historically-informed performance culture of bass Sorceresses, soprano Didos and tenor Aeneas, as well as the use of falsettist counter-tenors as chorus altos. In the 1990s this situation resulted in conductors feeling at liberty to mix and match elements of both new and old performance cultures, as well as making up their own voice-type casting to suit their personal artistic agendas, in a way that would be considered unacceptable in a Mozart, Verdi or Wagner opera. Whatever the documentary confusion, examination of the music and comparison of it with Purcell's other music for known voice-types may establish which of the twentieth-century performing conventions should continue in the historically-informed performances of the twenty-first century. [FN](#)

The Royal Women

Dido and her handmaidens, Belinda and the Second Woman, were the roles least subject to voice-type reallocation in the twentieth century. Although one manuscript source transposes Belinda down an octave from a soprano to an alto, this can be disregarded as a later attempt to add voice-type variety, since this voice-type did not exist in Purcell's time. In any case, the part is too low for a female alto and is equally unsuitable for a Purcellian counter-tenor, the average range of which was g-b'. Although counter-tenors did appear in drag on the Restoration Stage, they invariably did so in comic parts (for example Mr. Pate playing Mopsa in *The Fairy Queen*) and Belinda is a serious role. The only remaining performance choice to make about the Royal Women is whether Dido should be sung by a mezzo-soprano or a soprano.

The role of Dido ranges from c' -g'', a range which begins slightly lower than Purcell's standard soprano range of d' -g'' (a range exhibited by both Belinda and the Second Woman) and her tessitura is slightly lower than the Purcellian standard. This would appear to be a range manageable by both modern sopranos and mezzo-sopranos, but one must consider the other factors involved. One of the foremost is pitch. [2] The pitch standard fluctuated throughout Purcell's lifetime, ultimately meaning that the actual sounding pitch of Dido's role could be as low as b flat-f'', which is certainly modern mezzo territory. In addition, Dido's two laments on slow grounds are similar both musically and in subject matter to those sung by the lowest of Purcell's stage sopranos, Mary Hodgson, in the revivals of *Dioclesian* and *The Fairy Queen* in 1693, [3] whereas the music for Belinda is much more like that for his high stage sopranos. This suggests that the use of a slightly lower range for Dido was deliberate, and that Purcell perhaps wanted a warmer sound for his grief-stricken heroine than the bright tones of her cheerful handmaidens. However, this does not automatically mean that the role of Dido should be sung by a mezzo-soprano. It appears that in Purcell's day sopranos did not possess the higher or lower extremes of today's sopranos and mezzos, and any minor division of high and low sopranos took place within the range c' -a'' (possible

sounding pitch b flat-g'), but most sopranos sang in the range d'-g', and all female singers called themselves sopranos. This therefore makes it unlikely that there was a difference of tone-colour within Purcell's soprano ranks, since one would expect to see more musical differentiation, and also different terminology for the different types of soprano. The modern mezzo-soprano and soprano division is made largely on the basis of tone-colour, with sopranos bringing the radiance of their high register down through the rest of their voice, and mezzo-sopranos increasing the warmth of their lower notes. In Purcell's day, singers were taught to smooth over the breaks in their voices rather than blend the registers, so the chest, middle and head registers would each have had a slightly different tone-colour. Since most of Purcell's soprano music takes place in the middle-high register and never stretches below written c', it is unlikely that his sopranos would ever have developed the fruity tones characteristic of the modern mezzo-soprano, but would instead resemble a slightly less developed version of the modern soprano. [FN](#)

It seems that for a historically-informed performance, rather than employing a mezzo-soprano for the role of Dido, a soprano might instead be used who can bring out the warmer tone suitable to express emotional grief as a contrast to the two handmaidens, who should sing in a brighter style, a differentiation which should come naturally through dramatic interpretation of the music. This would go some way to replicating the differential range-related tone-colours of Purcell's original singers.

The Enchantresses

The Sorceress and her two witches, despite being female characters with parts notated in the treble clef in the two most reliable manuscript sources, [4] have been subject to much voice-type reallocation in an attempt to make them sound more evil and otherworldly. [FN](#)

In both 'authentic' and early twentieth-century performance traditions, the standard voice-type for the Sorceress was the mezzo-soprano, and the Second Witch is also sometimes cast with this voice-type. [5] This is largely because of their ranges; the Sorceress has the same range as Dido, and the Second Witch has a range of d'-f' (possibly sounding c'-e flat'). The unsuitability of the mezzo-soprano voice for Purcell's music has already been suggested, and while the tone-colour of a mezzo might add a malevolent air to the Sorceress (indeed, this may be the reason why she is often cast as a mezzo in performances where Dido is played by a soprano), [6] it does nothing for the role of the Second Witch but detract from the polyphonic interaction in her duets with the First Witch. Rene Jacob's use of the falsettist counter-tenors Dominique Visse and Stephen Wallace as the Witches raises similar issues. [7] Not only was the falsetto singing technique apparently considered second-rate in Purcell's day (the normal counter-tenor being a type of high tenor), [8] but also the Witches' music is far higher than any of Purcell's other counter-tenor music (including the counter-tenor part in the opera's choruses) when sung at pitch as Visse and Wallace do. Even transposed down an octave the Witches' music is much lower than the 'standard' counter-tenor range. In addition, as suggested earlier, the counter-tenor in drag was a comic device, and Visse and Wallace's highly enjoyable performance follows in this tradition. However, Tate's Witches are surely malevolent rather than mischievous, and had he and Purcell intended the parts to be played in an overtly comic way, they would have used the drag counter-tenor tradition to their advantage, and written the parts in an appropriate range for the voice. As it is, the use of falsettist counter-tenors detracts from the tragedy of the plot, whilst the use of a soprano and mezzo pairing detracts from the polyphonic music, so it seems that, to realize the music in a historically-informed performance, one might use sopranos with a suitably malevolent tone-colour fully to realize both the music and the characterization. [FN](#)

The historically-informed performance tradition regularly employs another voice-type casting for the Sorceress. There is a set of parts used for the Academy of Ancient Music performances of *Dido and Aeneas* in 1774 and 1787 where the role of the Sorceress appears in bass clef, a casting that is supported in a playbook from a performance in 1700, when John Wiltshire sang the Sorceress. [9] The idea of a bass sorceress is also fully supported by seventeenth-century theatrical convention. Tate's witches were an addition to Virgil's original and are probably modelled on those in Sir William Davenant's alteration of *Macbeth* (1663-4). In the two musical settings of this play – by

John Eccles in 1696 and Richard Leveridge in 1702 – Hecate, the principal witch, was played by a bass. This travesty tradition can be traced back to 1673, when Samuel Sandford also played Hecate on stage in a different play. [10] In addition, Purcell had a personal tradition of giving otherworldly roles to basses, using just the sort of accompanied recitative that the Sorceress has, and this musical form is much less frequent in the other voice-types. The range of the Sorceress's part is not quite as low as Purcell's other spiritual bass roles, and goes higher than the average top note of e', but since most of the other such roles are for good characters, this could have been a conscious decision to make the character sound more evil as the bass strained up to the higher notes. [11] In addition it has been surmised that the highest of the Sorceress's solos, 'Our next motion' (the only one containing g'') may in fact have been meant for the First Witch. [FN](#)

The fact that the Tenbury Manuscript has the Sorceress's part printed in the treble clef is no obstacle to the bass Sorceress theory, since a number of Purcell's songs performed on stage by basses appeared in manuscript in the treble clef. [12] In fact, the only real obstacle standing in the way of the reclassification of the Sorceress as a bass role is Tate's libretto. This is perfectly balanced, with Dido and her two handmaidens opposed by the Sorceress and her two witches; the Spirit and the Sailor as two messengers, one for each camp; and Aeneas as the pawn in the power struggle between the two parties, and the only character who has contact with both sides. Giving the role of the Sorceress to a bass would destroy this symmetry; even to an audience accustomed visually to the convention of men dressed as women on stage in 'serious' roles, the aural effect of the two opposing women would be lost. In addition, there is another reason for retaining the Sorceress as a female-voice role. As Jonathan Keates points out:

Madness was invariably fascinating to the men and women of the seventeenth century, partly because it seemed to some to present a glimpse of another world, exotic by virtue of its disdain for that rationality to which the contemporary ethos increasingly clung. [13] [FN](#)

The theme of madness, invariably madness inspired by love, is prevalent throughout Purcell's oeuvre, particularly in songs for the soprano voice. For example, the chamber song 'Bess of Bedlam', the theatre song 'From Rosy Bow'rs', and even the sacred song 'The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation' (which describes the Virgin Mary's fear and anguish at the disappearance of her young son), are supreme examples of emotional madness. Dido, at the start of the opera, is already 'press'd with torment' by her love for Aeneas, and at the end the failure of her love affair breaks her heart and drives her to her death. When one considers that she and the Sorceress, and for that matter the handmaidens and enchantresses, never appear at the same time in the opera, that their ranges are virtually identical (Dido and Sorceress = c' -g'', Belinda, First Witch and Second Woman = d' -g'', Second Witch = d' -f''), the fact that Tate added the enchantresses to the original story, and that his contemporaries had a fixation with madness, it seems that Tate may well have intended the six female roles to be doubled by three women, to give the plot obvious psychological implications. In 2001 Le Concert Spirituel made a recording using this doubling scheme to great effect, with the mezzo-soprano Laura Pudwell in the title role, and the sopranos Salome Haller and Mary-Louise Duthoit as the handmaidens and witches. [14] [FN](#)

However, even if Tate had intended the female roles to be doubled by three women, there is nothing to say that Purcell himself went along with this idea. Indeed, the similarity of the Sorceress's musical style to that of his bass music for otherworldly characters suggests that he may indeed have overridden his librettist's decision. Even if Purcell did intend this as a soprano part, he must have been aware of the Hecate tradition, so perhaps he deliberately wrote in a style that would work for a bass, so that the role could be taken by one at performances subsequent to the girls' school one. It therefore seems that, in the twenty-first century, either a bass or a soprano would be suitable for this role, depending on the artistic aims of the individual production.

The Messengers

The roles of the Spirit and the Sailor invited voice-type reallocation in the twentieth century because they are both male characters.

The most common voice-types used for the Sailor in the twentieth century were the tenor and the treble. The idea of a tenor Sailor is substantiated in the Academy Manuscripts where the role is printed in the tenor clef, and the suggestion that this is a male role is again backed up by the 1700 production, an engraving of which shows John Wiltshire (who also played the Sorceress) playing the Sailor. The problem with the use of the tenor voice is that the Sailor's range of c'-g'', translated down an octave, is slightly lower than Purcell's usual tenor range. In addition, the Sailor's solo becomes the soprano line of the following chorus, and it is more usual elsewhere in Purcell's works to find a solo which is repeated in an ensuing chorus exhibited in the same voice-type. The treble voice, on the other hand, has the right range for the Sailor's role and would exhibit the solo at the same pitch as the chorus. Nevertheless, extensive treble solos are rare in Purcell's output, and those that do occur are all for the same singer, Jemmy Bowen, who worked with Purcell during the last year of his life. Even if one could date the composition of *Dido and Aeneas* to the time when Bowen was singing for Purcell, the Sailor's solo has none of the characteristics of Purcell's writing for this singer. Since neither of these voice-types is entirely satisfactory and all of the other solo and chorus movements in the work are for soprano, and in view of the fact that the work may well have been written for a girls' school, it seems likely that the Sailor is in fact a soprano 'breeches' role, of the sort popular throughout the seventeenth century and common in Purcell's stage works (for instance Cupid in *King Arthur*), and that the Sailor was later turned into a tenor part to add vocal variety, or for reasons of availability of personnel in individual productions.

The Spirit appears to Aeneas in the guise of the male god, Mercury, and in the historically-informed performance tradition this role has been assigned repeatedly to a falsettist-countertenor, to emphasise its otherworldly nature. [15] For reasons explained earlier in this article, this voice is not particularly appropriate in Purcell's music, and in Purcellian terms the range of e'-e'' (or even e-e') is not a counter-tenor one. In addition, as pointed out earlier, when Purcell himself wanted to cast an otherworldly character (and particularly where this character was a messenger, such as Ismeron in *The Indian Queen*), his preferred voice-type was the bass rather than the counter-tenor. So, if one were to alter the voice-type, it would be more logical to use a bass, particularly since Purcell's one other independent solo with this range was 'Let not a moon-born elf mislead thee' from *King Arthur*, sung by the bass John Bowman as the evil spirit Grimbald. As was the case with the Sorceress, it is possible that this role was intended for bass, perhaps even by the bass playing the Sorceress since the stage directions read 'The Spirit of the Sorceress descends to Aeneas in the guise of Mercury', but there is no documentary evidence to support this. [FN](#)

When one takes into account the theory of dramatic symmetry outlined above, it is important that the Sailor and the Spirit have the same voice-type, and one recording by Les Arts Florissants has the tenor Jean-Paul Fouchecourt singing both roles. [16] Although from the point of view of range this could work for both roles, the fact that the Sailor's solo is developed into a soprano chorus line, and the supposition that if Purcell had chosen a male voice for the Spirit he would have used a bass, suggests that a soprano would be appropriate for both roles in order to preserve the dramatic symmetry. [FN](#)

Aeneas

The role of Aeneas was assigned in the twentieth century both to tenors and baritones, and since it is a 'heroic' role, and appears in all the manuscripts in tenor clef, it is unlikely that it was originally intended as a 'breeches' role. It is, however, possible that Aeneas was performed by Josias Priest's daughter in breeches at the school performance, since she had previously played Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*, but this would have been an alteration to the score for practical reasons, rather than Purcell's original intention. As was mentioned above, bass songs were occasionally published in the treble clef in Purcell's works, so either the tenor or the bass voice could be appropriate.

Aeneas's range of d-f' corresponds to Purcell's normal tenor range, but the tenor voice was more of a choral than a solo voice to Purcell, so it is unexpected to find a tenor singing the title role in Purcell's only opera. One would expect him to have chosen the counter-tenor (in those days a high tenor) instead, and to have expanded the role at the upper end of the register. There are no records of stage soloists calling themselves tenors working with Purcell, though some of his higher tenor solos were taken by counter-tenors, and some counter-tenor solos were printed in the tenor clef. There were, however, a number of high basses who sang for Purcell, one of whom, Thomas D'Urfey, was the singing master at Priest's School. [17] It seems highly likely that Aeneas was indeed a high bass part, particularly since Adonis in John Blow's opera *Venus and Adonis* – which was also performed at Priest's school and is acknowledged to be the inspiration for *Dido and Aeneas* – was a bass part. The voice most appropriate to sing this role in a historically-informed production of the twenty-first century would therefore be the baritone. [FN](#)

Chorus Counter-Tenors

The early twentieth-century performance tradition used female altos for the choruses in *Dido and Aeneas*, whilst the later historically-informed tradition, heavily influenced by the Oxbridge choral sound, favoured the falsettist countertenor, or a mixture of the two. The chorus counter-tenor part ranges from f-d'', but the higher and lower extremes are utilised rarely, and for the most part the chorus range corresponds to the standard range for the Purcellian counter-tenor of g-b'. The Purcellian counter-tenor, rather than being a falsettist, was a high tenor, so neither the female nor the falsettist alto can achieve quite the original effect. Nevertheless, even at the possible sounding-pitch of e flat-c'', the chorus counter-tenor line is a little too uncomfortable for high tenors to be a viable performance solution. This may be because Baroque singers used a different technique from modern singers, with a higher larynx position enabling them to sing stratospheric notes in their 'natural' voice. [18] The only way to replicate the sound of a Baroque tenor today would be to employ tenors singing with a folk or rock singer's technique, but the chances of finding a classical singer willing to risk their vocal health for this, or a rock singer willing to moonlight as a Purcell singer, are unlikely in the extreme. Another drawback would be that the sound created would go against the current perception of 'good' classical singing held by both performers and audiences, especially since in large auditoria it would require amplification. Additionally, in a choral context this would sound very odd if all the voices did not adopt the same technique, bringing us back to the original problem of personnel. [FN](#)

Clearly, in this case, historical accuracy is not an aim that can be achieved with any real success in the present performance climate, and instead some kind of compromise has to be reached. Since men did sing in falsetto in Purcell's day whereas, as far as we know, women did not, the falsettist would, in historical terms, be marginally more suitable. Perhaps, however, the ideal solution would be high tenors who slip into falsetto for the extremes, and who alternate with the tenors on the line below to prevent vocal fatigue. This mixed technique of natural and falsetto singing would at least go some way to replicating the colour-differentiation of vocal ranges that Baroque singers produced.

Historically-Informed Performance in the Twenty-First Century

Although historical accuracy is not a fully achievable goal in performance, especially in a performance climate where the sound made by original singing techniques would not be received favourably by the majority of performers or audiences, there is much to be said for trying to replicate the aims and ideals of a composer's work. In order to perform *Dido and Aeneas* in a manner as close to the probable style of the original performance as possible, sopranos should take the roles of Dido and the Sorceress, and the handmaidens and enchantresses should also be sopranos singing in a brighter style. These parts may be doubled or sung by six singers. There is, however, enough historical justification to have a bass singing the Sorceress; although I do not believe that this was Purcell's original intention, it is possible, because of the Hecate tradition, that the role was performed in this way during his lifetime. The Sailor and Spirit should also be performed by sopranos, and may be doubled by the same singer, and Aeneas should be performed by a baritone.

Footnotes

- [1] See: Ellen T. Harris, *Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas* (Oxford, 1987); Price & Cholij, 'Dido's Bass Sorceress', *The Musical Times*, 127 (1986): 615-18; Pinnock & Wood, 'Unscarr'd by turning times? The dating of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*', *Early Music*, 20 (1992): 372-390. [Back](#)
- [2] For further details on pitch standards, see T. Morris, 'Voice Ranges, Voice Types, and Pitch in Purcell's Concerted Works' in *Performing the Music of Henry Purcell* (Oxford 1996).
- [3] 'Since from my dear Astrea's Sight' and 'The Plaint'. [Back](#)
- [4] The Tenbury and Tatton Park manuscripts. [Back](#)
- [5] Donna Ames, Boston Baroque, dir. Pearlman (Teldec 1996); Pamela Helen Stephen, Collegium Musicum 90, dir. Hickox (Chandos 1995).
- [6] Jantina Norman, Taverner Choir, dir. Parrott (Chandos 1991); Sarah Conolly, Scholars' Baroque Ensemble (Naxos 1994); Ellen Rabiner, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, dir. McGegan (Harmonia Mundi 1994); Sally Burgess, Collegium Musicum 90, dir. Hickox (Chandos 1995); Claire Brua, Les Arts Florissants, dir. Christophe (Erato 1995); Laura Tucker, Boston Baroque, dir. Pearlman (Teldec 1996).
- [7] Dominique Visse, Stephen Wallace, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, dir. Jacobs (Harmonia Mundi 2001).
- [8] Colley Cibber, in his memoir *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber* (London, 1914) remarks that while his theatrical colleague Will Mountford could sing a certain song, he himself 'could only struggle through, under the imperfection of a feigned and screaming treble' (page 72). [Back](#)
- [9] It appears that Wiltshire was a baritone, since he sang both bass and tenor solos during his lifetime.
- [10] For further information see Price and Cholij, 'Dido's Bass Sorceress': 615-18.
- [11] Price and Cholij, *ibid.* [Back](#)
- [12] For example: 'Celia that I once was blest' (*Amphitryon*) sung by John Bowman, and 'Take not a woman's anger ill' (*The Rival Sisters*) sung by Richard Leveridge.
- [13] J. Keates, *Henry Purcell* (London, 1995): 115. [Back](#)
- [14] Pudwell, Hervey, Haller, Duthoit, Le Concert Spirituel, dir. Herve Niquet (Glossa 2001). [Back](#)
- [15] Jonathon Peter Kenny, Monteverdi Choir, dir. Gardiner (Philips Classics 1993); Michael Chance, Academy of Ancient Music, dir. Hogwood (L'Oiseau-Lyre 1994); Angus Davidson, Scholars' Baroque Ensemble (Naxos 1994); James Bowman, Collegium Musicum 90, dir. Hickox (Chandos 1995). [Back](#)
- [16] Jean-Paul Fouchecourt, Les Arts Florissants, dir. Christophe (Erato 1995). [Back](#)
- [17] For further details of Thomas D'Urfey's performances for Purcell see Wood and Pinnock, 'The Fairy Queen: a fresh look at the Issues', *Early Music*, 21 (1993): 44-62. [Back](#)
- [18] For detailed explanation of this theory see J. Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1998). [Back](#)

