

PARADIGMS OF THE TEXT–MUSIC CORRELATION IN HENRY PURCELL’S OPERA *DIDO AND AENEAS*

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SUMMARY. The present analysis proposes an insight into the celebrated world of Henry Purcell by approaching an important work among the baroque operas, remembered as one of the composer’s foremost stage works. We intend to demonstrate the strong co-dependent relationship between the text and the music of Purcell’s opera by illustrating the way the compositional elements come together to accurately depict a music that remains true to the text. The fragments chosen to prove the aforementioned premise will be solo parts, as well as duet or choral parts meant to be analyzed from the point of view of the compositional process. Consequently, we plan to present a small part of the genius of Henry Purcell, a composer who recognized the powerful impact that words have and doubled them with an equally eloquent music.

Keywords: Purcell, Dido, Aeneas, analysis, opera, text, word, music, correlation.

In order to shed some light on the meticulous manner in which Purcell follows the text of the libretto in his work, *Dido and Aeneas*, we intend to put before you a few examples in this respect. The analysis will follow the direction proposed by the topic, taking into consideration every one of those elements of musical language (aspects that concern the harmony, the orchestration, the composition techniques or the musical aesthetics problems, etc.) which are used by the composer in creating a music that remains true to the text.

1. To the Hills and the Vales

Among the works intended by Purcell for stage performances, the most famous aria from the point of view of the correlation between text and music is probably *What Power Art Thou* (sung by the Cold Genius) from *King Arthur*. We do not intend to dispute this fact, but merely point out other fragments exerted with similar artistry within the selected work – *Dido and Aeneas*. The choral parts of *Dido and Aeneas*, in our perception, reveal the same level of creativity as does the aforementioned example, a statement demonstrated by the music itself, which at the same time depicts the aesthetical principle of beauty.

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Our first example will be the choral part *To the Hills and the Vales* (no. 11 from Act I, accompanied by the orchestra, since there is no strictly choral fragment), which expresses the joy that resonates all over the kingdom of Carthage: love has prevailed through the union of Dido and Aeneas. The joyfulness is translated into music by the combination of certain means of composition: the fragment is written in C major, and it has a fast, minuet-like ternary metre.

The piece is meant for the choir, the string orchestra, and harpsichord and basso continuo. The orchestra doubles faithfully the choral voices (first violin = soprano; second violin = alto; viola = tenor; basso continuo and left hand of harpsichord = bass), and we detect only minor differences concerning rhythm, brought forward by pronunciation of the text. This fragment of the opera has a ternary form (A B A variation), followed by a Coda, the segments are built in distinctive ways:

Table 1

To the Hills and the Vales - form

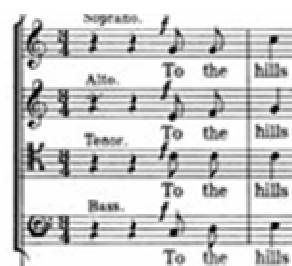
A	B	A variation	Coda
Conductus technique, homophonic (with short imitative sequences)	Conductus technique alternated by an imitative one, polyphonic	Conductus technique, homophonic (with short imitative sequences)	Imitative technique, but with conductus isorhythm, polyphonic
C major, Cadence in A minor	C major, Cadence in A minor	C major, Cadence in F major	F major, Cadence in C major
Tutti	Orchestral, followed by Tutti	Tutti	Tutti

The most interesting correlation between music and its text is revealed by the first section (A) of this choir, although the other two sections also bring musical elements to evoke the joy felt by the people of Carthage (Purcell uses here dotted rhythms and the technique of imitation).

Returning to section A, Purcell depicts here the natural setting described by the text within of the soprano line, using musical - melodic and harmonic - tools. We will illustrate this facet of the opera with a few examples from section A:

Musical depicting of the natural background in section A

Hills - leap 4↑ (soprano)



Ex. 1

Vales - descend 2↓ (soprano)

Ex. 2

Musical score for Example 2. It consists of four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are "and the vales, to the". The soprano line shows a descending interval of two notes (e.g., G4 to F4) corresponding to the text "and the".

Mountains – gradual ascending motion (soprano)

Ex. 3

Musical score for Example 3. It consists of four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are "rocks and the moun-tains,". The soprano line shows a gradual ascending motion (e.g., G4, A4, B4, C5) corresponding to the text "rocks and the moun-tains,".

Groves – gradual descending motion (soprano)

Ex. 4

Musical score for Example 4. It consists of four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are "mu - si - cal groves". The soprano line shows a gradual descending motion (e.g., G4, F4, E4, D4) corresponding to the text "mu - si - cal groves".

Cool shady fountains – sudden shift to pianissimo and G minor (in lieu of the anticipated G major)

Ex. 5

Musical score for Example 5. It consists of four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are "and the cool sha - dy foun-tains,". The soprano line shows a sudden shift to pianissimo (p) and G minor (indicated by a flat sign) corresponding to the text "and the cool sha - dy foun-tains,".

Therefore, if Bach is described by Albert Schweitzer to be “the poet-musician” – because he uses similar ingenious musical effects – then Purcell could be named “the painter-musician”.

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2. Ho! Ho! Ho!

The opera's second act includes two highly suggestive choirs, *Ho! Ho! Ho!* along with *In Our Deep Vaulted Cell*. Both of them use the same principle that can be traced back to Antiquity, and is used with much conviction in the baroque opera, namely, that of the *imitation* (or *mimesis*). Inside the choral, fragment *Ho! Ho! Ho!* music is summoned to reinforce a simple onomatopoeic text, which imitates the laughter of witches during the concoction of their diabolical plan. Consequently, we have two overlapping layers of imitation:

1. the onomatopoeic text that imitates the real laughter
2. the music that imitates the real laughter, as well as the text itself

Already witnessing the examples of Purcell's creativity, we are reluctant to consider the fact that having the music imitate the text underneath – both strictly and figuratively speaking – can be a mere “coincidence”. The use of the imitation technique in this fragment is the most suitable choice. In order to reproduce the laughter of a group of people, where everybody has their own distinctive, individual trait and the “incipit of laughter” does not coincide, music uses the principle of imitation:

Beginning of the *Ho! Ho! Ho!* chorus – laughing through musical imitation

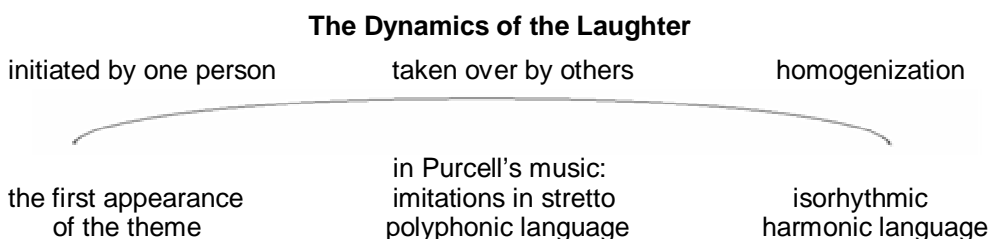
Ex. 6

The musical score for the beginning of the *Ho! Ho! Ho!* chorus is presented in a standard format. It consists of a piano accompaniment and four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The tempo is marked *Allegro vivace*. The vocal parts enter with the text "Ho ho ho" and are marked *sempre stacc.* (sempre staccato). The piano accompaniment provides a rhythmic and harmonic foundation for the vocal lines.

On hearing the fragment – and seeing the score – we can notice the way the music respects the *dynamics of laughter*. Starting at one person (the tenor), it “contagiously” spreads to all the other voices (alto, soprano, bass) and then takes on a new dimension. If at first the laughter spreads rapidly (imitative head-motifs in stretto – with a brief theme), towards the end a homogenization emerges and the isorhythmic and harmonic writing hinders the laughter. At the same time, the isorhythmia creates a sense of unity illustrated by the thoughts of the witches, who are all fighting for the same purpose: the destruction of Dido and Aeneas’ love.

We also observe in the score that the imitative entries in stretto emerge on different heights – C, F, B flat – and could be considered to be a quasi-real imitation of the range of the laughter: each man laughs at their own height...

It is interesting that this choral fragment appears three times throughout the opera (two variations: a choral one as well as a duet in the third act), being the only example of its kind. Could its reappearance suggest those “outbursts” of laughter that tend to recur? The unstoppable joy, which recurs in times of great happiness?



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3. In Our Deep Vaulted Cell

The next choral fragment presented here proposes to emulate a natural phenomenon, the echo, in order to suggest the location where the witches concoct their evil plan: beneath the surface of the Earth. The score itself includes the indication “In the manner of an echo”, to emphasize the spatial illusion that needs to be created with the help of the sound, more precisely with the help of dynamics. The musical echo is created by the partial or entire repetition of a number of motifs played first in forte, then in piano (by using the *antitheton* figure of the baroque rhetorical figures). Therefore, the main method in rendering the sombre text is – attention! – a playful one, thanks to the permanently alternating forte-piano. To exemplify the argument we will present the beginning of this choral part.¹

¹ From the point of view of the form, this fragment coincides with the previous phrase from period A.

Musical echoes made by using forte and piano alternation

Ex. 7

CHORUS. (In the manner of an echo.)

Moderato.

The musical score is for a chorus in 3/4 time, marked *Moderato*. It features a vocal quartet (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a basso. The instrumental parts include Violino 1 and 2, Viola, and Piano. The lyrics are: "In our deep vault-ed cell ed cell the charm we'll pre- pare, pre- pare." The score shows a strong emphasis on the alternation of forte and piano dynamics, particularly in the vocal lines and the piano accompaniment.

The spectacular echo effect is subordinated to the text, to the two verses (only two!) that are so magnificently composed, for they manage to sustain an entire piece:

„In our deep vaulted cell, the charm we'll prepare,
Too dreadful a practice for this open air.”

From the standpoint of form, we can safely say that the poetic structure determines the musical one. By repeating the two verses, the music acquires a bistrophic outline; B follows A, and these which are held together by the omnipresent isorhythm – while only the witches act in consensus and unity...

By the immediate repetition of certain previously enunciated words, the musical form links itself to the *repetitio* figure and achieves an entire succession of interior expansions. We will exemplify this unity between the poetic form and the musical one by presenting the consistent phrase of the first musical period (A):

Internal expansions in both text and music

Ex. 8

The image shows three systems of musical notation. Each system consists of five staves: a vocal line (soprano), a vocal line (alto), a vocal line (tenor/bass), a keyboard line (right hand), and a keyboard line (left hand). The lyrics are written below the vocal staves. Braces are placed above the first and second systems, indicating internal expansions in both text and music.

System 1: Too dread-ful a prac-tice, too dread-ful a

System 2: pra-tice, too dread-ful, too dread-ful a prac-tice, a prac-tice,


System 3: for this o-pen air, for this o-pen air,

Braces = expansions

If the first phrase (in the aforementioned example) was written in F major, the second phrase, in which the witches speak of their horrible practices, the atmosphere also “darkens” tonally, followed by modulations to descending alterations (such as the witches who descend beneath the Earth to prepare the spell): C minor – F minor – G minor, followed by a “lighter” phrase again – towards C major – when the text mentions the outer world yet again (“open-air”).

The final level of musical illustration of the text is can be found in the melodic line. We can observe a correlation between the text and the music as early as the first few measures. The words “In our deep vaulted cell” attract the descent of soprano’s melodic line also (anabasis), as though depicting the actual descent of the witches in the darkness beneath the Earth.

Ex. 9

Soprano.  anabasis

When this text appears for the second time, Purcell varies his methods a bit, and instead of a gradual descending motion, he uses a descending perfect fifth leap near the word “cell”:

Ex. 10

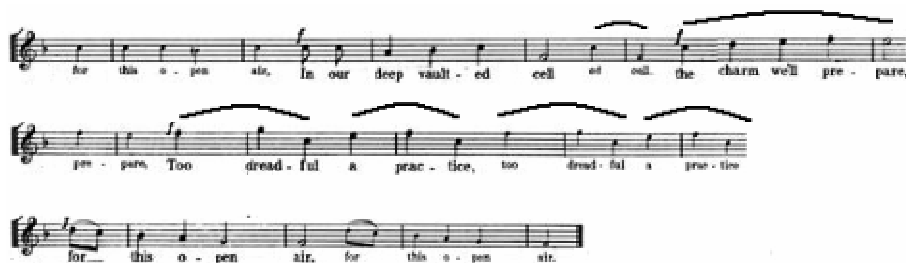


Another extremely interesting element emerges in this melodic sphere. Being that we are talking about a homophonic fragment (and in the homophonic parts the soprano’s melodic line is the most prominent one, as well as the most diligently elaborated one), almost the entire soprano line is made up by arched melodic lines, in “unison” with the text beneath, as well with the place where the action unfolds. Here are some of these arched melodic curves:

Musical arches imitating the vaulted cells’ form

Ex. 11

Soprano. 



4. But Ere We This Perform

Our next fragment is special on many different levels. Firstly, this is one of the actual duets of the opera², secondly, it is the only fragment that starts with a long, rigorous imitation, so that the listener initially expects a canon instead of a duet, and finally, this fragment brilliantly illustrates the baroque vocal virtuosity within *Dido and Aeneas*.

Alongside these significant aspects, we can also identify a close knit relationship between the music and the text beneath. As we mentioned earlier with *In Our Deep Vaulted Cell*, Purcell chooses only a few verses (again!) in order to create an entire fragment. A dialogue emerges among the witches, who reveal their plan to chase off Dido, Aeneas and the other courtiers who were out hunting back to the court. They plan to conjure up a storm and at the same time “redirect” Aeneas towards the shores of Italy.

The fervour with which the sorcerers get the plot ready is also present within the music in many regards. The form chosen by Purcell to convey this fragment is a bi-strophic one, thanks not only to the distribution of the text, but also to the sign of repetition that delimits the two periods. Nevertheless, the beginning indicates a strictly canonical repetition, maintained during the first musical phrase:

But Ere We This Perform – the beginning in stretto

Ex. 12

² In our opinion there are three actual duets in the opera: *Fear No Danger, but Ere We This Perform* and *Our Plot Has Took*, while the other cases where the alternation of two voices is present, we tend to incline towards recitatives.

We could associate this material with the impatience of the witches, who end up competing among themselves in carrying out the plan. The action, motion, restlessness are depicted in the fast tempo and rhythm, by the multiple melismas suggestively allocated to the word “storm” each time it appears. Every musical motif that accompanies this word is rapid, melismatic and descendent (except of course in the cadences):

The word “storm” and its descending musical appearances

Ex. 13



Yet the dominant musical motif is another. The first motif of the segment – presented by the Second Witch (or the soprano II) – is a specially offering part not only musically (in the form of variations) but also in the way that it suits the various meanings of the text. We hereby present a few varied examples of this motif:

Varied examples of the same motif

Ex. 14



in the first section



Ex. 15



in the second section

On the other hand, we notice parallel thirds and sixths, so popular since the English music of the Middle Ages³. Here Purcell expresses himself with the help of English musical means, which are used with a libretto written in the same national language:

³ *Sh Atlasz. Zene*, Atheneum 2000 kiadó, Budapest, 2003, p. 213.

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The image displays a musical score for a piece by Adél Fekete. It consists of three systems of staves. The top system features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "'em, drive 'em back to court. To court. court." The middle system shows a piano accompaniment in bass clef, with a dynamic marking of *f*. The bottom system shows a piano accompaniment in bass clef, also with a dynamic marking of *f*. The score includes first and second endings for the vocal line.

In conclusion, we could say that Purcell uses almost every musical element – form, tempo and rhythm, vocal material, or imitative technique – in order to illustrate a certain literary content, fact proven by the examples listed here.

5. The Recitative and Aria of Dido *Thy Hand Belinda..., When I Am Laid in Earth*

This recitative and aria is famous in the operatic literature, and it is referred simply as “Dido’s Lament”. Placed at the end of the opera, they convey the dramatic moment of Dido, bidding farewell to life. The text is filled with dramatic tension, in line with the music. Following Monteverdi’s example with *Lamento d’Arianna*, it has become a part much loved for its expressiveness it holds, so much so that some baroque composers did not shy away from introducing as many as four laments in one single opera⁴. Purcell preferred to keep this piece for the opera’s conclusion, choosing to retain its dramatic power for the negative climax of the work.

In the introductory recitative (*Thy Hand Belinda*), the harmonized line of the harpsichord and basso continuo accompanies the solo voice. At the end of her strength, Dido sings a descending musical line that is intensely chromatic, spread nearly to the length of an octave. Her depression is emphasized by the nuance of the segment – *pianissimo* – while the only crescendo appears at “death invades me”, with an accent placed over the word “death”... Purcell suggestively transposes the words “let me rest” into music, a respite proposed by the harmony, that is “resting” on the dominant as well as the two rests that follow. Here is the recitative itself:

⁴ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Second Edition, Ed. by Stanley Sadie, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001, vol. XIV, p. 191.

Recitative – *Thy Hand, Belinda*

Ex. 19

N^o 36. RECIT.

DIDO.

Soprano. Thy hand, Be-lin-da; dark-ness shades me; On thy bo-som let me

Basso.

PIANO.

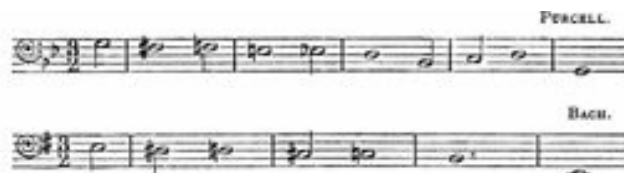
rest: More I would, but Death in-vades me: Death is now a wel-come guest.

The harmonic layer that accompanies the solo melody is a simple one. The harmonic movements succeed slowly, scouring on the harmonic trace from C minor to the cadence in D minor, which then becomes the dominant of G minor, the aria's tonality. We identify the sudden shift from a major scale to a minor scale (measure no. 7), which is a characteristic of Purcell's musical language. This harmonic change receives a subtext as well: the major chord stands at the end of the words "More I would, but death invades me", invoking hope still, but C minor emerges, as the first chord underneath the words "Death is now a welcome guest" – hence suggesting that death is welcome, all is lost.

Dido's will is in fact her last aria, which begins with the words *When I am laid in Earth*. The aria is not only accompanied by the harpsichord and the basso continuo, but also by the string orchestra. The broad writing as well as the time signature (3/2) suggests a slow tempo. This aria is envisaged in a variation form on basso ostinato, in this case the *English ground*. The ground of this aria is at the same time a *passus duriusculus*, this chromatic motif being often used by the baroque composers to illustrate the pain. This particular ground is very similar to the later composed bass of the *Crucifixus* from Bach's *Mass in B minor*.

Variational basses - Bach and Purcell

Ex. 20



The theme is followed by its eight variations; their characteristics are presented in the table below:

Characteristics of the theme and variations in the aria

Table 2

	Orchestration	Characteristics	Type	Unit
Theme	Bass, Harpisichord in the bass	Duration: 5 measures, Cantus Firmus doubled at an octave	Homophonic	1
Var. 1	Solo, Full orchestra	The harmony appears Harmonies on 4-5 voices	Homophonic	1
Var. 2	Solo, Full orchestra	A different harmony on top of the same basso ostinato. Changing notes appear. Harmony on 5 voices.	Homophonic	1
Var. 3	Solo, Full orchestra	Identical with Var. 1	Homophonic	1
Var. 4	Solo, Full orchestra	Identical with Var. 2 (var. 3 and 4 are repeated identically as well as the solo line)	Homophonic	1
Var. 5	Solo, Full orchestra	Brings major changes: 1. The two lower voices do not advance in parallel octaves anymore. 2. The soloist has a pedal point; therefore, the orchestra receives a more substantial role. 3. The orchestral material focuses on the motif of the bass, which is then repeated in various forms in the orchestral discant.	Polyphonic	2
Var. 6	Solo, Full orchestra	The discant receives its own melody.	Polyphonic	2
Var. 7	Orchestral	The solo voice disappears.	Polyphonic	2 (Coda)
Var. 8	Orchestral	The most chromatic variation.	Polyphonic	2 (Coda)

This path from simple to complex pointed out in the chart – cantus firmus, homophonic unit, polyphonic unit – resonates with the intensification of pain and tension, accentuated as the heroine approaches the moment of her death.

Dido's actual *Lamento* spreads over the variation layer of the bass, portrayed in an extraordinary fashion: it has a different phrasing weighed against the bass, which then allows a new formal meaning, a bi-strophic⁵ one:

The form of the *Lamento*

Introduction	A (A+A)	B	Coda (ritornello)
The theme's first appearance	lamento	lamento	The ninth appearance of the theme
(Measures 1-4)	(Measures 5-24)	(Measures 24-35)	(Measures 35-38)
----- Theme + 8 variations			

Inside Dido's melodic line, section A consists of two identical phrases – the first one is repeated but is harmonized in a different way. The construction of these phrases is asymmetrical, first describing an arch, and after that using plunging sequences towards the final note:

Dido's vocal line (first phrase of section A)

Ex. 21

Here the accent – both strictly and figuratively speaking – is put on the word “laid”, a word that determines the dramatic moment of the funeral, perceived by Dido to be her unavoidable destiny. This word is highlighted not only by the dynamic accent but also by the high pitch of the note it

⁵ This structure is provided in Henry Purcell *Dido and Aeneas, The Works of Henry Purcell vol. III*, edited by William H. Cummings, Novello, Ewer and Co., London, 1889. In the more recent version of Henry Purcell's: *Dido and Aeneas*, Edited by Margaret Laurie and Thurston Dart; Novello and Company Limited, 1966, and the B part has a symmetrical structure: B+B

accompanies, as it is always the highest note of the melodic line. In addition, Dido expresses her concerns for the one staying alive (beginning with measure 9), and wishes him to forget her sins. The sequenced motif (in measures 12, 13 with upbeat) and the cadence that close this phrase use the same rhetorical means that highlight the word “no” - the highest notes get an involuntary accent, the first one of those (E flat) has also an accent marked in the score.

The second section of the aria conveys the heroine's desire to remain in the memory of her loved-ones – uttered by the multiple repetition of the words “Remember me”⁶ – but in a manner that accentuates the tragedy of her destiny: “... but forget my fate”. This period is asymmetrical lengthwise (7+4 measures) but uses the same motifs for constructing the music of this period:

Dido's vocal line (section B)

Ex. 22

The image shows a musical score for Dido's vocal line in section B. It consists of two staves of music in a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "Re-mem-ber me, re-mem-ber me, but ah! for-get my fate. Re-mem-ber me, but ah! for-get my fate." Below the lyrics, there are two motifs labeled Alpha and Beta. The Alpha motif is a short phrase with a sharp accent on the final note. The Beta motif is a longer phrase with a sharp accent on the final note. The score shows how these motifs are used to structure the vocal line.

We notice that the Alpha motif appears only once in the second phrase, while Beta is a final motif, varied in comparison to the prior (Beta) motif – these motifs outline an arch like construction, which have opposed meanings. The evident rhythmic aspect of the Alpha motif is in a great contrast with the Beta motifs character, rhythm, and melodic line, thus highlighting the meaning of the words.

The two form types present in Dido's aria and discussed above may suggest the tear between the two worlds: the world of the living and the world that which she is already a part of, the world of the dead. As a result of the harmonious way it combines the tragic and lyrical beauty, it is considered to be one of the most renowned pages of operatic music of all times.

At the end of our quest, we can state that there is much evidence regarding the close relationship between the text and the music of *Dido and Aeneas*. We can conclude that Purcell's music is like a mirror to the text that it accompanies the turning points of the subject instantaneously become the turning points of the music itself. Among the selected parts for our analysis, we found numerous examples of this kind: the melodic “sketch” line that

⁶ Another important character in literature also uses these two words – Hamlet's father says goodbye using the same words...

follows the text describes in the choral part *To the Hills and the Vales*, along with the echo effect of forte-piano sequences that evoke the cave scene of the witches, the *Ho! Ho! Ho!* part with its imitational features that remind us laughter. In addition, a musical “chase” is presented in the *But Ere We This Perform* duet, brought to life by imitations and alternative motions of the two voices. Regarding the final aria of Dido, it expresses both literally and musically (with the aid of the passus duriusculus and the chromatic intervals) grief and pain, while the possibility to interpret in two different ways the form of the aria (a variation form and a strophic one) coincides with the departure of Dido from this world.

Those interested in further analysis of this work, will surely notice that not only the parts presented here, but others too present the same characteristic, namely the close relationship between music and words. We believe that this is an important aspect of *Dido and Aeneas*, and might explain (among other aspects) why only the work of Purcell became a chef d'oeuvre from the many works, which approached this particular mythological subject.

(Translated from Romanian by: Köpeczi Juliánna Erika)

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