



## ***Dido and Aeneas***

Santa Fe Symphony's Baroque Ensemble and Chorus  
St. Francis Auditorium, Feb. 7

## **Hit and myth**

*Great minds against themselves conspire  
And shun the cure they most desire.*

Dido loved Aeneas way too much. As Greek myth would have it, the Queen of Carthage and the shipwrecked founder of Rome had such a memorable fling that she killed herself when he left. In Henry Purcell's hour-long opera, Dido's tragic plight makes for some wonderfully sad music, along with some rousing ha-has along the way.

Written by Purcell for students of a London girls' school, the opera had its premiere in 1689. This Baroque piece is one of the earliest English operas. The music has an almost Renaissance tinge to it, a simplicity that belies the ornamentation and spectacle the form was later known for.

On a Super Bowl Sunday afternoon, with snow falling on the streets of Santa Fe, the atmosphere created by everyone on stage was not without beauty, emotion, and pathos. These came as mere moments of pleasure in a production that was somewhat of a mixed-bag.

The highlights:

▼ Sarah Weiler as the Sorceress. Weiler brought to her role a level of confidence and projection that offered weight to her characterization without witchy posturing. Her sound was full and rich, and her diction lent power to the evil inherent in the text.

▼ Tim Willson as Aeneas. By far the most operatic of the soloists, Willson may have lacked support in some of his higher notes. He was also the only singer to use breath and tone variance to attempt to color each phrase with drama.

▼ The chorus. The group's rich sound — though perhaps out of proportion with Purcell's intentions — clearly sung lyrics, and balance provided some of the most musically satisfying moments of the afternoon. The 52 committed singers produced a sound that was a welcome contrast to that of the female-dominated solo cast.

▼ The Baroque Ensemble, featuring Kathleen McIntosh on harpsichord, Dana Winograd on cello, violinists David Felberg and Nicolle Maniaci, Virginia Lawrence on viola, and Terry Pruitt on double bass. The ensemble evolved over the hour into a group that unobtrusively managed to define context and serve as a conduit between the big washes of choral color and the smaller, sometimes weaker, solo efforts. This small "orchestra" served up a solid, intelligent reading of the Purcell score, although the dance sections could have been more effusive.

The big aria of the evening was sung by Sarah Ihlefeld. "Dido's Lament" is the kind of tragic melody that opera buffs hold their breaths for — it can be sublime. Ihlefeld, solid and committed throughout the beginning of the piece, seemed unable to rise to the emotional peak of this final moment. Still, she stood out earlier — her initial scenes with Sasha Garver (as Belinda) and Rene M. Sosa-Provencio (as the second woman and first witch) were examples of vocal maturity versus youth.

Linda Raney conducted clearly and capably, although one wishes that some of the choral refrains could have come across as actual echoes and that there had been choral pianissimos that stunned with quiet.

— Michael Wade Simpson