

## “So Fair the Game, So Rich the Sport”

### REWARDING OPERA

by Edmund Gordon

*‘No one bosom shall be found  
Ere I have done, without a wound’  
(Cupid in Venus and Adonis)*

And so it proved, on the first night (no doubt subsequently too) of Hampstead Garden Opera’s double bill of Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* and Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*. Despite the tragic plots, the company can add two to its record of enjoyable Upstairs at the Gatehouse productions.

First nights have their own atmosphere. Audiences are anticipatory and, initially at least, in forgiving mood. Opera première casts, orchestras, conductors, production teams and stage staffs are sometimes nervous but usually optimistic.

This first night was no exception, but with extra tension. Not only were there two works but an attempt to weave them together. Set elements were almost identical. Formal or stylish modern dress was worn throughout, as the producer and director, James Hurley, imagined the action of the first piece, *Venus and Adonis*, taking place in connection with a wedding, as an episode of the characters’ lives played out separate in time from the two operatic narratives. Still photography was also a recurrent theme, as being evocative of memory and nostalgia.

Confused? Me too, but mainly in retrospect. I had been told this *Dido and Aeneas* would be unlike any other seen before, so preconception was abandoned. Audience reaction suggested my absorbed pleasure throughout the evening as widely shared. The productions generated consistent audience involvement with immediately believable characters, far from the idealized classical figures so often portrayed.

Musical and dramatic standards were impressive. They amply met what must have been substantial demands from the conductor (Oliver-John Ruthven) and producer/director. Lucy Roberts (*Venus*), Henry Deacon (*Adonis*), Anna Whyte (*Cupid/Belinda*), Emma Watkinson (*Dido*) and Ashley Riches (*Aeneas*) had most chance to shine, and took it fully, but all other cast members also gave exemplary performances. The Dionysus Ensemble (just six musicians this time) played with great feeling and understanding.

*Venus and Adonis* (libretto author unknown writer though Aphra Behn and the Countess of Winchelsea have been suggested, the latter regarded as most likely) is considered the earliest surviving English opera. Charles II attended its première in 1683, at the Duke of York’s house. The first recorded performance of *Dido and Aeneas* (libretto by Nahum Tate) was in 1699, at Priest’s boarding school in Chelsea. However, Bruce Wood, in *Purcell: An Extraordinary Life* (2009), believes musical evidence suggests it was composed in 1683, almost contemporaneously with *Venus and Adonis*. Musical and dramatic links between the works are striking. Aeneas in *Dido* even sings: ‘Behold, upon my bending spear A monster’s head stands bleeding, With tushes far exceeding Those did Venus’ huntsman [i.e. Adonis] tear’.

The similarities amply justify Hampstead Garden Opera’s intriguing double bill. The chorus in *Dido* sing ‘Grief should ne’er approach the fair’. Alas in both operas it does. But the line immediately before reads: ‘Banish sorrow, banish care’. As far as I could determine, the two first-night performances went far to doing both for most of the audience. They did so for me, too, though later having studied the libretti and listened to the music again (partly via a visit on another evening, with the alternate cast, also excellent), I could not help but wonder if greater fidelity of action to time and place would have been even more rewarding. But what time? What place? The original productions are thought likely to have had contemporary allusions.

