First-Rate *Dido and Aeneas* from Aston Magna

*by Cashman Kerr Prince*

Last night in Brandeis University’s Slosberg Hall, Aston Magna kicked off its 40th anniversary celebration with a lovely concert of aural delights for a packed hall. Music of Monteverdi, Purcell, Handel, and J. S. Bach thrilled the audience.

The concert began with four madrigals by Monteverdi: *Chiome d’oro*, a *canzonetta* setting of a text that is part blazon and part lover’s lament; *Hor che ’l ciel e la terra e ’l vento tace*, setting a sonnet by Petrarch that is nominally about war but really is about a lover’s tormented state; *Lamento della ninfa* (*Non avea Febo ancora*), a *rappresentativo* setting of a text by Rinuccini about the fire and ice of love; and, lastly, a “secular madrigal,” *Laetatus sum*, a setting of Psalm 122 (121). These four songs showcased the voices of Roberta Anderson and Kristen Watson (sopranos), Deborah Rentz-Moore (mezzo-soprano), Frank Kelley and Jonas Budris (tenors), and David Ripley (baritone). Daniel Stepner, artistic director of Aston Magna and violinist, together with Linda Quan, offered perfectly matched accompaniment to Watson and Anderson on the opening *Chiome d’oro*; Laura Jeppesen on *viola da gamba* gave an emotionally charged repetitive four-note descending lament figure throughout the beautifully affective *Lamento della ninfa* — in truth an opera in miniature with the three male voices as
chorus to Roberta Anderson’s singing of the Ninfa. Laetatus sum presents changes of mood and tempo which could be a challenge to lesser performers; last night’s reading was truly a happy marriage of music and musicians.

The program moved to scenes from Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas — primarily acts two and three. I admit this is the work on the program I was least anticipating: I’ve heard this work in concert several times and was prepared for another presentation of a familiar piece. More fool I. Emphasizing the importance of gesture, posture, and articulation, Aston Magna gave the finest performance of this music I have yet experienced. From the beginning of Lynn Torgove as Sorceress singing “Wayward sisters,” the audience was enthralled.

Watson and Anderson, as Witches, joined in with frightening mien to revel in sealing the fate of poor Dido. Jumping to the third act, Jonas Budris sang the role of the Sailor in “Come away, fellow sailors,” giving the song the lilt and brogue of a Celtic jig through enunciation and presentation, a nice reminder of Purcell’s time and context. Deborah Rentz-Moore as Dido, David Ripley as Aeneas, and Roberta Anderson as Belinda, continued to seal the doomed queen’s fate as Aeneas leaves Carthage in “Your counsel all is urg’d in vain,” and the wonderfully embodied spurn of rejected love as Dido sings to Aeneas, “No, faithless man, thy course pursue. . . . No, no: away!” Tears were shed by many in the audience as Rentz-Moore sang Dido’s parting lament to Belinda, “When I am laid in earth.” I would not have missed this performance for the world.

The close of intermission was announced by a call on natural horns from Richard Menaual and Frederick Aldrich, a fitting announcement in this concert and a foreshadowing of music to come. We returned for highlights from Handel’s Triumph of Time and Truth. Recitatives were sung in English, arias in
Italian, a nod to this work’s complex history of revisions and presumably also the use of the third and last version of Handel’s music. The highlights included the Overture and recitatives and arie for each of the four singers. Kristen Watson as Beauty and Deborah Rentz-Moore as Pleasure were a vocal but not a narrative match to Lynn Torgove as Truth and Frank Kelley as Time. The music is sublime, the text moralizing; perhaps it was only sheer perversity that I quietly rooted for Pleasure to route the white purity of Truth and the inexorability of Time, but after Dido’s lament how could I not? (In this one respect only your reviewer resembles Saint Augustine.) Pity: the triumph still belonged to the Two T’s, beautifully sung but with arguments that I hardly find inspiring — no fault to the performers, of course.

The evening concluded with J. S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No.1, BWV 1046, highlighting Menaul and Aldrich on natural horn; what we heard before the concert is that instrument’s earliest appearance in the concert hall. The Aston Magna ensemble, 19 musicians strong, breathed fresh life into this (overly) familiar work, the capriciousness of the natural horn adding that extra frisson of excitement and color to Bach’s harmonic architecture.

While this concert highlighted the vocalists, the instrumentalists assembled for this concert gave truly remarkable performances. Stepner played violin and conducted, both with finesse and aplomb. Loretta O’Sullivan on baroque cello and Anne Trout on violone, together with Peter Sykes on organ and harpsichord (and reading his music from an iPad, a nice nod toward the future of Aston Magna performances, perhaps) and Catherine Liddell on theorbo, took the bass and continuo parts to new heights, giving a solid yet always musical and sumptuous foundation to the music. Stephen Hammer, Marc Schachman, and Priscilla Smith played
baroque oboes and recorders; together with Andrew Schwartz on baroque bassoon, they blew forth beautiful currents of music.

The concert repeats tonight, Saturday, June 9th, at Ozawa Hall, Tanglewood. It is well worth the trek to go hear these musicians and join in celebrating their 40 years of accomplishments.

Cashman Kerr Prince is trained in Classics and Comparative Literature and is now a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classical Studies at Wellesley College. He is also a cellist of some accomplishment, currently playing with the Brookline Symphony Orchestra.