

Music

Superb performance

The Pharos Trust excelled in their choice of musicians on Thursday night for the concert performance of Purcell's rarely-heard opera *Dido and Aeneas* at the Strovolos Municipal Theatre. The Academy of Ancient Music, under the conductor and harpsichordist Richard Egarr was superb.

The programme began with the choral works of Christopher Gibbons whose music has not been heard for the past 350 years. As Egarr so eloquently explained, "the composer suffered from two problems – a very famous father and the disappearance of music generally during the Civil War" Egarr's interest and discovery in Gibbons' music began 10 years ago and has been played only in Amsterdam, Toronto and Croatia, so Cyprus was privileged to be added to the list. Egarr's witty and intelligent introductions were as delightful as the music which followed.

The 13-strong choir was joined by gamba player, Reiko Ichise for the first work *Not to us, O Lord*. This is the best choral singing I have heard for many years – they were not only perfectly balanced, but the meticulous attention to diction, the closing of syllables and phrasing was faultless. They were greatly assisted by director Richard Egarr who, with his entire body and soul with incredible energy showed each nuance extracting tonal variety and colour in carefully shaped phrases.

The *Fantasia in A* was written for two violins, gamba and organ. For this performance, the organ was replaced by the harpsichord and was equally exciting -full of drive and energy.

Egarr closed the first half of the programme by intentionally repeating *Not to us, O Lord* – a very clever approach in giving us an opportunity to listen once again to a work still unfamiliar, and which on second hearing, was even better.

A concert version of Purcell's only opera *Dido and Aeneas* followed the interval. It premiered during the 1680s and tells the story of how Dido, Queen of Carthage falls in love with the Trojan prince Aeneas, who was shipwrecked there. Dido agrees to marry him, but suspects his love is fleeting and a Sorcerer proves her correct by persuading Aeneas to follow the command of Jove and leave Carthage. In their final meeting, Dido spurns Aeneas' offer to stay and takes fatal poison.

The opera is only one hour long and calls for small string orchestra, chorus and nine solo parts, but in order to make an impact, these forces need to be of top quality. The Academy of Ancient Music, chorus and soloists did not disappoint.

Lorna Anderson as Belinda sang with confidence and clarity although occasionally the diction was not always clear.

Dido, sung by Dutch mezzo soprano Wilke te Brummelstrote was superb. The famous last aria and lament *When I Am Laid In Earth* was very moving with beautifully-controlled vibrato and dynamics and shaded phrases never allowed to become over sentimental.

Bass, Giles Underwood excelled in his counter-tenor role as did baritone Maarten Koningsberger as a rounded and robust-toned Aeneas.

The orchestra provided a dramatic accompaniment exploding with energy and drama allowing their technical and musical expertise to shine through. The dynamic arm of Egarr ensured sparkling, well-taken tempi without the ritardandi one so often hears at the end of each scene.

The careful attention to dotted rhythms, texture and dynamic variation all provided a vibrant, polished and exhilarating performance, which further confirmed their outstanding reputation as one of the foremost period orchestras.

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Σαββατο, 4 Οκτωβριος 2008, p. 39

