



John Blow: Venus & Adonis

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Curtis Price, New Grove Dictionary of Music

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Tragic opera in a prologue and three acts by John Blow; London or Windsor, court, c. 1683.

Parts

Cupid	soprano
Venus	soprano
Adonis	baritone
Shepherd	alto
Shepherdess	soprano
Huntsman	alto

Choruses of shepherds, shepherdesses, huntsmen, little cupids, courtiers

Setting Venus's palace

Background

One of the early manuscript scores describes *Venus and Adonis* as 'A Masque for the entertainment of the King', that is, Charles II. It was presumably mounted privately at court, though there is no record of the venue and the identity of the librettist remains unknown; the suggestion that, because of its feminist overtones, the poem might have been written by Aphra Behn, with whom Blow later collaborated on a play, is intriguing but unproven. The same early manuscript also records that the actress-singer Mary (Moll) Davies, the king's former mistress, took the part of Venus, while their illegitimate daughter, Lady Mary Tudor (about ten years old at the time), sang the part of Cupid. This unusual casting tends to confirm the private nature of the first production. The opera is to some extent a satire on the liberal sexual mores of King Charles's court, and the fact that from September 1683 Lady Mary was granted an annuity of £1500 suggests that the entertainment was designed as a gentle reminder to the king of his extramarital responsibilities.

A recently discovered printed libretto of *Venus and Adonis* shows that the opera was revived on 17 April 1684 at Josias Priest's boarding-school at Chelsea, the same institution that mounted Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* some time later. Blow's original score was apparently arranged for all-female performance, since Priest's daughter acted Adonis (a baritone in the main sources), with Misses Baker and Helsham as Venus and Cupid respectively. No other public or private production is recorded during Blow's lifetime, but the existence of several contemporaneous manuscript scores shows that the opera possibly enjoyed further revivals, first in the early 1690s and then around 1700.

Venus and Adonis is the earliest surviving English opera and served as the model for Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. It is further remarkable for being through-composed (with no spoken dialogue) and for having a tragic ending. While the musico-dramatic structure is *sui generis* [unique in its characteristics], Blow was indebted to Matthew Locke for the basic style of the recitative: a measured arioso, always in duple metre, in which expressive words are set melodically and sometimes repeated. *Venus and Adonis* also resembles Lully's *tragédies en musique* in its reliance on dance to articulate and relieve the drama and for the inclusion of a French overture. But to Blow alone should go the credit for creating large, coherent structures in which recitative, ariettas and choruses constantly alternate to impel the story to its tragic conclusion.



Purcell's debt to Blow is everywhere to be seen in *Dido and Aeneas*. Both works are three-act miniatures with an active and dramatically multifarious chorus; both include scenes of comic relief (the Cupids' spelling lesson in Blow, the sailors' scene in Purcell); each ends with the death of one of the lovers. Purcell borrowed many melodic details from Blow and even alluded to the earlier work in Act 2 scene i, where Aeneas enters with a 'monster's head' impaled on his spear: Adonis's death by the Aedalian boar is thus avenged. The most obvious difference between the two operas is Blow's almost total avoidance of arias or other set pieces. The music is virtually continuous from beginning to end.

Synopsis

Prologue – *The grove* – After a rather brash French overture, Cupid addresses the shepherds and shepherdesses (actually Venus's courtiers) in his traditional posture ('Behold my arrows and my bow'). They are inclined to make love; he at first deplores their general faithlessness ('At Court I find constant and true/Only an aged lord or two'), then invites them to seek the sweetest pleasures of the grove.

Act 1 – *A room in Venus's palace* – Venus and Adonis are discovered embracing on a couch; an obbligato recorder is added to the sensuous recitative; she toys with his sexual frustration ('Adonis, thy delightful youth') and is about to let him have his way when hunting music is heard ('Hark, hark the rural music sounds'). Adonis vows not to join the chase, but Venus (in a departure from the myth) urges him to leave ('Absence kindles new desire'), and Blow underscores the line 'I would not have my lover tire' with witty, descending chromatic lines. Adonis responds indignantly to her teasing, but the huntsmen burst in to describe a mighty boar that is wreaking havoc. Unable to resist the challenge, he leaves for the hunt.

Act 2 – *A room in Venus's palace* – Cupid is taking instruction in the art of love from Venus, his mother, who sings the arietta 'Fit well your arrows when you strike'. Cupid in turn teaches the Little Cupids, a children's chorus, to spell the word 'mercenary', a few letters at a time. Cupid responds with the only proper aria of the opera, 'Choose for the formal fool' (in binary form). When he humorously advises his mother to treat Adonis badly to assure his constancy, Blow writes out Venus's terrifying laugh note-for-note. The rest of this act is occupied by an incidental scene for the Graces who sing the chorus 'Mortals below, Cupids above' and offer a series of dances, culminating in a long chaconne.

Act 3 – *The same room* – The curtain opens to show Venus standing 'in a melancholy posture. A mourning Cupid goes across the stage and shakes an arrow at her'. The recitative which opened Act 1 is transformed into a portentous wail ('Adonis, uncall'd for sighs'). Adonis, gored by the wild boar, is led in mortally wounded. After a passionate exchange, he sings his final ironic lines, 'Let me on your soft bosom lie/There I did wish to live, and there I beg to die'. Struggling to regain her composure, Venus begins a funeral march ('With solemn pomp') and is joined by her courtiers. The finest piece in the opera is the final G minor chorus, 'Mourn for thy servant', whose elegiac counterpoint does not suffer from comparison with the similar final chorus of *Dido and Aeneas*.

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The tragedy of Venus and Adonis is born of circumstance rather than inner conflict, as in Purcell's opera. But Blow has drawn a vivid picture of pastoral indolence, sexual impetuosity and grief, all of which are visited upon real characters. That the score includes only one outstanding piece ('Mourn for thy servant') is less a comment on Blow's inspiration than an indication of his desire for true *dramma per musica* in which nothing is allowed to impede the action.



'Dido and Aeneas': questions of style and evidence

Curtis Price, Early Music (February 1994)

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Fundamental assumptions and long-held opinions about Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* have recently been shaken. The discovery in 1988 of a printed libretto of John Blow's closely related *Venus and Adonis* may have major implications for our understanding of Purcell's opera. The libretto proves that Blow's opera was first performed before King Charles II and then revived in 1684 at Josias Priest's boarding school at Chelsea. Capitalizing on this discovery, Bruce Wood and Andrew Pinnock argued in the August 1992 issue of *Early Music* that the well known performance of *Dido and Aeneas* at the same school in 1689 was in fact a revival of a production which also originated at court, perhaps as early as 1683-4. With thinking about Purcell's opera in such a state of flux, it is probably inopportune to attempt any general assessment of recent research, but the time is certainly ripe to question methods and weigh up the value of the new evidence. It obviously matters a great deal whether the opera was composed in 1683 as a court entertainment or in 1689 for semi-public performance by schoolgirls.

While Wood and Pinnock's sweeping challenge to orthodoxy brings to light several interesting peripheral points about the sources of Nahum Tate's libretto, the heart of their argument is a conviction that *Dido and Aeneas* has a much greater stylistic affinity to music Purcell is known to have composed in 1683-4 than to that written five years later. Two kinds of evidence are adduced in favour of the earlier date. First, Wood and Pinnock note the similarities between *Dido and Aeneas* and *Venus and Adonis*, implying a causal and close temporal relationship between the two works, they claim that the two composers borrowed almost exclusively from each other's recent music' (p.381), though no examples are cited. Second, they note the apparently close resemblance between certain passages in *Dido* and other pieces Purcell is known to have composed in the early 1680s.

The similarities in overall structure and certain melodic details between *Dido and Aeneas* and *Venus and Adonis* have been widely recognized: Purcell obviously modelled his opera on his friend and colleague's little masque. But what has not been stressed enough is the vast difference between the two works, not just in quality and degree of refinement, but in musical and dramatic style. *Venus and Adonis* resembles a *tragedie lyrique* in comprising almost entirely arioso punctuated by brief ariettas and choruses. The music is virtually continuous and there are no set-piece arias, unless one counts Cupid's diminutive song in Act 2, 'Choose for the formal fool'. In terms of musico-dramatic style, *Venus and Adonis* shows little advance on Matthew Locke's scenes for the 1659 version of *Cupid and Death*. *Dido*, by contrast, though still heavily indebted to Lully, shows a full awareness of an important development in Venetian opera: the concentration of musical and emotional weight in fully developed, closed-form arias. In this and other respects, *Dido* inhabits an entirely different operatic world from *Venus and Adonis*.

Furthermore, in assuming a close chronological and causal connection between the two works, Wood and Pinnock have laid a trap for themselves: though Blow's opera was revived at Priest's school in April 1684, its actual date of composition is unknown. The *terminus a quo* for its creation has to be estimated from a note in British Library Add. 22100 that Cupid was sung by Lady Mary Tudor (who would have been about nine years old in 1682), assuming she was the first to sing the role. Thus the date of *Venus and Adonis* also hangs by a thread of evidence and on an assumption: when would Lady Mary have been able to manage this part? At nine or ten? At seven...