

Miss Me But Let Me Go: Dido Sings Farewell

The death speech of Dido in *Aeneid IV* is one of the most intensely personal and poignant speeches in all of Roman epic. Readers may argue over the tone and implication of her words, whether they suggest bitterness and resentment for her lost love and unrealized inheritance. Yet composers have generally taken her words at face value, content to wrap her *adieu* with suitably chastened and even brittle music. The Renaissance saw an unusual number of composers drawn to *Dulces Exuviae*, setting most, if not all, of her words; these musicians include, in chronological order: Josquin Des Prez (c.1440 – 1521), Jean Mouton (c.1475 – 1522), Adrian Willaert (c.1490 – 1562), Jacques Arcadelt (c.1505 – c.1560), Alonso Mudarra (c.1510 – 1580), Cipriano da Rore (c.1515 – 1565), Jacobus Vaet (c.1529 - 1567), Orlandus Lassus (1532 – 1594), and Jakob Handl (1550 – 1591). All but two of these men were Franco-Flemish, and most spent some time in northern Italy; there they may have first met the Vergilian text through the music of Josquin, who spent much of his professional life in Milan and Rome.

However, with the birth of opera, Dido was heard more on stage than within an intimate circle of madrigalists; consider the operas *La Didone* (1641) by Francesco Cavalli and *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) by Henry Purcell; here Vergil's own words were abandoned for lengthier libretti by Giovanni Francesco Busenello and Nahum Tate respectively. And these latter day poets were willing to adapt and even alter Vergil to suit their own dramatic purpose: so Tate had Dido plead "Remember me, but forget my fate." Such a verbal conceit may seem far-fetched to experienced readers of the Aeneid, but it does allow the composer to craft exceedingly poignant music.

The next major treatment of the grand passion of Dido and Aeneas appears in the *Les Troyens*, an opera completed in 1858 by Hector Berlioz, who not only wrote the music but also crafted the French libretto. Though he consulted the original poem, Vergil's own words are

nowhere to be heard. And this neglect of the Latin verse continued largely to be the case until very recently, when the British composer Sasha Johnson Manning selected them as a counterpoint to words by an Anglo-American populist, Edgar Guest (1881-1959). Though born in Birmingham, England, as a young boy Guest moved with his family to the USA where he ultimately earned the moniker ‘The People’s Poet’, writing more than 11,000 poems. One of his most popular, and still used at funerals and memorials, is *Miss Me, But Let Me Go*, and it was this that Sasha Johnson Manning decided to interweave with Dido’s words sung in Vergil’s Latin. Scored for two separate choirs of mixed voices, this work received a highly acclaimed premiered in May 2016 in St. Louis, Missouri, and is now being considered by advanced choirs around the globe. Thus, the Vergilian lyrics have finally been given a modern voice, albeit in a context that is both new and appropriate.

This paper summarizes the popularity of Dido’s farewell among composers of the Renaissance and beyond, and suggests reasons – the euphony of the Latin words, the arresting nature of the scene itself – why composers turn and return to Vergil and *Aeneid IV* for inspiration. The contrast between Vergil’s stark realism and the sentimentalism of both Tate and Guest is explored, and the paper includes recorded excerpts from both the Purcell and Johnson Manning works. This paper invites us to contemplate not only Dido’s final journey, but also that of her final words.