

THE NORWEGIAN CHURCH ARTS CENTRE, CARDIFF BAY

(14th November 1997)

THE SANDS OF TIME & DIDO AND AENEAS

The ideas of two operas given in one evening in a tiny performing space, being the work of composers separated by some three centuries, was in itself an intriguing prospect; an additional attraction was the entry of the first (and later one) in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the shortest opera ever - about four minutes. I confess to a liking for short operas (and short concerts for that matter), while *The Sands of Time* clearly has no designs on the title of 'The Welsh Ring'. (A quiz question for suitably disposed readers: which four once-popular operas of last century were collectively nick-named 'The English Ring'?) Moreover Purcell's masterpiece, though incomplete as we have it, and allegedly written for a girls' school, never fails in its attractions, and is still, fairly arguably, the greatest opera by an Englishman, - with no disrespect to Walton, Britten, Tippett, et al.

The brevity of Peter Reynolds's *The Sands of Time* inevitably made it a kind of *bonne-bouche* overture to the Purcell (and the cause of an early interval!) but this did in no way detract from its effect: if anything the reverse. Performed with piano, rather than wind band as originally devised for the March 1993 première under the baton of WNO's Carlo Rizzi (see the composer's article in an earlier issue of this journal), its comic-satiric impact was clear and incisive. This version served to highlight the clever libretto by Simon Rees, as well as a certain lyric 'sharp edge' which transcends the pastiche elements of the musical style, formally incorporating as it does the set-pieces of early nineteenth century 'Verdi-gurdy' opera-overture, recitative, solo, duet, ensemble etc., all compressed into very brief service. The story itself is funny enough: a domestic dispute, during the boiling of an egg, rather cynically perhaps mended by the *deus ex machina* of the announcement of a pools win. This latter dates it slightly; nowadays it would be a Lottery jackpot! The husband and wife roles were effectively and extrovertly sung by Charles Davidson and Jean Andrews, with no less effective a mini-chorus of four female voices.

Dido and Aeneas was, obviously, more leisurely and also more formal in its style, both musical and dramatic, though kept under admirably tight control. Here again one marvelled at the canny use of limited space and skilful deployment of lighting by the producer, Sara Clethero, even to the extent of some stylish and carefully devised dancing, which made no unreasonable demands on amateur and semi-professional performers, nor caused clumsy movements to distract the audience from the drama and the emotion of the music. (I have seen worse in better conditions, with supposedly more experienced performers). The soloist Meriel Andrew and Paul Carey-Jones were quite impressive in their eponymous roles, as was Bairbre McAteer as Belinda. The Canton Chorus, with friends, and trained by John Abraham, was rich in tone and good on diction; the small instrumental ensemble was ably directed by Duncan Fielden (at the keyboard throughout the evening); and the whole partnership lived up to its name 'Youthful Promise Wales - Rhagolwg Ieuenticid Cymru', presenting an evening of special charm and more than expected pleasure - certainly to this particular reviewer. And yes, I forgot to time the Reynolds work but I was equally oblivious to such considerations for the rest of the programme.

A.J.H.R.