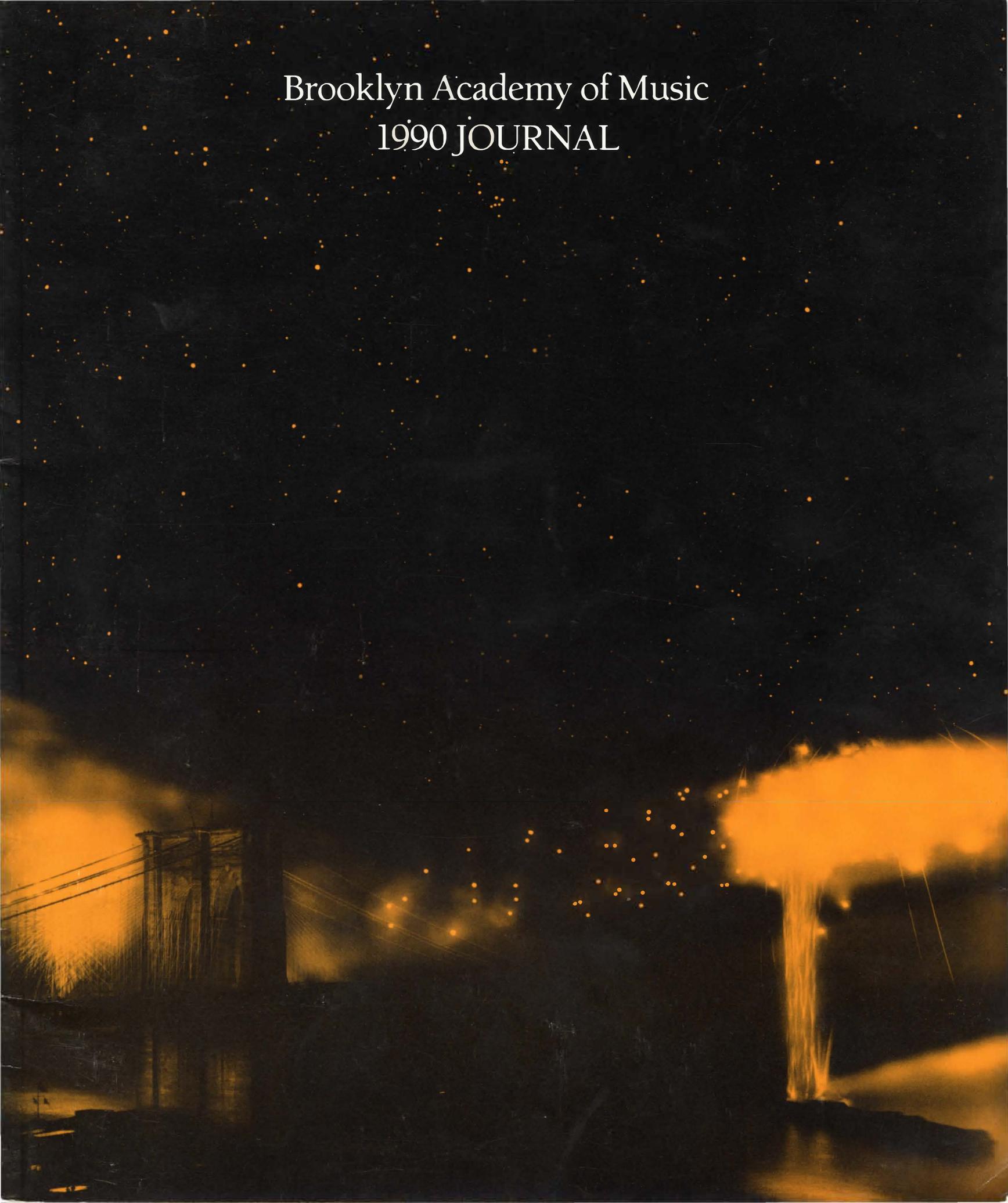


Brooklyn Academy of Music  
1990 JOURNAL



# Brooklyn Academy of Music

## 1990 SPRING PROGRAMS

BAM Opera

### La Finta Giardiniera

March 15, 17, 19

BAM Majestic Theater

Family Fun Series

### Zoppe Circus Europa

March 23, 24

BAM Opera House

### King Lear

April 2-4, 6-8

BAM Majestic Theater

Family Fun Series

### The Wizard of Oz

May 6

BAM Carey Playhouse

651

### The Savoy Ballroom

May 13

BAM Opera House

Family Fun Series

### The Jungle Book

May 19

BAM Lepercq Space

651

### The Coltrane Legacy

May 19

BAM Majestic Theater

651

### Latin Concert

May 20

BAM Majestic Theater

### DanceAfrica

May 26, 27

BAM Opera House

Family Fun Series

### The Shooting of Dan McGrew

June 2, 10

BAM Majestic Theater

651

### Gospel Concert

June 9

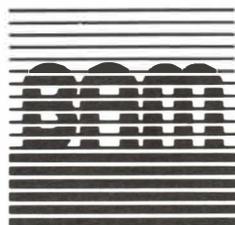
BAM Opera House

651

### Blue Lights in the Basement

June 16

BAM Opera House



BAM Opera

### Dido and Aeneas

June 20-23

BAM Majestic Theater

651

### Caribbean Carnival

June 24

BAM Majestic Theater

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# DIDO and AENEAS

PHOTO BY TOM BRAZIL

## Dido and Aeneas

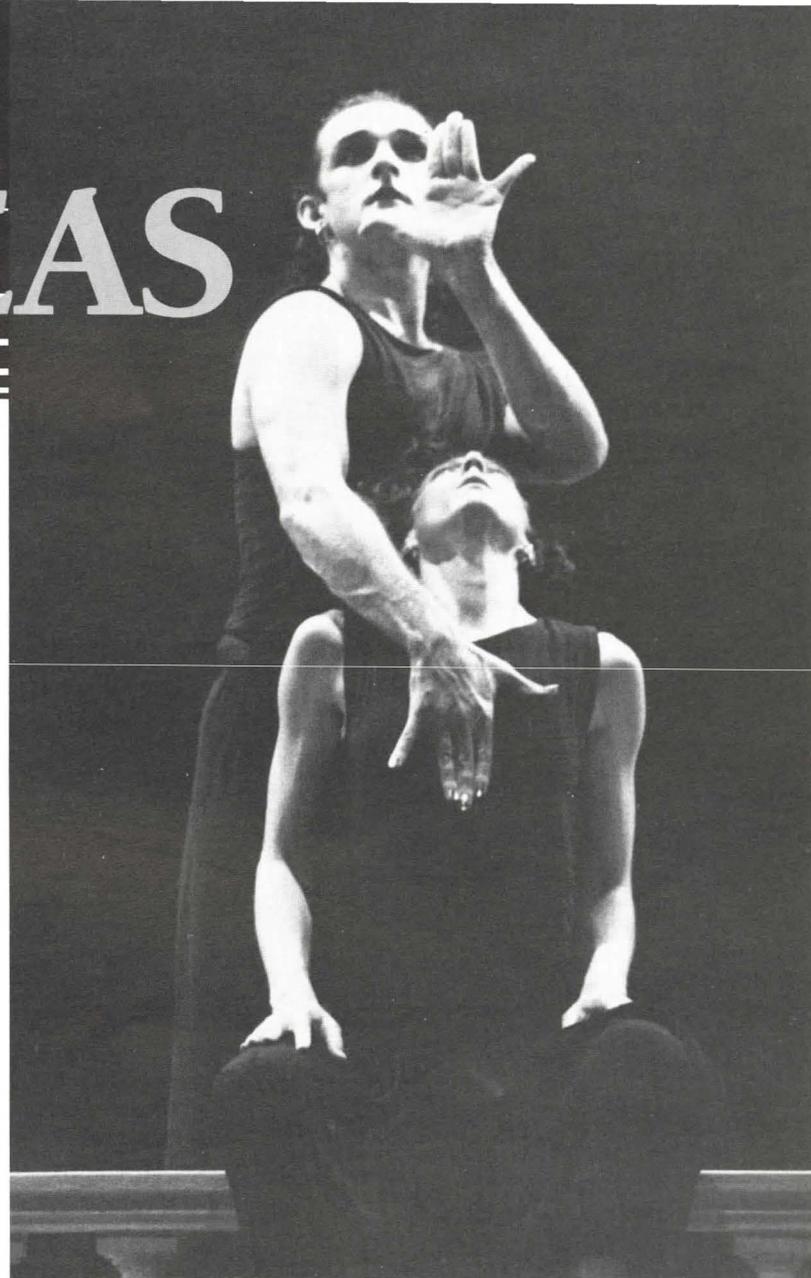
By Dale Harris

Three hundred years after the premiere of *Dido and Aeneas*, it requires a leap of historical imagination to make a connection between Purcell's powerful work and the unassuming, almost domestic circumstances of its first performance. From today's perspective, there's something distinctly odd about the fact that an opera whose subject is the carnal passion of mighty monarchs, — Dido is Queen of Carthage, Aeneas the founder of Rome — an opera, moreover, whose final scene portrays the destructive consequences of emotional betrayal, should have been written for a girls' boarding school, presumably as a kind of end-of-semester celebration.

"Presumably" — because our knowledge of the event is limited to whatever can be gleaned from the list of credits at the head of the printed libretto: "An Opera / Perform'd at / Mr. Josias Priest's Boarding-School at / Chelsey. / By young Gentlewomen./ The Words Made by Mr. Nat. Tate. / The Musick Composed by Mr. Henry Purcell." Only a single copy of this publication has survived. Without it, we would be even more in the dark than we are about the conditions under which *Dido and Aeneas* was first presented.

Still, given our knowledge of musical life in England in the latter years of the seventeenth century, we can assume a certain amount. The libretto may seem to ascribe exclusive responsibility for the performance to Josias Priest's pupils, but most scholars today think it unlikely that they carried the performance entirely on their own shoulders. The "Gentlewomen" no doubt sang in the chorus, took their place in the orchestra, and participated in the opera's many dances — Priest, after all, was the most eminent English dancing-master of the age, and dancing, like music, was a subject in which, in those times, women of gentle birth were taught to be proficient.

Despite this, it seems hardly likely that the fledgling talents of Priest's students sufficed to meet the expressive demands of Purcell's music. There is every probability that the ranks of the gentlewomen were reinforced by a number of professional singers and players. Dido, her opening utterance weighty with melancholy, her farewell to her companions darkened by her



Mark Morris with Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris in *Dido and Aeneas*.

BAM Opera presents

## Dido and Aeneas

by Henry Purcell

Libretto by Nahum Tate

Conducted by Nicholas McGegan

Staged and Choreographed by Mark Morris

with Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris

and Members of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra

BAM Majestic Theater

June 20, 21, 22, 23, 1990

This presentation is made possible, in part, by The Harkness Foundations for Dance.

acceptance of imminent death, is scarcely a role for a teenage girl. Neither is the malevolent Sorceress. In any case, the parts of Aeneas and the Sailors must have been filled by outsiders.

Yet even when we extend our notion of the opera to include the world beyond the confines of the prep school which commissioned it, a sense of incongruity persists. Acknowledge though we may the probability that Josias Priest hired a certain number of professional instrumentalists and singers, and, in addition,



PHOTO BY TOM BRAZIL

attracted a highly cultivated adult audience to the performance — immediately after the premiere of *Dido and Aeneas*, Purcell and Priest were commissioned by Thomas Betterton, the great actor-manager, to create another opera — we are still likely to feel a sense of disjunction.

One reason for this is that it's very difficult not to posit a connection between the social context of the opera's birth and the fact that Aeneas, the only individualized male character in the cast, is the merest cipher, especially by comparison with the much more fully realized Dido. Unlike Dido, Aeneas has no aria. Even Belinda, Dido's lady-in-waiting, is given the opportunity to establish her personality in solo song. Aeneas is the kind of male character who might have been created, out of hearsay, by a sheltered gentlewoman attending Priest's school, rather than by a worldly author with a string of metropolitan successes to his credit.

Aeneas' responses to the unfolding tragedy in which he is involved, for example, are for the most part mechanical. Unlike Dido, he exists not for his own sake but simply in order to play a pre-determined role in the ruin of the Queen. Dido, on the other hand, is distinguished above all by her capacity for feeling; indeed, the greatness of her character is not fully established

until the end of the opera, when she responds to her betrayal with a grief that only death can assuage.

Aeneas, by comparison, is hardly capable of feeling, let alone passion. The very weakness of his character, however, serves to magnify the stature of Dido. The Queen is abandoned by Aeneas and, finding no further purpose in an existence without the possibility of lifelong love, takes her own life. Aeneas abandons Dido with barely a qualm, and — followed by his men, the survivors of Troy — sets out from the African shore to seize his imperial destiny on the Italian peninsula.

Another reason we are continually aware of a fundamental discrepancy in *Dido and Aeneas* is that the incongruity between the opera's genteel origins and the emotional intensity expressed by the work as a whole is mirrored in the incongruity between Tate's language and Purcell's music, the one insipid, the other inspired. Tate, though appointed Poet Laureate three years after the appearance of *Dido and Aeneas*, and indubitably sophisticated, was a hack, who did not scruple to rewrite *King Lear* with a happy ending — not to mention a love affair between Cordelia and Edgar. His libretto for *Dido*, though, is no worse than those of many another successful opera. Despite the notoriety of the passage, there is nothing unique about the banality of the Sorceress' outburst after she has tricked Aeneas into abandoning Dido: "Our Plot has took. / The Queen forsook, ho, ho, ho."

Purcell — a born operatic composer, despite the lack of opportunity he was given to exercise that significant aspect of his genius — had no problem converting such doggerel to the ends of the musical drama. The music for the Sorceress, like that of the Witches, is chilling, even when, stylistically speaking, it borders on the comic. In 1698, three years after the composer's untimely death at the age of thirty-seven, John Playfair wrote about his gift for word-setting: "The Author's extraordinary Talent in all sorts of Musick is sufficiently known, but he was especially admir'd for the *Vocal*, having a peculiar Genius to express the Energy of *English Words*, whereby he mov'd the Passions of all this Auditors."

Throughout the opera, Purcell gives ample proof of this ability to touch the listener's feelings, and nowhere more so than in Dido's great lament, "When I am laid in Earth," long recognized as one of the peaks of operatic music because of the way in which it fuses beauty and expressiveness. Yet in watching the opera, we are always conscious of Tate's prissy dramaturgy. In Virgil, Aeneas abandons Dido at the command of Mercury, who awakens him from his dream of passion to an awareness of his divinely ordained duty to found the empire of Rome.

In the opera, Aeneas abandons Dido at the command of a spirit conjured up by the Sorceress, an "elf," as Tate's libretto has it, disguised as Mercury. The result is to change Aeneas from an instrument of the gods into the catspaw of a shrew, a shrew, besides, whose malevolence toward Dido is purely arbitrary: "The Queen of *Carthage* whom we hate, / As we do all in prosperous State. . . ." Thus is heroic opera reduced to the status of soap opera.

Or it would be had Purcell's music not transformed both the diction and the characterization bequeathed him by Tate. Not everything in the opera is on the inspired level of "When I am laid in Earth." Nor could it be, since Purcell's compassionate identification with the feelings of Dido necessarily exalts her fully only at

Mark Morris with Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris  
in *Dido and Aeneas*.



PHOTOS BY TOM BRAZIL

the point where she is prepared to die in the cause of an ideal love. But Purcell's skills as an operatic composer are never more clearly seen than in the inevitability with which the music — and thus the drama — rises to the awareness made manifest in Dido's farewell.

Previous productions of *Dido and Aeneas* in the metropolitan area, notably those at the Mini-Met in 1973 and City Opera 1979, have tended to take their cue from Tate rather than from Purcell — as, indeed, is commonly the case. It is the virtue of Mark Morris' radical staging — in which, as with Diaghilev's production of *Coq d'Or*, the action is provided by dancers, and not by singers — that the narrative elements of the work supply merely a framework for what is essentially a ceremonial experience. Envisioning the opera, not as a baroque spectacle, but as a mythic ritual of betrayal and despair, he has attempted to give Purcell's music the determinative role in illuminating the mysterious questions raised by the tragic fate of Dido.

*Dale Harris is Professor of Literature at Sarah Lawrence College and Professor of Art History at the Cooper Union. He writes about music for the New York Post, is a Contributing Editor of Opera Quarterly and is the dance critic of The Wall Street Journal.*

