

'TOP- DRAWER OPERA'

meets

STAR WARS

Rosie Clay, of Hurn Court Opera, tells the story behind this young company and its new production of Purcell's operatic jewel, *Dido and Aeneas*

PHOTOS: Hurn Court Opera



Guy Elliott as Damon in HCOs 2018 production of *Acis and Galatea*

Star Wars mixed with a classical tragedy by the Roman poet Virgil and music from one of the giants of English baroque – yes, we are talking about opera here. Add a select cast of young singers

fresh from conservatoire studies and a former Royal Ballet Principal, and you have a recipe for something very special.

Hurn Court Opera (HCO) brings all these elements together in a new production of Purcell's much-loved opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, which will be staged in Bournemouth and Salisbury in September.

Founded in 2017, HCO was set up as a charity to provide quality, paid performance opportunities for talented young classical singers launching their careers. The venture is the brainchild of Lynton Atkinson, the Artistic Director, who himself had an international career as a tenor soloist, and his wife mezzo-soprano, teacher and director, Joy Robinson.

The impetus was twofold. After many years of training, it's quite common for emerging classical singers to take unpaid work, and even pay to sing. 'In a small

way,' says Lynton, 'we wanted to create a few more, good-quality opportunities for artists at this stage'. Lynton and Joy's involvement with concerts at Hurn Court near Bournemouth, in aid of music therapy at Poole Hospital, provided another prompt. Both felt these events held the kernel of a larger enterprise.

In less than four years, our Bournemouth-based organisation has staged two operas, including a critically acclaimed production of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, masterclasses with international operatic stars and a regular series of vocal recitals. Our annual national Singer of the Year competition, now in its fourth year, provides both a competitive opportunity for singers between the ages of 20 and 29, and brings new talent into our view.

Lockdown of course slowed our activities. Our 2020 casted production of Mozart's *Così fan Tutti* had to be cancelled, as were all live recitals. But while singers' diaries emptied, we kept opportunities open in different ways, shifting the 2020 Singer of the Year competition online, running our planned masterclass online and commissioning lockdown recordings.

In keeping with our model, September's fully staged production of *Dido and Aeneas* features a cast of young singers who are reaching the end of, or have recently completed, conservatoire studies. ▶

In the title roles are Welsh lyric mezzo-soprano Angharad Rowlands as Dido and baritone Theo Perry as Aeneas. Natasha Page, soprano, will sing Belinda and countertenor Hamish McLaren performs the role of the Sorcerer.

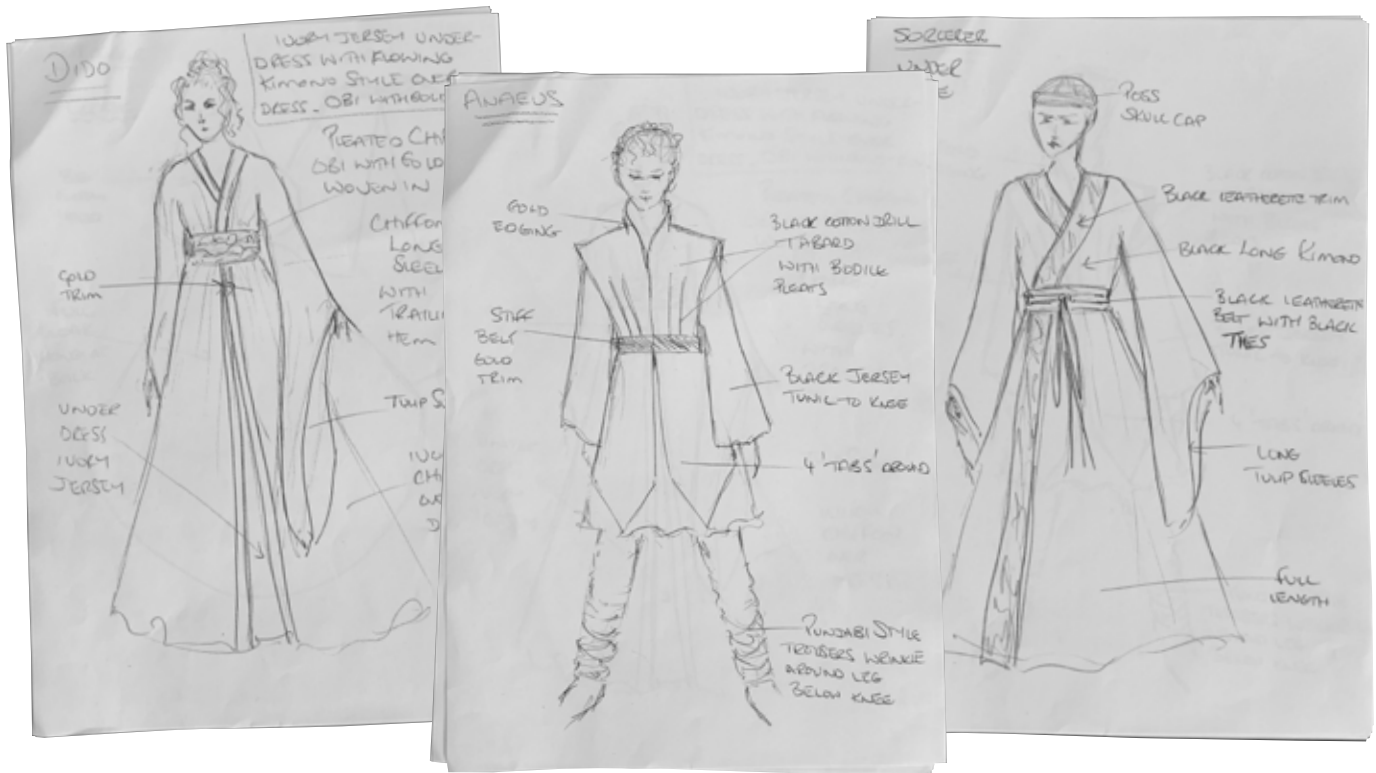
Although we don't have a formal young artists' programme, our Singer of the Year competition, which last year attracted a record 114 entries, is a key route through which talented singers can reach us – both Angharad and Natasha were finalists in the 2020 competition. Successful entrants may also receive offers of recitals and chances to take part in masterclasses. In this way we create an informal cycle of freelance work, that gradually moves on as singers become more established and new ones come on the scene.

Another important part of our mission is to give this young talent exposure to people at the top of the profession. The Singer of the Year judging panel has included distinguished figures from the music world such as baritone Sir Simon Keenlyside CBE, who is also our President, and international operatic soprano Claire Rutter. Claire has also generously given a masterclass for HCO young singers, as have other international stars such as soprano Kate Royal and tenor Mark Milhofer. Feedback from people like this is hugely valuable to a singer at the start of their careers.

For the coming production of *Dido*, we're delighted to welcome former star Principal of the Royal Ballet, Zenaida Yanowsky to the creative team. 'Nowadays,' Lynton explains, 'opera singers aspire to be complete stage



'Dido has some of the most gorgeous musical lines and poignant moments'



Illustrations by Sue Grove/Hurn Court Opera

The costumes for *Dido and Aeneas* designed by Sue Grove, draw on elements of Hanfu costumes from China and could be straight out of *House of Flying Daggers*, while the costume for Aeneas has more than a passing nod towards Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*!



Adam Maxey as the monster Polyphemus with the Chorus of HCOs 2018 production of *Acis and Galatea*

LET'S GO...

DIDO AND AENEAS:

September 2:

Richmond Hill St
Andrew's URC Church,
Bournemouth, BH2 6JJ

September 3:

Wilton Parish Church,
West Street, Wilton,
Salisbury, SP2 0DL

Both performances at 7.30pm. Tickets £25 from ticketsource.co.uk/hurncourt-opera. Under-18s and those in full-time education - free (ticket still needed).

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Other HCO events coming up...

AUTUMN RECITAL:

October 17:

Merley House, Wimborne

HCO SINGER OF THE YEAR

COMPETITION 2021:

November 14:

Bournemouth University

CHRISTMAS CONCERT:

December 5:

Church House, Wimborne,

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For further details go to hurncourtopera.org/whats-on

*HCO performances from your armchair: See these HCO productions online, Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (2018) and extracts from *The Magic Flute* (2019) at hurncourtopera.org/video.*

Watch lockdown performances from young artists at hurncourtopera.org/lockdown-performances



A scene from Hurn Court Opera's 2019 sell-out performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Pamina played by Joanna Songi, with the Three Spirits - Maria Willsher, Bradley Hubbard and Lizzie Reece

performers and so the chance for our cast to work with Zenaida, who's mastery of expressive movement on stage is unparalleled, is extraordinarily exciting'.

As Movement Director, Zenaida will blend movement, though not choreographed dance, with Purcell's baroque music. 'My aim,' she says 'is to stylise the movement of the singers but without losing the human breath. If by intertwining movement with the music and words of *Dido and Aeneas* we magnify the impact of this masterpiece, I would say we've done a good job.'

WHAT IS THE STORY OF DIDO AND AENEAS?

Composed in the 1680s, and based on Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*, the opera tells the story of Dido, Queen of Carthage and her love for the Trojan, Aeneas. Dido has made Carthage prosperous through her wisdom and leadership, and the heroic Aeneas has the potential to reign with her. But fate intervenes in the form of Mercury who ruthlessly destroys the lives of both lovers, culminating in one of opera's most beautiful and touching arias, Dido's lament. Director Joy Robinson observes 'You're left with the vision of Dido and Aeneas as the playthings or puppets of fate, subsumed within a higher vision.'

Supporting the cast will be a small ensemble of string instruments and a harpsichord. As was common in the baroque era, and in keeping with this, the music will be directed from the keyboard, meaning that the musical director both 'conducts' and plays at the same time.

Dido has some of the most gorgeous musical lines and poignant moments. Not only does it have that heart-breaking final aria which is regularly voted the nation's favourite, but the drama and emotion is communicated directly in English.

Opera may carry for some an elitist tag, but HCO firmly believes it is an art form that touches us all. Proving the point, our 2019 production of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* at Christchurch's Regent Centre sold out, drew a standing ovation and the accolade 'An unexpected feast of top-drawer opera' declared Will Frampton in the *Bournemouth Echo*.

'This response was tremendous,' adds Lynton. 'It exemplified completely our aim to showcase high-quality singing from young artists, and to enthuse audiences with its power and beauty.'

So, if you're new to opera, HCO's *Dido* may be the one to try. I also hope the opera buffs among you might be tempted too... ♦



Photo: Helena Cooke

ANGHARAD ROWLANDS, *Dido*

Mezzo-soprano Angharad has just finished the first year of an MA in Performance at the Royal Academy of Music. In 2019 she made her debut at the Royal Opera House as 2nd Bridesmaid in David McVicar's revival production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*.

'Welsh is my mother tongue, so I grew up in the Welsh folk tradition competing in the National Eisteddfod of Wales. I had a wonderful singing teacher at that stage, Leah Owen, who instilled in me the importance of storytelling.

I continued to sing at university where by chance Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Artistic Director of the Monteverdi Choir, heard me perform. He later invited me to join their Apprentices Programme and I've since sung with the choir all over the world. I'm delighted to be performing *Dido* with HCO, a role I've always wanted to explore. I'm also currently preparing solos for concerts with the Monteverdi Choir conducted by Gardiner at the Salzburger Festspiele in August – Covid permitting!'



Photo: Maddie Needham

THEO PERRY, *Aeneas*

Theo graduated from the MA course at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance with distinction in July 2020. The baritone was the winner of the Trinity Laban Gold Medal 2020, the Paul Simm Opera Award and a Director's Prize for Excellence. He moves on to join the Royal College of Music International Opera Studio in September.

'I first jumped on stage aged 14 for the local amateur dramatic society, and for a number of years I wanted to be an actor and musical theatre performer. While studying music theatre at university my singing teacher suggested I explore some Schubert. Very quickly I was hooked and started working on classical singing, then opera.

Recently, I've been navigating the current situation by working as an IT Technician in a school in London, while studying privately to prepare for *Dido and Aeneas* and the Opera Studio course at the Royal College of Music that starts in the autumn.'

MEET SOME OF THE CAST OF DIDO AND AENEAS



LYNTON ATKINSON,
Musical Director

Lynton's career as tenor soloist in opera, concert and oratorio began soon after his training at Cambridge University, leading to performances in prestigious venues throughout the world including The Royal Opera, where he was a contract principal artist. Before founding HCO and becoming Musical Director for its operas, he had directed the Gentlemen of St John's at Cambridge, conducted the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus and for the Broadstone Music Series.

'Hurn Court Opera has become very special to many people locally in a short period of time. We handpick from a nationwide pool of talented and highly trained young classical singers, and it seems that people absolutely love hearing the ones we choose. After all, our audience has the privilege of hearing singers at precisely the time in their lives when their voices have maximum beauty and elasticity. I really believe that these singers, will give the audience for *Dido* a truly memorable live operatic experience... and on their doorstep!'



JOY ROBINSON,
Director

Joy is a mezzo-soprano who has performed throughout Europe, notably singing the *Junge Hirt* in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Bayreuth Festival. A regular tutor on the Wessex Solo Singers courses, Joy has developed a respected teaching practice.

'Serendipity played a part in bringing the threads of this production together. Given the rare chance to collaborate with Zenaïda, we've been able to use movement to reveal the energy of attraction and resistance between people. This has made distance – which we've had to observe during rehearsals – a positive aspect of performance. It's also led us to use elements of Chinese Hanfu (the historical styles of clothing worn by the Han people in China) in the style of costumes, designed by Sue Grove, and an almost Oriental formality in the interaction of Dido's court which may resonate with people familiar with *Star Wars* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Plus Angharad (Dido) has a natural raw and powerful honesty in her singing, which we love.'



ZENAÏDA YANOWSKY,
Movement Director

Named Best Dancer at the National Dance Awards in 2016, and nominated for an Olivier Award in 2017, Zenaïda's dance career is illustrious. A Principal dancer with the Royal Ballet for 23 years, her numerous roles include Odette/Odile (*Swan Lake*), Sylvia, Sugar Plum Fairy (*Nutcracker*) and Manon.

'I retired from the stage in 2018, saw my last curtain call fall in front of my eyes and felt ready to embark on a new journey, coaching the new generation of dancers. Coming from a family of creatives, I've always been curious where choreography is concerned. I've worked with over 50 choreographers during my career, and have had to re-interpret their dance vocabulary to suit my physicality. That constant collaboration has given me enormous understanding of movement. Even if the *Dido* singers have limited dance experience, the movement I provide won't be alien but will carry through the intention of the composer.'

Working with Lynton and Joy is wonderful as they are both so openminded and knowledgeable.'