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theatre

Society : Kennet Opera  
Production : Dido and Aeneas/The Zoo  
Date : Friday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2018  
Venue : Arlington Arts - Newbury  
Report by : Jeanette Maskell

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## Show Report

Well I was certainly in for a treat having two for the price of one! These two performances could not have been more different. Dido and Aeneas whilst not being the most joyful of operas had been well cast and aptly dramatic. The Zoo in complete contrast was light hearted great fun and had also been well cast.

### **DIDO and AENAES**

**Tamsin Slatter** – (Dido) – This actress played the drama brilliantly. She displayed her emotions through her singing which was heartfelt and poignant; especially “Dido’s Lament”. Her deportment and bearing were absolutely right for the character which culminated in a fine performance.

**Luke Deacon** – (Aeneas) – What a super performance this was! It was adept and polished with a great characterisation. I very much enjoyed his singing which was quite effortless and was pleased to see that he kept in character whilst acting his way through his renditions. His interaction with Dido was first rate and his anguish at leaving believably tangible.

**Rachel Crisp** – (Belinda) – This was a delightful performance and I enjoyed every moment of her stage time. She had a lovely voice and I liked all her numbers however for me “Pursue thy Conquest” was a highlight of the performance.

**Lucy Fitt** – (Anna) – As friend to Belinda and Dido this young actress gave a super account of herself. She was serenely animated and engaged with audience brilliantly. Her duet with Belinda was well sung with some lovely harmonies; however she really came into her own with her solo “Oft she Visits”.

**Susan Moore** – (Sorceress) – What a fine character actor this young lady is! She had great stage presence and a strong powerful singing voice which truly matched her persona. I so enjoyed the rapport she had with the two witches and her “Ho Ho Ho” was magnificent.

**Clare Kirk** – (First Witch)

**Cathy Black** – (Second Witch) – This pair gave knockout performances making perfect foils for the sorceress! Their singing was absolutely superb with some sublime harmonies and their duet was superlative. They were visually animated and their movement befitted the characterisations perfectly.

**Ant Goffart** – (Trojan) – I really enjoyed this actor's performance. He had a rich tenor voice and impeccable diction which enhanced his solo famously.

**Camilla Kirk** – (Sacrifice) – Although this was a minor role it was nevertheless integral to the plot. This youngster acquitted herself admirably and played her part with a self-assured confidence.

**Kennet Opera Chorus** – This chorus started so well; "Shake the Clouds" was confident harmonious and well enunciated. However as the performance progressed there were some rather ragged moments; in particular "Thanks to these Lonesome Vales". The sailors however were in fine voice for their "Come away fellow Sailors". The ensemble kept their characters throughout moving effortlessly from one scene to the next. Whilst I appreciate the story did not give them much to smile about; I would have liked to have seen more facial expressions and animation.

**Dancers** – These four young dancers moved well with exquisite footwork and soft well defined lines. Their musicality was first rate and their movement completely in sync. One little note; a couple of the dancers had to make sure their feet were still at the end of their legs! Just be aware of this and keep looking up and out at the audience.

**Don Crerar** – (Stage Director) – For the most part this had been well directed with some excellent staging and groupings. However the continuous movement of the chorus settling themselves down during the start of the picnic scene was most distracting and could have been better thought out. Maybe had the chorus brought on their own chairs etc. rather than having the crew faffing around it would have been more natural and less intrusive. He had created some interesting and intimate scenarios which enhanced the overall performance. I liked the way he had the spirit appear on the steps in the auditorium which worked extremely well. He had given the chorus good direction with their characters and ensured they maintained them throughout. The final scene had been superbly set creating an atmospheric despondency.

**Justin Bindley** – (Music Director) – This MD had clearly spent a lot of time working with principals and chorus. Although there was the odd occasion when the chorus were a little ragged; the level of confidence he had instilled in them was superb. I appreciate that it is imperative for singers to see the conductor for their entries; however the positioning of the orchestra made it difficult for them to make this indiscrete; and there were times when this impacted on the fluidity of the action. That said he controlled the orchestra brilliantly and the balance between them and the singers was fantastic.

**Rachel Vallence** – (Choreographer) – The choreography that had been devised for this performance was balletic rhythmic and graceful. I thought it depicted the scenes and told the story perfectly. Although the movement given to the sailors was simple and static; it was nonetheless absolutely right and they kept immaculate time.

## THE ZOO

**Gavin Evans** – (Aesculapius Carboy) – I was absolutely smitten with this young man. His character shone through his acting and into his singing. He was deliciously morose and

overacted brilliantly at just the right moments. His interaction with the chorus was fabulous and his rapport with Laetitia completely over the top. However best of all was his instinctive reactions when acting with Grinder. I so enjoyed his singing which was articulate expressive and revealing.

**Susan Moore** – (Eliza Smith) – As the refreshment stall holder and love interest of Thomas this actress gave a lively and sassy performance. Visually she was animated and expressive and vocally she characterised her singing with a creditable cockney accent in both her solos. What a shame then that she did not employ this at any other time. She interacted well with everyone on stage and drew them into her story telling.

**James Mitchell** – (Thomas Brown) – A duke in disguise eating his way through Eliza's wares in order to prove his affection for her then fainting due to the sheer volume were just some of the well delineated characteristics of this actors portrayal. The rapport he created with Eliza was great; honest and simple yet extremely humorous. The reaction to his return as the Duke creeping through the crowd was funny and amusing. He had a good singing voice which suited his songs impeccably. I particularly enjoyed "Unaccustomed as I am to public ah! Ah!"

**Rachel Crisp** – (Laetitia) – I so enjoyed this young lady's performance; it was bright spirited and lively. She interacted and reacted intuitively to Aesculapius and Grinder. Her singing was exquisite and "Laetitia's Song" was a highlight of the evening. The trio "My Father" was highly amusing and I enjoyed it greatly.

**Don Crerar** – (Mr. Grinder) – This actor has a natural talent for comedy both visually and vocally. His characterisation was absolutely spot on and his comic antics quite hilarious. He has a strong clear singing voice which was perfect for "Where is my Daughter".

**Kennet Opera Chorus** – This chorus was superb. They had great characters and reacted brilliantly to each other and the principals as the action progressed. Their singing was expressive with great dynamics; the voices were well balanced as were their harmonies. They were clearly enjoying every moment of this performance and having the best time.

**Jim Petts** – (Stage Director) – This director brought out all the humour of the piece and gave it pace and energy. He had given the chorus some super characterisations and ensured they maintained them throughout; whether performing a chorus number or watching proceedings from the peripheral. Direction given to the principals was super and I so enjoyed the interaction he created within the relationships and the way he had convinced them to go over the top. His staging and groupings were terrific ensuring there was no crowding shadowing or upstaging. There were some delightful touches throughout which added to the overall performance. The scene with Grinder Laetitia and Aesculapius was so funny it had me laughing out loud!

**Justin Bindley** – (Music Director) – It would appear that Sullivan's music was easier to direct and develop with the cast than that of Purcell. Principals and chorus seemed more at ease and felt little need to keep looking at you. They sang with confidence achieving good diction and dynamics with effortless flow and fluctuation. Once again the orchestra was superb and I very much enjoyed their playing.

**Suzanne Thomson** – (Set Designer) – This designer had created a simplistic set for Dido and Aeneas with a central dais and sacrificial table and a more intricate set for The Zoo which nicely depicted the central refreshment area of the zoo.

**Jo Spratt** – (Stage Manager) – with DSM **Sam Spaak** and **Crew** although there was comparatively little for this SM to do; she nonetheless ensured the crew carried out their changes quickly and efficiently.

**Vicky Allen** – (Lighting/Sound) – I'm guessing that it was the director's decision to use projection for the Witches? Such a shame he didn't want any more! This meant there was only a cyclorama for this technician to light. However she made great use of colour making it interesting for the audience. There were some super intimate spots which created real atmosphere and the spirit in the auditorium was extremely well spotted which is no mean feat. I really liked the lighting for the final scene with Dido in a spot at the back which gradually faded to black whilst keeping the rest of the cast in full light at the front. Superb! For The Zoo more general lighting had been plotted although there was still a good use of spots.

I have on previous occasions had cause to criticise the sound in this venue; however I would like to commend this technician for the excellent sound quality achieved. I was impressed with the balance she attained with the sound effects. They were clearly audible yet totally unobtrusive.

**Phil Hallam/John Heywood/Chris Moore** – (Set Build) – The set for The Zoo looked bright and colourful with two flats either side at the back one a bear in a cage and one of a lion which had been well painted with good detail. I liked the signposts which added greatly to the set and Eliza's booth which was functional and brightly decorated. All items were sturdy and well built.

**Gay Buchanan** – (Props) – This props mistress really had her work cut out. There were so many props; banners rugs cushions chairs umbrellas tables picnic hampers ropes bottles cakes too many to mention really but all appropriate for their use! She must have been on her toes throughout the two performances. The stage for Dido and Aeneas was simply but well-dressed making use of different colour covers for the centre piece. I'm guessing Aeneas had friends in England who sent him the Fortnum and Mason picnic hamper!

**Lili Tuttle/Helen Ryan** – (Costume Design) – assisted by **Grant Wheatley** – Costumes were authentic to the period for both pieces and accessories added the finishing touch. What a shame then that the men had such a variety of shoes that were modern looking; which rather spoilt the overall effect. Something to think about for the future.

**Elisabete Santos** – (Makeup Design) – assisted by **Deanna Ellington** makeup had been well applied with good definition. Although the witches had a white base their features were still well defined and we were able to see their expressions.

**Mike Merchant/Felicity Merchant** – (Programme) – This was a good quality programme which was well laid out and informative. A nice size legible font had been used which made for easy reading and the cast photos were crisp and clear.

**Jim Needham/Karen Cameron-Taylor/Justine Fry/Philippa Harper/Lizzie Weller** – (Front of House) – This team was friendly and approachable. A special mention to Jim Needham and Justine Fry who looked after me famously!

Thank you

**Jet**

Jeanette Maskell - NODA Representative - London Region - Area 13