

A singalong Dido and Aeneas

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Audience participation was key to this spirited production at Longborough festival opera

“Yes, it’s that kind of show,” shouted Bjarte Eike, artistic director of the early music group Barokksolistene, as he urged a hesitant audience to yell “hah!” on cue. The show in question was Purcell’s [Dido and Aeneas](#) (1689) in a new staging for Longborough festival opera in Gloucestershire, directed by Erlend Samnøen and designed by Alys Whitehead. Not quite singalong-a-Dido – her untouchable Lament remained blessedly untouched – but participation was key. Soon the intrepid crowd was bawling out the sea shanty Haul Away Joe, more or less in tune. The connection with *Dido*? Sailors.

Longborough festival, founded by Martin and Lizzie Graham in 1991 in the grounds of their Cotswolds home, won widespread recognition after mounting Wagner’s Ring in 2013. Another full cycle was staged last year. This season marked an ending: Martin Graham, the puckish, free-thinking visionary builder – he was rather more than that, but canny skill with a digger was key to his success in constructing a Bayreuth-inspired theatre in his garden – died earlier this year. His daughter, the director Polly Graham, is now artistic director. Sadness at his absence notwithstanding, the festival is alive and moving forward. This *Dido and Aeneas* reflects that spirit.



Jasmine Flicker's Belinda

Established in Norway two decades ago, Barokksolistene combine historical nous with their own style of tightly disciplined improvisation. (You can also hear them in Edinburgh and at the Proms this summer.) Productions develop in rehearsal, starting with jamming sessions. For *Dido*, the musicians, playing from memory, were on stage interacting with the drama, as if they themselves were props and sets in constant motion. The simple staging made deft use of lighting (by Peter Small) and a painted backdrop reminiscent of a 17th-century classical scene.

Purcell's short opera, first performed by the "young gentlewomen" of Josias Priest's School for Young Ladies in Chelsea, has survived incomplete. To make a whole evening's entertainment, Barokksolistene expanded the action and added a villain at whom the audience could boo. The result was far more porous and masque-like, with alehouse songs and nods to Shakespeare dropped in. Purcell's affecting *Music for a While*, from another work altogether, was beautifully sung by Jasmine Flicker (Belinda). In its use of a ground (repeated) bass, the song acted as a pre-echo to *Dido's Lament*, which uses the same technique.

The impressive 12-strong cast, led by Camilla Seale (*Dido*) and Sam Young (*Aeneas*), was drawn from the festival's Emerging Artists scheme. Longborough Youth Chorus, a committed group of seven- to 18-year-olds, sang the choruses, cheerfully shapeshifting as required. They rehearse and perform throughout the year. For some, it is their only form of music education. It is worth remembering, as the "country house" opera season draws to a close, the unseen work these private companies do.



Perfect pitch: Nikolai Lugansky performs at the Oxford piano festival on 29 July

Oxford piano festival, held annually in the last week of July in venues around the city, combines world-class recitals with masterclasses and a recital for early-career soloists. Its ethos is summed up as “exchange over competition”. I heard two contrasting international stars: the Icelandic [Vikingur Ólafsson](#) at the Sheldonian theatre and the Russian [Nikolai Lugansky](#) in Merton College Chapel. Lugansky, self-possessed, magnetic and inscrutable, usually associated with Russian music, chose Beethoven, Schumann and arrangements of Wagner. He ended with Liszt’s supremely virtuosic Legend No 2: St Francis of Paola Walking on the Waves. The saint crosses the sea by laying his cloak on the water. Tiny ripples soon turn into a heaving ocean. The tumult of chromatic runs, on the page like swarms of eels, can sound flashy. Lugansky, unfazed by any technical challenge, digs beneath the surface to engage with Liszt the heartfelt musician, giving all the pianistic flamboyance meaning.

Ólafsson poured fierce, unblinking absorption into an 80-minute programme of Bach, Beethoven and Schubert played without a break. Always seeking out musical connections, at the end he explained his choices: works in the keys of E minor or E major, which to him were palpably in dialogue with each other. As someone with synaesthesia, he associates keys with colours. His green velvet jacket was the clue we needed. He also, like Lugansky, has perfect pitch. In his Bach encore, a passing car horn interrupted concentration. “It’s OK – it’s in the key of E,” Ólafsson quickly noted, mid-phrase, and we all relaxed.

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