



Bjarte Eike brought the raucous atmosphere of his Alehouse Sessions to Purcell's Dido and Aeneas

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FIRST NIGHT

Dido and Aeneas review — purists may clutch their pearls but this rocked

Bjarte Eike's riotous energy made him the perfect choice to reinvent Purcell's opera in this concert staging at the Glasshouse in Gateshead

[Simon Thompson](#)

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The Norwegian violinist and conductor Bjarte Eike is most familiar in the UK as head of the Barokksolistene, his troupe of badly behaved musicians who recreate the raucous tavern music of Restoration London. He may seem like an odd choice to let loose on the altogether more decorous world of baroque

opera, yet it's that very sense of riotous energy that made him the perfect choice to take on *Dido and Aeneas*.

The performance he headed at the Glasshouse, Gateshead, was a descendant of the staging he mounted at Longborough last summer, but here it was stripped of sets and costumes. Instead the dramatic focus was poured into the music, to exhilarating effect, because Eike took all the lessons of his Alehouse Sessions and applied them with ear-opening dynamism to Purcell.

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Part of that was in his instrumental approach, with everything pared back and opened out, delivering an orchestral sound of optimum transparency. Gateshead's Royal Northern Sinfonia, supplemented by a handful of Norwegian guest musicians who helped to deliver a terrific kick to the continuo, bought into this fully with lithe period-influenced playing, although the slightly gusty singing of the incongruously large RNS Chorus occasionally undid the effect.



Katie Bray led the cast as an imperious Dido

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More mischievously, Eike interpolated other music, from foot-stamping sea shanties and folk songs to other Purcell arias, throughout the score. Purists may clutch their pearls, but with a guide as winning as Eike the effect was enriching, and nobody could possibly complain about the opportunity to hear Rowan Pierce's Belinda sing *Music for a While*, whatever the context.

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The one misfire came at the end. After Dido’s lament, which Eike sensibly allowed to unfold without interference, the deceased queen was given a wake consisting of a suite of music that ranged from Purcell’s *Funeral Sentences* to Tyneside folk songs. All very interesting, but it didn’t half kill the sense of tragic catharsis you get over Dido’s deathbed.

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Still, with a singing cast led by Katie Bray’s imperious Dido, Jonathan McGovern’s vigorous Aeneas and Lea Shaw’s dark, dangerous Sorceress we were in top class company. And it was one of those interpolations that stole the show: an aria from *The Fairy-Queen* sung with understated grace by the soprano Jasmine Flicker, which seemed to speak as powerfully about the dilemmas of love as anything in *Dido*.

★★★★☆

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