

**Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* directed by Jason Goldberg
to be performed at Oberlin and CWRU**



by Mike Telin & Daniel Hautzinger

Directing an opera is an enormous task. “Opera equals nuclear fusion,” said Jonathon Field, Director of Opera Theatre at the Oberlin Conservatory. But Jason Goldberg, a fifth-year student majoring in vocal performance and opera directing at Oberlin Conservatory, isn’t afraid of the challenge.

On April 15 and 16 at 8:00 pm in Oberlin’s Fairchild Chapel and on April 17 at 3:00 pm in Case Western Reserve University’s Harkness Chapel, Goldberg will present his production of Henry

Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, a student-led project in collaboration with CWRU.

Goldberg, a New Jersey native, is only the third student in the history of the school to pursue an individual major in opera directing. Having already staged Gian Carlo Menotti’s one-act opera *The Telephone*, Goldberg’s production of *Dido and Aeneas* is his final project.

“When I told Jonathon Field I wanted to produce *Dido and Aeneas*, he was silent,” Goldberg recalled. “Then he said, ‘*Dido* — why *Dido*? That’s one of the most difficult pieces because you have every element of theater in it!’ And I replied, ‘That’s exactly why I want to do it. You have music, intense drama, dance, and props. There are difficulties in terms of the lighting when switching back and forth between the witches and the court. Then there is so much research involved around the mythology. And it happens to be one of my favorite operas of all time.’”

Based on Book IV of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the opera recounts the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for the Trojan hero Aeneas, and her despair when he abandons her after witches interfere in their romance.

After reading three different translations of the *Aeneid*, including one by C. Day-Lewis, Goldberg decided he wanted to mount a historically-informed production, complete with

period instruments and fully fleshed-out Baroque dance. Upon a suggestion from Webb Wiggins, Oberlin's Associate Professor of Harpsichord, Goldberg approached Julie Andrijeski, Senior Instructor of Baroque Violin and Dance at CWRU, to be the choreographer for *Dido*.



“It’s really great to have a collaboration with Oberlin,” Andrijeski said. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a while.” The dancers for the production are all members of CWRU’s Baroque Dance Ensemble, which provides student musicians with the opportunity to learn about movement as well as performing the dances. “The Baroque period is a special time for dance because there was a very specific notation for the choreography that was initiated by Louis XIV in France,” Andrijeski said.



“The opera contains five dances. Two are noble dances using traditional steps that you would find in formal choreography from the time,” Andrijeski explained. “Then there are character dances, including two witches’ dances, where I’ve incorporated a little bit of *commedia dell’arte*. We know that part of being a witch is to do everything wrong. You turn your feet in instead of out — things like that. Finally there is the hornpipe or sailor’s dance, which is more caricatured and raucous.”

Goldberg’s next order of business was to enlist a music director. At Wiggins’ suggestion, he contacted Nicholas Capozzoli, a master’s student in historical performance at Oberlin. “Nick has been one of the best students I’ve ever had the opportunity to work with,” Wiggins said. “He’s always prepared, diligent, intelligent, and unfailingly pleasant and fun.”

“This is the first opera I’ve ever been in, let alone music directed!” Capozzoli said. “But it’s been the perfect opportunity to combine many of the interests I have developed over the past 5 years at Oberlin, including historical keyboard playing and early choral singing.”



Capozzoli said that Baroque opera is all about dramatic contrasts and text. “Purcell is the master of text-setting, expertly evoking the imagery of each line. The music is always shifting emotions, sometimes within a single measure. I think of this opera as a musical variety show, and Purcell gives us French overtures, grounds, Italianate recitatives, and even sea shanties.”

Goldberg’s next task was finding singers. Luckily for him, when Jonathon Field was about to hold auditions for his production of Handel’s *Alcina*, he allowed Goldberg to audition singers for *Dido*’s eleven-member cast at the same time.

“The audition process was fascinating,” Goldberg said. “Doing it on that scale with that many people was absolutely eye-opening.”

Katherine Early, who will perform the role of Dido, first sang that character’s famous ‘Lament’ when she was sixteen years old. “At the time, I was still oblivious to much of the opera world, let alone the historical importance of this opera,” Early said. “Now, knowing full well that great divas like Jessye Norman and Janet Baker have so masterfully sung the role, it is certainly a more humbling prospect to work on it.”

“Aeneas mostly functions as an object of Dido’s affections,” Adam Wells said about his character. “One of the things that Jason and I have discussed is Aeneas’s sincerity. How much is genuine? How much is a façade? I find Aeneas to have a balance of the two.” Wells added, “I think the production has really brought out everyone’s creativity in the best way. We manage to keep things light and have fun while getting the work done.”



In addition to directing, Jason Goldberg is also the opera's producer. "Part of what I'm training students to do," said Jonathon Field (pictured above), "is not only to think artistically like a stage director, but to also think managerially. They learn about creating rehearsal schedules and contracts, and how to negotiate with people to come up with a plan that is equitable for all parties."

Goldberg said he has enjoyed wearing the producer hat. "There have been so many different learning experiences in terms of making sure everyone is on the same page. Considering how new this is to me, it has been a huge learning curve, but it has been so valuable."

We asked Field what makes Jason Goldberg a fit for the independent major in opera directing. "As a child performer he worked at The Metropolitan Opera with conductors like James Levine and Mark Elder, and directors like Julie Taymor and Otto Schenk. He knows those people and I think he brings a sense of standards and an awareness of the art form that many people his age don't have."

"Jason is coming from a line of opera directors who have created self-designed majors at Oberlin," Field added. "Lydia Steier was the first — she is directing in Berlin, and recently directed at LA Opera. Erich Einhorn was the second. He runs his own company (On Site Opera) and is on the directing staff of The Met. Jason is the third, and what I'm proudest of is that they are all different, and none of them direct like I do."

Everyone we spoke with agreed that being part of Jason Goldberg's student-run production of *Dido and Aeneas* has been a great experience. Webb Wiggins summed things up. "When trust — with some guidance — is placed in curious and motivated students, great things can happen."

Rehearsal photos by [Julie Crookston-Gulenko](#).

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