

Mark USHER, with John PEEL and Janice JOHNSON
Vivit et astra tenet: Epitaphs, Elogia, and Astral Immortality

*Voces Vergiliana*e was commissioned by Willamette University, and premiered March 10, 1999, in Salem, Oregon. We, the composer and librettist, will discuss our collaboration on this opera, and the soprano soloist who premiered in the role of Dido will perform selections to illustrate the ways in which *Voces Vergiliana*e is a modern reflex of early opera and ancient tragedy.

Voces is a late twentieth-century interpretation of the amorous tragedy of Dido and Aeneas, itself a classic theme of the early modern lyric theater. Previous operatic treatments include, of course, Purcell's opera from 1689 and Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1890). The music to *Voces* is crafted in a modern post-tonal language that is sensitive to the dramatic needs of the text. At times the sonorities and lines are controlled by a central tonality or underlying bass line—scene II, for example, contains a ground-bass homage to Purcell's "When I am Laid." At other times, such as the death of Dido in scene IV, the text brings forth music of greater complexity—angular, raw, visceral perhaps more in the world of Strauss' *Elektra*. The formal organization of the music contains elements derived from opera seria and baroque oratorio. These include recitative, aria, scena, passacaglia, choral and ensemble numbers.

The libretto is a cento or pastiche of verses drawn not only from Books 1 and 4 of the *Aeneid*, but from other books of the poem as well. The love duet of Dido and Aeneas in the cave borrows imaginatively from the Georgics. Many of these verses have nothing directly to do with either Dido or Aeneas; and even when they do, the characters in *Voces* often sing lines not assigned to them in the *Aeneid* proper. In displacing such passages the idea was to construct a narrative that was organic and faithful to its source, yet one that could also comment at a deeper level on the many thematic and semantic links between various scenes in Vergil's intricate poem. The result is an interpretation of the whole *Aeneid* through its parts: the disparate, even dissonant voices of its many characters meld for a moment to sing of arms, a man, a woman, and their love. This is especially true of the Chorus, who sing from multiple perspectives in this piece. Polyphonic in every sense, they are at once Trojan and Carthaginian in their sympathies, and sometimes play the role of an omniscient narrator.

Vergil lived through one of the most tumultuous periods of Roman history. As a young man, he experienced the ravages of war during the civil unrest of the late Republic, and in later life enjoyed the blessings of Roman peace under Octavian. His poetry refracts the uncertainty of his times; it is an achieved anxiety creatively poised between hope and despair. This too we have tried to convey: *Voces* begins with an optimistic passage taken over verbatim from Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, and ends with Dido's suicide, narrated by the Chorus, who sing the final lines of the epic—lines that properly describe not Dido's death by her own hand, but Aeneas' slaughter of his enemy, Turnus. Dido and Turnus are but two of the many casualties in Rome's relentless march to world domination, and Vergil himself invites his readers to make the connection between them in the *Aeneid*. We wanted to make it explicit—suggestively—by using lines from the one scene to evoke the

other, and underscoring it musically by thematic, motivic and instrumental parallels. The structure of the opera is meant to be suggestive as well. It is modeled loosely on Greek tragedy, whose formal conventions of strophe, antistrophe, and epode organize the choral passage in scene II.

In reworking Vergil's poetry for this new occasion, we often had to change a word in a line, or play with a given Latin word's connotation to make a verse fit its new context. In every instance, however, we have preserved the metrical integrity of the original hexameter. Others have reworked Vergil's poetry along similar lines, often setting his verses to non-Vergilian themes: Ausonius of Bordeaux in the fourth century; Scottish theologian Alexander Ross in the seventeenth. One Renaissance reader, Maphaeus Vegius, found the abrupt ending of the Aeneid unsatisfactory and composed a happier ending, an additional Thirteenth Book in perfect Vergilian Latin. For our part, we have found Vergil a sufficient interpreter of himself, and have let him speak in his own multifarious voices: *Voces Vergilianae*.