

Total performance time: approximately 120 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

# 'I never laid eyes on Aeneas ...': Women's Stories from the Ancient World

**Nardus Williams** soprano

**Elizabeth Kenny** archlute / theorbo

**Mary Beard** classicist

**John Blow** (1649–1708)

Welcome, welcome ev'ry guest

Sappho to the Goddess of Love

**Henry Purcell** (1659–1695)

Beneath a dark and melancholy grove (1681)

**Barbara Strozzi** (1619–1677)

Begli occhi ('Beautiful eyes')

**Francesca Caccini** (1587–1640)

O vive rose ('O bright roses')

Dispiegate, guancie amate

('Unfold, beloved cheeks')

INTERVAL

**Henry Purcell**

Dido's Lament, from *Dido and Aeneas* (1689)

**Barbara Strozzi**

Mi fa rider ('It makes me laugh')

**Francesca Caccini**

Dov'io credea le mie speranze

('Where I believed my hopes')

**Henry Purcell**

Nymphs and Shepherds

**Daniel Purcell** (1664–1717)

When Daphne first her Shepherd saw

**Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre** (1665–1729)

Jupiter avait fait ..., Quel triomphe, from *Semele*

(arr. Elizabeth Kenny)

**George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759)

Endless Pleasure, from *Semele* (1743)

(arr. Kenny)

John Blow's musical career reads like a procession through the landscape of sacred music in Restoration England. Transferred at a young age from his local parish choir in Nottinghamshire to the Chapel Royal, he subsequently progressed through the roles of Gentleman, organist and choirmaster. He was later organist at Westminster Abbey, and choirmaster at the newly consecrated St Paul's Cathedral.

A prelude invocation of the Muses was a convention of classical poetry and imitated throughout the Renaissance. Blow's **Welcome, welcome ev'ry guest** falls squarely within that tradition, appositely drawing together the key threads of the classical world, its legacies and artistic invention.

Aside from his prolific output of sacred music, Blow was also a successful composer for the stage. His *Venus and Adonis* is often considered the first English opera. Interestingly, the feminist perspective of the libretto has led to its attribution to various women writers from the literary firmament of the Restoration. Closely associated with this circle was Arabella Hunt, celebrated soprano and lutenist, for whom **Sappho to the Goddess of Love** was written. Rumoured to have been the lover of Aphra Behn and Nell Gwyn, she was also married for six months until the union was dissolved on the grounds that the other party was in fact a woman. We remain with Sappho in **Beneath a dark and melancholy grove**, by Henry Purcell. Widely considered to be the master of English Baroque style, Purcell, like Blow, effortlessly moved between music for the church and the stage.

Already a noted performer by the age of 16, Barbara Strozzi was able to fashion her own stage – the *Academia degli Unisoni*, over which she presided – fostering debate, rhetoric and musical performance. However, these recondite meetings precipitated allegations against her, alluding to the well-worn connection between music-making and sexual license. In **Begli occhi**, a deeply sexually charged song, she hardly shies away from these insinuations. Intriguingly, much of the imagery of the song echoes the only contemporaneous painting of her, in which she is depicted with many of the symbols of the coetaneous Venetian courtesan – bare breast, references to flora and inert musical instrument. Her oeuvre tells a different story, of longer-term ambition: her eight books of songs, madrigals and cantatas made her the most-published composer (male and female) of the 17th century.

Francesca Caccini swiftly ascended to become the highest paid musician in the Tuscan court, under the beneficence of Christian de Lorraine. This exceptional confluence of both female composer and patron, perhaps explains the liberated and subversive perspective of **O vive rose** and **Dispiegate, guancie amate**. All three Caccini songs featured in this programme come from her remarkable collection *Il Primo Libro delle Musiche*. Published in 1618, it was 'the most extensive collection of solo songs by a single composer that had hitherto appeared in print'. Embracing both sacred and secular subjects, the collection featured every conceivable style of song from the period, ranging from hymn to madrigal, yet all tied together in her distinctive style.

A version of the Dido episode in the *Aeneid* loomed large in the imagination of 17th-century poets and librettists, most of whom were keen to stress the poor choice made by the Queen of Carthage in yielding to passion, thereby threatening the hero's pre-destined Fate. Purcell's music undermines librettist Nahum Tate's moral certainty, tugging listeners towards her point of view with the unarguable power of the now-famous Lament.

The female lament became one of the central pillars of vocal music in the 17th century, owing to the hugely influential and much imitated 'Lamento d'Arianna' (Ariadne's Lament) by Claudio Monteverdi. In **Mi fa rider** we see Strozzi in dialogue with this tradition wryly highlighting recurrent classical themes and claiming they are merely myths. Caccini's **Dov'io credea le mie speranze** is thought to have been written in response to the Monteverdi; reimagining the same scene, but through the subtleties of text and music, she presents a reflective rather than resigned Arianna.

We now move into the world of **Nymphs and Shepherds**. Written by Purcell for an earlier play *The Libertine* by Thomas Shadwell, despite its genesis as occasional music, the song was frequently recycled through the years; from Vauxhall Pleasure Garden standard in the 18th century; to concert hall staple in the Victorian era. Daniel Purcell's **When Daphne first her Shepherd saw** concludes this section. Unlike his more famous brother, this Purcell did leave London and became organist of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was noted for the quality of his puns and drinking. The text for this song was written by the poet and feminist essayist Mary Chudleigh, who was notable for her advocacy of women's education and marriage reform.

Like Caccini and Strozzi, Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre had the benefit of an exceptional education – in Jacquet de La Guerre's case this was overseen by Louis XIV's mistress, Madame de Montespan. Unusually for a woman composer of her day, she was more closely associated with instrumental music. **Jupiter avait fait un indiscret serment** and **Quel triomphe, quelle victoire** come from her cantata *Semelé*.

Superseding the English Baroque style exemplified by Purcell, Italian opera became the hot ticket in early 18th-century London, and no one composed Italian opera for the London stage more successfully than German-born George Frideric Handel. **Endless Pleasure** comes from Handel's oratorio *Semle*. It was a genre-busting work in many ways; a secular work for the Lenten period; an opera in all but name; a Handel drama that featured pastiches of Alessandro Scarlatti, Telemann, et al. Naturally the public of the day were somewhat confused, and the run was not a particular success. Today, it is hugely popular and is regularly performed across the world in all its paradoxical glory.

The Greek poet Sappho takes a large part in the programme. Living around 600 BCE on the Greek island of Lesbos, and later nicknamed the ‘tenth Muse’, she was especially famous for her poems of desire for other women (hence our term ‘lesbian’). But she was not the only woman writer in the ancient world, even though much less written by her successors now survives. One of these, following in the tradition of Sappho in focusing on love and passion (not necessarily for women) is Nossis, from a city in southern Italy around 300 BCE. Their poetry gives a glimpse of what was once a rich tradition of women’s poetry in ancient Greece and Rome.

More often in surviving literature women’s voices are ventriloquised, or their stories told, by male authors – as Virgil in the first century BCE scripts the dying words of Dido as she is abandoned by Aeneas, or Ovid a little later describes the plight of Semele (who is tricked into looking directly at Jupiter, her secret lover, and is incinerated by the sheer sight of him). But male writers also offer some unexpected angles on women’s words and lives: from the extraordinarily explicit description on the tombstone of a Roman woman, to a racy dialogue between two Greek female partygoers getting ready to go out, or the late-Roman poet who turns the myth on its head and imagines Dido saying that she never set eyes on Aeneas. These ancient women’s stories continue to be reworked even now – as the American poet Carolyn Kizer, for example, asks us to rethink the tragic story of Semele.

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### from Carolyn Kizer: *Semele Recycled*

After you left me forever,  
I was broken into pieces,  
and all the pieces flung into the river.  
Then the legs crawled ashore  
and aimlessly wandered the dusty cow-track.

[...]

After I died forever in the river,  
my torso floated, bloated in the stream,  
catching on logs or stones among the eddies.  
White water foamed around it, then dislodged it;  
after a whirlwind trip, it bumped ashore.  
A grizzled old man who scavenged along the banks  
had already rescued my arms and put them by,  
knowing everything has its uses, sooner or later.  
But then your great voice rang out under the skies  
my name!—and all those private names  
for the parts and places that had loved you best.

[...]

our two bodies met like a thunderclap  
in midday—right at the corner of that wretched field  
with its broken fenceposts and startled, skinny cattle.

We fell in a heap on the compost heap  
and all our loving parts made love at once,  
while the bystanders cheered and prayed and hid their eyes  
and then went decently about their business.

from *Cool, Calm & Collected*, © 2002 by Carolyn Kizer  
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#### List of readings:

1. **Plato** (427–348 BCE), attrib.  
Palatine Anthology 9, 506

2. **Sappho** (630–c.570 BCE)  
Poem 31 (extracts) (from Longinus, *On the Sublime* 10)

3. **Sappho**  
Fragment 193 (from Aelius Aristides, *Orations* 28, 51)

4. **Epitaph of Allia Potestas** (1st–4th centuries CE)  
Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum 6, 37965 (extracts)

5. **Nossis** (fl. 300 BCE)  
Palatine Anthology 5, 170

6. **Sappho**  
Poem 16 (from a papyrus)

1. **Virgil** (70–19 BCE)  
Aeneid 4, 653–660 (extracts) and Aeneid 6, 469–471

2. Palatine Anthology 16, 151 (extracts)

3. **Theocritus** (c.300–after 260 BCE)  
Idyll 15 (extracts)

4. **Carolyn Kizer** (1925–2014)  
‘Semele Recycled’ (extracts), from *Cool, Calm & Collected*  
(Copper Canyon Press, 2002)

5. **Ovid** (43 BCE–17/18 CE)  
Metamorphoses 3, 280–285

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