DECLAMATION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH OPERA, or
THE NATURE OF “RECITATIVE MUSICK”

by

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ABSTRACT

During the English Reformation, composers attempted to create a uniquely English take on opera, one rooted in dramatic elements and conventions tied to the English court masque of the earlier part of the century. One component essential to opera, recitative, was understood then and now to be an Italian invention, and though the Britons knew it to be an indispensible element of operatic style, they had only a passing acquaintance with its specific characteristics. Using stylistic features present in declamatory lutesongs from within masques and without, English composers attempted to develop their own brand of musical monody to fulfill the dramatic function of recitative in their operas. Traditionally, the stunted growth of this tradition has been explained by cultural and political factors alone; however, this study shows how the difficulties encountered while developing an English recitative tradition prevented composers from having the tools necessary for their operas to flourish. This fact is shown by examining the obstacles that had to be overcome when attempting to reconcile a rich, existing tradition of dramatic poetry with the demands of creating a moving and varied musical setting of the text. Further, an attempt is made to define the genre of English recitative and the breadth of style therein by examining the specific features of declamation in the major operatic works of Restoration England. The analysis further shows how the inconsistent degree of efficacy in these composers’ efforts prevented them from creating a conventionalized style of declamation applicable to all dramatic situations.
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I. Introduction

Proportionately, the number of operas in English is small, and musicians and scholars alike would be hard-pressed to name any besides *Dido and Aeneas* or perhaps one of Benjamin Britten’s works. Naturally, some anglophones might bemoan such an underrepresentation of their language in the opera world, yet many (especially singers) accept the situation, for English has long been labeled a cumbersome language for singing. But while the French language presents similar problems when sung, the reign of Louis XIV saw an explosion of successful operas by Jean-Baptiste Lully and his successors. Scholars have frequently cited the economic, political and cultural differences between the two nations as the reason for France’s success and England’s relative failure, but it is the purpose of this study to demonstrate how linguistic and poetic obstacles were greater for the English than for French composers and librettists—and that this is a contributing factor to the paucity of operatic successes in Baroque England.

Of course, the advent of opera at the turn of the seventeenth century is commonly associated with the collective genius of the Florentine Camerata, a group of intellectuals whose goals included imbuing contemporary drama with the attributes of ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. One such attribute, that all text was sung and not spoken by the actors, occupied these reformers almost relentlessly. What did this sung drama of the ancients sound like? How could it be recreated in late sixteenth-century Florence? These were questions whose answers eventually changed the course of music history forever and arguably formed the foundation for baroque vocal music: The development of the new style of *monodia* was not only an artificial result of the Camerata’s experiments but also marked the culmination of the Humanist preoccupations of the previous era, which
prescribed that the intelligibility of sung texts should be the highest priority in vocal music.

Naturally, a style of music in which textual clarity supersedes all other elements demands certain qualities. First, the text setting must be primarily syllabic so as to emulate speech. Second, the accompaniment should not upstage the voice, but rather support it in a largely subordinate manner. Third, the overall impression created by the combination of the two should stir the passions and move the listener in a way that common speech alone cannot. The harmony created by the realized basso continuo part and the melody in the voice part both serve to heighten the declamation, and the emphasis on either one of these as the dominant means of expression would vary from composer to composer.

The above prescriptive stylistic elements, codified in Girolamo Mei’s influential Discorso sopra la Musica Antica et Moderna gave rise to the “reciting style” (stylo recitativo) commonly called recitative. As the Camerata would assert, drama sung throughout was impossible without this declamatory style of singing which formed the backbone of the new genre of dramma per musica. We know now, of course, that this style was adapted to many languages, including French, German and even English, and since seventeenth-century England is this study’s focus, we must now examine how the distinctly Italian idea of monody came to England and how it was used there throughout the century.
II. Historical Framework

As Edward Dent proclaims, “the germ of English opera is to be found not in the drama proper but in the masques of the early seventeenth century.”¹ By that time a uniquely English genre, the masque included a great variety of entertainments, not only spoken drama and song, but also choruses, spectacle, elaborate stage designs, and most importantly, dance. These were primarily royal diversions, and the nobility and even the monarch were expected to participate through the dance, joining the professionals on stage at points only tangentially tied to the overall drama. Song chiefly took the form of popular-style ballads with dance-derived rhythms, but as in the independent lute song repertory from the same period, one starts to see an increasing number of so-called “declamatory ayres” appearing in the works of such composers as John Dowland and Nicholas Lanier. The latter ostensibly helped cultivate the declamatory ayre as a form of dramatic music within the masque, the best known example being Lovers Made Men (1617). The English were apparently aware of the similarities between their monodic songs and Italian recitative, as the preface to a 1640 publication of Lovers Made Men mentions that Lanier, who had travelled to Italy, sang the whole masque “stylo recitativo”.² The characteristics shared by the English declamatory air and Italian recitative of this period are rather superficial, however; they merely included a syllabic text setting, relative freedom of delivery, and a dramatic underlying text. Unfortunately,

¹ Edward J. Dent, Foundations of English Opera: A Study of Musical Drama in England during the Seventeenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928, repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1965), 3. This source is still arguably the most comprehensive study on seventeenth-century English opera, and while its approach is in many ways antiquated (anachronistic and almost worshipful references to Wagner appear throughout), the facts it presents have gone largely unchallenged over the last century.

none of Lanier’s masque songs are extant, so it is impossible to gauge how indebted to Italian models these early efforts were. Given what we see in the declamatory ayres from outside the masque repertory, however, it seems unlikely that the English had much exposure to the sound of Italian opera or recitative—certainly not enough to imitate it well.

Slightly later masques are exemplified in such productions as James Shirley’s The Triumph of Peace (1634), which is not sung throughout but is important because it is one of the first masques whose music is extant. This music, primarily by William Lawes, is described by Dent as follows:

The treatment of the words [in this masque] proceeds on the lines which by this time were well established in England. William and Henry Lawes were both pupils of the Italianized Coperario, and their musical declamation, like that of Lanier and Ferrabosco in earlier years, is clearly derived from that of Caccini […] The Roman composers Stefano Landi and Domenico Mazzocchi were already departing from the austere ideals of the Florentines, and were preparing the way for the domination of the aria, but the English composers could hardly be expected to be in close touch with this movement.³

While Dent acknowledges that the music is by contemporary Italian standards old-fashioned, Coperario (born John Cooper) is possibly given too much credit for the dissemination of even outdated Italian traits here. According to Christopher Field, evidence bearing on Coperario’s travels to Italy is “elusive”.⁴ And, like Lanier, Coperario should probably receive credit mainly for bringing home Italian ideas than concrete stylistic traits. As for the Lawes brothers, especially Henry, their style “owes more to the

³ Foundations, 29.

⁴ Christopher Field, “John Coperario,” in NGD.
direct study of English verse than to Italian example.”\(^5\) Ian Spink comments that “in it the ideals of Baïf’s *Académie* and the Florentine *Camerata* fuse and find a practical application consistent with the character of English verse.”\(^6\)

Because juxtaposing French and English operatic development will prove essential to this study, one must consider here the similarities between the ballet de cour in France and the masque in England. The *air de cour*, an essential component of the ballet and an important genre in its own right, can be seen to have undergone similar developments as the English song. The ballet de cour in France featured the same components as the masque: dance, song, drama, chorus and spectacle. Both were elaborate courtly entertainments involving the participation of the nobility, and both treated singing as a secondary constituent of the whole. Despite this, just as the role of operatic forerunner is played by the masque in England, the ballet de cour has a similar relationship to true French opera of the late seventeenth century. While continuity of plot was rare in the masque, its presence in the ballet de cour fluctuates. In the 1610s one genre in particular, the ballet mélodramatique, puts particular emphasis on continuity of plot.\(^7\) Arguably, this facet of the ballet de cour alone provided the French with a more useful model for opera than did the masque for the English.

Both independent airs and those in the ballet de cour were affected by a phenomenon similar to that discussed above in connection with the English lute songs. They became gradually more declamatory in line with Humanist preoccupations, the

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\(^7\) See James R. Anthony, “Ballet de cour” in *NGD*. 
French poet Baïf having placed the same emphasis as Zarlino and Mei on the proper representation of poetic stress and text accent in songwriting. In mentioning Baïf, however, we must not forget the efforts of Thomas Campion in England. Both poets sought in their respective nations to revolutionize poetry by returning to the quantitative accent which informed the verse of the Classical poets. This required an acknowledgement of the tendency of vowels to be either long or short in pronunciation—a trait much more applicable to the French than to the English language. Campion attempted to systemize English vowels along these lines anyway, and both authors championed a style of song in which the rhythms were primarily determined by the relative lengths of the poetic syllables. This led to the declamatory musique mesurée in France most closely associated with Claude le Jeune, and it also contributed to changes in the English lutesong at the beginning of the seventeenth century (along with the aforesaid influx of Italian ideas).

Thus, genres native to both England and France followed similar, if independent, trajectories. However, one can already see that in the former there was less fertile soil for nourishing the seeds of opera. The ability of French poets to apply quantitative accent to their verse would help them create a form of recitative well suited to their language. English did not so easily lend itself to this application. Additionally, while there was spoken drama featuring continuity of plot in both countries, only in France was there a genre combining music with a single plotline to serve as a model for opera.

One would expect the years of the Commonwealth (1649-1660) to have greatly disrupted the development of opera due to the disbanding of the royal court and the Puritans’ hostility toward the theater. However, this last fact actually catalyzed “proto-
opera” in England, as masques, by virtue of being a mixed entertainment including music, spoken drama and dance, did not fall under the category of plays in the eyes of the Puritan censors. In fact, composers began to have a greater role in the production of masques, and this lead to an increase in the proportion of music in them, thus further distinguishing the genre from the forbidden play.

Eugene Haun discusses how “travelers returning to England brought the notion of opera back with them—men like Sir John Reresby, who traveled in Italy in 1656 and 1657” and attended operas, which he defined more in terms of a type of drama than a musical genre. As the Puritans closed the doors of existing public theaters, new venues sprang up for various other entertainments, and it was this environment that led to the first public interest in operatic ventures among the English. Dramatic works sung throughout began to appear, a genre which Haun notes, “met the theatrical needs of the time more effectively perhaps than any other kind of production.” The term “opera”, of course, was in no way a household term at this time, not yet even in general usage in Italy. Thus, for want of a better term, the English continued to refer to these increasingly operatic works as masques.

As Haun indicates, however, the diffusion of the concept of opera increased in a pronounced way in the 1650s, and it became clear that the quintessential component of this Italian art form was “Recitative musick”. Two important proponents of this relatively new genre in England weigh in on the subject at this time. One must remember that the

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 24.
term “recitative” appeared for the first time in print in 1640 and the genre remained obscure even into the next decade. In the mid-1650s, William D’Avenant, in the preface to his The Siege of Rhodes (1656), declared that the style was “unpractis’d here [in England]”. Less frequently cited than D’Avenant, however, is Richard Flecknoe, who wrote an important preface to his own dramatic work, Ariadne (1654). Declaring “the Excellency of Recitative Musick,” he writes:

Tis many years since I proposed unto a Soveraign Prince the congruity, that as their Persons, so their Musick, should be elevated above the Vulgar; and made not only to delight the ear, but also their understandings; not patcht up with Songs of different subjects, but all of one piece, with design and plot, accommodated to their several dispositions and occasions; which they then gratiously pleased to be inclined to hearken to, when the intervening of certain unexpected accidents, diverted their ears from it, and me from farther thought thereof, till travelling into Italy I found that Musick I intended to introduce, exceedingly in vogue, and far advanced towards its perfection, which made me also more study the perfectioning my self therein, I mean Recitativo Musick, being a compound of Musick and Poetry together, affecting the mind and sense with redoubled delight, since if a thing but barely pronounced has such force to move the Soul, how much more forcible must it be, when the Harmony of Musick is added to the pronuntiation?

Several important points are raised here: First, as related by Flecknoe, a burgeoning interest arose around this time in fostering an understanding among the English of the potential power of recitative when applied to drama. Second, the idea of a drama “all of one piece” and not “patcht up” clearly is novel here. Flecknoe is reacting against the present state of the masque with its many songs and theatrical components unlinked by a common plot. Third, and most interestingly, he seems to indicate that he

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12 Richard Flecknoe, preface to Ariadne Deserted by Theseus, and Found and Courted by Bacchus (London, 1654).

13 Flecknoe, preface to Ariadne, A2-A4.
“found that Musick” in Italy after already having been exposed to the idea of it; that is, he must have seen stirrings of recitative in both masques and declamatory songs prior to his journey but only realized the full potential of the style after seeing at first hand how the Italians handled it. It could, in fact, carry all of the words in a drama, separated only by the songs, dances and spectacles in the masque.

As for what Flecknoe’s recitative was like, we cannot say, since the music for Ariadne is not extant. It probably did exist, though, for the title page of the publication says that the work was “written and composed” by Flecknoe, and his preface goes on to discuss how his recitative is “different from the Italian” as though to forewarn anyone with an improbably large exposure to Italian music that he had had to make arrangements for the “difference betwixt their Musick and poetry, and ours.”

Thus, whatever his approach to recitative was, the result probably looked and sounded nothing like that of his Italian contemporaries.

Ariadne was succeeded in 1656 by William D’Avenant’s The Siege of Rhodes and three years later by a re-setting of James Shirley’s Cupid and Death, first written in 1653 but now with additional recitative scenes set to music by Matthew Locke. The preface to The Siege of Rhodes expresses admiration for recitative and gives an explanation of it, but unfortunately the music is lost. Although Cupid and Death (unlike Ariadne and The Siege of Rhodes) does not use continuous declamation, it is fortunate that all of its vocal music is extant and since Locke made the greatest contribution to it, it furnishes us with a model for the use of recitative in contemporary masque compositions. Even though, as Dent observes, “the chance of seeing how these composers would have treated such long

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14 Flecknoe, Preface to Ariadne, A10.
stretches of recitative as D'Avenant required”

is not clear, nevertheless the extant music still gives a fairly good idea of the style employed by Locke.

A full scale analysis of Locke’s style will have to wait for a later section of this study. What is important to note here is that Cupid and Death really must be seen as representative of the “Recitative musick” in The Siege of Rhodes and Ariadne, despite the fact that it is merely a masque without the innovative through-composition of Flecknoe’s and D’Avenant’s works. Moreover, it contains a staggering 244 bars of declamatory writing in the last of its five sections alone, a fact which puts it in a different category than pre-Commonwealth masques.

The momentum gained in this period towards full-scale English opera would lead to no explosion of creativity in the following decade. In 1661, the exiled Charles II returned to England from France, bringing with him a great enthusiasm for French music and a disdain for native English traditions. He “was a professed lover of musick, but of this [French] kind onely”, according to Roger North. No longer interested in English genres such as the consort for viols, he galvanized the burgeoning enthusiasm for the violin family by introducing his own string band modeled on Louis XIV’s Vingt-Quatre Violons du Roy. He then ordered musicians John Banister and Pelham Humfrey to Paris to learn about current musical practice there, having himself become enamored with it during his banishment. Dent notes that, “[d]uring the first ten years of the reign of

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15 Foundations, 55.


Charles II ‘Recitative Musick’ seems to have declined rapidly in public favour,\(^{18}\) in effect compromising the headway made by Flecknoe and D’Avenant to increase the Britons’ exposure to (and appreciation of) it.

During Charles’s exile in France, the 1650s had witnessed a coexistence of the ballet à entrées and Italian operas there by composers such as Rossi and Cavalli, the former preferred by the court, and the latter promoted by the highly powerful cardinal Mazarin. As Georgia Cowart observes, these two genres each had separate political functions, the ballet being the primary domain of the monarch and his court,\(^ {19}\) and Charles, as a visiting member of that establishment throughout the decade, certainly would have fallen on that side of the dividing line. The nobility did not completely shun Italian operas however, whatever their somewhat auxiliary nature,\(^ {20}\) and Charles most certainly experienced them there. Thus, his likely familiarity with Italian opera should not be ignored, especially since he allowed a “vocal consort [which had] arrived in London around 1663 to establish an Italian opera company [there]”; it was led by Vincenzo Albrici (a pupil of Carissimi).\(^ {21}\) This ultimately proved unsuccessful, and many of these Italians ended up leaving,\(^ {22}\) a notable exception being Giovanni Battista Draghi, who would collaborate with Matthew Locke on \textit{Psyche} in the 1670s.

\(^{18}\) \textit{Foundations}, 97.

\(^{19}\) See Georgia Cowart, \textit{The Triumph of Pleasure} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Chapter 1.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 7-8.


\(^{22}\) Peter Holman, “Giovanni Battista Draghi” in \textit{NGD}, 7:551.
According to Peter Holman, however, strong Italian influence on vocal music would have to wait for the 1680s.\textsuperscript{23} The 1660s and 1670s saw the spread of French elements into all aspects of music in England, especially in the theater. The most obvious indication of this was Charles’s appointment of the Frenchman Louis Grabu, a pupil of Robert Cambert, as Master of the King’s Musick in 1666. His teacher came to England in September of 1673 as the result of Lully’s new monopoly on French opera and music for theater, bringing with him a desire to establish an academy of music to promote opera in England to rival the \textit{Académie} in France. This enjoyed little more success than the Italian attempt, yet Charles was much more enthusiastic about this venture than the previous one. Cambert’s \textit{Ariane} (unrelated to Flecknoe’s work) had its first English performance in March 1674, apparently to a rather unenthusiastic audience,\textsuperscript{24} the king’s preferences aside.

In this new environment of prevailing French tastes, native English composers and poets did not continue to write fully sung dramas like those of Flecknoe and D’Avenant. The shift away from native musical practice at court filtered down to the public stage as well, and the 1660s saw a relative decline in declamatory writing for theatrical works. The focus was now on composing purely incidental music for plays. This makes perfect sense, given that the English had been starved of plays during the Commonwealth, and demand must have been high for spoken drama which had been absent for nearly fourteen years. Music still played a large part in these productions, as witnessed by Shakespeare’s \textit{Macbeth}, adapted and modernized by D’Avenant in 1663.

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\item[(23)] Holman, \textit{Henry Purcell}, 37.
\item[(24)] Ibid., 192.
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with symphonies and dances by Locke.\textsuperscript{25} The absence of court masques from this period further indicates that poets and composers did not immediately find work at the beginning of the Restoration writing dramatic music for the king. They had to seek lucrative opportunities elsewhere, and without masques or further operatic experiments such as \textit{The Siege of Rhodes}, opportunities to write “Recitative Musick” were lacking.

Eventually, however, such an emphasis on foreign music and the influx of foreign composers like Albrici, Draghi, Cambert and Grabu most likely vexed English composers to a point where they began to react against it. Around 1673, when French influence was at a high point at court, various dramatic works in English appeared which can be read as a push back against opera in French. \textit{The Tempest}, another Shakespeare adaptation, was put on at Dorset Garden in the Fall of 1673, immediately after the arrival of Cambert.\textsuperscript{26} That last fact is probably no coincidence. The text was adapted by Thomas Shadwell, and the music was by Locke and Draghi, but Pelham Humfrey also composed portions of it. Interestingly, the collaboration therefore included the champion of the native English pre-Reformation style, an Italian, and an Englishman freshly returned from his studies with Lully in France.

More homogenous in style (and a product of a less rebellious venture), the first surviving masque performed at Charles II’s court appeared the same year, with music also by Locke. This may have been the English composer’s chance to prove to Charles the virtue of the English declamatory style, which left the monarch apparently unfazed because French productions resumed the following year. A little discussed play, \textit{The

\textsuperscript{25} Dent, \textit{Foundations}, 128. Dent mentions that the surviving music for \textit{Macbeth} may actually be from a later revision, but we can’t know for sure. Its crudity suggests an early dating.

\textsuperscript{26} Eric White, \textit{A History of English Opera} (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 94.
Empress of Morocco was presented in 1674 at court by Elkanah Settle. Locke’s contribution to the performance was the masque in the fifth act, completely unrelated to the plot and based on the Orpheus story. It is short, but importantly, it is completely self-contained and sung throughout—a true opera in miniature.

Another landmark work was Shadwell and Locke’s Psyche, the 1675 publication by the composer bearing the ostentatious title “The English Opera, or the Vocal Musick in Psyche.” Shadwell had the words alone published in the same year, and in this edition, he discusses not only the vague relationship between his work and the 1671 Moliere/Lully collaboration with the same name, but also gives a D’Avenant-style apologetic explanation of his poetry. He writes:

In a good Natur’d countrey, I doubt not but this my first Essay in Rhime would be at least forgiven; especially when I promise to offend no more in this kind: But I am sensible, that here I must encounter a great many difficulties. In the first place (though I expect more candour from the best Writers in Rhime) the more moderate of them […] are very much offended with me […] but me-thinks they might be satisfi’d, since I have made but a small incursion [into the domain of rhymed tragedy,] and am resolved to retire. […] Those who are too great admirers of the French Wit, who (if they do not like this Play) will say, the French Psyche is much better; if they do, they will say, I have borrow’d it all from the French.27

Obviously, Shadwell is addressing both his English and French peers in this defiant statement. At the same time, not having written a rhymed tragedy before, he is heading off criticism from his fellow English poets. Also, since a number of travelers may have seen the ballet Psyché in France, he necessarily needed to discuss the understandable possibility of comparison between the two works, despite the fact that they are quite different. In her thesis comparing the two dramas, Helen Weise concludes that “to look only at the similarities between the two is to ignore the different approaches to tragedy,

the English bent for incident being directly at odds with the literary orientation of the French.”

Her main focus on the dramatic structure of the ballet and the masque is largely irrelevant to our study, but her point extends to the fundamental differences in the distribution of musical elements throughout and is well taken.

_Psyche_, in effect, picks up where D’Avenant left off with _The Siege of Rhodes_. This work is not all sung, but great stretches of ‘Recitative musick’ not unlike that of Locke’s earlier efforts, reappear here. This time, however, Locke set poetry freed from “the heroic couplets of rhymed tragedy,” and in its place, Shadwell provided him with verse in which there occur “frequent lapses from iambic pentameter into tetrameters and even trimeters with great frequency.” He also “[liked to vary the rhyme scheme.”

This all provides a solid bridge between the earlier works of Locke, written in a style largely his own, rooted in the English declamatory ayre of the earlier seventeenth century, to the more modern efforts of the 1670s incorporating French elements. Importantly, Locke’s declamation especially seems untouched by outside influence, except those changes made possible by the more accommodating aspects of Shadwell’s poetry, which possibly were due to the influx of French practices. This will receive more attention later. Certainly, though, the French style does inform the instrumental music in the work, the ouverture, and the choruses, and Shadwell himself admits French influences in the way stage machinery is used; the declamation, however, seems in a way isolated from all of this, protected by the apparent efforts of Locke and his predecessors in assuring that the

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30 Preface to _Psyche_, A7.
English language inform declamation in a manner unique to itself. Thus, the same thread of ‘Recitative musick’ runs from Lanier to Purcell, a line of development which without Locke would have been impossible. It was Locke who transmitted the older style to the younger generation, preserving the earliest ideals brought back from Italy by Lanier and Coperario which in the ensuing sixty years had generated a style of recitative quite different than in the country of its origin. The English composers had taken an Italian idea and made it quite their own.

Locke’s death in 1677 effectively passed the torch, as it were, to the younger generation including John Blow and Henry Purcell. The next major English dramatic work after *Psyche* was Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* (1683), a work equally indebted to new French elements, Locke’s endeavors, and Blow’s own creativity. Certainly more scholarly research needs to be done on Blow, who even in his lifetime was eclipsed by the younger Purcell, yet *Venus and Adonis* is in many ways a stepping stone to the famous *Dido and Aeneas*.

Remarking on Blow’s style in general, Henry Leland Clark discusses how “Blow combines the virile elements of English folk music with the finesse and more ornate music of the French court.” Figure 1 gives an indication of this, showing how something between a French *canarie* and an English hornpipe serves as an act tune. The dances would in general be right at home in a French ballet or opera but do occasionally have certain “jazzy” rhythmic inflections that seem to draw more upon English music than French. As well, the asymmetrical phrase structure lends a certain quirkiness to the dance and, while Lully’s dances do not always proceed in foursquare phrases, the canarie and gigue (suggested by the opening rhythm here) do tend to be quite regular in structure.

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31 Clark, “John Blow,” i.
This reliance on French models (the ouverture is French too) makes perfect sense at this point in time since, as Clark notes, Blow “may well have attended” Cambert’s *Ariane* in 1674 or an English revival of Perrin’s earlier opera for Paris, *Pamone*, indeed possibly even playing harpsichord in the productions.\(^{32}\) Since *Venus and Adonis* was “a masque for the entertainment of the king”,\(^{33}\) Blow knew full well that Charles’s interest in French music must dictate the style throughout, and as Clark’s quote indicates, his thorough exposure to French practice would have made this rather straightforward for him. Dent remarks that:

> [a]lthough described as a masque and constructed on a very diminutive scale, *Venus and Adonis* is a real opera both in its libretto and in its music. It begins with an ouverture for strings in the form adopted by Lulli, although the handling of the instruments shows a decidedly English influence. It leads straight into the prologue, which begins with an address by Cupid to the audience in an *arioso* style, accompanied by *continuo* only.\(^{34}\)

His description of the work as “a real opera” comes from its having a single, continuous plot unlike a true masque, though it does retain a somewhat episodic quality in terms of the inclusion of scenes contrary to the overarching drama. The whole second act, for

\(^{32}\) “John Blow,” 457

\(^{33}\) Dent, *Foundations*, 172.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 172.
example, dispenses with Adonis entirely, and consists primarily of Venus teaching her little cupids about the nature of love. This retention of a masque element in something more like an opera resembles the persistence of the divertissements in the tragedie lyrique of Lully—a remnant of the court ballet which frequently had nothing to do with the plot. Blow may have known about this practice having heard full-scale French operas, and the inclusion of dances at the end of every act may have been a further allusion to that highly French convention.

Dent’s remark about the English “handling of the instruments” surely refers to the lack of five-part French scoring and a relatively free approach to counterpoint in the inner parts leftover from the highly contrapuntal treatment of viols in the English consorts. That influence never quite disappeared in England, and Lully’s rigidly homophonic style of string writing would not have been easy for a composer with Blow’s experience in earlier English part-writing practices to adopt.

Further, Dent’s description of Cupid’s entrance in the prologue as “arioso” brings us to the most critical aspect of the work for this study: the abundance of declamatory writing. Interestingly, Clark also uses the terms “declaration” and “arioso” for what others might consider recitative, or what Flecknoe, D’Avenant and Locke would have termed “Recitative musick”. Probably this simply indicates a bias on the part of Clark who, writing in 1947, most likely wanted to reserve the term “recitative” for a more Italianate style. His comparison of Blow and Purcell regarding their approaches to the treatment of the continuo part illustrates this: while Purcell’s bass “clings to the first note,

35 “John Blow,” 487.
after the fashion of earlier Italian opera,” Blow’s bass is more active.\(^{36}\) As we shall see in a later chapter, however, English recitative really used the declamatory ayre as a model, and the vestigial influence of that genre’s through-composed lute accompaniment lingers throughout the century. Static basslines in the manner of the Italians also exist, even as early as in \textit{Cupid and Death}, and in the surviving declamatory songs of Henry Lawes. Therefore, there is too much variety in the treatment of the bass throughout the century to use it as a gauge of Italian influence.

As native English entertainments continued to reflect French traits, the French themselves remained a fixture at court until Charles II’s death in 1685 and that same year, the former Master of the King’s Musick, Louis Grabu, produced a fascinating work, a full-scale opera in an arguably pure French style, with English text provided by John Dryden. The work was originally merely an allegorical prologue (like those of Lully and Quinault) to a planned drama much like \textit{The Tempest}, but happily (perhaps with the through-composition of \textit{Venus and Adonis} in mind), Dryden decided to add two acts to complete the story and make it a full-scale opera entitled \textit{Albion and Albanius}.\(^{37}\) Abandoning all restraint, the 1691 printed version declares the work “an Opera”, only the second large-scale work to be printed with that title (the first having been \textit{Psyche}).\(^{38}\)

The libretto concerns itself largely with Charles II’s exile (as Albion) at the hands of the allegorical figures Democracy and Zelota (representing the Puritans) and his eventual triumphant return. The whole cast is a perplexing mix of Roman deities and various other allegorical figures. It has been criticized by almost every author who has

\(^{36}\) Clark, “John Blow,” 489.

\(^{37}\) White, \textit{A History}, 105.

referred to it on the basis of its rather weak dramatic content and even worse music.\textsuperscript{39}
That Grabu was much “decried” by native English composers is acknowledged by Dryden in his preface, but this he attributes to Grabu’s nationality alone, praising his skill as a musician.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, composers such as Blow and Purcell must have hated a foreigner holding the highest-ranking musical position in England, and one glance at his music is enough to give the lie to Dryden’s praise of his skill. His music betrays his terribly poor knowledge of English accent structure. However, for our study, Grabu’s frequent application of Lullian recitative to English words reveals a fascinating approach to setting the language that no native composer could have taken. There are moments when the accent is faithfully reflected, and they deserve serious study as an essay on what could come of applying French principles of declamation to English verse, as we shall see.

_Albion and Albanius_ had little success, given that the monarch in whose praise it had been written died shortly before its premier. It was performed anyway, with a last-minute alteration by Dryden to include Albion’s ascent to the heavens, an obvious acknowledgment of Charles’s death.\textsuperscript{41} While these circumstances surely contributed heavily to the work’s failure, the impoverished plotline (suddenly having even less relevance) and the combination of a pure French style and English verse must have been incredibly perplexing to the English audience.

In 1686, the English debut of Lully’s _Cadmus et Hermione_ underlines the continuation of French influence despite the failure of _Albion_. No Italian operas had the privilege of full-scale performances during this time, though a frequently cited quote by

\textsuperscript{39} See especially Dent, 163; White, 107; Clark, 462; Haun, 125, among others.

\textsuperscript{40} Preface to “Albion and Albanius,” A5.

\textsuperscript{41} White, _A History_, 107.
Purcell indicates that Italian music was starting to gain a foothold in England at least by 1683. The preface of his highly Italianate *Sonnata’s of III Parts* from that year describes Purcell having “faithfully endeavour’d a just imitation of the most fam’d Italian Masters; principally, to bring the seriousness and gravity of that sort of Musick into vogue, and reputation among our Countrymen, whose humor, ‘tis time now, should begin to loath the levity and balladry of our neighbours.”

The last phrase naturally refers to the French, though we have no indication (especially if someone other than Purcell wrote the preface) that Purcell only begrudgingly wrote in the French style. He had certainly learned it from Pelham Humfrey who had spent years in Paris on the order of Charles II. Dent muses on Purcell’s musical upbringing, stating:

> The strongest musical influences on Purcell during his early period of activity must have been those of Locke, Pelham Humfrey, and Blow. Pelham Humfrey, as a pupil of Lulli, was naturally more familiar with the music of Paris; Locke and Blow leant rather to the Italian style, as represented mainly by Carissimi and Cesti. […] it is clear that Purcell, no doubt out of deference to the King’s taste, has endeavored conscientiously to assume a more definitely Parisian manner, especially in the instrumental sections. The French style is occasionally perceptible even in the recitatives.

He goes on to mention the quote from the preface above, citing it as a move towards more Italianate thinking on Purcell’s part; he even proclaims that “this strong modern Italian influence […] made the composition of *Dido and Aeneas* possible.” This goes a bit too far, seeing that the instrumental music in *Dido* is strongly influenced by the French style, especially in its handling of dances. While the influx of violinists such as

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42 Preface to *Sonnata’s of III Parts* (London, 1683). The words are most likely by John Playford, the printer, or Purcell himself, speaking in the third person to effect humility.


44 Ibid., 154.
Nicolai Mattheis in the 1670s may have brought a greater exposure to up-to-date violin writing in Italy, we cannot be sure of any new vocal or dramatic music that could have influenced Purcell’s conception for his opera.

Regarding the aspect of foreign influence on *Dido*, Peter Holman’s thoughts are particularly helpful:

Much has been made of the supposed French or Italian influence on *Venus and Adonis* and *Dido and Aeneas*. In general terms, it is probably true that their declamatory writing was modelled [sic] to some extent on the recitative of mid-century Venetian operas, just as their dance-based airs and choruses may owe something to French models.\(^{45}\)

On the same page, however, he continues:

But, as so often in English music, foreign models seem to have influenced the planning of these operas rather than their musical style. Blow and Purcell did not need to imitate Cavalli’s type of recitative, for they had plenty of models in Locke and earlier English song composers, though Venetian opera might have helped them and their librettists to develop an Italianate relationship between the declamatory passages and the concerted numbers, based on the contrast between action and reflection, conflict and portrayal of character.\(^{46}\)

This study goes on to suggest that, not only would Purcell and Blow not have needed to imitate Cavalli’s recitative, but would in fact have found such an imitation odd. Holman does not indicate where either of them would have encountered and seriously studied Cavalli’s music, but regardless, the English demonstrated throughout the century that they were perfectly capable of developing their own style of declamation suited to their own language. The truth of the matter is, the English had endeavored for a century to arrive at their own ‘Recitative Musick’ and did not have the *sound* of any foreign recitative practice in their ears until the arrival of the French in the 1670s. But as Holman

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\(^{45}\) Holman, *Henry Purcell*, 199.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
indicates, they did not need to assimilate French or Italian declamatory practice into their own writing—and really, they could not since the languages are so different.

Though Purcell wrote a great deal of theater music and composed numerous semi-operas in the 1690s, *Dido and Aeneas* really forms the capstone to the development chronicled thus far in this study. It is the crowning achievement of Restoration attempts at English opera, being the only one with a full-scale, continuous, truly operatic plot, and a completely extant, uniquely English style of declamation. Purcell’s achievements are largely indebted to Blow and Locke before him, but all of the efforts in the 1670s show strong parallels with French practice. *Dido* is no exception. The one Italianate aspect, however, could be Dido’s famous lament aria at the end: the ground bass certainly originated in Italy, but it probably made its way to England through the French, who had already absorbed that genre into their own vocal music. Lully had certainly been exposed to it and it appears in many of even his earlier works. The declamation, however, must be said to mark the culmination of efforts by English composers during the seventeenth century, resulting in a style that is uniquely English and that had found in Purcell’s hands a marvelous fluency unparalleled in his predecessors’ work.

Certain issues have now been raised and must be addressed separately in the following sections of this study. What specific barriers had to be overcome when marrying English verse to recitative, the essential component of opera? Given that both the English and the French adapted the Italian idea of monody to their own languages, how did the two nations’ differing poetic traditions allow France the upper hand in this matter? Moreover, what even qualified a piece as ‘Recitative musick’ in the eyes of seventeenth century English writers? Where do we, as modern scholars, draw the line
between song and operatic declamation? Is such a distinction even useful or even always possible? And finally, what aspects of the text inform the declamation of each composer most, and how did he portray the text rhetorically, with specific emphasis on the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic portrayal of the words? These questions shall direct the ensuing chapters of this study in an attempt better to understand this ‘Recitative Musick’, comparing it to the arguably more successful efforts of the French.
III. Adapting the Poetic Traditions of English Drama for Recitative

Since in both France and England opera and recitative were imported practices, the two nations’ composers and poets immediately faced obstacles in reconciling existing poetic traditions with the demands of creating an effective style of declamation in their native languages. However, the problems they faced stemmed from different aspects of their respective poetic practices, and as I hope to show, the English had greater difficulties with which to contend than the French in their attempts at operatic declamation.

Patricia Ranum pinpoints the primary difference between French and English poetry, observing that

To the French ear, poetic meter conveys nuances that are difficult for the English ear to imagine, accustomed as it is to verse with a repetitive pattern of rhythmic feet—[…whereas,] in French poetry and song, it is line-length and rhyme that create the meter.\(^47\)

In their approaches to dramatic works such as masques, plays, and later opera libretti, seventeenth-century English poets acknowledged “heroick verse” (rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter) as a paradigm, one with a rich history in the native poetic tradition.\(^48\) But making a break with such a repetitive poetic form was necessary when it came to setting this elevated verse to music. The French similarly had to avoid monotony, but as Ranum’s above quote indicates, the fixed patterns of stress created by the ubiquitous English iambic pentameter were never a part of the French poetic tradition, largely due to the relative lack of any sharp distinction between qualitatively stressed and unstressed


syllables in French. Nevertheless, the fact that serious French drama employed the Alexandrine meter points to an immediate parallel between the two nations’ practices. The twelve-syllable lines of the Alexandrine meter have no true accent structure but are governed by the mere sameness of their line lengths and recurrent rhyming couplets. Thus, the risk of metric monotony in texts to be sung in a fixed rhythm had to be addressed by poets and composers of both nations.

An obvious solution to this problem was simply to diversify the line lengths of verse, a practice followed in both French and English recitative texts. The English, in particular, expressed a certain reluctance to break their lines into fragments. One of the earliest acknowledgements by a poet of a need to do so is found in the preface to William D’Avenant’s work *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656), a through-composed entertainment. The music does not survive but the extant libretto explicitly calls for recitative. D’Avenant writes:

> You may inquire, being a Reader, why in an heroick Argument my numbers are so often diversify’d and fall into short fractions; considering that a continuation of the usual length of *English* verse would appear more Heroical in reading. But when you are an Auditor you will finde that in this, I rather deserve approbation than need excuse, for frequent alternations of measure (which cannot be so unpleasant to him that reads as troublesome to him that writes) are necessary to *Recitative Musick for variation of Ayres.*

D’Avenant’s almost defensive tone is typical here of contemporary poets addressing this issue.

Another characteristic device used to introduce variety into the framework of heroick verse was enjambement, especially in earlier works such as *Cupid and Death* (1653), a masque by James Shirley set to music by Matthew Locke. While the typical

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masque included discrete songs (whether declamatory or tuneful), *Cupid and Death* is remarkable in that Locke set large portions of text not specifically marked to be sung. Since Shirley uses a very free blank verse for the spoken text, their setting by Locke as recitative resulted in some of the only unrhymed recitative settings in Locke’s entire output. Song texts, which appear in the published libretto in italics, are set in iambic verse in a fairly regular tetrameter. Enjambement peppers these verses however, as is evident in such passages as the following:

Victorious men of Earth, no more*
Proclame how wide your Empires are;
Though you binde in every shore,
And your triumphs reach as far*
   As night or day,
Yet you proud Monarks must obey,
And mingle with forgotten ashes, when*
   Death calls yee to the crowd of common men.^[50]

Naturally, employing this device creates a disconnect between the rhyme scheme and the grammar: a poetic line does not contain exactly one clause, and the final word which forms the end rhyme may indeed be an unimportant one (such as “more” or “when” in the example above). Locke’s setting of this particular passage betrays a clear interest in intelligibility, as all of the rests in the music coincide with commas in the text in order to highlight the grammatical caesuras. As a result, the rhyme is almost unnoticeable when it does not coincide with the end of a clause. While the use of this technique helps to neutralize the monotony of obvious end rhyme, a certain sense of harmoniousness is clearly lost when the rhymes no longer coincide with a point of musical arrival. Composers and poets may have been aware of this, for Locke’s later dramatic collaborations feature far less enjambment to vary the versification.

For the French, the rhyme “that ends each line establishes phrasing patterns” and thus is essential to the structure of the poetry.\textsuperscript{51} The concept of poetic feet does not really factor into the organization of the verse, despite attempts by seventeenth-century writers to discuss French poetry in terms of classical terminology such as iambics and trochees.\textsuperscript{52} End rhyme invariably coincides with the grammatical ends of clauses so that French composers such as Lully insisted that the rhyming words occur on strong beats, preferably downbeats. This practice strengthens the impression that the music truly served to heighten the sentiments expressed in the poetry and ensure their utmost intelligibility. In fact, even Lully’s earliest experiments in recitative, those scant examples in the ballets of the late 1660s,\textsuperscript{53} already reflect an adherence to this practice. At first, aligning the rhyming points of repose in the text with strong beats depended upon superfluous rests, whose only function was to ensure that rhyme and the unwavering common-time musical meter coincided. These unnecessary rests resulted in an unnaturally halting delivery of the text. So instead of placing silences on intervening “spare” beats, Lully merely removed them and in their place introduced meter changes. James Anthony points to an example of an early recitative from the Ballet des Muses (1666) that exemplifies a recitative filled with these extra rests; he comments that, were such a passage written “by the time of Cadmus, […] Lully would have undoubtedly revised” it to dispense with them.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Ranum, \textit{The Harmonic Orator}, 46.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{53} See in particular \textit{Le Ballet des Muses} (1666) and \textit{Le Ballet des Nations} (1670), the intermède for \textit{Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme}, among others.

Locke’s early experiments with recitative show a much more diverse method for ensuring the alignment of the poetic and musical meters. Examples in *Cupid and Death* already indicate the composer’s fondness for melismas on seemingly unimportant words, often in unimportant metrical positions. Dent remarks on this phenomenon, suggesting that “it was perhaps due to his being a singer himself that he has a frequent tendency to indulge in florid passages, not always very judicious, and often set to the most unimportant words; but they are evidently intended to be musically expressive, and not mere exhibitions of virtuosity.”  

But Dent overlooks a rather important function of these melismas: they, like Lully’s extraneous rests, sometimes serve merely to take up extra metrical slack so as to ensure the arrival of the final (usually rhyming) word on a downbeat. Without the historical precedent of *musique mesurée* which allowed Lully to introduce fluctuating musical meters into his declamation, English composers continued to require functional, rhetorically insignificant rests and melismas for single syllables merely to align poetical caesuras with strong beats. These techniques are illustrated by the fourth song from *Cupid and Death* (figure 2) which also demonstrates Locke’s use of fermatas to give further control of the delivery beyond the limitations of rhythm in common time.

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Dent makes another important observation:

French recitative takes sentences as wholes, and seeks to reproduce their general contour even at the cost of perpetual changes of time-signature. An English composer never changes his time-signature: I cannot recall a single instance of an English recitative which fluctuates between common and triple time, nor indeed any declamatory music in triple time at all. When Locke, for instance, breaks from common time to triple time, it means that he momentarily abandons the *parlando* style, and sets his words to a definite tune. English composers, especially of the earlier period, seem to have aimed not at expressing sentences, but at intensifying single words.56

There are actually examples of English declamation with fluctuating meters, for example in *The Tempest*. Pelham Humfrey, who had studied in France, was no doubt less wary of changing meters in declamatory passages than his contemporaries. As well, in his *Albion and Albanius* (1685), the French composer Louis Grabu applies the Lullian recitative style to an English text, and as we shall see, it is not the use of mixed meters alone which

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56 *Foundations*, 127.
derail the work’s recitatives. Understandably, however, Dent’s disdain for *Albion* no doubt led him to eliminate it from serious consideration.  

As to the disparity Dent sets up between emphasizing “whole ideas” and “single words”, the French naturally favor the former due to the lack of artificially superimposed poetic feet in their verse. This allows their poetry to flow like natural speech. Given the preponderance of monosyllabic words in English, composers wishing to emphasize one word could do so by placing a melisma on it more easily than one could on a multisyllabic word. However, this tendency interrupts the flow of the declamatory delivery, a problem which John Dryden likely had in mind when he notes that “the English has yet more natural disadvantage than the French; our original Teutonique consisting most in Monosyllables, and those incumber’d with Consonants cannot possibly be freed from those Inconveniences.”  

He goes on to lament the “scarcity of female Rhymes” in English, a feature which, according to Patricia Ranum, is seen as an essential component of French poetry “to avoid monotony”.  

Thus, the linguistic advantages of French over English include greater flexibility of stress patterns within the line and a more equal distribution of masculine and feminine rhymes, and therefore, a general lack of need to employ enjambement to introduce variety. It was more natural, therefore, for the French to foster a speech-like flow in declamation, punctuated by harmonious and varied rhymes always in alignment with the grammatical structure of the expressed sentiments. This is not to say that all English

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59 Ibid.  
60 Ranum, *Orator*, 50.
declamation floundered in a sea of poor verse encumbered by its linguistic limitations, but the inherent problems of creating recitative in English were solved differently in each self-contained experiment throughout the Reformation. In most cases, following the logic of a given composer in his settings of the poetry in recitative musick depends on examining these solutions and understanding their implications.

We have already seen how enjambement, though a useful device for diversifying verse, creates a disconnect between grammar, rhyme, and the musical-rhetorical emphasis on particular words. After Cupid and Death, there is a brief period during which other methods were employed to introduce variety. D’Avenant’s Siege of Rhodes, for example, frequently breaks away from couplets, and also finds variety by introducing different line lengths while still retaining a largely iambic meter throughout. After the relative absence of entertainments which include recitative musick in the 1660s, the efforts of Locke in the 1670s reflect many of the recommendations made earlier by D’Avenant: the masque of Orpheus in The Empress of Morocco (1674) by Elkanah Settle continues to employ quatrains to break up patterns of couplets, as well as varied numbers of poetic feet throughout.

Tellingly, it is not until the middle of the decade, after the influx of Cambert and the explosion of French activity at Charles II’s court, that one sees a shift back to almost exclusive use couplets in poetry geared towards setting as recitative. This coincides with a conscious effort to diversify the character of the poetry so that it did not employ exclusively iambic meters. Passages such as the following appear in Psyche (1675):
Früts shall they bring, and pretty Garlands weave,
And shall the Meads of all their Sweets bereave:
Verúnnus ἂν Flórα their Tribute shall pay,
And to Psyché shall dedicate this happy day.

Figure 3. Matthew Locke, Psyche, Pan’s opening recitative.

Locke was keenly aware of the shift in accent at the third line, as evidenced by his switch from a common-time declamatory style to an *a tempo* triple-meter setting for the second couplet (figure 3). Murray Lefkowitz has shown how Locke, shortly before composing *Psyche*, may already have had contact with French practice that went beyond merely what he would have been exposed to at court. In fact, Locke apparently owned a manuscript which included music from Lully’s ballets. On this basis, Lefkowitz hypothesizes that Locke at least knew of Lully’s earlier (pre-*tragédie lyrique*) style of recitative and air, and this finds support in passages such as the above from *Psyché*. There is something quite Lullian about the way in which short triple-time airs intermingle with more static declamatory passages in Locke’s music, and one wonders if Locke recognized the rich variety of accent structures that could be obtained from setting verse freed from unremitting iambic patterns.

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62 Ibid.
In collaborating on the libretto for *Psyche* with Thomas Shadwell, Locke may have discussed with him observations he had made concerning Lully’s setting of French verse, perhaps including new ways to enrich both the poetry and the declamation resulting from it. Shadwell implies a greater mutual effort than usual in his following statement, that he “chalked out the way to the Composer […] having design’d which line [he] wou’d have sung by One, which by Two […] Voices, &c. and what manner of Humour [he] would have in all the Vocal Musick.” This bold proclamation surely is unusual for a poet, and is mirrored by Locke in the preface to his published score of *Psyche*, where he remarks on his own role in the intimate marriage of word and tone:

That *Poetry and Musick*, the chief manifesters of Harmonical Phancy, should produce such discordant effects in many, is more to be pitied than wonder’d at; it being become a kind of fashionable wit, to Peck and Carp at other Mens conceptions, how mean soever their own are. Expecting therefore to fall under the Lash of some soft headed, or hard hearted Composer (for there are too many better at finding faults than mending them) *I shall endeavour* to remove those few blocks which perhaps they may take occasion to stumble at.

The 1680s saw the rise of more features in common with French poetry, namely an increased awareness of feminine rhyme as a means of alleviating the monotony of ending each line with a strong syllable. Dryden, lamenting the lack of feminine rhyme in English, made up for this by having some of his lines end with a gerund. We can see his first serious attempt to so diversify his rhymes in *Albion and Albanius*, such as in the following passage:


64 Matthew Locke, Preface to *The English Opera, or The Vocal Musick in Psyche* (London, 1675). Emphasis mine. This later publication includes all of the vocal music by Locke, whereas the 1675 print does not. Giovanni Battista Draghi’s instrumental contributions to the score are lacking in this publication, however, and are therefore have not survived.

65 Preface to *Albion and Albanius*. 
It seems here that Dryden has rendered lines 2 and 4 in trochaic meter entirely to allow a weak final syllable, whereas the other lines are iambic as expected, though the first weak syllable lacks from the third and fifth lines.

**Figure 4.** Louis Grabu, *Albion and Albanius*, Act One, Scene One.

Figure 4 shows Louis Grabu’s setting of Dryden’s verse, unfortunately the most significant example of a purely French-style recitative set with English words. Earlier, Lully’s use of changing meters to avoid extraneous rests was mentioned, and here we see the procedure used ignorantly by Grabu to the detriment of the music: Not a single rest is
used at all, not even when there are commas in the text. The problems with this example far outweigh its merits; however, it presents an interest glance into the basic procedure adopted here. The rhyming syllables (alternating every other line) do indeed arrive on downbeats without any exceptions. This reflects the poetic structure well, but without rests written in at punctuation marks, the composer does not take into account the grammatical structure of the text. Of course, the singers would breathe naturally with the phrasing and the continuo players could accommodate them, but it is poor practice not to build such a fundamental aspect of the text into the setting. Other glaring problems include the accentuation of the word “never” in the third bar, and the subsequent problem it causes for “I”—the result being “ne-VER will I cease my mourning”. Clearly, the verb “cease” should be stressed over the pronoun “I”, both given the poetic meter and the relative grammatical importance of those two words to one another.

In this case, then, Dryden’s admirable attempt at poetic diversification could not achieve its full potential because of Grabu’s ineptitude. Further, we see that employing fluctuating meters (for which French declamation provided the precedent) does not necessarily solve the problem of fluidity in delivery. While no extra, non-rhetorical rests or melismas have to be used to align the text accents with the musical meter, rests coinciding with the reposes of speech are of course essential and indispensable. Their absence throughout Grabu’s recitative would cause tremendous problems in performance.

Dryden’s contemporary, the anonymous poet of the libretto to Blow’s *Venus and Adonis*, seems to follow a trend of returning to the normalcy of couplets and so in order to maintain variety, he too relied on devices such as varied line lengths and occasional feminine rhyme. Blow’s masque, however, relies heavily on *a tempo* dialogue airs
(almost like those of Lully) rather than more declamatory writing to convey the text.

Declamation is used in the French manner and is even in a certain sense reserved for the most emotionally poignant moments in the drama, such as the opening of the first act and Adonis’s death at the close. In his “Recitative musick”, Blow takes the freest approach to rhythm of all the composers considered in this study: the lines seem to float within the barlines, at times rather unconcerned with the metrical structure of the music.

Consequently, scholars have hesitated to use the term “recitative” in referring to Blow’s settings, preferring instead the term *arioso.* However, there are clear differences between these passages and the tuneful songs in *Venus and Adonis.*

The freedom afforded to rhythm in this work’s declamatory sections recalls the earliest efforts by Locke, which naturally do not reflect the same concentration of French influence as his later works. Clark points out that “Blow may well have attended” a performance of Cambert’s opera *Pomone* in 1674, and this is probably true; Blow seems not to have possessed the same first-hand knowledge regarding the relationship of poetry and music in French practice as Locke did in his later years, yet some French elements certainly appear. Though Dent describes *Venus and Adonis* as having “no regard for the regular operatic traditions either of France or Italy”, the French ouverture and rather French take on the dramatic roles of dialogue airs and recitative certainly must be seen as acquired traits from the Continent.

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Figure 5 exemplifies Blow’s approach in general. The text adheres to iambic pentameter and tetrameter with unbroken chains of couplets. In terms of the setting, one immediately obvious Lullian element is an expressive shift of the accent to a weak beat for exclamations such as “Oh!” and “why”, two of Lully’s favorite words to give such a treatment. However, the relative disjunction between the poetic structure and the musical meter weaken the effectiveness of this device. The rhyme pair “dart” and “part” ought to receive placement on the same strong beat of their respective measures for maximum clarity, yet “dart” ends up on beat four, followed by an overly long rest on the following downbeat. While the comma legitimizes that rest, its occurrence on a downbeat seriously weakens the expressive effect of a rest on the downbeat two measures prior, as in the second case, there is no clear rhetorical function for the rest. Blow harmoniously places the end rhymes of the remaining couplets on congruent beats throughout the remainder of this example, yet the second pair actually seems a bit awkward. Here again

a case of enjambement occurs, where “I” is the last word of poetic line 3, rhyming with “die” in line 4. The fact that “I” receives an entire quarter note on a strong beat brings out the rhyme with “die” in the following measure, yet “I” simply does not have enough contextual importance to receive this treatment.

Thus, Blow may well have absorbed some ideas both from Locke and from hearing French declamation performed at court, yet both his poet’s and his own relative inexperience seem to have encumbered him a bit. This is not to say, of course, that the scene from which figure 5 is taken lacks beauty or skill. Other factors of Blow’s work will receive more attention later, and the intense expressivity he achieves has no parallel in the music of any other English composer of the time, except perhaps for that of Purcell.

In *Dido and Aeneas*, one sees the richest variety of accent structure of any of the works considered here. The following example (the Sorceress’s monologue from Act One) shows not only the diversity of poetic feet, but also of line-length and end rhyme:

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Wayward sisters, you that fright
The lonely traveller by night,
Who, like dismal ravens crying,
Beat the windows of the dying.
Appear! Appear at my call, and share in the fame
Of a mischief shall make all Carthage flame.
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Clearly, the basic meter here is iambic tetrameter, wherein the first and last syllables of the lines may simply be omitted for variety.\(^{70}\) Coupletts dominate the structure but they sometimes fall into feminine rhymes such as in the third and fourth lines here. As well,

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\(^{70}\) For a more comprehensive evaluation of the techniques used by Tate to diversify his verse, see Joan Bicknell, “Interdependence of word and tone in the dramatic music of Henry Purcell,” PhD diss., Stanford University, 1960, 83-39.
anapestic feet (weak-weak-strong) can substitute for iambic feet as they do at points throughout the last two lines. The use of enjambement in this passage (marked with an asterisk) is not as excessive as in *Cupid and Death* and it never causes extremely unimportant words to be emphasized. Thus, the librettist, Nahum Tate, seems to call upon the experience of the entire century in finding a good balance between regularity and variety.

**Figure 6.** Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, the witches’ entrance in Act One. (Upper string parts omitted.)

Purcell’s setting of this text (figure 6) capitalizes on all of its beneficial qualities and truly represents his sensitivity as a composer. The rests in the music always coincide with punctuation marks, and the rhythmic flexibility results in a rather Lullian adherence to placing rhymes on downbeats. Only in the case of “fame” and “flame” is this practice not obvious, for the enjambement causes the rhyme to become buried in the middle of a clause. The fairly static bass line also means that the performer may take some liberties with the delivery: rhythmic values and rests that seem overly long relative to the rhythm.
of ordinary speech could have been speeded up in reality. However, given that the sorceress is singing an incantation, the drama here affords definite legitimacy to the exaggeration of the text beyond mere speech-like delivery. It is not to belittle Purcell’s talent to say that the care taken by Tate in crafting passages like this greatly aided the composer in avoiding the cumbersome techniques used by his predecessors. Purcell writes no superfluous rests or wandering, unnecessary melismas, and yet the placement of the verse within the metrical structure of the barlines is entirely effective.

It took decades of experimentation to arrive at the delicate balance achieved by Tate and Purcell in designing a poetic and compositional strategy for English recitative. The successes of Matthew Locke and his collaborators paved the way, yet *Dido and Aeneas* truly represents a landmark achievement in creating a continuous, operatic drama whose *recitative musick* effectively functions as well as that in any French or early Italian opera. Unfortunately, the 1690s saw another decline in interest for true opera in England. Purcell’s primary poetic colleague during that decade, John Dryden, turned away from creating recitative text like that in *Albion and Albanius* and instead pioneered the new genre of English semi-opera, which had little need for the continued development of English recitative, as it incorporated spoken dialogue. Again, we see here the importance of the poet for the success of *recitative musick*: when the musical requirements of declamation were no longer taken into consideration, the genre could not flourish.
IV: “Recitative Musick”: A Question of Genre and Style, Then and Now

By this point, we have seen both a historical overview of recitative in English drama and an analysis of the poetic factors involved in the application of recitative to English text throughout the seventeenth century. However, a question remains unanswered. What exactly is this “recitative musick”? What qualified a passage to bear that name in the seventeenth century, and how consistently do we, as modern scholars, apply the term to the surviving repertoire of the dramatic music of the Restoration? I have thus far designated a fairly wide variety of declamatory vocal music as recitative, which I believe is in keeping with the breadth the genre seems to have covered in seventeenth-century England. As we attempt to define it more clearly, however, we must begin with the history of the usage of the term and then determine what formal and stylistic features appear in the music bearing that descriptor. Indeed, the variety of stylistic elements found in English recitative far exceeds that of Italian practice, and even that of the many overlapping French styles bearing the name récitatif.

The earliest written reference to recitative in England occurs in a 1640 publication of masques by the poet Ben Johnson, which describes how “the whole Maske [Lovers Made Men] was sung (after the Italian manner) Stilo recitativo, by Master Nicholas Lanier.”71 According to Peter Walls, this fact is problematic given that the masque in question was first performed and subsequently published in 1617, the printed edition

lacking any reference to the term “recitativo”.\textsuperscript{72} McDonald Emslie is cited by Walls here, to make the point that the music in \textit{Lovers Made Men} “was not full recitative, but at the most declamatory ayres.”\textsuperscript{73} The distinction made by Emslie as to which genre Lanier used ostensibly relies on whether or not the English singer and composer had yet travelled to Italy. In fact, Lanier had travelled to Italy by 1625.\textsuperscript{74} Therefore, we must raise the question here as to whether there is any clear stylistic distinction between the English use of the term “stylo recitativo” and the so-called “declamatory ayre” which was already a popular form of lutesong at the beginning of the seventeenth century. As we shall see, the boundary is certainly blurry—if it even exists—but for now, we must investigate how Italian practice may have come to England at this time.

Lanier, the first English musician associated with the term \textit{recitativo} in print, is often credited by seventeenth-century writers (such as Ben Johnson in the above quote) as having brought the style to England. One ought not to accept this too readily, for there is much dispute surrounding the various accounts of Lanier’s life. While Walls suggests that Lanier made his first visit to Italy in 1625,\textsuperscript{75} Ian Spink’s biographical article in the \textit{New Grove} makes note of a visit by the singer to Venice in February 1611 as a royal courier. Of course, it is uncertain whether monody had yet made its appearance in Venice by that time, but if it had, Lanier probably would have been exposed to it. How much he could have studied it or really understood it is another question, and whether or not he returned to England with little more than an idea of it is even more difficult to know.

\textsuperscript{72} Walls, “Origins,” 25.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{75} Walls, “Origins,” 25.
By 1611, however, declamatory songs had already appeared in England in the works of John Dowland, among others.\textsuperscript{76} It is difficult to determine how exclusively this was a native development responding to the Humanist desire for textual clarity in the previous century. Indeed, Joan Bicknell notes that Zarlino’s writings are mentioned in Thomas Morley’s \textit{Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musick} (1597), and that Caccini’s foreword to his \textit{Nuove Musiche} is referenced in John Playford’s \textit{Introduction to the Skill of Musick} (1654).\textsuperscript{77} Whether or not the English also knew Giralomo Mei’s writings is not as easily ascertained, but these Italian musings (if not the music itself) had undoubtedly crossed the English Channel before Lanier made his first Italian sojourn.

Ian Spink addresses the issue of early Italian influence directly:

\begin{quotation}
\text{[…]T}he question arises as to how far Italian influences, direct or indirect, are involved. It has to be admitted that the vogue for things Italian was at its height at the end of the sixteenth century and that it persisted into the seventeenth. The taste for Italian madrigals, and the Italian influence on the English madrigal, is the most persuasive evidence of this ultramontanism, and we can be sure that printed books from Italy, madrigals and (after 1602) monodies, were sought after and studied with interest. Yet their availability in the early years of the seventeenth century does not seem to have extended much beyond the madrigalian repertory, and indicative of this is the fact that Francis Tregian did not include any monodic pieces in his vast anthology of mainly Italian vocal and instrumental music compiled while in the Fleet Gaol as a recusant from 1609 to 1619. However, there is little doubt that certain composers affected the Italian style (either as they knew or imagined it) and even set Italian words.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quotation}

The key point here is Spink’s apparent belief that there is a disconnect between Italian and English monody, as though they had developed simultaneously and with the same

\textsuperscript{76} Spink, \textit{English Song}, 106.


\textsuperscript{78} \textit{English Song}, 42.
goals, but separately. Indeed, he goes on to say, “one gets the impression that Italianate composers such as Ferrabosco and Lanier had not so much heard the ‘new music’ as heard about it.”

This point is well taken, for monody necessitates a highly intimate relationship between the text setting and the accent structure of the language being set, as we have seen in the previous chapter. It would have been largely futile for composers to attempt composing in the exact style of Caccini and Monteverdi when setting English texts. The languages and poetic traditions simply are not compatible. Moreover, the rich history of the English song gave composers all of the tools they needed to continue writing in the genre after the turn of the seventeenth century; thus, songs were not really infused with new Italian musical elements. Rather they reflected the same (albeit independent) developments as Italian music to adopt a clearer subordination of the melody to the accents and caesuras in the text.

As we have seen, the most novel use of this more “monodic” style of singing was in the court masque. Song, like drama, had an almost secondary function in these works, and declamatory songs, those uninformed by dance rhythms or popular-style tunes, were largely limited to scenes of a supernatural nature. They were not normally used to carry dialogue in the course of the drama. Thus, the function of musical declamation in early masques more closely mirrors that of the aria in later opera, yet the style of these declamatory songs increasingly took on the monodic flavor of recitative.

Here we have come to what is possibly a defining factor, one that modern readers invariably have in the back of their minds based on later practice, namely, that recitative is a transitional genre whose purpose is to efficiently deliver dialogue. That assumption carries with it certain suppositions about what separates recitative from air: If a passage

79 *English Song*, 43.
is tonally closed, has an active bassline, and features a melody which strays from a strictly parlando style, many would hesitate to designate it as recitative at all. As we shall see, however, these factors did not clearly define genre in any of seventeenth-century English repertoire. The disconnect from the very beginning between English and Italian approaches to declamation should be enough to exclude any attempt here of treating the insular English practice on any terms but its own. Each composer’s approach was different in terms of the tonal function of his declamation related to the larger structure, the activity of his basses, and his relative reliance on melodic embellishments or harmonic coloring to render the text expressively. Remarkably, these factors seem to rely more on personal taste on the part of the composer than is the case in contemporary Italian or French practice.

A masque, *Cupid and Death* gives us the earliest complete picture of how the declamatory ayre was adapted to suit dramatic situations. The masque is divided into five “entries”, each containing a song (in rhyming verse) set by Locke. (Notably, the last entry also includes Locke’s setting of a dialogue in Shirley’s unrhymed blank verse which the poet does not specify to be sung.) Each entry follows the structure laid out below: a suite consisting of allemandes, courantes and sarabandes introduces a chain of declamation, tuneful song, chorus and instrumental ritornellos, as table 1 shows. One will immediately notice that declamatory passages, whose style ostensibly has its roots in the song tradition, frequently begin and end in different keys. However, the same is true of tuneful song settings and choruses as well, making it difficult to consider open versus closed tonality as indicative of any particular genre in this early work. However, each musical unit starting with declamation is treated as one large closed form, the only exception
occurring at the end of the fifth entry. This, according to Ellen Harris, is a masque convention, one that still resonates even with later works such as *Dido and Aeneas*.  

Table 1. Matthew Locke, *Cupid and Death*, Overall structure. Closed tonal sections shown in bold.

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Second Entry

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Third Entry

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Locke’s later works reflect a continued adherence to these chain-like structures. The masque of Orpheus in *The Empress of Morocco* follows the same basic structure as any one of the entries in *Cupid and Death*, despite its having been composed nearly twenty years later. Again, sections of declamation crop up in both closed and open tonal plans, in the latter case generally spilling into a tuneful air which returns to the opening key of the declamation. Harris calls these “two-part airs”, and designates them as something uniquely English, yet they do not seem to occur with regularity until the 1670s, which could point to a French origin. Table 1 shows how any tonally open

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81 Ibid., 97.
recitative in *Cupid and Death* is frequently followed by a song or chorus which does not finish in the same key that the declamation began; this resolution generally has to wait until the conclusion of a larger section.

Harris goes on to argue that even in the late case of *Dido and Aeneas*, recitative does not actually exist, limiting the genres used by Purcell to include “the declamatory air, the dance or tuneful air, […] the two-part air, […] and the dialogue [air]”. Examples such as “Whence could so much virtue spring?” from Act One of *Dido* “is not a simple recitative but a carefully and strictly measured declamatory song” due to its “stable” (i.e., closed) tonal plan. She states that these declamatory airs “substituted in England for continental recitative.” While there is no question that English “Recitative musick” descended from the true monodic songs originating earlier in the century, contemporary writers seemed not to limit their usage of the term “recitative” based on open tonality in any sense. For example, Pan’s recitative at the outset of Locke’s *Psyche* is so named in Shadwell’s printed libretto, yet Locke’s setting alternates between common-time declamation and a more tuneful triple-meter style, the whole section remaining firmly planted in the key of D major. Harris also avoids using the term “recitative” even for sections of *Dido* for which she acknowledges an “open harmonic plan”, which is perplexing given that, by her own logic, these do not have the required tonal closure of a song. Even outside of England, a cursory glance through any work of Lully’s shows

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82 *Dido*, 97.
83 Ibid., 96.
84 Ibid., 88.
86 Harris, *Dido*, Table 2, 99-100.
tonally closed sections of declamation appearing frequently, though there is little debate
over whether his recitative should be called anything but that. Therefore, the distinction
between “song” and “recitative” cannot depend on the aspect of tonal closure, especially
in English music.

The rhythmic profile of both the melody and the bass constitutes a second
historically important element used to distinguish recitative from other vocal music.
Dent’s attitude toward Purcell (and by proxy, his predecessors) is typical of scholarship
from earlier in the twentieth century, and the ideas contained in the following have not
dissipated entirely: Purcell, according to Dent, expressively employs

“florid passages, and [he has a] tendency to [use] measured *arioso* rather than to
[employ] free declamation on an almost stationary bass, as in Italian *recitativo
secco* of the operatic type. Purcell never relaxes the sense of rhythm […] nor does
he […] even permit himself that common Italian formula, the dominant-tonic
cadence independent of the general rhythm, which is scattered all over the works
of Bach and Handel, to say nothing of the Italians, and which to the average
reader is the most characteristic and annoying feature of recitatives. Nor does
Purcell consider that recitative absolves him from the restrictions of key any
more than those of rhythm.”87

One will notice a rampant bias in favor of Italianate (and for that matter, eighteenth-
century) markers of recitative. Dent discusses freeness of rhythm, bass stagnation, and a
greater sense of harmonic liberty as qualities lacking from Purcell’s declamation, which
he opts to describe as “arioso.” I included the section regarding the lack of the ubiquitous
out-of-tempo cadence merely to show how far Dent strayed into the stereotypical generic
definition of recitative. Though scholarship has come a long way from the universal
application of the paradigm set up in Dent’s quote, vestiges of it certainly remain. A
ghost of it underlies Harris’s statement that “Locke’s declamation moves towards

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lyricism and song [and] turns away from the careful speech rhythms of Lanier and the Lawes brothers. His style is not wholly new, however, but reminiscent of declamatory songs from earlier in the century.\textsuperscript{88} Moreover, Henry Leland Clark describes Blow’s declamation as “Blovian arioso” given that the bass does not “[cling] to the first note, after the fashion of earlier Italian opera.”\textsuperscript{89} But given what we know of the history of English “Recitative musick”, why would we ever expect Locke, Blow or Purcell’s declamation to look anything like Italian recitative at any of its stages of development? Indeed, when the latest Italian form of declamation arrived in the early 1700s, the English were astonished by it, according to an account by Joseph Addison, who remarks “there is nothing that has more startled our English Audience, than the Italian Recitativo at its first Entrance upon the Stage.”\textsuperscript{90}

Indeed, the notion of whether the bass “clings to the first note” seems connected to the Italian idea of monody, especially given how important the development of thoroughbass practice was to that tradition. In discussing earlier declamatory music in England, Spink notes that

\begin{quote}
The freedom of declamation which comes with the \textit{basso continuo} and an improvised accompaniment is denied with this music, whereas it is the essence of \textit{le nuove musiche}. Indeed, the fact that figured basses are virtually non-existant [sic] in England before the 1630s itself suggests that Italian monody was not well known.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

However, the declamation in Locke’s \textit{Cupid and Death} (1659) already features figured bass and contains much longer stretches of whole notes occupying the accompaniment

\textsuperscript{88} Harris, \textit{Dido}, 91.

\textsuperscript{89} Clark, “John Blow,” 487.

\textsuperscript{90} Joseph Addison, \textit{The Spectator} 19 (1711), cited in Jack Westrup, “Recitative §2” in \textit{NGD}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.

\textsuperscript{91} Spink, \textit{English Song}, 42.
than perhaps any of the later works considered here. This is most noticeable in the fifth entry, which contains a dialogue between Cupid, Death, Nature, and Mercury. In the plot, Cupid’s and Death’s arrows had been switched, causing young lovers to die and the elderly to spring to newfound affections, and at the moment in figure 7, Mercury reveals to the two the havoc they have caused. While we shall evaluate the harmonic aspects of this passage in greater detail shortly, for now one merely must note the static character of the continuo part. In fact, there are cases when four or even five bars will pass without a single change in harmony. The passage here is completely typical of Locke’s treatment of the bass throughout the work.
In his masque in *The Empress of Morocco*, certain moments do have a more active treatment of the bass, yet these instances seem dramatically motivated. Figure 8 shows a more dynamic moment in the accompaniment corresponding to the singer’s
greater agitation. Orpheus, who pleads with Proserpine and Pluto for the return of Eurydice, becomes more urgent in his calls of “my fair Eurydice”, and his expression spills over into the bass part as well.

Figure 8. Matthew Locke, the masque in *The Empress of Morocco*. 
It is this fluidity, or, to use White’s word, “suppleness”\textsuperscript{92} of texture which separates English declamation from the Italian and French. These other nations’ practices do include \textit{arioso} and \textit{récitatif mesuré}, respectively, and these genres’ basses are indeed more active, yet English recitative never developed to the required level of self-awareness to really allow for the distinction of such subgenres. An adherence to the need to apply such terms as \textit{arioso} to English declamation may seem helpful in describing the music relative to Italian practice, yet small pockets of greater bass activity (appearing in a highly unregulated fashion) such as that in figure 8 really do not warrant the universal application of such terminology to the repertoire. Clark’s employment of the term to describe all of \textit{Venus and Adonis} is particularly misleading, as one will remember that declamation in that work seems reserved for the highest points of dramatic intensity. Given that Locke was a model, we shall see that Blow relied on harmonic instability (hence an active bass) to help portray the emotional upheavals in the drama. \textit{Dido and Aeneas} adheres to the same tradition, and since the bass provides the foundation of the harmony, fully understanding why this “suppleness” was allowed throughout English dramatic music requires a look at these composers’ harmonic practices in their declamatory music as a whole.

Locke, in general, relies on a mixture of modern tonal and older madrigalian harmonic procedures to color his text setting. The beginning of figure 7 shows how static this can be, yet the composer does move through a wide range of key areas in 24 measures: e minor, C major, G major, F major, d minor, and a minor and D major. While taking C major as a sort of neutral zone to start Mercury’s call for Cupid, the sharp side is emphasized at first (G major) until suddenly, when the messenger unblinds the

\textsuperscript{92} White, \textit{A History}, 92.
mischievous dwarf, there is a move toward the flat side (F major). This shift, in turn, expresses the horror of Cupid’s inadvertent murder streak, peaking at the g-minor chord underlying the word “slaughter.” Curiously, Locke seems to pursue a sort of color difference when moving back towards sharper tonalities immediately thereafter, coming to rest on the dominant of e minor on the word “pale”. If Locke’s harpsichord were tuned to mean-tone temperament (as is likely), this B major triad certainly would have had a rather wide third, meaning that the choice of this chord would have a greater expressive effect than a mere glance at the score would indicate.

On the larger scale, the rapidity of the harmonic rhythm coincides with the emotional urgency of the text. As Mercury is merely commanding Cupid to appear, his insistence is expressed through static harmony. When Cupid looks out and sees the effect he has wrought by shooting Death’s arrows instead of his own, the unstable and rapidly changing harmony underlines the confusion likely felt by the remorseful god. Thus, the larger dramatic mood and small-scale expressive touches on particular words both receive careful harmonic attention by Locke, leaving the melody largely free to merely declaim the text in a fairly efficient manner. Harris’s discussion of Locke’s abandoning the “careful speech rhythms” of earlier composers is partly true, yet Locke definitely does make choices aimed at maintaining clarity in the declamation. As noted in the previous chapter, melismas such as those on the words “fond” and “thy” in figure 7 function partially to ensure that the most important word arrives on a downbeat, which is not suggestive of Harris’s “lyricism” but rather of an astute attention to proper word emphasis. The intervallic makeup of the melody, further, seems to be fairly independent
of the expression, frequently reiterating one pitch, or simply moving triadically or stepwise.

Moving forward to the masque in *The Empress of Morocco*, the expression in Locke’s recitative intensifies, yet it still is expressed primarily in the harmony. Figure 8 illustrates the bold choice of f minor to underline the subject matter of Proserpine’s text - that of hell and misfortune. The music preceding the example is in the main key of the whole brief drama, F major, rendering this shift rather sudden and striking. To cap this off, a surprising leap of a diminished seventh occurs on the word “down (to Hell)”, a new expressive device that Locke would not have had in his arsenal had he set the same text around the time of *Cupid and Death*. In general, although the melody remains primarily concerned with clear declamation, there are frequent displacements of accent throughout the example which must be seen as intentional (not careless), given their dramatic impulse. We have already seen the role of the more active bass in portraying a more restless mode of expression in the setting of “My fair Eurydice”, and the fluctuating accent in the melody further contributes to this. For example, the accented syllable in the word “Eurydice” occurs first on beat 4, then on beat 1 at its second appearance. More striking are the syncopated entrances on the words “forc’d”, “breathing” and the cry of “Orpheus”, the latter having an analogous (though less effective) relationship with Mercury’s cries of “Cupid” in figure 7. Both the eighth note rest (as opposed to a mere beat displacement) and the surprising occurrence of an A-flat in the bass contribute to this device’s effectiveness.

Despite his having obviously followed Locke’s example in developing his own style of recitative musick, John Blow stands out from his contemporaries for the extreme
richness of his melodic expression. While Locke focuses his attention more on the prevailing harmonies to color each moment relative to the next, Blow concentrates less on the overall dramatic effect and instead uses incredibly affective melodic devices to develop a uniquely rich form of expression, one that possesses a sense of immediacy lacking in Locke’s style. The opening of Act III in *Venus and Adonis* portrays this aspect of Blow’s approach better than anything else. The relatively active bass and consequently dynamic harmony all serve the richness of the melodic material, creating a fluidity found nowhere in Locke for whom the use of harmony is the end, not the means by which the effect is achieved. Figure 9 shows Blow’s style: the melody, though of course primarily syllabic, displays a much greater use of appoggiaturas and passing figures than Locke’s generally does. Melismas occur on rhetorically appropriate words such as “mournful”, and because Blow does not always rely on accent displacement as an expressive device, the relationship between lines of poetic text and the placement within the bar are not important. One should note that the treatment of the dissonances here is extremely French, as in the case of the rising appoggiatura figure for “I grieve”. However, the expressive use of cross-relations such as that at “dominion of my eyes” between the C in the bass and the C# on the word “of” in measure 8 is distinctly English. Most remarkable in the passage is the juxtaposition of the key areas c minor and a minor under the word “mournful”, and again, this functions with the melody to decorate that particular word—it does not function to create an independent mood for a complete thought as one would expect in the case of Locke.93

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93 I have added bass figures to this passage in Figure 3 of my own to illustrate the harmony. An enharmonic transfer occurs on the D in the bass under “mournful” which links c minor and a minor, the A-flat in the diminished seventh chord being reinterpreted as a G-sharp. The use of such a device in England during the mid-1680s is very remarkable and unique.
One could hardly call the passage in figure 9 *arioso* as Clark does, or *song* as does Harris, despite the fluidity of its bassline and the highly decorated, extremely lugubrious text setting. While it strays from the strictly *parlando* style with static bass associated with Italian recitative, it is still declamatory, and it simply does not behave like an air. The focus is on the drama, and Venus is directly addressing Adonis. Her sentiments have a train-of-thought quality, and though the rhythms applied by Blow as they stand serve to support this aspect of the text, performing this passage without a flexible tempo would fail to do justice to the extreme grief expressed by Venus here. Harris’s reference to these English “declamatory ayres” as being “strictly measured” in contrast to Italian recitative as applied to a performance of this poignant passage from *Venus and Adonis* would not be so flattering. This is precisely why this question of genre

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94 Clark, “John Blow”, 487.
95 Harris, *Dido*, 93.
96 Ibid., 97.
is so important. For whatever was considered “Recitative song” by John Playford, should be subject to a certain flexibility of tempo,\(^97\) as he considered it “a kind of Speaking in Singing”\(^98\), and no passage could be more in need of the application of such flexibility of delivery than this one. This is not to say that the rhythmic character of this recitative should not be carefully observed, but the dramatic intensity necessitates an extremely affective delivery which requires that the tempo be flexible. The term arioso or “air” in general suggests a more judicious observance of a regular pace which is simply out of place here, and its use merely emphasizes how very un-Italian Blow’s recitative is.

Because he reserves declamation in recitative musick for these most important dramatic moments, Blow is forced to use dialogue airs (that is, a tempo) for more commonplace moments in the drama. Figure 10 shows an example of this practice from Act I, when Venus and Adonis break out of their more passionate dialogue and begin discussing whether or not Adonis should go hunting. It seems almost as though Blow had no fitting model of recitative for such a trivial discussion, though Locke’s Cupid and Death and the other Commonwealth offer examples. Perhaps those exemplars were so far in the distant past by the 1680s that Blow did not have access to them. In any case, the reversion to this other, more neutral form of expression is of key importance because it exposes a limitation in the English conception of recitative: it really only served to heighten moments of great dramatic intensity as it always had throughout the masque tradition. Even though Venus and Adonis is sung throughout, the libretto presents few

\(^{97}\) John Playford, An Introduction to the Skill of Musick, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (London, 1655), cited in Bicknell, 12.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 12\(^{th}\) ed. (London, 1694), 181.
moments when trivial plot-related dialogue would need to be spoken, and when it does, Blow finds ways around using “Recitative musick” for setting them.

**Figure 10.** John Blow, *Venus and Adonis*, Act One, mm. 109-120.

Purcell’s declamatory style, naturally, builds upon what preceded him in the works of Locke and Blow, synthesizing the best qualities of each. From Locke, he inherited a judicious attention to proper word accent and utmost clarity of text; from Blow, he acquired ideas of how to soften declamation lest it become too stiff. Further, a great deal of credit must be given both to his own ingenuity and to the possible influence on his music of the French musicians at court. Among all of his dramatic music, *Dido and Aeneas* shows Purcell’s handling of declamation at its best. The large-scale use of key has ties to particular characters and moods. According to Harris, “Dido’s grief is represented by C minor, and Aeneas is identified by E and A minor […] Dido’s emotions are presented with flat and minor chords, whereas Aeneas’s military exploits appear on
sharp and major chords.” This global use of specific harmonic areas recalls that of Locke mentioned earlier, though for Purcell, the use of specific harmonies to represent certain characters and their characteristics far outstrips Locke’s methods in its sophistication.

There is also a particular layer of subtlety in Purcell’s text settings which seems too consistent to be coincidental, though it frequently is overshadowed by the more blatant aspects of word painting that occur throughout. In her analysis of eighteen French baroque airs, Patricia Ranum observes an important (and often underrepresented) factor of musical-rhetorical expression:

The perfection or the imperfection of an interval conveys an expressive message all its own. […] Perfect intervals support reposeful concepts, tender thoughts and allusions to stability and self-control. Imperfect intervals express the more emotional, passionate or transitory ideas of an air.

If one examines carefully the intervals formed between the melody and the bass on each beat in Purcell’s recitatives, the sentiment expressed in each case is colored very subtly by the resulting sonority. Figure 11 shows an excellent example: While Belinda, Dido’s handmaiden, speaks frequently in pedantic aphorisms such as “Grief increases by concealing”, a distressed Dido responds emotionally with “Mine (my grief) admits of no revealing”. Belinda’s words form primarily perfect consonances with the bass, fifths and octaves; the same is true for her line “then let me speak.” Dido, on the other hand, forms all thirds and sixths against the bass when delivering her line, rendering her delivery more emotionally charged. As Belinda seems to assure Dido that she understands what is

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99 Harris, Dido, 103.
100 Ranum, The Harmonic Orator, 354.
troubling her (the fact that she has fallen in love with Aeneas), more imperfect consonances such as those at “guest”, “ten-der”, and “thoughts” appear. This technique is subtle indeed, but it breathes an incredible amount of life into these characters. These are not mere word painting devices to color the text; rather, the nuances here apply shading to the emotions of these characters’ in their interactions with one another and allow the audience a highly intimate glimpse into the hearts of each of them as they declaim their lines. The careful control of this level of expression allows Purcell to reserve the extremely affective style such as that found in Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* (figure 9) for equally expressive moments in his own work, such as the analogous scene in *Dido* as the title character dies (“Thy hand, Belinda”). While the great merit and potential of Blow’s style was recognized by Purcell, he understood that, in the context of an entire drama, the intensity of Blow’s melodic expression was effective only at dramatically climactic points. This freed up recitative for less highly affective moments, and the control of perfect versus imperfect intervals allowed Purcell to appropriately (and more subtly) control the level of passion depicted in each of his characters.
This method of expression continues throughout the opera, even when the declamation becomes more ornate; the melodic skeleton always conforms appropriately to this established range of neutral to affective intervals between the bass and vocal parts. In figure 12, Dido begins by admiring Aeneas’s militaristic exploits (an “allusion to stability” for Ranum) and on every strong beat, she forms an octave or a fifth with the bass. When discussing his “valor” and his “charm”, however, sixths and thirds appear, giving way to dissonances such as a diminished seventh and later a ninth on the word “soft”, her most tender description of him.
As the previous figure (11) shows, however, Purcell also followed Blow’s example in incorporating French-style petits airs either to express a fairly bland statement, a maxim, or fairly pedestrian dialogue. Belinda’s air “The greatest blessing” breaks from the preceding declamation, which is dramatically wise on Purcell’s part, since it would have cheapened the previous lines to set her blithely hopeful statement here in as serious a style as the previous recitative.

While this all may suggest that Purcell, like Blow, privileges recitative over air for moments of emotional poignancy, one would likely be quick to point out Dido’s famous lament aria as evidence against Purcell’s adoption of such a practice. While there is no doubt that the provenance of the lamenting ground bass aria is Italian, Purcell’s incorporation of it in its dramatic context is highly unique among all of the works considered here and speaks more to the composer’s own skill as a dramatist than to strong Italian influence. After all, the ground bass had been abandoned in Italy by 1689.
Interestingly, Aeneas’s climactic expressive moment at the end of the second act is set as recitative. Some might see the possibility of some kind of gender expression juxtaposition here, with the feminine expressed in air, and the masculine in recitative.

While there may be something to this, for our purposes the use of both genres at moments of heightened emotion merely points to Purcell’s conception of both as equally appropriate vehicles for expressive setting of text.
V: Conclusions

From the preceding analysis, we can conclude that the range of style and techniques applied by English composers in their “Recitative musick” varied greatly, though some elements remained consistent throughout the Restoration. In attempting to define what “Recitative musick” meant for the English, then, I would return to Richard Fleknoe’s explanation of it as a “compound of Musick and Poetry together, affecting the mind and sense with redoubled delight.”101 While some may be troubled by the vagueness of this definition, to me it is perfect, for the only requirements are these: that the composer and poet collaborate together to create something that truly affects the listener, and stirs his or her passions. The notion of how “songish” the declamation is need not factor in, and our precepts of songishness, namely a closed harmonic plan, or an active, tuneful bass and more decorative melody should not encourage us to misapply foreign terms such as *arioso* or even “song” or “air” to what is clearly, to the seventeenth-century English mind, something else -- “recitative musick.” Only when the music takes on a clearly dance-derived or other kind of more rhythmically regulated tunefulness should we conclude that we are experiencing air or song.

As to the function of “recitative musick” in English dramatic music of the time, I hope to have shown how the inconsistency in the practice of poets and composers discouraged any manner of conventionalized vehicle for text declamation from coming to the fore. In spite of this, the culmination represented by the “recitative musick” in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* would have served as the perfect model for further English operas had the timing been right. He and Nahum Tate managed to overcome the obstacles that had faced poets and composers since Flecknoe, in his *Ariadne*, first showed an

101 Richard Fleknoe, preface to *Ariadne* (London, 1654).
interest in cultivating opera with recitative in England. The fact was, however, that \textit{Dido} was a private entertainment. The public was unaware of it and really never came to understand what they erroneously saw as a largely foreign type of diversion. Dent, although his work now quite shows its age, really puts it best when stating that some [collaborators in English opera] could never find the right form in which to express themselves; some found the form, but not the audience to understand it; others have had the technique, even the audience as well, but not enough fundamental poetic power to make their work live. Yet in spite of public apathy, in spite of inadequate means of presentation, in spite of uncertainty of method, the effort has been continuous, determined and persistent.\footnote{Foundations, 2.}

The purpose of this study is not so much to lament what could have been. Rather, it is to show that all of the ingredients for English opera were there: in the masque, in the declamatory songs from the earlier part of the century, and in the importation of an Italian \textit{idea}. Those factors all came together to produce some remarkable experiments. The most critical factor, that of recitative, the one that had been the germ of opera in the first place, was not a failure in the hands of English composers as some have argued.\footnote{Manfred Bukofzer, \textit{Music in the Baroque Era} (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1947), 184 cited in Harris, \textit{Dido}, 105.} And it was not just that the English culturally could not “rellish [sic] that perpetuall Singing”,\footnote{\textit{The Gentlemen’s Journal} (Jan. 1691), 5 cited in Haun, \textit{But Hark!}, 155.} the reason traditionally given as for English opera’s relative failure. The fact was that opera required recitative, recitative required suitable poetry provided by a willing and flexible poet, and the composer had to produce something out of this poetry that suited both the language and the overall drama effectively. Since the stars so infrequently aligned to bring all these elements together, English recitative simply never caught the public’s
fancy. Moreover, the arrival of up-to-date Italian recitative in the early eighteenth century in the music of Handel and Buononcini sounded the death knell for all that had been accomplished to create a uniquely English declamatory style.

Given the problems inherent in setting the English language to this new style of recitative in an attempt to keep up with taste, recitative continued to seem foreign (for at that point it truly was), and eventually, the popularity in London of Italian operas in Italian snuffed out any remaining hope for carrying on the commendable progress made by Restoration poets and composers to create a native operatic tradition. While this is truly lamentable, we should never forget that English recitative should be considered in its own light—not merely as an Anglicization of something Italian, but rather as a remarkable bud of a plant that could have blossomed into a truly spectacular flower had circumstances been different.
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