

Studying Henry Purcell's Ground Bass Arias in «Dido and Aeneas» in Comparison with
Late Renaissance Instrumental Tradition and Italian Opera

The last years of the musical Renaissance and the first appearance of what is generally termed Baroque was a time of transformation for instrumental music and instrumental musicians. Pieces written specifically for instruments were being composed and notated. For anybody even vaguely familiar with music in the twenty-first century, the idea of music designated for instrumental interpretation is commonplace, but, beginning in the sixteenth century, such a concept was revolutionary and at times controversial. Throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, instrumentalists enjoyed little praise. Their subordinate position is evident in manuscripts preserved over time (musicians who played instruments rather than sung were in essence a way to fill in for vocalists, always supportive and almost never of primary focus) as well as documentation of their being relegated in society. As time went on, and instruments were allowed into the Church, value placed on non-vocal music was raised. Much of the instrumental idiom grew out of vocal tradition, but improvisation rooted in techniques for the instruments themselves was crucial. Instrumental music was becoming different from vocal music, and with this change came the prevalence of standard instrumental formulas for improvisation and composition: grounds.

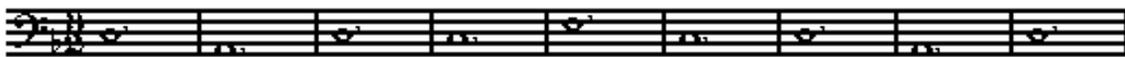
A ground, or ground bass, is a repeated phrase played most often by a bass instrument, over which chords and/or melody are added by an improviser or composer. Henry Purcell employs ground-bass technique in three arias from «Dido and Aeneas»,

the second time with a closed ending in response to its open halfway point. Purcell's ground does not modulate. The *Romanesca* pattern may be heard as a modulation to the relative minor of the opening major mode. These differences aside, Purcell's ground resembles the standard pattern with enough precision to suppose at least a subconscious influence, if not an outright borrowing from the *Romanesca*, a recourse used by influential opera composers as early as Monteverdi and as late as Handel.

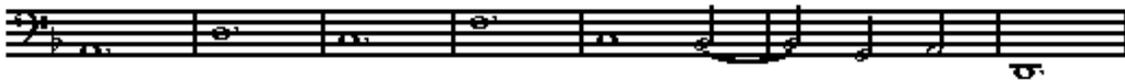
“Oft she Visits this Lone Mountain”:



La folia:



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Explaining the source of Purcell's second ground bass aria from this opera to be *La folia* is somewhat more difficult than the first example. First, suppose that the entirety of Purcell's ground corresponds to the first eight measures of *La folia*. As the Purcell proceeds without a cadence that interrupts the running eighth notes until after the orchestral ritornello, it may be interpreted as a version of *La Folia* that repeats the first half for an extended period of time before finally cadencing on the tonic (as opposed to the cadence on the dominant halfway through the standard pattern). Within Purcell's four-bar ground, the implied harmony is not dissimilar to the harmony often associated with the standard form. Both begin on the tonic of the minor mode, but then move clearly to the diatonic third scale degree, suggesting a modulation to, or tonicization of,

modal and tonal definition. In other words, Purcell's chromatic lament bass was not that innovative. This is not to detract from his brilliance as a composer.

Purcell's use of standard bass formulas in the creation of expressive vocal music neither weakens the purpose of the ground bass as a formal component nor obeys the simple expectations of the listener, who would probably be surprised by the incongruity between steady repetitions in the basso continuo and more dynamic vocal phrasing. All in all, Purcell's ground bass arias do not lack in tunefulness or creativity, and do prove to be formally cohesive as well as harmonically true to the schemata established by first-rank opera composers.