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Presentation of two similarly themed works illustrates good vs. great

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The differences between good and great were starkly displayed this weekend when two English baroque operas were brilliantly performed at Synod Hall in Oakland in a collaborative presentation by Chatham Baroque and the Renaissance and Baroque Society of Pittsburgh.

Both "Venus and Adonis" by John Blow and "Dido and Aeneas" by Henry Purcell are chamber operas with similar themes drawn from the myths of antiquity about women who end up lamenting the deaths of their lovers.

"Venus and Adonis," written in 1683, is a pleasingly tuneful work. To supplement the primary story, Blow created a delightful part for Cupid and a band of little cupids that includes a funny number about "The insolent, the arrogant and the mercenary" -- the last spelled out in song -- being the ones to be teased in love's adventures.

But from the opening notes of "Dido and Aeneas" -- written only six years after Blow's opera -- it is obvious that Purcell was by far the greater composer. He was more imaginative both rhythmically and harmonically. Purcell's opera concludes with "Dido's Lament," which is more powerful harmonically than Blow's similarly conceived lament for Venus.

Comparisons were facilitated by the excellent performances given both works. Soprano Julianne Baird is a star of the early music world, and sang with ravishing line, agility and control of volume.

Curtis Streetman was also impressive as Adonis and Aeneas. The bass possesses an appealing voice that he uses boldly, and he acted well.

Soprano Laura Heimes was fabulous as Cupid in Blow's opera. She possesses not only a wonderful soprano voice -- warm yet focused and seemingly free as a bird -- but is also a magnetic presence onstage.

Lucky Daphne Alderson made the most of the Sorceress role in the Purcell work. And baritone Robert Frankenberry's timing of his drunken sailor's routing was masterful.

An adult chorus prepared by John Goldsmith, and members of the Children's Festival Chorus trained for these performances by Elaine Goldsmith, were both superb.

Chatham Baroque, led by the musically vivacious and technically assured violin playing of Julie Andrijeski, contributed exemplary performances

Andrijeski also provided the choreography, and a child dancer known as Aviana was charming and assured far beyond her 8 1/2 years.

The stage director, James Cassaro, made excellent use of the available space, and brought vibrant details to the portrayals. He also provided excellent program notes.