

Fairest Isle: Music of Henry Purcell

In England in the early seventeenth century the great poets and the great composers collaborated on a new kind of English song, fueled in part by the expansion of music printing in London: composers such as Dowland, Campian, Jones, Lanier and Ferrabosco developed the English declamatory style with a keen awareness of musical trends in France and Italy: this distinctly English style of song combined new harmonies with florid ornamentation and rhetorical patterns of speech.

The striking degree of critical awareness, international sophistication and eclecticism that were a major part of this music culminates at the end of the century in the works of the “English Orpheus,” Henry Purcell. If Purcell wrote, in the words of John Milton, with “just note and accent,” it is in part due to the remarkable musical and literary environment of England at the time, a culture in which the amateurs, both poets and musicians, were so skilled that they could compete for places in the great anthologies of music and verse such as *Orpheus Britannicus*, *Harmonia Sacra* and *Amphion Anglicus*, from which many of the songs on this program are drawn. One of the great strengths of Purcell and his teacher John Blow is that they were not only excellent composers, but that they also knew how to choose the best texts to set, and these span the entire range of styles from “golden” to the “drab,” in the words of C.S. Lewis: composers set not only the compressed neoplatonic conceits of Dryden but also the experimental international poems, fragments, and small scenes of lyricists and dramatic writers. In the verse of Purcell’s time, the Italian blazons, in which a single affect is motivically transformed in accord with the text, (such as *Music for a while* or *Welcome, welcome*) peacefully coexist with the irregular pater-song rhythms and rhymes of the French court airs; Purcell somehow manages to combine the seemingly incompatible styles of English divisions, Italian melismas and French *brouderie* (the “embroidered” style).

Of the poems set to music in tonight’s program, by far the most complex is the anonymous invocation to the Muses, “Welcome, welcome” from *Amphion Anglicus* (London, 1700):

Welcome, welcome ev'ry Guest;
Welcome to the Muses' Feast;
Musick is your only cheer,
Musick entertains the Ear.

The sacred Nine, Observe the Mode,
And bring you dainties from abroad:
The delicious Thracian Lute,
And Dodona's mellow Flute,
With Cremona's racy Fruit.
At home you have the freshest Air;
Vocal, Instrumental Fare.
Our English Trumpet nothing has surpast.

The poem reveals the degree to which composers were willing to deal with highly complex verbal textures. The “sacred nine” refers to the nine muses—the patrons of the arts—and the “mode” is a triple pun: the modes of music, the mode or custom of bringing gifts (the “dainties from abroad”), and the ideal number of guests at a dinner party in classical antiquity, which was either three (the number of graces or the original, smaller number of muses) or nine (the nine muses). The Thracian Lute refers to the lyre of Apollo, which was often termed the lute in literature, which, according to legend, was played by Orpheus, one of Thrace’s most famous citizens. Dodona’s mellow flute refers to the oracle of Zeus at the oak grove of Dodona (the oaks would whisper the oracle) in ancient Greece. Dodona has two associations to wind instruments, the first is the famous wind chimes which sounded continuously in the groves, and the second is the legend that Zeus daughter, Athena, invented the flute (the Greek *aulos*), and then, disappointed with the way it made her cheeks puff up, threw it on the ground, where it was claimed by Marsyas, who then used it in a musical competition with Apollo. Although “Cremona’s racy fruit” is

sometimes cited as a reference to the Italian violin makers, it (and the other instruments) refers to the highly influential and apocalyptic Latin poem of Marco Girolamo Vida of Cremona (1485-1566): *Christiados* (the *Christiad*). Milton and Dryden were among the many poets to draw from Vida, and here the reference is to the trumpet, the third and last instrument in the last line of “Welcome, welcome”:

Thus Christ, his bless'd ascension near at hand,
Consign'd his precepts to th' associate band.
Part on the tow'rs and lofty bulwarks stand,
Part line the ramparts, and the walls command.
These from the gates to issue forth prepare;
Swift as they mount, their wings obscure the air.
Some with their breath the shrill-ton'd flute inspire,
The cornet some; some sweep the sounding lyre:
Some the hoarse trumpet to their lips apply,
Some shake the brazen cymbals thro' the sky.
When now the throne of heav'n's eternal King
They thrice had circled, borne on rapid wing.

The reference to Cremona is made clear by Milton's Ode *The Passion*:

Loud o'er the rest Cremona's trump doth sound;
Me softer airs befit, and softer strings
Of lute, or viol still, more apt for mournful things.

However, in John Blow's version, England “trumps” Cremona: “Our English Trumpet nothing has surpast,” postponing, for a time, the inevitable decline, and restoring harmonious order.

In order to understand the rest of the poem, it is helpful to recognize that many of the words for the text were specifically chosen for their multiplicity of meanings—just as a chef assembles a dish from specially chosen, harmonious ingredients. Many of these words have clear associations with music, literature, food, wine and poetry. The works of John Dryden, from the same time as Purcell and Blow, are an excellent source for these references. “Mellow” refers to perfectly ripe fruit: “Nature drops him down, without your Sin, Like mellow Fruit, without a Winter Storm” (Dryden, *The Spanish Friar*), as well as well-aged wine. Both are necessary components of the banquet and poetical emblems. “Racy” refers to both wine and food of high quality: “Pure luscious Sweets, that mingling in the Glass, Correct the Harshness of the Racy Juice, And a rich Flavour through the Wine diffuse.” (Dryden, *Miscellany Poems*). “Flute” is a pun on the instrument as well as the glass that holds wine, both “flute” and “delicious” refer to Euterpe, the muse of music, whose name means “giver of things delicious” in Greek, and whose emblem was the flute or *aulos*.

Although it is tempting to think of baroque opera as a unified construct, in which every aria and interlude has a fixed place in a larger, transformational scheme, it is clear from the manuscript and printed sources that composers often favored a modular approach, in which a series of songs, often drawn from other sources, are fashioned into a loose narrative. In many cases, opera needed to be tailored to the specific situation at hand, and the extraordinary construction of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is in many ways atypical of the genre. In Purcell's operas, it is often impossible to say whether the individual songs were incorporated into the operas (such as “Music for a while”) or popular songs from the operas were printed in markedly different arrangements; in any case, the songs survive in many forms and variants, and many were extremely popular in Purcell's time. At first glance, a case for thematic unity in composition could surely be made for “See my many colour'd fields,” from *The Fairy Queen*, which is part of a larger allegorical cycle representing the seasons. This cycle, however, can be viewed as the same modular approach for planning a dramatic work but on a larger scale: the cycle of the seasons is different in form and style than the other songs in the opera, and may have been composed separately. Purcell may have penned the work originally as a set of seasons: many composers were experimenting with writing sets based on the months and the seasons at the end of the 17th century, well before Vivaldi's famous set of concertos, and it is published this way as four songs in *Orpheus Britannicus*.

Of Purcell's instrumental music we present two sonatas from the posthumous collection *Ten Sonata's in Four Parts* (London, 1697). Purcell composed more than twenty sonatas, and these represent one of the most important collections of chamber music from the end of the 17th century. Written in the 1680s, the sonatas display a sense of buoyancy and introspection: Purcell maintains a delicate sense of humor even in the gloomiest slow movements. In his preface to the reader, he makes clear his admiration for the "fam'd Italian masters", and the Italian style is clearly present, especially in the Golden Sonata, in which Purcell displays a brilliant command of motivic development and harmonic structure. The most unusual sonata from the 1697 print is the single-movement No. 6 which is all Purcell in style: wild chromaticism and French ornamentation are spun effortlessly over a repeating ground bass. The title of Sonata No. 9, the "Golden Sonata," first appears in a reprint from 1704 with the rubric "That Excellent Sonata in F...call'd The Golden Sonata;" however, the title may derive from Purcell's imitation of earlier works such as Antonio Bertali's "Taussent Gulden." The *Pavan in B Flat* shows the native English side of Purcell, he writes in a renaissance dance form with "modernized" chord progressions; the unaccompanied *Prelude in G Minor* is a perfect miniature.

In both his "vocal and instrumental fare," Purcell uses melismas to emphasize part of the text or as a flourish to the underlying harmony. One of the challenges for the performer is to add ornaments tastefully in the style of the time—an integral part of the performance. Roger North, writing retrospectively some years after Purcell's death, noted what he considered an essential skill:

The grace of the hand is no other than a voluntary expression of the graces of the descant [part writing] or of the composition [harmony]. But to sett them downe in the musick book is such paines, and for the continuall use and smallness of them, so intricate, puzzling, and unintelligible, that with best musitians they are altogether omitted. But of late times some masters, to encourage their scollars by ease, have in their printed songs done it....The Italians who I thinck may be our masters, never express graces, but write the true note which governs in the harmony, and leave the gracing to the skill and capacity of the performer....And therefore if wee had masters who are capable, which (now Purcell is gone) is much to be suspected, they should not teach their scollars Gracing but as inferences from the nature of the composition, on which all depends.

Further reading: The British Library has an online set of manuscripts and accompanying sound files featuring Purcell's work:

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/purcell.html>

Much of Purcell's music is now online, including important facsimiles at the IMSLP website:

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Purcell, Henry](http://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Purcell,_Henry)

John Wilson's edition of the writings of Roger North, "Roger North on Music" is an excellent source of information of the music from Purcell's time.

--David Tayler, Ph.D.

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