

## The Genius of Purcell

Written by Tony Moss.

Good evening and welcome to an evening celebrating the extraordinary range and musical diversity of Henry Purcell.

He was born in 1659, the final year of the so-called 'Commonwealth', a period in which Oliver Cromwell's Puritan fervour had led to the outlawing all entertainment with the great cathedral choirs disbanded and Christmas carols banned. If it had not been for the Restoration of the Monarchy it's hard to imagine what Purcell might have composed or been permitted to perform in such a restrictive climate.

But in 1660 Charles the Second returned from exile in France and quickly set about reviving the country's musical heritage, bringing composers and musicians from Europe to perform work never heard in England before. Crucially, he commissioned new works to celebrate key moments in the calendar – the New Year, his own birthday and the annual reopening of Court after his summer sojourns.

Becoming a member of the newly reformed Chapel choir at the age of 7, young Henry took part in many of these events. At the staggeringly young age of 14 he was chosen for the prestigious post of keeper of the King's instruments giving him access to instruments such as French oboes and bassoons, unseen or unplayed during England's long musical drought.

At just 18 he was anointed composer to the Royal Band known as the King's Violins, working with some of the finest musicians mostly trained abroad. He was charged with composing welcome songs, anthems and odes - poems set to music – something he continued to do as monarchs came and went right through to his death. We begin our concert with a birthday ode for one of Charles's successors, Queen Mary.

(Symphony/Come ye sons of Art)

### Music for the Church

The Reformation also meant the re-establishment of the Anglican church at the heart of the nation's musical life – with services once again full of music. Charles, who'd spent his formative years in France, expected even liturgical music to be lively – famously saying he did not expect to be bored at prayer. To this end he created a number of new posts to revive England's sacred musical traditions. Crucial was the reopening of the Chapel Royal along with the nation's cathedral choir schools.

Like others during this period of flux young Purcell began writing in a variety of styles, harking back to Tudor times and before as well as experimenting with current Italian and French forms.

At the age of 20, England's foremost composer John Blow stood aside so he could be appointed organist at Westminster Abbey - the highest paid music post of the day. And composing for the church became Purcell's predominant activity throughout most of his twenties. Critics of the day remarked on his sublime ability to convey powerful emotions such as pain and loss through the way he set the words – usually biblical text - to his music. We now present three of his sacred works.

(Remember not O Lord/ Evening Hymn/Rejoice in the Lord Alway)

## Songs

In 1683 a group of musicians known as the London Music Society sponsored the first Cecilian Festival, in honour of the early Christian martyr and patron saint of music. It commissioned the poet Christopher Fishbourne to write an ode in praise of music and asked Purcell to set it to music.

He became an active supporter of this new annual event which came to premiere a number of his solo songs and duets. All told, Purcell composed more than a 100 songs, the majority written - not for the court or the stage but to be performed by professional or amateur singers in private houses and the burgeoning new music salons. In practice most were upstairs rooms in the reopened pubs and taverns with drinkers charged extra for the entertainment. Critics then and since have marvelled about his capacity, from an early age, to intertwine the words and poetry of great emotions - love, loss and lamentation - around his music.

(Ye birds that sing sweetly/Here let my life/Since from my dear)

## Dido I

Opera, born in Italy more than a century earlier, had inspired much musical innovation and experimentation on the continent as composers rose to the challenge of creating full-length musical dramas without spoken dialogue.

But there'd been little interest in England - perhaps unsurprising as no opera could've been staged during the nearly two decades when the theatres had been shut – under Cromwell.

In 1683 Charles, a great lover of French opera, commissioned Purcell's teacher John Blow to compose and stage one of the first full-length operas in English. And in the tradition of much entertainment at Court the cast was mainly composed of the King's family and inner circle - including his mistress, his mistress's mother and his 10 year old illegitimate daughter.

While Blow's 'Venus and Adonis' wasn't a great success it spurred the 24 year old Purcell to write what is arguably the greatest-ever English opera – Dido and Aeneas. Based on Greek tragedy, it told the tale of the Queen of Carthage's doomed love for the Trojan hero. But in a departure from Virgil's original, Purcell starts act two with a sorceress and her witches plotting the destruction of Carthage.

(Act 2 - Witches scene)

## Dido II

Despite its towering reputation today, Dido and Aeneas seemed to have passed almost unnoticed at the time, and there's no definitive record of its first performance or subsequent stagings during Purcell's lifetime. Most scholars agree it was put on four or five times, at most, in the late 1680s - and mainly at a girls' school in Chelsea.

Amid the complex politics of the time, the evil machinations of a sorceress had uncomfortable associations with Papist plots, real or imagined, which bedevilled the reign of Charles's successor James the Second. Equally, London's two theatres were awash with the new Restoration comedies which promised three to four hours of rakish and ribald entertainment for the capital's middle classes. Doubtless theatre bosses questioned whether there was popular demand for a foreign art form as opera, especially one with a bleak and tragic tale that lasted just 60 mins.

To be fair Purcell injected plenty of drama and spectacle into his version of Dido. Act three opens – as we shall hear - with a rumbustious scene of sailors preparing to cast anchor, leaving their floozies behind – before the unfolding of Dido’s tragic demise.

(Act 3 to end)

## **End of First Half**

We’ll now have a 15 min interval during which drinks and snacks are available downstairs. In the second half we’ll hear how Purcell largely turned his back on church and crown at the age of 30 to compose almost exclusively for the stage in the last five years of his short life.

## **2nd Half**

### **Music for the Theatre**

When the staunch protestant William the Third deposed James the Second in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 the impact was immediate. Suspicious of the florid musical influences of the continent, the new monarch favoured military bands and a strictly limited role for music in national worship. This Calvinist outlook resulted in little support or encouragement for new or challenging music - and an active hostility to many who’d prospered under Charles and James the Second.

With diminishing opportunities at Court and Church, Purcell began composing for the newly-built Dorset Gardens theatre – writing songs and incidental music for at more than 40 productions between 1690 and his death five years later. Sited by the Thames at Fleet Street, Dorset Gardens allowed audiences – and Purcell – to come and go by ferry from Westminster and beyond free from the hazards of a dirty and often dangerous carriage journey through town.

Designed for great spectacles – unlike its rival Drury Lane – it was replete with trap doors, flying scenery and the technology to deliver cutting edge special effects. Purcell rose to the challenge of providing equally dramatic music – from poignant love songs to orchestral accompaniments to thunder, lightning and other visual effects – for whoever wanted his services. We start the second half with a selection of songs and music written for five different plays.

Curtain tune/My dearest/ Altisidora’s Song/Music for a while/Rondo

### **Semi-Operas**

Dorset Gardens was also the venue for a number of Purcell’s semi-operas – a peculiarly English hybrid in which the story unfolds through scenes of spoken dialogue interspersed with musical interludes of singing and dancing sometimes connected to the overall plot, sometimes not.

In the Fairy Queen – Purcell expanded Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream into a 4 hour extravaganza featuring gods and goddesses, shepherds, monkeys, Chinese dancers and the four seasons – much of which bears no relation to the main narrative. To a modern audience it remains an unwieldy challenge despite featuring some of the finest music Purcell ever wrote - so we’ll just offer you a selection of pieces – followed by a poignant aria from his final and unfinished semi-opera ‘The Indian Queen’.

(Hark the Echoing air/Thus the Gloomy World/Thus happy and free)

## **The Catches**

One of the most popular musical forms in Elizabethan times was the Catch or Round – where one singer starts a song and two others ‘catch’ on at later points but starting from the beginning. In Shakespearean tradition they were invariably bawdy and irreverent; the best containing comic juxtapositions as the singers’ lines intersected .

Post Cromwell there was a big upsurge in Catches which often delivered instant commentary or satire on the events of the day – most notably Ring a Ring a Roses after the Great Plague of 1665 – along with that other perennial children’s favourite London’s Burning following the Great Fire of London.

England’s pre-eminent composer couldn’t resist them. Although there was no obvious money to be made, Purcell wrote a staggering 52 Catches – the first at the age of 8 – and often performed them with friends in local taverns where he was, to put it mildly, a frequent visitor. His Catches were a great hit and sheet music faithfully reproduced how Purcell intended them to be performed – including, for example, explicit markings on where to belch and fart. (Start singing ‘A Pox on You’)

That’s enough from me.

(2 catches)

## **King Arthur**

Of Purcell’s six semi-operas - the biggest box office success was undoubtedly King Arthur - written by Purcell’s friend and collaborator, John Dryden. A catholic who’d been forced to resign as poet laureate after James the Second’s ascension, he’d also become reliant on the stage to make a living. This proved to be Purcell’s only semi-opera written specifically for this hybrid musical form – featuring alternating scenes of drama, and singing and dancing, performed by separate casts of actors and musicians and dancers. Together, they amounted to vast panoply of legendary characters, Norse gods, spirits, supernatural creatures and ordinary humans.

Act three opens with the Saxon magician Osmund waving his magic wand to transform everything and everyone to frost. This was a time – since dubbed ‘The Little Ice Age’ - in which the Thames regularly froze over in winter. And Frost Fairs sprung up with Royals and Commoners alike revelling in ice skating, ball games, animal baiting and general debauchery. It was an obvious inspiration for the scene in which Cupid rudely awakens the Spirit of Winter - the Cold Genius - from his slumbers – replete with daring chromatic harmonies and shivering strings.

(Frozen sequence of songs/music)

## **King Arthur 2**

Happily, Merlin manages to break the wicked cold spell and King Arthur emerges from the forest amid nymphs and wood spirits dancing with joy at the triumph of good – and love in particular - over evil. This piece is followed by a patriotic paean to our Fairest Isle. At the premier in 1691 the soprano Charlotte Buttler insisted on facing the back of the stage so the audience could not see her ‘unladylike facial contortions’ when she performed this aria. Our soloist Sarah is not so vain.

We then bypass a lengthy battle scene – mainly told through spoken drama – to rejoin the victorious King Arthur for the glorious musical finale as everyone celebrates the Britons’ final defeat over their Saxon foes.

(How happy the lover/Fairest Isle/St George/Our natives)

### **Final words**

In 1695 Purcell was at the peak of his powers when he died at the age of 36, having outlived all but two of his six children. Despite being one of the most famous figures in London there is no record of the cause of death – speculations ranging from tuberculosis to food and alcohol poisoning remain just that. He was buried under the newly-rebuilt organ at Westminster Abbey having never had the chance to play it.

In the final year of his life he composed music for a new production of the Jacobean play Boadicea, and his Druids’ battle song ‘Britons Strike Home’ became something of a national rallying cry after his death until Thomas Arne’s ‘Rule Britannia’ nearly a century later.

(Britons Strike Home)