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THE ORIGINS AND
DEVELOPMENT OF
HIS MUSICAL STYLE
MARTIN ADAMS

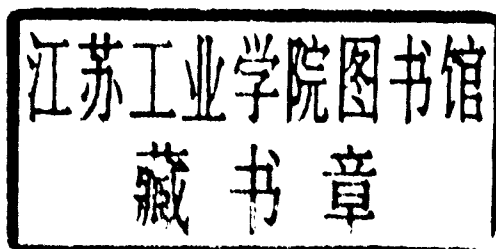
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Henry Purcell

The origins and development of his musical style

MARTIN ADAMS



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This is the first book thoroughly to explore the musical style of Henry Purcell. In this comprehensive study, Martin Adams identifies music by other composers, both within England and from abroad, which influenced Purcell's compositional decisions. Using a mix of broad stylistic observation and detailed analysis, Adams distinguishes between late-seventeenth-century English style in general and Purcell's style in particular, and chronicles the changes in the composer's approach to the main genres in which he worked, especially the newly emerging ode and English opera. As a result, Adams reveals that although Purcell went through a marked stylistic development, encompassing an unusually wide range of surface changes, special elements of his style remained constant. The book will be of interest to students and scholars of music and theatre history, and of British cultural and social history.

Preface

THIS BOOK WAS BORN out of a conviction which took root around 1974, during an analytical study of Purcell's fantasias, sonatas and a few late instrumental pieces, and at a time when some long-established views of Purcell were just beginning to be questioned. I was working on ground prepared by others, in particular by Michael Tilmouth's article on the sonatas, which demonstrated their close affinity with the fantasias, and by Margaret Laurie's demonstration, largely through a study of sources, that Purcell is unlikely to have written most of the music for *The Tempest* generally attributed to him. The results of my youthful delvings suggested there was much wrong with one prevalent view, which saw Purcell's development mainly in terms of progress towards an English version of the contemporary Italian style.

The core of my conviction, which this book seeks to validate, is that despite the extraordinary surface changes in Purcell's style between his mid teens and his death in 1695 aged around thirty-six, he was a deeply conservative composer, who had to struggle to reconcile the tide of the times – which he helped so strongly on its way, and which he identified primarily with Italian music – with the compositional priorities of his early music.

In the last twenty or so years others have expressed views more or less concordant with this position. But in the process, other misconceptions have sprung up, especially concerning possible influences on Purcell and aspects of chronology. Most of these arise from a failure to distinguish between levels and kinds of compositional development and influence, especially when seeking to identify specific pieces which might have inspired Purcell, when searching out the origin of a sudden stylistic innovation, and when considering the development of his own style.

This book attempts to draw such distinctions, and to show how complex was the web of native and foreign influence around Purcell. It is not intended as a

final proof – if such a thing were desirable or even possible – nor does it attempt to present in any detail the range and chronology of his output or the minutiae of his varied private and public fortunes. Rather it seeks to define those Purcellian features common to music as diverse as the early pavans and *The Indian Queen* (Z.630), to identify or speculate upon which foreign and native music might have inspired Purcell's choices, and to see how he reconciled that which he found attractive in such music to his distinctive compositional aspirations. The evidence is drawn mainly from an examination of his changing approach to each of the main genres in which he worked.

Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK WOULD NEVER have seen the light of day without the help and encouragement of many people. Special thanks to Sir William Glock, who first suggested that I should write it, and who proved unfailingly encouraging to a very young, inexperienced and unproven academic. For help and inspiration in my earliest days of Purcell research I am indebted to Peter Evans and to Robert Hanson. Generous in his comments and encouragement was the late Michael Tilmouth, who read over portions of the text. Many others have offered support by showing an interest and engaging in conversations which have affected my own thinking – in this respect I must particularly thank Nigel Fortune, Kevin O'Connell, Curtis Price and various colleagues in Trinity College Dublin too numerous to single out. For generous responses to written and other queries over the years, thanks are due to Andrew Ashbee, Peter Holman, Rosamond McGuinness, Thomas Mitchell and Bill Vaughan. Many thanks to Michael Dervan for reading over, and commenting on, parts of the text.

Many library staff have been unfailing in their assistance, often above the call of duty. I am indebted to various staff from the Bodleian and Christ Church Libraries, Oxford; the Music Room and the Manuscript Department of the British Library, and the library of the Royal College of Music, London; the Barber Institute, University of Birmingham; and finally to many staff of the Library at Trinity College, Dublin.

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Abbreviations

- MB *Musica Britannica*, London: Stainer and Bell
NPS *New Purcell Society Edition*, London: Novello (all editions after 1961, except vol. XXX – 1959)
PS *Purcell Society Edition*, London: Novello

Note on music examples and figures

MOST MUSIC EXAMPLES have been derived from modern critical editions. In the absence of a reliable modern source, seventeenth-century sources, either manuscript or printed, have been used wherever possible. In analytical diagrams, a close onto a major chord at the end of a phrase in the minor is indicated v(V), etc. The sign ~ is used to indicate harmonic instability. Wherever possible, time signatures are expressed in their original, seventeenth-century forms, e.g. 31, $\frac{6}{31}$, Φ . Unless otherwise indicated, all choruses are SATB. All music examples were typeset by TopType Music Bureau, Dublin.

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PART ONE

Stylistic development and
influences

Early years at court and home: developments to c. 1680

THE LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT survives suggests that Henry Purcell, arguably Britain's greatest composer, was born in 1659, probably in Westminster, then a more or less separate city some three miles west of London.¹ His father was one of two brothers, Thomas and Henry Purcell, both of whom earned a living as professional musicians (the balance of evidence favours Henry as the father). Both were on the King's musical establishment in 1661, just a year after the restoration of the monarchy and, while Henry died in 1664, Thomas continued to accumulate appointments and seems at the very least to have been responsible for young Henry during the boy's youth.²

We know practically nothing of young Henry's childhood, beyond some dates in archives of court and church which record his teenage rise up the ladder of appointments. He became a chorister in the Chapel Royal, almost certainly not later than his tenth year. His voice broke in 1673 and in that same year he was appointed assistant to John Hingston, keeper of the King's musical instruments: effectively this made him Hingston's unpaid apprentice.³ He must have done well in this work, for in 1675, and for several years thereafter, he tuned the organ at Westminster Abbey. In 1677, on the death of Matthew Locke at around fifty-five, the eighteen-year-old Purcell received his first major appointment. On 10 September he was admitted as one of the composers in ordinary for the violins. His duties involved writing music for the court's entertainment – Thomas Purcell had held the same post since 1671. Two years later, in 1679, young Henry's responsibilities were formally extended to church music, when he was appointed organist of Westminster Abbey.⁴

And what of composition during these years? Certainly the young Purcell was active. By 1679, and almost certainly for a few years before this, his verse anthems were in regular use in the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey;⁵ in tandem with these unusually accomplished sacred works there was a regular

output of consort music, remarkable for its technical skill and expressive profundity. As one might expect, these early pieces tend to imitate the sacred and consort music with which Purcell was most familiar; but it is still interesting to note how selective the precocious youngster was in choosing his models. Despite his later fame as a song composer, his early songs are generally less impressive than his instrumental and sacred music, though here too he made his mark early. The first reliable attribution is the five songs published in 1679, in the second book of *Choice Ayres and Songs to Sing to the Theorbo-lute or Bass-viol*. As the publication of this collection had been delayed, it is unlikely that any of them are later than 1678, and some could have been composed earlier.⁶

As a chorister Purcell received musical instruction under the supervision of the Master of the Children, Captain Henry Cooke (c. 1616–72). There is no obvious evidence in Purcell's music of the influence of Cooke's compositions; but two of Cooke's other pupils, Pelham Humfrey (1647–74) and John Blow (1649–1708) – both much better composers than their teacher and only a few years older than Purcell – were to become primary influences.⁷

On Cooke's death in 1672, Humfrey took over as Master of the Children. Although he was to hold the position for a mere two years – he died on 14 July 1674⁸ – it is certain that his influence on Purcell had taken root much earlier. Humfrey had been something of a prodigy. He was taken on as a chorister in the Chapel Royal and at around seventeen years old was sent to France and Italy by Charles II to study foreign musical practices. After his return in 1667, 'an absolute Monsieur' according to Pepys, his music became a regular feature of Chapel Royal services, so Purcell must have been familiar with – indeed have sung in – a number of his anthems.⁹ Also, it is possible that Humfrey taught Purcell while Cooke was Master of the Children, for senior musicians other than the Master did instruct the boys from time to time. Purcell's interest in his music is attested by the presence of five of his verse anthems in an early autograph score-book (Fitzwilliam MS 88) which, it seems likely, was assembled by Purcell between 1677 and 1682.¹⁰

Blow was born just two years later than Humfrey, and like him had been one of the boys in the early years of the re-founded Chapel Royal. As he took over the role of Master of the Children from Humfrey on the latter's death in 1674, he in turn became Purcell's teacher, in which role he is remembered on his memorial in Westminster Abbey as 'Master of the famous Mr H. Purcell'.¹¹ In Fitzwilliam 88 he is better represented than anyone other than Purcell himself, there being no less than eleven anthems of various sorts. He was a prolific, imaginative and versatile composer, whose relationship with Purcell was to prove mutually beneficial in the same sort of way as the much more famous one between Haydn and Mozart.

There is evidence that Purcell was also taught by Christopher Gibbons

(1615–76), son of the famous Orlando Gibbons junior, who appears to have been well known to the Purcell family, was a composer, organist at both the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey, and court virginalist. It seems likely that he taught Purcell on those instruments;¹² but here too there is little firm evidence of influence on Purcell's compositional practice.

A rather older man, Matthew Locke (1621/2–77), was not on the staff of the Chapel Royal, but on 23 June 1660 had been appointed composer in the King's private music. He would have been known to the Purcells in that capacity; also as one of the composers for *The Siege of Rhodes*, which was first produced in 1656 with Henry Purcell senior as one of the singers, and is often described as the first English opera. But he seems also to have been a family friend: in the diary entry for 21 February 1660, Pepys mentions that he had spent time with 'Mr Lock and Pursell' singing a 'variety of brave Italian and Spanish songs' while, rather less reliably, the nineteenth-century historians Rimbault and Cummings claimed that the former owned a letter from Locke to the young Henry, inviting him to join Locke and other musicians from the court in a little domestic music making.¹³ That Locke was acquainted with the family is confirmed by young Henry himself, for in the second book of *Choice Ayres* (1679) he published what might be the first of his large recitative songs, *What Hope for Us Remains?* (Z. 472), 'On the death of his worthy friend Mr Matthew Locke'.

As far as musical style was concerned, post-Restoration England was something of a melting pot. Throughout Europe, the Italian style was generally regarded as a standard bearer for innovation, to the chagrin of those who supported French practice. While Purcell was to draw extensively on French models, both he and Blow were to show a more profound interest in Italian music, by copying pieces for their own study, by imitating distinctive Italian practices and, in Purcell's case at least, by declarations in print.

It might therefore seem contradictory that both composers were also deeply affected by the work of the old-style English polyphonists. Around 1680–2 Purcell copied into his Fitzwilliam autograph three works by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), three by William Byrd (1542/3–1623), one by Thomas Tallis (c. 1510–85) and one by William Mundy (c. 1529–c. 1591). All had been Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, and Purcell would have known their music, for their anthems and services were still in use there. Nevertheless, this interest at a time when his own compositional style was well developed and when he was working on his earliest successful Italianate pieces, suggests a complex musical personality.

Even Purcell's earliest surviving works show this natural complexity. *The Stairre Case Overture*, which was discovered a few years ago, minus its viola part, is a well-wrought piece unlikely to be later than the mid-1670s, and shows

the imitation of established practices (in this case they seem to be those of Locke and contemporary French composers) which one might expect from a young composer eager to learn and to prove himself. The title almost certainly comes from the ascending and descending scales of the first section, which might owe something to Locke's music for the 1674 production of *The Tempest*.¹⁴ To accompany a storm, Locke provided a Curtain Tune which begins 'soft', works up 'lowder by degrees' to rushing scales and concitato repetitions as the storm is at its height, and becomes 'soft and slow by degrees' as it passes. Then there is the First Music, the independent part writing and general style of which are similar to those of Purcell's overture (cf. Ex. 1 and Ex. 33).

Such textures and those of the second and third sections can be found in French music, which seems another likely influence on this and other early orchestral pieces. But French influences could also have been received through Humfrey, whose music displayed a French affinity in keeping with the court's tastes. The dance-like, binary form, top-line-dominated second section of Purcell's overture, is in the same style as that often used by Humfrey in his symphonies to anthems and odes, the 1672 birthday ode *When from His Throne* (BL Add. MS 33287) for example; and Humfrey in turn might have been influenced by works such as the overture to the Prologue of the 1657 ballet *L'Amour malade* by Lully (1632–87).

The Stairre Case Overture has a long-range cogency very different from Locke's striking but somewhat quirky music. Its line-driven texture is remarkably economical in motivic material and has broad harmonic paragraphs. In the second section, the top line consists mainly of repetitions of just a few motifs, counterpointed against just a few more distinctive motifs in the surviving lower parts. Such economy was to become a hall mark of Purcell's style in all genres.

The Stairre Case Overture and other early overtures might have been played by a small group, in private gatherings of the Purcell family and friends, or of the musicians of the royal establishment, or even at court. Indeed, if the portrait (of unknown provenance and whereabouts, but reproduced by Zimmerman) of a young man holding a tenor violin is in fact of Henry Purcell, it raises the prospect that he played the missing viola part himself.¹⁵

This overture is unusual for combining technical complexity with expressive directness. The latter quality at least seems to have been a prerequisite for any music designed for Charles II, who 'had an utter detestation of Fancys' and, apparently, of any other music to which he could not beat time.¹⁶ It, or pieces like it, must have made an impression, for while Westrup plausibly suggests that Purcell's youthful appointment as composer for the violin owed something to 'the working of influence', it is doubtful that the honour was based entirely on preferment.¹⁷

Ex. 1 Locke, *The Tempest*, First Music: bb. 1-8

Violin I
Violin II
Bass

1

[soft] [loud]

[soft] [loud]

6

Despite the young Purcell's success in a Francophile court and the fact that he later put himself forward as a champion of foreign, specifically Italian practice, he reserved his best efforts, in these early years at least, for the intimate, somewhat insular world of English consort music. He produced the final flowering of a tradition which had proved remarkably persistent and immutable – even esoteric: not only did it last through the Civil War and the Restoration into Purcell's lifetime but, in his hands and those of his immediate forbears, it also continued to use the Renaissance-based genres from which it arose, long after most of these and their equivalents had fallen out of use in France and Italy.

In 1667, in the second edition of *A Compendium of Practical Music*, which Purcell admired, Christopher Simpson (c. 1605–69) had recommended that aspiring composers of instrumental music 'need not seek [the example of] outlandish authors ... no nation in my opinion being equal to the English in that way'.¹⁸ He tells us what types of piece a composer of instrumental music could