

Performing the Music of

HENRY PURCELL

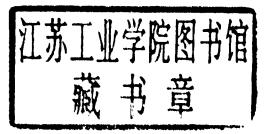
Edited by Michael Burden

Purcell

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EDITED BY
MICHAEL BURDEN



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Preface

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The contents of the present volume have, for the most part, their origins in papers given at a conference also titled 'Performing the Music of Henry Purcell', held in Exeter College, Oxford, in 1993. However, the conference was unusual in that it was the idea of a collection of essays on the performance of Purcell's music that produced the conference, rather than the conference that produced the collection of essays. The conference speakers were largely invited in an effort to cover as many aspects of the topic as possible, although not all the papers have been included here, and several papers have been added to the collection. However, the book remains a volume of papers, and does not pretend to be a comprehensive guide to all aspects of relevant performance practice. The foresight of Bruce Phillips, commissioning editor of music books at Oxford University Press, is responsible for the book's appearance in the year of Purcell's tercentenary, and his patience in dealing with an editor working with a large number of contributors—the difficulties here can scarcely be exaggerated—has been exemplary.

The conference received generous financial support and assistance from the University of Oxford and Brasenose College through the Hulme Fund, the Warden and Fellows of New College, the Early Music Centre, and the respective universities and academic institutions of those giving the papers. The New Chamber Opera, through the receipt of an Arts Council Grant, was able to give a series of four concerts during the conference, while the BBC recorded for later broadcast a concert by the Parley of Instruments. My thanks are due to Alison De Lavis, Emma Dillon, Graham Dixon, Edward Higginbottom, Harvey McGregor, Nicholas Kenyon, Timothy Morris, Christopher Morrongiello, David Palfreyman, and Paul Plummer, and the staffs of Exeter and New Colleges. Andrew Pinnock was my partner on the conference itself, and his constant support and advice have been invaluable.

It is a great sadness to record the untimely deaths of two influential figures in the early music world who were associated with the conference. Fred Martin, administrator of the Early Music Centre, who was killed in a road accident shortly before the conference began, had calmly guided our early discussions; and Christopher Kite, Chairman of the Council of the Early Music Centre, Head of Music Studies at the Guildhall, and a former member of New

College, who died of cancer in 1994, was among the performers at the Saturday night concert given by conference delegates.

Without the musical director of the New Chamber Opera, Gary Cooper, to whom this collection is (editorially) dedicated, both the book and the conference would have been but a glimmer in the mind's eye; his constant desire to employ an extensive (and expensive) continuo group focuses the mind with alacrity on the possible historical minimum.

MICHAEL BURDEN

New College, Oxford 1994

Acknowledgements

(E#2)

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Abbreviations

(643)

Evelyn The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. E. S. de Beer (London, 1955).

Grove VI The New Grove, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980).

Pepys The Diary of Samuel Pepys, ed. R. Latham and W. Matthews (London,

1970-83).

Works I The Works of Henry Purcell, started in 1876 by the Purcell Society and

completed in 1965.

Works II The Works of Henry Purcell, revised edition.

Zimmerman I Franklin B. Zimmerman, Henry Purcell 1659-1695: An Analytical

Catalogue of his Music (London, 1963). Z numbers in this book refer

to this catalogue.

Zimmerman II Franklin B. Zimmerman, Henry Purcell 1659-1695: His Life and Times

(Rev/2, Philadelphia, 1983).

The following system of music notation is used throughout:



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INTRODUCTION

Henry Purcell: Towards a Tercentenary

(C#3)

NICHOLAS KENYON

We all pay lip service to Henry Purcell, but what do we really know of him?

The words are those of Ralph Vaughan Williams, in the Foreword to Eight Concerts of Henry Purcell's Music, given during the Festival of Britain in 1951.1 More than forty years on, are we much the wiser? We know little more of Purcell's life now than we did then, in spite of strenuous researches. His personality is, save for a few enigmatic clues, a shadowy, elusive thing onto which we can project almost anything we choose. In our understanding of Purcell's music and its manner of performance, we may claim some signal advances, but who is to say whether they have brought us closer to the composer or merely closer to the taste of our own times in dealing with his music? Many composers have been celebrated with conferences during their anniversary years, and the idea of those organizing 'Performing the Music of Henry Purcell' to hold it in advance of the tercentenary was an excellent one for it has helped to set the agenda for 1995 in the broadest possible terms. Performance and scholarship are as much of a 'blest pair of sirens' as words and music, and their imperatives frequently pull in different directions. But this conference showed players and directors and dancers and scholars all pulling together to establish the most fruitful lines of enquiry for the future. If the Purcell tercentenary achieves nothing else, this blueprint for future research and development will have been set. There is certainly more to be discovered (where is the elusive record of Purcell's birth?!), and what we think we know already would benefit from further analysis. Many stimulating arguments of recent years, notably that over the dating of Dido and Aeneas chronicled in the pages of Early Music, depend on a heady mixture of factual hypothesis and stylistic analysis, which require further exploration.2

¹ Eight Concerts of Henry Purcell's Music (London, 1951), 7.
² See Bruce Wood and Andrew Pinnock, "Unscarr'd by turning times?": the dating of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas', Early Music, 20 (1992), 373-90; with replies by Curtis Price, 'Dido and Aeneas:

Musically, the omens could not be better. Looking back to the Purcell performances with which some of us grew up, it is striking how tenuous their links are to any continuous tradition. The sound of Stanford's revival of Dido and Aeneas³ or Holst's performance of The Fairy-Queen⁴ are lost in the mists of time, and the continuous modern history of Purcell's performance begins only with those early recordings by Alfred Deller that so piercingly and so dramatically etched themselves into the consciousness of the post-war generation—including, crucially, that of Michael Tippett,⁵ whose music was so profoundly influenced by Purcell's word-setting. Those few years after the war and the moment when for Tippett 'the centuries rolled back' were decisive for the future of Purcell's reputation.

Vaughan Williams wrote somewhat dismissively of Covent Garden, which 'more one suspects out of piety than affection, produced The Fairy-Queen amidst complete public apathy'.6 The handsome record of the 1946 staging contains a few hints as to why the public might have been unconvinced. 'To work from the original libretto would clearly have been a waste of time,' proclaimed Constant Lambert, 'so I set to work on Professor Dent's libretto (finished 1914; published 1920) . . . collated with Mr Dennis Arundell's version.'7 Even that great Purcell scholar Jack Westrup (whose Master Musicians volume has proved defiantly resistant to replacement, though it has been updated) wrote scathingly of some of Purcell's output, in particular the odes, many of which Westrup had never had the chance to hear.8 The most successful recent recording of The Fairy-Queen, by William Christie, based on performances at Aix-en-Provence, has not found favour with some Purcellians; yet in terms of bringing the masterpiece alive for a new generation its vitality could scarcely be bettered. In Aix, however, it was scarcely more than the quasi-cinematic accompaniment to a performance of a play that had been re-Shakespearianized;9 while our approach to musical performance strides on, our approach to authenticity in the theatre (as Simon Callow has written in the Manifesto at the end of his marvellous book Being an Actor¹⁰)

Questions of Style and Evidence', Early Music, 22 (1994), 115-25 (with response by Bruce Wood and Andrew Pinnock, "Singin' in the rain": Yet More on Dating Dido', Early Music, 22 (1994), 365-7), and Andrew R. Walkling, "The dating of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas"? A Reply to Bruce Wood and Andrew Pinnock', Early Music, 22 (1994), 469-81.

³ At the Lyceum Theatre, 20 Nov. 1895.

⁴ At the Victoria Hall, 10 June 1911.

⁵ See Michael Tippett, Music of the Angels (London, 1980), 67–8.

⁶ Eight Concerts, 7.

⁷ Punell's The Fairy Queen as presented by The Sadler's Wells Ballet and The Covent Garden Opera: a photographic record by Edward Mandinian with the Preface to the original text, a preface by E. J. Dent, and articles by Constant Lambert and Michael Ayrton published by John Lehmann (London, 1947), 21 see Michael Burden, "Gallimaufry' at Covent Garden: The Fairy-Queen in 1946', Early Music, 23 (1995), 2-18 for an account of this production.

⁸ Jack Westrup, Purcell (London, 1937; rev. Fortune, 1980); see e.g. pp. 172-5 and 190.
9 For some of the history and problems associated with Shakespearianization of The Fairy-Queen, see Ch. 9.

¹⁰ Simon Callow, Being an Actor (London, 1984), 185-8.

has been much slower to take root. One positive result of the tercentenary would be for theatre and indeed dance to take their rightful places at the very centre of Purcell's creative life.

In musical performance, the remarkable achievements of recent years have not invalidated the achievements of earlier generations. The recordings of Anthony Lewis and Benjamin Britten pioneered popular acceptance of the music in this country; that vivid Hail, Bright Cecilia! recorded by Charles Mackerras, the Geraint Jones version of the Funeral Music, the anthems recorded by St John's College, Cambridge, and several other products of the 1950s and 1960s stand up remarkably well today. Of course, there were impenetrable textures and lugubrious speeds, as well as aberrations as great artists imposed their taste and will on the hapless composer, among which I persist in regarding Jessye Norman's Dido as an outstanding example; it gives that famous line 'Time stands still' a whole new meaning. But the fact that major performers wished to grapple with the Purcellian style was to be welcomed rather than despised, and there is no doubt that it helped to create the sea change in audience response to the composer which we are now witnessing during the tercentenary.

There was a small glimmer, as period instruments first came into service for the music of the Baroque, of what David Munrow might have made of Purcell in his recording of Come, ye sons of art, which remains an isolated treasure. The landmarks in this area have been Christopher Hogwood's pioneering recordings of the complete theatre music, a wonderful set of church music recorded by Simon Preston and the Choir of Christ Church, Oxford, discs by Peter Holman's Parley of Instruments, and Robert King's recent Herculean efforts in recording, first all the odes and then the church music and the songs, which have brought many superb pieces to disc for the first time. Tercentenaries cannot be entirely bad things if they enable such projects to happen and encourage audiences to make more of them.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps sensible to sound a note of radical caution, which is partly what gives this volume a reason for being. There are many questions which remain unanswered about the performing forces of Purcell's time. It could be, for example, that the whole image and sound of the male falsettist on which Deller and Tippett built the modern Purcell revival is no more than a myth. We still cannot confidently answer the question, 'Does the modern countertenor have a place in Purcell's music?'; more information and a provocative discussion is provided in Andrew Parrott's stimulating contribution to the recently published *Purcell Companion*.¹¹

¹¹ Andrew Parrott, 'Performing Purcell', in *The Purcell Companion*, ed. Michael Burden (London, 1994), 387–444.

As well as specific areas of doubt, there is also the general worry that the revival of 'the Baroque orchestra' has been projected back from the eighteenth century on to Purcell as if he wrote for the same thing. Simply because the instruments are the same as those he used (at least some of them, though there is the question of 16' pitch), his music is too often delivered in a conventionally 'orchestral' manner. This is analogous to Monteverdi's having been credited with inventing the orchestra in *Orfeo*, a delusion suffered by Charles Burney and repeated often since, simply because there were lots of instruments present which subsequently became part of orchestral ensembles.¹²

As far as I am concerned as a listener, one of the chief benefits of the historically based approach to performance has been to make each musical style, each composer's vision, as specific as possible. The message must be: do not generalize your performance habits so that every Baroque orchestral piece sounds the same; for what matters is that each piece sounds unique. Or, as Philip Brett has memorably put it, in words that ought to be inscribed over the desk of every performing musician, what the historical approach has given us 'is a sense of difference, a sense that by exercising our imaginations we may, instead of reinforcing our own sense of ourselves by assimilating works unthinkingly to our mode of performing and perceiving, learn to know what something different might mean and how we might ultimately delight in it'. 13

The argument about authenticity has moved on since Philip Brett wrote those words, slightly alarmingly (if highly relevantly) so in recent exchanges in Early Music about the a cappella controversy. Here, Christopher Page went so far as to postulate the (on the face of it) breath-taking hypothesis that, because in the area of English vocal music there has been some continuity of performing tastes and performing institutions, as well as personal involvement by some supposedly key people in those institutions, English performances today 'represent a particularly convincing postulate about the performing priorities of the original singers'. Page's remark covers medieval and Renaissance repertory, but by extension, and with reference to the same continuity of institutions and people, it should surely apply to Purcell, or at least to his church music.

Not only does Page posit an Oxbridge conspiracy which has maintained a continuously developing style, but, to add surprising insult to injury, he argues that we have, because of this, got it right! If this were true, it would be truly

See e.g. Charles Burney, A General History of Music, ed. Frank Mercer (London, 1935), ii.
 435-6. Neal Zaslaw, 'When Is An Orchestra Not An Orchestra?', Early Music, 16 (1988), 483-9.
 Philip Brett, 'Text, Context and the Early Music Editor', in Authenticity and Early Music, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford, 1988), 114.

¹⁴ Christopher Page, 'A Reply to Margaret Bent', Early Music, 22 (1994), 127–32; see also next note.