

中央音乐学院图书馆藏书

书号

215

总登
记号

BK303495



PURCELL

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First published in 1995

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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First published in the United Kingdom in 1995 by

Chatto & Windus Limited

Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited
PO Box 337, Bergvlei, South Africa

Random House UK Limited Reg. No. 954009

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7011 4693 1

Printed in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham, PLC, Chatham, Kent

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Preface

Unlike many of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries, Henry Purcell had the good fortune never to sink without trace from the musical horizon during the two hundred years in which Baroque music was either misunderstood, treated as an antiquarian curiosity or else despised and ignored completely. He was not restored to greatness in the manner of composers such as Vivaldi and Marc Antoine Charpentier, because he had never entirely forfeited his position as the gifted author of a voluminous oeuvre, at least some of which, in however exiguous a portion, was always available for performance, listening and study. Purcellian scraps, whether in the form of anthems and canticles, theatre music or even such a charming little nonesuch as the part-song 'When the cock begins to crow', were performed throughout the eighteenth century. The Victorians, from patriotic as much as artistic motives, began digging deeper into the mine, dusting off works like *Dido and Aeneas* and developing the idea of the composer not so much as a musical Shakespeare (the term was first applied in 1789 by Charles Burney) as an equivalent Chaucer, a sturdy if often outlandish founding father. When the young Arthur Sullivan, defending his decision to enter the Chapel Royal, protested to his parents: 'But Purcell was a Chapel boy!', the invocation was of an established English musical household god, however imperfectly envisaged.

By the 1950s, when I first heard Purcell's music ('I attempt from love's sickness to fly', sung by my mother at the drawing-room piano) the picture had greatly altered. The tercentenary celebrations in 1959 set the seal on a re-evaluation of the composer as an original genius worthy to be set beside Handel, his fellow subject for commemoration that year, and fully justified in receiving

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homage from modern English composers, led by Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett. Our musical Shakespeare had become the national Mozart, a youthful genius gathered too early, but not before he had astonished everybody by his fecund, protean brilliance in an outpouring of music unrivalled in its sheer diversity by any of his immediate European contemporaries. We can all name a historically more important late seventeenth century composer than Purcell – Lully, Corelli, Buxtehude and Stradella spring instantly to mind – but none of these has his phenomenal virtuosity distributed with such effortless grace among multiple genres, and none quite reaches into the well-springs of our essential humanity in the way that Purcell, balancing his musical learning and expressive profundity with masterly manipulations of ‘the common touch’, can always contrive.

A biography of the composer is an impossible exercise, since we know so little about his antecedents, personal life, domestic surroundings or intimate acquaintance. Hardly any anecdotes exist to fill out the blurred background, made vaguer still by the almost total absence of letters or private papers. The manuscripts, so neat and confident, with hardly a suggestion of a backward glance, tell us something. Otherwise we have to rely, whatever our Micawberish hope that something more positive will turn up, on those largely chimerical aids to the biographer, ambience, period detail, hypothesis and sheer guesswork.

My aim in this book has therefore been to provide a context for the earliest performances of Purcell’s works, relating it to the sketchy details of his professional life. As in my earlier biography of Handel, I haven’t stepped back from commenting on individual pieces and expressing personal preferences. I’m conscious that in certain areas, especially as regards the debut works in various fields (the *Theodosius* music, the elegy on Matthew Locke, for example) I have said rather too much, and that in others, such as Purcell’s official positions in the court and ecclesiastical establishments, I have sketched in the outlines more thinly. The total picture, however, will perhaps convey something of my undying affection for the composer and his age.

The roots of this love date from 1959, when my enlightened prep school headmaster John Engleheart, himself a pioneer in the

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Baroque music revival, introduced me to *Dido and Aeneas* and took me to a remarkable series of tercentennial concerts, in which the experience of hearing *My beloved spake* and *My heart is inditing* was literally a case of 'since then I never looked back'. My first acknowledgment must always be to him.

Most of the work for this biography has been carried out in the congenial surroundings of the Bodleian Library's Music Reading Room in Oxford. My thanks to its staff, and to those of the London Library and the British Library for their continuing helpfulness.

My editors Jenny Uglow and Sarah Holloway have been endlessly encouraging. Jonathan Burnham, originally responsible for commissioning the book, conducted it expertly through an uneasy initial phase.

The following gave various kinds of help or showed interest in the project: Kathy Chubb, Mrs G. Fallows, Anthony Gould, Robin Lane Fox, Gerard McBurney, Alison Millar, Nick Morgan, Roger Parr, Jon and Carol Rayman, Michael Rose, Valerie St Johnston, Mary Sandys, Emma Tristram.

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Prologue: The Unfriendly Time

During the fiercely hot summer of 1656, a season of 'so great a drought that hay was £40 the load', Thomas Tomkins, last of the great Tudor composers, died at his son Nathaniel's house in the parish of Martin Hussingtree, a few miles north of Worcester. The city in whose cathedral he had served as organist and master of the choristers for almost fifty years had suffered severely for its loyalty to the crown in the Civil War, and the great church itself, burial place of King John, had been desecrated on several occasions by Parliament's troops. In 1643, when Tomkins's own dwelling was hit by a cannon ball, the organ, installed under his supervision by the leading Jacobean organ-builder Thomas Dallam, was ravaged and the stained glass smashed, following established Puritan practice. Three years later, after a successful siege, the same forces imposed their presence by dismantling what remained of the instrument altogether, while 'some Parliamenters, hearing the music of the church at service, walking in the aisle fell a-skipping about and dancing as it were in derision'. With considerable courage 'a merry lad (about ten years old)' reminded them that when the organ had first been vandalized by the troopers, one soldier had broken his neck, 'and they will not prevent the like misfortune'. The final Anglican service was an evensong three days afterwards, when loyal worshippers crowded to receive Bishop Prideaux's blessing. Tomkins, retreating to his turret study on the south side of the cathedral, turned to the writing of keyboard music, including an eloquent memorial in 1649 for the recently executed King Charles I, entitled '*A Sad Pavan: for These Distracted Times*'.

Born in 1572, the composer had grown to manhood in the age of William Byrd and Thomas Morley, and like them had excelled

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in the period's chief musical genres, the church anthem, the consort song, madrigals and keyboard pieces. Early in his career Tomkins contributed a madrigal to *The Triumphs of Oriana*, the anthology published in 1601 to honour Queen Elizabeth I which Morley himself had edited, and in the *Songs of 3, 4, 5 and 6 Parts* (1622) he revealed a wide acquaintance among the finest English musical talents of the age, dedicating individual works to composers such as John Dowland and Orlando Gibbons. In the setting of sacred texts he had few rivals during the early decades of the seventeenth century. 'Very elaborate and artful pieces' was one contemporary judgment on his anthems and services, 'the most deserving to be recorded and had in everlasting remembrance'.

The musical world whose values Tomkins and his works had so vividly emblemized now lay to all intents and purposes in ruin. Worcester was not alone in having suffered at the hands of the pious reformers, concerned as they were to purify divine worship of the various forms of sensual delight held out to the worshipper by musical, ritual and visual adornments. At Westminster Abbey the Parliament soldiers 'brake down the rayl about the Altar, and burnt it in the place where it stood . . . They put on some of the Singing-men's surplices, and, in contempt of that canonicall habite, ran up and down the Church; he that wore the surplice was the hare, the rest were the hounds.' At Exeter they taunted the choristers, crying, 'Boys, we have spoiled your trade, you must go and sing hot pudding pies.' In Canterbury they despoiled the splendid array of funerary monuments, stripped the lead off the cathedral roof and, encouraged by the preacher Richard Cullmer who announced that he was 'rattling down proud Becket's glassy bones', they knocked out several of the more 'idolatrous' medieval windows. Troopers at Winchester marched into the cathedral with drum and colours, ripped out the altar and rails and burned them at a drunken revel in a nearby alehouse . . . 'and in that fire burnt the Books of Common Prayer, and all the Singing books belonging to the Quire'.

These same Civil War years which saw the destruction of cathedral worship witnessed an inevitable dispersal of the extensive musical establishment gathered around the royal court of the Stuart monarch. Charles I had been noted for his love of music

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and had given employment to some of the choicest spirits of the period. These included Tomkins himself, Orlando Gibbons, the brothers William and Henry Lawes, the viol player John Cooper whom a visit to Italy had transformed into Giovanni Coprario,* and the inspired theatrical song-writer Robert Johnson, composer of the earliest settings of Ariel's songs in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Once the war began, though the King retained certain musicians in attendance at Oxford, the chief Royalist stronghold until 1646, a regular provision of music in chapel and chamber which contributed towards the dignity and 'seemliness' so admired in the English court was no longer appropriate or affordable.

Gone too were the masques, whose elements of dance and song enabled talented amateurs among the courtiers to exhibit their skills alongside professional performers without compromising the social position which many in that parvenu aristocracy were all too conscious of having won very recently. The public playhouses, what is more, had closed their doors in 1642. This prohibition was confirmed six years later by sanctions decreeing that the stages and seating were to be demolished and forbidding all forms of dramatic spectacle on pain of whipping for the players and fines for the audience. As the war drew to a close and the period loosely referred to as 'the Commonwealth' began, during which Oliver Cromwell ruled the nation under the euphemistic title of 'Lord Protector', it must have seemed to many musicians that their sole chances of employment lay either in the lowly capacity of city waits, to provide entertainment at mayoral feasts, or else in attaching themselves to the household of some country landowner with a turn for music, to whose benevolence they could trust until the dawn of a more auspicious political climate.

It would be wrong, however, to see 'the unfriendly time' as being a kind of musical wasteland patrolled by the thought police of Puritan joylessness in an attempt to suppress anything that sounded too suspiciously unlike a psalm tune. The true picture is both more fragmented and more fascinating. If, in the eighteen years between the outbreak of war in 1642 and the restoration of

* He was born John Cooper around 1570, but italianised his name after a journey to the continent, and is often referred to as John Coprario.

Charles II in 1660, there was no obvious sense of an established community and hierarchy of English musicians required to furnish composers and performers for court and church, then the void was filled up instead with a whole range of miscellaneous creative activity bearing witness to the nation's unquenchable passion for making and listening to music.

Cromwell himself led the way. His love of music, formed doubtless during his childhood among the good families of his native Huntingdonshire and neighbouring counties, and developed during his years as a Cambridge undergraduate, found its deepest echo, not, as might at first be thought, in metrical psalm-singing, but in the Latin motets of *Cantica Sacra*, the work of Richard Dering, a Papist convert who spent much of his creative life on the Continent before returning to England in 1625 to become a composer in the Catholic chapel of Queen Henrietta Maria. At the wedding of the Protector's daughter Frances in 1657, the feast was enlivened with '48 violins, 50 trumpets and much mirth with frolics, besides mixt dancing (a thing heretofore accounted profane) till 5 of the clock yesterday morning'.

However others may have condemned dancing, Cromwell and many of his contemporaries clearly saw no harm in it as a formal exercise, linked perhaps with concepts of order and decorum inherited from the liberal pedagogic traditions of the Renaissance which the intrusive religiosity of Puritanism had been unable to destroy. As his ambassador to Queen Christina of Sweden, Cromwell had wisely chosen Bulstrode Whitelocke, a cultivated and accomplished lawyer whose most notable achievement before the Civil War had been to organize the production of a masque *The Triumphs of Peace* to a text by James Shirley, which was presented by the Inns of Court in honour of Charles I with scenery designed by Inigo Jones. The music was provided by the much admired William Lawes and by the versatile Simon Ives, 'an honest and able musician, of excellent skill in the art'.

Christina, preparing to abdicate the Swedish throne and retreat to Rome, the most musically sophisticated city in mid-seventeenth-century Europe, was curious to know something of English manners under the Commonwealth regime and asked Whitelocke whether dancing was forbidden. 'Some there are that

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do not approve of it' he answered, 'but it is not prohibited by law, and many there are that do use it'. As if in earnest of this, and 'lest I should be judged too severe and morose, and too much to censure', he accepted the Queen's invitation to a court ball, where an orchestra of violins, bass viols, flutes and citterns first played French dances (including the once-popular but increasingly obsolescent 'branes', known in England as 'brawls') and then performed English country dances. Whitelocke and his fellow diplomats, let it be said, not only joined in the former, but actually taught some new versions of the latter to the Swedes.

Oliver Cromwell plainly saw no harm in this: when the Ambassador told him that they had beguiled the long northern winter nights with dancing for the purpose of exercise and harmless amusement, in addition to Latin debates and orations, he merely observed, 'These were very good diversions and made your house a little academy.' Neither does he seem to have identified anything especially inappropriate in the performance of two pastorals at the wedding of his daughter Mary to Lord Fauconberg at Hampton Court barely a week after her sister's bridal feast, on 19 November 1657. Here the married couple actually took part in a court masque, the groom playing Endymion and his wife Cynthia, though whether, as has been suggested, her father himself appeared as Jove is not firmly established. The other entertainment was a dialogue between three country folk on the nuptials of 'Marina' and 'Damon', though here the couple stayed mute.

It seems clear that as so often under a dictator – and in its overall character and psychology, Cromwell's reign irresistibly embodies various important aspects of a modern dictatorship – a double standard prevailed. While the general tone of public life was that of a theocracy, its rhythms dictated by various kinds of religious observance and pious exercise, the ruler himself – a cultivated member of the Caroline upper classes, who employed the music-loving Italophile John Milton as his Latin secretary – understood the value of sustaining the appropriate amenities of a princely court for the purpose of impressing foreign ambassadors. In 1653, for example, the Portuguese envoy Dom Domingos de Vasconcelos was entertained with a specially composed masque (the first on such a scale to be performed for over a decade)

entitled *Cupid and Death*, on a text derived by the dramatist James Shirley from Aesop's fables and using material from two of his earlier masques written for Whitehall in the 1630s.

Telling the story of a disastrous prank played on Cupid and Death when their arrows are exchanged while both are staying at an inn, the piece is divided, after the French fashion, into five 'entries', involving progressive stages of the spoken drama enlivened with songs and choruses set to music by Christopher Gibbons (son of the more famous Orlando) and Matthew Locke, whose career as one of the most accomplished of seventeenth-century English composers was to blossom at the Restoration. In addition each entry featured dances, specially choreographed by Luke Channen, whom Samuel Pepys later referred to in jocular admiration as 'the hop merchant'.

What the audience of *Cupid and Death* were seeing – and had indeed a chance to see again in 1659 when the work was revived – was the nearest equivalent England had yet produced to the operatic form now evolving so exuberantly in the various cities of Italy. In the extended passages of recitative Locke displayed a pliant sensitivity to verbal nuance and to the changes of mood ordained in Shirley's poetry, as well as making some attempt to link the characters, Cupid, Death, Mercury and Nature, to distinctive keys, which in any case determined the governing structure of the scenes he was assigned to set.

Perhaps inspired by this example, no less a figure than Sir William Davenant, epic poet and ingenious dramatist and masque-maker under Charles I, now sought to circumvent the ban on stage plays altogether by mounting dramatic performances clothed in music, according to the Italian mode. In 1656, under the aegis of a group of senior lawyers which included Bulstrode Whitelocke, he presented *The Siege of Rhodes*, a play transformed into an opera libretto and published with the elaborate excuse that it was 'Made a Representation by the Art of Prospective in Scenes, And the Story sung in Recitative Musick'. Neither the vocal items, by Henry Lawes and Henry Cooke, nor the instrumental music, by Charles Coleman and George Hudson, have survived, but the piece by its very nature attracted attention even from Davenant's more sophisticated contemporaries, familiar with the Italian oper-

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atic style at its native source. The diarist John Evelyn (whose description of the genre, after attending a performance of Giovanni Rovetta's *Ercole in Lidia* at Venice in 1645 as 'one of the most magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of man can invent' has been quoted to death) witnessed a presentation either of *The Siege of Rhodes* or of its successors *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* and *The History of Sir Francis Drake*.

I went to visit my brother in London; and, next day, to see a new opera, after the Italian way, in recitative music and scenes, much inferior to the Italian composure and magnificence; but it was prodigious that in a time of such public consternation such a vanity should be kept up, or permitted. I, being engaged with company, could not decently resist the going to see it, though my heart smote me for it.

This mixture of self-reproaching gravity and natural aesthetic inquisitiveness is typical of Evelyn, and we would give much to know what exactly he heard which made him judge the work so unfavourably. From these original performances, which took place at Rutland House 'in the upper end of Aldersgate Street', beside the former Carthusian monastery of the Charterhouse, all that has come down to us beyond Davenant's texts is the splendid set of scene designs which Inigo Jones's pupil John Webb created for *The Siege of Rhodes*. From these we can see that the work was presented in a visual context by no means unlike that of contemporary Italian opera, with an ornamental proscenium arch framing a stage picture, which could be changed through a sequence of different backdrops. The limited space allowed by the improvised acting area at Rutland House meant that the wings remained fixed throughout, but Webb was able to compensate for this by the decorative elegance of his painted scenes, including a view of Rhodes with the Turkish fleet, the besieged town with tents and guns, and the pavilion of Sultan Solymán the Magnificent, who himself appears in the play.

The Siege of Rhodes proved so popular that after the Restoration Davenant added a sequel and eventually, jettisoning the operatic element altogether, 'caused it to be acted as a just drama'. If the

work, with its two companion pieces, did not succeed in establishing a vogue for English opera, it had undeniably made an impact in its original form. Seventeenth-century London would see further attempts at grafting the newer continental musical styles on to the robust traditions of vernacular drama, a *mélange* which Davenant had initiated as a practical means of circumventing the Commonwealth's blanket ban on theatrical performances.

It was not in London alone that musical activity weathered the storms of civil war, theocracy and dictatorship, and the doctrinal bullying which accompanied them. The venerable and entirely praiseworthy English tradition of amateur musicianship – reflected in today's choral societies, school orchestras and *ad hoc* chamber groups – was already well established, and skill on the viols, the violin, the organ or the lute was an accepted indicator of cultivation and gentility. Throughout England noble families welcomed, and when necessary sheltered, visiting professional musicians, and in certain cases such figures were retained in the household either as superior servants or, in at least one instance, honoured guests. Before the Civil War the Kytsons of Hengrave Hall in Suffolk, whose domestic inventory featured sackbuts, hautboys, four lutes, six violins, a chest of viols and 'one payer of great orgaynes', had received the madrigalist John Wilbye, who lived with them for over thirty years until the widowed Lady Kytson's death in 1628. At Kirby in Northamptonshire, home of the Hatton family whose fortunes had been established by Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the personable Sir Christopher, the singular talents of George Jeffreys found a welcome. Until the collapse of the Royalist war effort in 1646, Jeffreys had been a successful composer of secular vocal and instrumental music and organist to Charles I at Oxford. Only when he joined the Hattons as their house steward, conscientious in the management of the day-to-day affairs of the family and the drawing up of accounts, did Jeffreys turn at all seriously to religious compositions whose distinctly Italianate caste reflects an absorption of continental styles not found elsewhere in English music of his immediate period. As an isolated experimenter in an alien mode liturgically ill-suited to a climate of institutionalized plainness in worship, he has been almost completely ignored by musical historians (the latest reputable account of seventeenth-

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century English music makes two brief references to him), but anyone hearing his anthems will at once be struck by their complex artistic individuality.

The most remarkable case of a composer whose achievement as one of the age's most inventive instrumental writers, not merely in England but throughout Europe, was set against a background of country-house visits and residence with noble families, is surely that of John Jenkins, whose work breathes forth as no other the authentic voice of refined, expressive musicianship among cultivated amateurs in the age of Cromwell. The son of a prosperous carpenter of Maidstone in Kent, Jenkins had joined the household of the Countess of Warwick as a musician around 1603 when he was only eleven. Later entering the service of Sir Thomas Derham of West Dereham Abbey in Norfolk, he came into contact with the family of Sir Hamon L'Estrange of Hunstanton. Both households loved music so much that 'service' is probably the wrong word to use in reference to Jenkins's time with either. In any case, those who knew and admired the composer are at pains to stress his social acceptability among the East Anglian gentry. His friend the Oxford antiquarian Anthony à Wood tells us that 'though a little man, yet he had a great soul', while the invaluable memorialist of English seventeenth-century music Roger North describes him as 'a very gentle and well bred gentleman, and was allways not onely welcome, but greatly valued by the familys wherever he had taught and convers't'.

Jenkins's young pupil Roger North developed an affectionate respect for him. The most versatile of instrumentalists, in 1654 Jenkins came to live at Kirtling Park in Cambridgeshire, where Dudley, third Lord North, Roger's grandfather, had turned his own musical obsession to excellent account by building up an entire household of performers, either dilettante or professional. Not only was the 'good old lord' himself a practitioner on 'that antiquated instrument called the treble viol', but his son and grandchildren all played, as well as 'the servants of parade, as gentleman ushers, and the steward, and clerck of the kitchen'. There was a domestic organist, who accompanied Sunday night singing, there were 'symphonys intermixt with instruments' and 'solemne musick 3 days in the week', let alone open-air concerts with

accompanying picnics in a nearby wood called Bansteads, which Lord North had redesigned with glades and arbours as 'a parcel of delectable grounds', nicknamed Tempe after the Grecian vale celebrated by ancient poets.

This utterly irresistible vision of a community of melomanes, gentle and plebeian, beguiling their idle hours with singing and viol consorts is completed by the presence of Jenkins himself, a figure valued evidently as much for his wit and charm as for his skilful musicianship. Dudley North's comment that 'Spirit, Garb and Air shine in his first appearance' applied as much to the man as to his works, and Roger says of him that 'he was ever courted and never slighted, but at home wherever he went; and in most of his friends houses there was a chamber called by his name. For besides his musickall excellences, he was an accomlisht ingenious person, and so well behaved as never to give offence . . .'

Jenkins's popularity underlines the impression, easily gathered elsewhere, of a musical world during the Commonwealth period in which, whatever the essential fragmentation and lack of institutionalized employment for professional performers and composers, the irrepressible musicality of the English guaranteed the endurance of essential traditions and skills and created a continuity on which artists and enthusiasts of a succeeding generation could build. By particular irony, it was the very existence of Puritanism and the lack of a cosmopolitan royal court which contributed towards the survival of robust vernacular forms such as the viol fantasy and the unaccompanied anthem among those who had enjoyed them in times of peace. As Roger North famously observed, 'when most other good arts languished Musick held up her head, not at Court, nor (in the cant of those times) profane Theaters, but in private society, for many chose rather to fiddle at home, than to goe out and be knockt on the head abroad . . .'

In 1658 Cromwell's musicians, including John Hingeston, who had petitioned him the previous year for the establishment of a 'corporacion or Colledge' to supply the deficiencies resulting from 'the late dissolution of the Quires in the Cathedralls', and the fiddler Davis Mell, 'a prodigious hand on the violin', followed the procession to his grave. The Lord Protector's death had apparently been accompanied by a violent storm, afterwards known as