BMC 10 - Henry Purcell: Incidental Theatre Music and Chamber Works

The writing of incidental music seems not to have been regarded by Purcell as embarrassing or beneath his dignity as Organist of Westminster Abbey. He was in the very midst of a tradition that not only permitted but actually encouraged well-known church musicians to provide lighter music for the theatre and opera, and this was an accepted practice in the great continental cities as well as in London. Most of Purcell's theatre music was written between 1690 and 1695 (the year of his death), and within that relatively brief period he supplied music for more than forty plays. Much of the instrumental music was published in 1697, when the composer's widow compiled A Collection of Ayres, Compos'd for the Theatre, and upon Other Occasions. This body of music, viewed as a whole, shows that Purcell gave to the theatre some of his happiest melodic inspirations, distributed among solemn overtures, cheerful or pathetic airs, and delightful dances of every imaginable kind.

Distressed Innocence, or *The Princess of Persia* was first produced in October 1690 at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. The author, Elkanah Settle (who was assisted in the final scene and epilogue by William Mountfort) based his play on the story of Isdegerdes, King of Persia, though Purcell's music is of course no more Persian than Shakespeare's actor-workmen in A *Midsummer Night's Dream* are Athenian.

Amphitryon, or *The Two Sosias* was written by John Dryden (with some indebtedness to Plautus and Molière) for the official birthday of Queen Mary in 1690, but she and her entourage attended not the first performance on April 30, but a later one in October of the same year. The first night saw the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, as full as it could be with London society and playgoers, and the music seems to have contributed not a little to the initial and continuing success of the work. In his dedication, Dryden paid eloquent tribute to his distinguished collaborator: 'What has been wanting on my part has been abundantly supplied by the excellent composition of Mr. Purcell, in whose person we have at length found an Englishman equal with the best abroad.'

Abdelazer, or *The Moor's Revenge* failed to please the audience at the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields when it was revived in April, 1695. Colley Cibber tells us in his autobiography that the first attempt on the part of Thomas Betterton's break-away group from the Theatre Royal 'was a revived play, called *Abdelazer*, poorly written, by Mrs. [Aphra] Behn. The house was very full, but whether it was the play or the actors that were not approved, the next day's audience sunk to nothing.' Mrs. Behn's tragedy, based on an earlier play by an unknown author, *Lusts' Dominion*, or *The Lascivious Queen*, was first produced in 1676, but Purcell's music was definitely not written then; it belongs to the revival of 1695.

Unlike the other works recorded here, **The Fairy Queen** ranks as a masque rather than a play, and Purcell's music is more closely integrated into the action and the plot. The unknown adapter of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may well have been Elkanah Settle, and his main purpose seems to have been to provide a somewhat unsafe literary scaffolding for a lavish and spectacular presentation. Luttrell, in his diary for Thursday, April 28, 1692 speaks of 'a new opera, called The Fairy Queen: exceeds former plays: the clothes, scenes and music cost 3,000 pounds.' The word *opera* was then loosely used for any type of theatrical performance in which vocal music played an unusually important role. Purcell's songs, choruses, and instrumental items far exceed the quality of the play, which deservedly lies in an obscurity as dark as Purcell's music is luminous.

Many of Purcell's Royal Odes, and many of his plebeian Suites written for the London theatres, are prefaced by an Overture whose primary function is to call attention to the beginning of a performance. These Overtures are generally cut to the prevailing French pattern - a slow movement in dotted rhythm followed by a quick movement and a brief coda. They make excellent and often inspired use of a five-part string orchestra, revelling in the kind of lush sonority ideally suited to an opening number. The **Overture in g-minor** may have originally formed part of a set of pieces for a play: on the other hand it could have been associated with some courtly ode or welcome song. The dignified opening phrase of the first violins, soon repeated more powerfully by cellos and basses, launches a surging introduction.

This is followed by a gently-flowing movement with two distant themes which rise and fall throughout the entire texture, creating contrapuntal patterns of great beauty and complexity.

Purcell had been a devotee of the older viols as well as the more modern violins when he was a young man, cutting his contrapuntal teeth on such forms as the fantasia and the sonata with remarkable and lasting success. But while most of his fantasias were meant for viols, just as his sonatas were intended for violins, one work stands out from the rest because of its unique form and style and its particular instrumental garb. This is the **Fantasia**, **Three Parts Upon a Ground**, probably composed when Purcell was in his early twenties. The present writer transcribed and edited the work for the first time in 1952, having obtained permission from the Queen's Librarian since the original manuscript (Royal Library, RM 20.h.9) was not at that time in the public domain. It is scored for three violins - or groups of violins - with cello, bass, and harpsichord,

and the key is D major. A fragmentary copy elsewhere in another key hints that there was also a version for recorders, but the one for violins is by far the more brilliant and effective. The work is like a fantasia in that the form is of the sectional or additive type: a certain idea is briefly worked out only to give way to a new idea, which in turn leads to another. On the other hand it is like a ground-bass composition because its underlying six-note theme is one of the chaconne patterns, which is used 28 times during the course of the fantasia. Purcell's contrapuntal ingenuity finds an outlet in certain sections exploiting various canons - two in four, three in one, and even with inverted and retrograde motion.

One of the most important musical developments in Restoration London was the gradual establishment of regular public concerts. By the time Henry Purcell began to attend such concerts in the 1670s there were many highly skilled players of the violin, cello, and flute, as well as exponents of the (for London) relatively new art of playing continuo instruments, the most usual being the organ and the harpsichord. It was in gatherings such as these that the present group of chamber works, the Trio Sonata, Violin Sonata and Harpsichord Suite would have been performed.

The **Trio Sonata 10 in D Major** is the last of the second set of Trio Sonatas (the first having been published in 1683) consisting of ten works, the first nine of which are recorded on BMC 9. The set was offered for sale in 1697 two years after Purcell's death by J. Heptinstall on behalf of Purcell's widow. Full of pomp and circumstance, the opening *Adagio* to this tenth sonata in D Major sets the tone for a ceremonial finale. The *Canzona*, based on a D major arpeggio figure, possesses great impetus and musical purpose, and a short but expressive *Grave* links it with a *Largo* movement in which the violins are paired in the best melodious Italian vein. We are thrust into a final *Allegro* whose theme contains a built-in pedal, and after a mischievous touch of inversion Purcell brings us to a bright and breezy ending: no slowing down, no regrets, no sentimentality.

The miniature **Harpsichord Suite 6 in D** was first published in 1696, in a volume entitled A Choice Collection of Lessons for the Harpsichord or Spinnet composed by the late Mr. Henry Purcell Organist of His Majesties Chapel Royal, & of St. Peters Westminster. The title page further tells us that the music was printed from copper plates, that the prime mover of this publication was 'Mrs. Frances Purcell, Executrix of the Author,' and the publisher was Henry Playford. The suite begins with an improvisatory prelude following this with an Almand and Hornpipe.

The original manuscript of the **Violin Sonata in g-minor** has been missing for many years, and even when it was available for inspection no decision was reached as to when in relation to Purcell's trio sonatas this solitary work was written. The first movement, apparently lacking any tempo indication but obviously a slow movement, gives the violinist a long-drawnout, lyrical line akin to a sad aria. There follows a canzona-like movement based on a characteristic violin subject, and after that a gently-moving saraband. The *finale* is again unmarked, but calls for a lively and lilting style of performance as in the Italian sonatas 'da camera'.

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