

At a Glance

This concert revels in the superb music of the English Restoration period during the second half of the 17th century. After Oliver Cromwell's austerities were defeated, the pleasure-loving King Charles II ushered in a brilliant period of artistic creativity in theater and music, with the two art forms frequently joined together in English operas and masques. And musicians flourished to meet the opportunities. Though the lives of Christopher Gibbons, John Blow, Matthew Locke, and Henry Purcell spanned more than a generation, they all knew and influenced each other. The second half of this concert will be devoted to the youngest and greatest of them, Purcell, and to his finest musical/theatrical creation, *The Fairy Queen* of 1692.

CHRISTOPHER GIBBONS (1615-1676)

Fantasy in A minor

The oldest surviving son of one of England's greatest Renaissance composers Orlando Gibbons, Christopher Gibbons had to wait until after the end of Cromwell's Protectorate to be able to fully reap the rewards of his talents as composer and organist. Trained by his illustrious father, he was appointed organist at Winchester Cathedral in 1638. But the English Civil War erupting in 1641

brought his career almost to a halt as the Puritans sacked the churches and his organ was destroyed by Cromwell's soldiers.

During a hand-to-mouth existence as a Royalist musician in London, Gibbons collaborated with his fellow Royalist Matthew Locke to write one of England's first theatrical masques, *Cupid and Death*, in 1653. Rewarding his loyalty, Charles II in 1660 favored Gibbons by appointing him as organist and chorus master at the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey, where he shone more as a performer than a composer. Among his students at the Chapel Royal was Henry Purcell. Although his music is rarely heard today, Gibbons wrote significant organ and sacred choral music, as well as some attractive consort music for small ensembles, including the Fantasy in A minor that opens today's concert.

JOHN BLOW (1649-1708)

Three Songs

Born just ten years before him, John Blow pursued a career in tandem with Purcell's. As a boy, he like Purcell was selected as a chorister of the Royal Chapel and demonstrated his precocious composing skills with several sacred anthems. Taught there by Christopher Gibbons, he in turn trained Purcell when he arrived in the choir. In 1668, he was appointed organist at Westminster Abbey and would be succeeded in that post a decade later by Purcell.

Though Blow was most admired for his sacred music, he wrote a short opera, *Venus and Adonis*, for King Charles II that was extremely popular at the court and was a significant inspiration for Purcell's later opera *Dido and Aeneas*. Blow also wrote quantities of secular and sacred songs of which we will hear three.

Probably written for the feast of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music, "Welcome, Every Guest" is a spirited song contrasting English musical style with foreign influences ("your dainties from abroad"). In its middle section, Blow is happy to provide an animated Spanish dance with guitar and recorders, but gives the final prize to the soprano's English virtuosity at the end. Telling the old story of innocence betrayed, "Lovely Selina" uses a lilting repeating bass melody to ground the soprano's free-flowing lines. A sacred song "Peaceful is he and most secure" reflects the earlier style of the English lute song, in which words are beautifully painted and the instrumentalist and singer merge as equal expressive partners.

MATTHEW LOCKE

(1621-1677)

Curtain Tune from *The Tempest*

A fervent Royalist, Matthew Locke trained as a chorister at Exeter Cathedral under Edward Gibbons, Christopher Gibbons' uncle, and there was drawn into the final struggle of Charles I to keep his throne (and his head) against Oliver Cromwell. In the early 1640s, Charles and Queen Henrietta chose Exeter as their sanctuary, and their son, later to restore the monarchy as Charles II, lived for several years close to Locke. At some point, Locke left with Prince Charles for The Netherlands, where he converted to Catholicism. In 1660 when he returned to the English throne, Charles II unsurprisingly chose him as a court composer for his 24 Violins and his wind ensemble. Locke also wrote the processional march for Charles' coronation.

Locke was a daring and original composer whose music deeply impressed the young Henry Purcell, who was later to write an ode mourning Locke's death.

Locke's remarkable music for Dryden's revision of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in 1674 was one of Purcell's favorites and an inspiration for his own theater music. The "Curtain Tune" opens *The Tempest*, with a vivid musical portrait of the storm that sets the play in motion. It begins with an ominous calm before the storm, featuring foreboding dissonances as the chords rub against each other. Then a gradual accelerando and crescendo set the winds blowing with slashing fast scales imitating lightning. In this score, Locke used some of the earliest detailed dynamic markings indicating exactly the effects he wanted to produce.

HENRY PURCELL

(1659-1695)

Selected works

Though in his own day Henry Purcell was already considered the most gifted of the English composers, strangely as little is known about his life as is about Shakespeare's. Even his birthdate is unknown as well as the exact identity of his father, although we do know he was born into a family of musicians associated with the English court. At about nine or 10, he became a boy chorister in the Chapel Royal. After his voice broke, he held a series of increasingly important positions in the royal music establishments. In 1677, he was appointed a composer for the King's 24 Violins and two years later at age 20 became the organist at Westminster Abbey. After 1685 when James II came to the throne and turned out to be an indifferent patron of the arts, Purcell began concentrating on writing incidental music for the thriving London theatre as well as creating several of the stunning British masques, a Baroque form that combined music, theatre, and dance with extravagant stage effects. When he died — of causes we do not know — at the premature age of 36 on November 21, 1695, he was mourned by London's musical and theatrical establishment and buried with much ceremony at the foot of Westminster Abbey's organ.

Though he also wrote significant instrumental works, Purcell especially excelled in vocal music both for chorus and solo voice. In addition to writing independent songs, he included quantities of songs in his incidental music for the theatre.

In publishing the posthumous collection of his songs, *Orpheus Britannicus*, in 1698, Henry Playford extolled Purcell's "peculiar Genius to express the Energy of English words, whereby he mov'd the Passions of all his Auditors." Purcell created a new standard for setting the English language — notorious for its bewildering variety of syllabic stresses and

its over-abundance of consonants — with clarity and beauty. He was a master of “word illustration:” the art of conveying both the meaning of words and their emotional connotations through the imaginative use of melodic shapes, harmonic colors, and rhythm. Fascinated with the florid vocal writing of the Italian composers of the 17th century, Purcell artfully used coloratura not merely for vocal display but to give stress and emotional color to significant words.

Two of the Purcell songs Rowan Pierce will perform demonstrate the composer’s daring musical techniques for expressing extreme emotions. Setting a text by Nahum Tate, the librettist for *Dido and Aeneas*, “The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation” dramatizes a scene found in the Gospel of Luke, in which the 12-year-old Jesus wanders away from his parents during a visit to the Temple at Jerusalem. Their frantic search for him finds him calmly discoursing with the priests of the Temple. Tate builds this short passage into a harrowing scene in which Mary is tormented by all the worst fears a mother of a lost child might experience, immensely amplified by the divine identity of this particular child.

Purcell sets Mary’s fast-changing moods of hope and despair in the form of an Italianate solo cantata mixing passages of recitative and aria. Using jagged recitative, the song opens impatiently with Mary’s cries imploring some angel to tell her where Jesus has gone. Memories of the Holy Family’s perilous journey into Sinai to escape King Herod’s wrath culminate in furious coloratura on the word “tyrant’s” as she condemns Herod’s wicked court. The most powerful moments come with Mary’s repeated cries to Gabriel, the angel who told her she was bearing God’s Son, set on high G’s above a clashing instrumental series of chords. As her mood lightens twice to reminiscences of happier moments, the music shifts into flowing arias in courtly dance style. The final recitative sums up her fear in a poignant melisma prolonging the syllable “O” — a heartbreaking summation of her anguish.

Another celebrated song of a mind in extremis is “From Silent Shades,” subtitled “Bess of Bedlam,” from 1683, set to anonymous verse. Purcell captures the disordered mind of this woman driven insane by unrequited love through violent shifts in tempo, meter, melodic style, and mood. Purcell biographer Jonathan Keates writes: “Madness was invariably fascinating to the men and women of the 17th century, partly because it was so little understood and also because it seemed to present a glimpse of another world ...”

Quite different is the mesmerizing “Music for a While,” composed in 1692 for a revival of John Dryden’s play *Oedipus*, a retelling of Sophocles’ classic story. It is sung by one of the priests trying to summon the spirit of King Laius to name the person who murdered him. Purcell was a master of creating songs on a ground, or repeating bass pattern, over which the

vocal line operates independently. Here the bass pattern relentlessly ascends while the vocal line droops soothingly downward.

Before we turn to music from Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, we will hear the regal Chaconne Henry Purcell created for the 1691 play *King Arthur*, also written by Dryden. Bearing little resemblance to the Arthurian tales we know, this allegorical play focused on an evil wizard representing a rival king who tries to destroy Arthur with alluring temptations, which, of course, make extravagant use of the spectacular scenic effects Restoration audiences loved. After Arthur subdues his enemies, the play closes with the Chaconne in F Major, a serene dance of peace achieved. Originating in the late 16th-century in Spain and Italy, this three-beat dance consists of variations built over a repeating harmonic pattern. Purcell was a great admirer of Jean-Baptiste Lully, Louis XIV's court composer, and this piece is filled with French touches that pay tribute to him.

HENRY PURCELL

Excerpts from *The Fairy Queen*

Premiered on May 2, 1692 at the Queen's Theatre, Dorset Garden in London, *The Fairy Queen* contains the finest music Purcell wrote for the theater. It was a hybrid work built around a shortened version of Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which largely omits the human figures lost by night in an Athenian forest while concentrating on the play's fairy subplot starring the rulers of the Fairies, Titania and Oberon. Purcell did not write any music for the Shakespearean text; instead, he created the music for the dazzling masques — a mixture of music and dance enhanced by gorgeous costumes and scenery — that were inserted between the acts and were only loosely connected with the play's events. These masques were designed to appeal equally to the eye as to the ear.

As with many theatrical works in Purcell's day, *The Fairy Queen* had an contemporary allegorical aspect: it paid tribute to England's late 17th-century rulers King William and Queen Mary with Titania and Oberon meant to loosely represent them. Specifically, it was written to celebrate William and Mary's 15th anniversary. The lavish scenery of Act IV's masque includes a beautiful garden with fountains spouting water high in the air; this salutes William's fascination with designing fountains. In a bit of a stretch, Act V's masque is set in an exotic Chinese garden, honoring Mary's love of Chinese porcelain and lacquered screens, as well as the new English mania for tea drinking.

The excerpts will not be played in sequential order as they occur in the play. Before the play began and while the audience was still taking their seats and chatting with each other, the

First and Second Music was played. From the second of these preludes, we'll hear the graceful, melodious "Air" scored for strings and a prominent solo oboe. It is followed by livelier "Rondeau," a French court dance in three beats.

Jumping to Act III, the next selection is "If Love's a Sweet Passion," a beautiful, subtly ornamented aria for soprano and chorus in minuet rhythm setting oxymoronic verse about the conflicting emotions of pain and pleasure love brings. Also from Act III's masque, we hear two highly contrasting dances: "A Dance of Fairies," an elegant, light-footed gavotte for these ethereal creatures, followed by the charmingly bumptious "Dance of the Haymakers," with trumpets and drums stressing the rustics' stumbling gait. Even clumsier is the following "Monkeys' Dance" from Act V, with its grotesquely low bass part accompanying clownish gymnastic feats from the dancers. To balance the emphasis on courtly elegance in these masques, Restoration audiences loved these numbers of anarchic comic relief.

Representing the reconciliation of Titania and Oberon after their quarrel, Act IV displayed spectacular scenery: fountains, cypress trees, and statues surrounding a grand staircase. This visual feast was echoed by the opening Symphony with its majestic music for trumpet and drums interspersed with slower and very beautiful music for the other instruments.

From Act V, "The Complaint" is one of Purcell's most beloved arias, a song of love lost built over a downward-drooping repeating ground-bass theme. However, scholars increasingly believe that it was likely composed by a different Purcell, Henry's younger brother Daniel, and was added into *The Fairy Queen's* score for the play's revival in 1693.

Returning to Act II and Titania's bower in the forest, we hear some of this work's most unusual music: the arrival of Night and her followers Mystery, Secrecy, and Sleep come to lull Titania into dream-filled slumber. Night sings a slow aria of enchantment over eerie music in C minor for muted strings. This is followed by the beautiful "Dance of the Followers of Night": a grave, slowly circling dance set as a double canon. This is Purcell's salute to Matthew Locke, who in his music for *The Tempest* created a similar double-canon piece.

Despite an interlude of anguish in "The Complaint," Act V is a scene of triumphant love as the three pairs of lovers, freed from their nocturnal struggles, are wed at the close of Shakespeare's comedy — and simultaneously a salute to William and Mary's wedding anniversary. The gorgeous Chaconne for dancing couples that closes *The Fairy Queen* mirrors the Chaconne from King Arthur that opened this program's second half. Its

regal main theme is poised against fascinating episodes of softer viol music and epitomizes the musical splendor that Henry Purcell could summon for his enraptured audiences.

– *Janet E. Bedell*