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THE CHURCH MUSIC OF HENRY PURCELL (1659-95):
A STUDY OF HIS ANTHEMS WRITTEN
BETWEEN 1680-85

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PREFACE

This paper will analyze Henry Purcell's church music composed between the years 1680 and 1695. Six anthems will be discussed specifically, demonstrating Purcell's style characteristics and how they enhance the excellence of his traditional manner of writing.

The story of the development of church music is the story of the evolution of musical style in general, touched here by genius, there by showmanship, and elsewhere by dullness.¹

Henry Purcell (1659-95), one of England's greatest composers, certainly was a genius in the development of church music. His name was accepted abroad as that of a great musician; but, unfortunately, his music seemed misunderstood in many respects because of poor publications, the misconception that in order for music to be "sacred," it had to be performed slowly, and the highly exacting virtuosic solo parts which were often times designed for the abilities of specific individuals.

Purcell was a chorister of the Chapel Royal until his voice broke in 1673, when he was given the unpaid appointment of "keeper, taker, sender, repayer, and tuner of the regalls, organs, virginals, flutes and recorders."² He also did some music-copying for Westminster Abbey. He seems to have been a suitable pupil: he later became the official organ tuner at the Abbey, a composer for the King's violins, and in 1679, the organist for the Abbey. With the latter position, Purcell finished his formal musical training. "His efforts to master all styles of music were to continue to the end of his life, but henceforth he was to be his own teacher."³ At this point in his life, at the age of twenty, and for five years thereafter, he wrote church music that seems to represent the true essence of his style. After

this period, Purcell tended to write more music for the stage in order that he might achieve more fame, popularity and fortune; his church music began to lack the excellence of his earlier works.

Purcell wrote anthems in two styles: the full anthem and the verse anthem. The former follows closely the traditional style of writing with little advancement, save its harmonic conception firmly rooted in the tonal system. It is written for full chorus with an occasional introduction of a solo quartet or trio. The latter incorporated various innovations, including lengthy orchestral introductions, solos, trios, sections for full choir and orchestral interludes, inevitably advancing progress. In this style, verses are sung by soloists. Five full anthems and one verse anthem will be discussed in this paper.

"... Purcell had two styles at his disposal: massive choral declamation, and the thick archaic polyphony of his own making." The latter manner, a la Palestrina, characterizes explicitly Purcell's full anthems. They exemplify a close affiliation with the traditional, polyphonic, unaccompanied style of the Renaissance. Superimposed upon this, however, is Purcell's unique treatment of syncopation, crossed dissonances (progressions in which a note in one chord is followed by a chromatic alteration of the same note in a second chord, or the simultaneous sounding in a single chord of a note and its chromatic alteration), appoggiatura (a rhythmically strong non-harmonic tone which gives the impression of leaning heavily on the tone into which it finally resolves, by half or whole step), suspensions (the sustaining of one of the notes of a consonant interval while the other note moves so that the first becomes dissonant; this dissonant note then resolves downwards to a consonance), retardations (a device which acts like a suspension, but resolves upwards),

and open fifths at cadence points.⁵

Probably Purcell's most profound characteristic is his use of crossed dissonances, a characteristic which Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-85) used before him. Countless examples can be cited. The following excerpt from "Remember Not, Lord, Our Offences," provides a very clear example:



6

Here the G's on the first beat in the soprano part and on the second beat in the tenor part, change to G#s on the fourth beat.

The following illustration shows a simultaneous sounding of a crossed dissonance, in this case, an F# against an F# :



7

The crossed dissonance in this example, from "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," is heard as a diminished octave, rather than as an augmented prime, as in the previous illustration.

This excerpt, from the same piece, displays a crossed dissonance over a bar-line:



Crossed dissonances also occur between voices, as in the following case from "Lord, Save My Soul from Sinners":



The $E\sharp$ in the tenor part on the second beat and the $A\flat$ on the third beat in the soprano part are crossed dissonances.

A striking example of crossed dissonances in close imitation occurs in "Hear My Prayer, O Lord."



The following canonic passage from "Save Me, O God," shows an interplay of $G\sharp$'s and $E\flat$'s. The clashes occur because of canonic interplay.

m. 61

Sop. I
Sop. II
Alto
Tenor
Bass

11

Purcell's uses of the appoggiatura, suspension, and retardation are factors contributing to the pathos which is so characteristic of his music. This illustration from, "I Will Sing Unto the Lord," exhibits a beautiful chain of "prepared appoggiature" (appoggiature which act like suspensions; the dissonance, however is not tied over from the previous chord; rather it is sounded again.)

m. 42

Organ

12

An example from "Hear My Prayer, O Lord," very effectively demonstrates the strength of a "prepared appoggiatura" as it is interwoven into an eight-part polyphonic piece:

m. 11

13

The appoggiatura is often used for tone-painting as in the following illustration from "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry." The text of a portion of this passage is: "...but have mercy upon us, and that soon, for we are come to great misery." It is on the word great that the appoggiatura occurs, signifying the intensity of the misery:

no. 21

Alto

Tenor

Bass

The musical score shows three staves for Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Alto staff has a treble clef and a common time signature. The Tenor and Bass staves have a C-clef (soprano clef) and a common time signature. The music consists of several measures. An asterisk (*) is placed above the final measure of the Alto part, indicating the appoggiatura on the word "great".

14

The retardation is used much less frequently than the suspension and the appoggiatura; however, it is as equally striking as the other two; it occurs most prominently in the remarkably dissonant overture to the anthem, "I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord."¹⁵ The following passage from "Remember not, Lord, our Offences" shows a good example of this device:

no. 27

The musical score shows two staves, likely Soprano and Bass. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. The music consists of several measures. An asterisk (*) is placed above the final measure of the top staff, indicating the retardation.

16

Here, the non-chord members C and E^b resolve upwards to ^{the} A⁺ D and F members of the C² chord on the second beat of ^{second} the A measure.

Furcell enriches many cadencial situations by employing appoggiature and/or suspensions. In the following example from "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," the cadencial dissonance in the two Soprano parts

is achieved essentially by the use of a prepared appoggiatura in the Soprano II, followed by an anticipation.

m. 10

Sop. I, II

Alto

Tenor
Bass

17

The cadence in "Save Me, O God" demonstrates the same dissonance in the soprano parts, achieved this time by use of a suspension, while additional passing-tone dissonance occurs in the tenor part.

m. 5

Sop. I, II

Alto

Tenor
Bass

18

from "Hear My Prayer, O Lord,"

The following excerpt demonstrates this dissonance in addition to another Purcellian trait - the open fifth at a cadence point:

m. 33

19

In addition to the attributes previously mentioned, Purcell's style presents some other features. First of all, he introduces the solo quartet and trio into his full anthems. "Save Me, O God" is a prime example. This technique is an initial step in the development of the verse anthem, which includes both individual solo and ensemble solo sections.

Yet another Purcellian characteristic is crossed voice leading created by imitation at the prime, as in this example from "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry:"

m. 26

Sop. I
Sop. II
Alto
Tenor
Bass

The second soprano part imitates the first soprano part in the first measure; in the second measure, the second soprano sings higher than the first because of the imitation. The same situation occurs in "Save Me, O God." In this case, a full canon is evident:

m. 6

Sop. I
Sop. II

"Save Me, O God" exhibits other Purcellian traits. One is the abrupt change in tonality:

m. 10

Musical score for measures 10-12. The score is written for four parts: Sopranos I and II, Alto, and Tenor Bass. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major). The time signature is 4/4. The Soprano I part has a whole note in measure 10, followed by rests. The Soprano II part has a half note in measure 10, followed by a quarter note in measure 11, and a quarter note in measure 12. The Alto part has a half note in measure 10, followed by a quarter note in measure 11, and a quarter note in measure 12. The Tenor Bass part has a half note in measure 10, followed by a quarter note in measure 11, and a quarter note in measure 12.

22

The feeling for the key of C major is altered suddenly by the subsequent E major chord.

Another trait is the sudden appearance of an additional part, in this from "Save Me, O God," came a second tenor part in measure twenty-nine. After seven measures, the additional part ceases.

"I Will Sing Unto the Lord" exhibits still another characteristic. Purcell occasionally chooses to treat five-part writing artistically in a double-chorus situation. The alto part is usually the

m. 42

Musical score for measures 42-44. The score is written for five parts: Soprano I (S₁), Soprano II (S₂), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major). The time signature is 4/4. The Soprano I part has a whole note in measure 42, followed by rests. The Soprano II part has a half note in measure 42, followed by a quarter note in measure 43, and a quarter note in measure 44. The Alto part has a half note in measure 42, followed by a quarter note in measure 43, and a quarter note in measure 44. The Tenor part has a half note in measure 42, followed by a quarter note in measure 43, and a quarter note in measure 44. The Bass part has a half note in measure 42, followed by a quarter note in measure 43, and a quarter note in measure 44.

23

Purcell often uses syncopated rhythms at cadence points, as in the following illustrations:

From "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry"

m. 45

Sop. I
Sop. II
Alto

24

Detailed description: This is a musical score for three voices: Soprano I, Soprano II, and Alto. The music is written on three staves. The Soprano parts feature a melodic line with various note values and rests, while the Alto part provides a harmonic accompaniment. The score is labeled 'm. 45' at the top and '24' at the bottom right.

From "Save Me, O Lord"

m. 24

Alto
Tenor
Bass

25

Detailed description: This is a musical score for Alto and Tenor Bass. The music is written on two staves. The Alto part has a melodic line with several asterisks (*) above it, indicating specific notes or phrases. The Tenor Bass part provides a harmonic accompaniment. The score is labeled 'm. 24' at the top and '25' at the bottom right.

In addition, Purcell changes meter during the course of an anthem in order to enhance the syllabication of the text and the phraseology of the line, as well as to create variety. This is evident in "I Will Sing unto the Lord" and "Lord how long wilt Thou be angry."

"Near My Prayer, O Lord" (1680-82), is considered incomplete by many musicologists because Purcell left many blank pages after his final written one, and the final cadence does not exhibit his customary authentic treatment. "It seems quite likely," writes one editor, "that having written it he realized how difficult it would be to match its brilliance, and deliberately wrote no more."²⁶

The entire piece is built out of the two phrases (a) and (b) heard at the outset; these phrases are then often inverted:

27

The effective use of these two motives gives the piece definite coherence.

"I Will Sing Unto the Lord" (1683), the only full anthem discussed in this paper that was not composed between 1680-2, seems to foreshadow Purcell's verse anthem, "Rejoice in the Lord Always," completed in 1685. The following excerpt is closely identical to the chorus of "Rejoice in the Lord Always:"

from "I Will Sing Unto the Lord"

m. 28

28

From "Rejoice in the Lord Always"

The image shows two systems of handwritten musical notation. The first system is marked with a tempo of '♩ = 55'. It consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with various note values, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, along with rests. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The second system continues the piece with similar notation, showing the continuation of the melodic and harmonic lines.

29

The elements which are common to both of the above examples are the rhythmic scheme, the chordal style and the melodic contour (i.e. the descent of a third as the melodic line moves from a shorter note value to a longer one.)

"Rejoice in the Lord Always" is one of Purcell's finest and most popular verse anthems. A lengthy introduction and ritornelli are incorporated into the piece. Between the verses which are sung by soloists, the chorus is repeated with varied harmonizations and voice-leading each time.

Purcell's verse anthems have always been the subject of critical debate, the main issue of which is their alleged secularity. The introduction of the instrumental "symphonies" was considered secular in nature since there had been no tradition of instrumental church music in England up to that point.

It has too often been supposed that a secular style means a frivolous style, unsuited to the divine offices; whereas it should have been obvious that secular music can, and often is, as sober and dignified as anything written expressly for the church. The whole objection to the innovation was, in fact, based

on a false hypothesis.³⁰

Inevitably, English church music was being influenced by the rise of the Italian and French operas, and consequently, the dramatic style. In addition, concerning religiosity, "it is impossible to feel that (the verse anthems) are intended solely for the glory of God. They are there also to be noted and approved by man." ³¹ The Chapel Royal, like the Theatre Royal, provided good music by some of the best musicians in the kingdom - the only source of concert-going that was available.

While greatly affected by secular styles and devices, Purcell's church music is not frivolous or superficial, even though it lies far from the reserved expression of his predecessors. Religiosity in music will vary from individual to individual, and, consequently, the issue of secularity can only be founded on personal opinion.

The secularity question concerning Purcell's religious music can be applied in reverse - that is, his secular music can also provide religious connotations. The final chorus in his opera, Dido and Aeneas, with its polyphonic texture and intense pathos, is deeply reverential. In fact, it seems evident that whenever pathos is the underlying ingredient, as in Purcell's full anthems ("Save Me, O God," "Lord how long wilt Thou be angry," etc.), Purcell is at his finest.

J. A. Wentrup writes:

As a boy (Purcell) must have sung church music of all kinds, old and new, and formed an ineradicable impression of conflicting styles. The old music evidently appealed to him strongly, since he wrote a number of full anthems in the polyphonic tradition. These all belong to the earlier part of ^{his} career. But as time went on it was impossible for him to remain content with old formulas. He had to develop a style based on the new methods that were already beginning to dominate English music. To us, admiring the

texture of the old masters, the change may seem unfortunate. To him it would have seemed a natural, and obvious step forward.³²

Between 1689 and 1695, Purcell had broken with the old style in order to keep up with the musical advancements that were going on around him. The full mastery of the new style was necessarily a slow and laborious process for him.

In 1694, one year before his death, Purcell composed a Te Deum and Jubilate in the developing verse-anthem style. This magnificent work for five-part chorus, solo voices, strings, trumpets, and organ was "Made for St. Cecilia's Day, 1694", for performance by the Musical Society. After 1743, however, the Te Deum was seldom performed because

Handel's superior knowledge and use of instruments, and more polished melody, and indeed, the novelty of his productions, which will always turn the public scale, took such full possession of the nation's favour, that Purcell's Te Deum and Jubilate, is now only performed occasionally, as an antique curiosity, even in this country.³³

Thus, even one year before his death, Purcell had a long way to go before he could master the new style. He died at the age of thirty-six before he was able to do so.

Until recently, Purcell's style was stereotyped on the basis of his latest works. Today, however, according to Manfred Bukofzer, an opposing opinion seems to predominate. However, Bukofzer gives no specific evidence concerning what it is about Purcell's earlier compositions that gives them such strength. The writer of this paper maintains that it is through his unique treatment of accented non-chord tones, other dissonances, syncopation, polyphonic writing, and the underlying pathos, as cited in this paper, characteristics found commonly in his earlier work's (the full anthems) but seldom in his later works (the verse anthems),

that Purcell's stylistic excellence is made evident.

The five full anthems discussed here very effectively exhibit the above-mentioned characteristics which are prevalent in most of Purcell's writing in the traditional style. The verse anthem which was discussed, "Rejoice in the Lord Always," and the Te Deum and Jubilate, rarely incorporate these elements; therefore, they lack the excellence of the full anthems.

Roger North writes:

"(Purcell) began to shew his Great skill before the reformation of musick, "al Italliana," and while he was warm in pursuit of it, Dyed..."³⁴

The genius of Henry Purcell, then, lies in his perfection of the "stilo antico." His later works, despite their lack of musical excellence, were to be the foundations on which subsequent great composers, i.e. Handel and J. S. Bach, would develop their own ascendancies in the new style, just as Purcell had developed his in the old.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Davison, Archibald T. Church Music: Illusion and Reality. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 79.
- ²Long, Kenneth R. The Music of the English Church, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971, p. 269.
- ³Zimmerman, Franklin B. Henry Purcell: His Life and Times. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967. p. 76.
- ⁴Bukofzer, Manfred. Music in the Baroque Era. New York: W. W. Norton, 1947, p. 207.
- ⁵Westrup, J. A. and Harrison, F. The New College Encyclopedia of Music, New York: W. W. Norton, 1960.
- ⁶"Remember Not, Lord, Our Offences", Hollywood: Walton Music Corp., mm. 3 and 4
- ⁷"Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," New York; Arista Music Co., m. 7
- ⁸Ibid., mm. 25 and 26
- ⁹Ibid., mm. 43 and 44
- ¹⁰"Hear My Prayer, O Lord," New York: Alexander Broude, Inc., 1965, mm. 12-14.
- ¹¹"Save Me, O God," Moseler Verlag Wolfenbuttel, m. 61
- ¹²"I Will Sing Unto the Lord," New York: H. W. Gray, m. 42,43.
- ¹³"Hear My Prayer, O Lord," mm. 11-12
- ¹⁴"Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," m. 21
- ¹⁵Bukofzer, p. 215.
- ¹⁶"Remeber Not, Lord, Our Offences," mm. 27-28
- ¹⁷"Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," m. 10

FOOTNOTES, continued

- 18 "Save Me, O God," m. 5.
- 19 "Hear My Prayer, O Lord," mm. 33, 34
- 20 "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," mm. 26-27.
- 21 "Save Me, O God," m. 6
- 22 Ibid, m. 10
- 23 "I Will Sing Unto the Lord," mm. 42-45
- 24 "Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry," m. 45.
- 25 "Save Me, O God," mm. 24-26
- 26 "Hear My Prayer, O Lord," Alexander Broude, Inc., 1965, Christopher Dearnley, ed.
- 27 Ibid., mm. 1-8
- 28 "I Will Sing Unto the Lord," mm. 28-35
- 29 "Rejoice in the Lord Always," New York: H. W. Gray., mm. 55-62
- 30 Westrup, J. A. Purcell. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1937, p. 202
- 31 Ibid., pp. 207-8
- 32 Ibid., p. 202
- 33 Arundell, Dennis, Henry Purcell, London; Oxford University Press, 1927, p. 55.
- 34 Bukofzer, p. 218

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