



A
SHORT HISTORY
OF
OPERA

• SECOND EDITION

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seventeenth century is incarnated in Blow and his great pupil, Henry Purcell.

The music of Henry Purcell¹⁴ represents a fusion of different

¹³ H. Watkins Shaw in *Grove's Dictionary*⁵, s.v. "Blow."

¹⁴ Biography by J. A. Westrup (1937, 1949); R. E. Moore, *Henry Purcell and the Restoration Theatre*; Rolland, in Lavignac, *Encyclopédie*, Part I, Vol. III, pp. 1881-94; I. Holst, ed., *Henry Purcell*; relevant sections in the histories of Hawkins (IV, 495-539), Burney, and Parry (OHM III); last three chapters of Dent's *Foundations of English Opera*; Barclay Squire's bibliographical study, "Purcell's Dramatic Music."

EXAMPLE 47 *Venus and Adonis, Act III* Blow

Ah, ah ah ah

A - do - nis my love, ah, ah, ah, A - do - nis

national style qualities. His early training under Captain Henry Cooke, master of the boys of the Royal Chapel, made him familiar with the English musical tradition; from Pelham Humfrey he undoubtedly learned something of the French manner of composition, and from Blow the Italian, but these elements were always dominated by a genius essentially individual and imbued with national feeling. The dramatic work of Purcell includes only one opera in the strict sense—that is, sung throughout—namely *Dido and Aeneas*. Composed for performance at a girls' school in 1689, it is on the scale of a chamber opera rather than a full stage work, though exquisite in detail and effective in performance. The rest of Purcell's theatre music consists of overtures, interludes, masques, songs, dances, choruses, and other music for plays;¹⁵ but in some cases the extent and importance of the musical numbers are so great that the works may rightly be considered operas, and indeed were commonly so called in England at the time.¹⁶

It will readily be seen that such productions are similar to the Renaissance Italian plays with *intermedi* and the French dramatic ballets, though of course their immediate forebears are the masque and the comedy-ballets of Molière and Lully. It is remarkable how long it

¹⁵ The principal ones are: *Dioclesian*, 1690; *King Arthur*, 1691; *The Fairy Queen*, 1692; *The Indian Queen*, 1695; *The Tempest*, 1695; *Bonduca*, 1695; and the masque in *Timon of Athens*, 1694.

¹⁶ Cf. Locke's preface to *Psyche*, 1675.

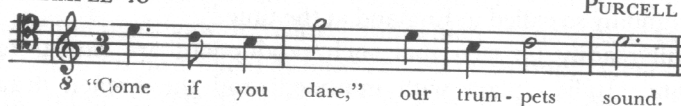
took before poets and composers worked out fully the implications of the ideal of *dramma per musica*, drama carried on wholly by means of music. To be sure, in Italian opera all the dialogue was sung and, at least with composers like Monteverdi and Cavalli, often sung in appropriately flexible and expressive recitative. Nevertheless the Italian tendency, as we have seen, was constantly toward sharpening the contrast in musical style between action dialogue on the one hand and verses expressing emotion on the other. Even their arias, solos and duets in regular closed musical forms with periodic melody, were at first treated almost like interpolations and given only to subordinate characters, while larger musical units involving choruses and dances were held quite distinct from the development of the action itself. By and large, this was the state of affairs in Lully's *tragédies lyriques* also. But early German opera often, the French comedy-ballet always, and early English opera with only two or three exceptions, kept the distinction absolute: spoken dialogue for the action, music only for "set numbers."

When we examine Purcell's music, we are impressed first of all by the fresh, engaging quality of his melodies, so like in feeling to English folk songs. The air "Pursue thy conquest, love" from Act I of *Dido and Aeneas*, with its horn-call figures and constant lively echoing between melody and bass, suggests the sounds and bustle of the chase. In *King Arthur* the martial "Come if you dare" shows an English adaptation of the popular trumpet aria of Italian opera, with two of these instruments concertizing in the introduction and interlude, and the characteristic rhythmic motif ♩ ♩ common in French music and so appropriate to the declamation of English words (Example 48).

King Arthur, Act I

EXAMPLE 48

PURCELL



The duet "Fear no danger" from Act I of *Dido and Aeneas* is similar in rhythm and style to the duets of Lully. No less characteristic, though in a different mood, is an aria such as "Charon the peaceful shade invites" from *Dioclesian* (Example 49), with the two concertizing flutes,

the three- and six-measure phrases, the delicate cross relations, and the word painting on "hastes." There are also many fine comic airs and duets, particularly in the lesser theatre pieces.¹⁷ Da capo arias are not frequent in Purcell, but he uses most effectively the older form of the passacaglia or ground, the best example of which is Dido's "When I am laid in earth" from the last act of *Dido and Aeneas*, one of the most affecting expressions of tragic grief in all opera. Another air of this kind is the "plaint" ("O let me weep") from Act V of *The Fairy Queen*.

Purcell's recitative is found at its best in *Dido and Aeneas*, the only one of his operas that gives opportunity for genuine dramatic dialogue. The treatment, as Dent points out,¹⁸ has nothing in common with the Italian recitativo secco; rather, the style is that of free arioso, admitting expressive florid passages, and always maintaining a clear rhythmic, formal, and harmonic organization, yet without sacrificing correctness of declamation or expressive power. The dialogue in the parting scene between Dido and Aeneas (Act III) and the beautiful arioso phrase which introduces Dido's last aria show what can be done by way of dramatic musical setting of the English language, that despised tongue which has been so often condemned as "unsuitable for opera." In Purcell's other works there are isolated examples of recitative phrases, including one from *The Indian Queen* which Dr. Burney called "the best piece of recitative in our language"¹⁹ (Example 50).

The overtures to Purcell's operas are in the same general form as the French overtures of Lully; one of the finest examples is found in *Dioclesian*. Other instrumental music includes "act tunes" (that is, interludes or introductions), and there are some interesting examples of the canzona and other forms.²⁰ There are dance pieces of all kinds, including the hornpipe, *paspe* (French *passepied*), canaries, and special descriptive dances as in Lully; a favorite type (also common in French opera) is the chaconne or ground, which is often placed for climax toward the end of a scene, and in which dancing is combined with solo and choral singing as well as with instrumental accompaniment.²¹ Descriptive symphonies

¹⁷ Examples: "Dear pretty youth" (*The Tempest*), "Celia has a thousand charms" (*The Rival Sisters*), "I'll sail upon the dogstar" (*A Fool's Preferment*), "Celimene pray tell me" (*Oroonoko*), and the song of the drunken poet "Fi-fi-fi-fill up the bowl" (*The Fairy Queen*, Act I).

¹⁸ *Foundations of English Opera*, pp. 188-92.

¹⁹ *History* (2d ed.) II, 392.

²⁰ *Indian Queen*, Acts II and III; *Fairy Queen*, Act IV; *King Arthur*, Act V.

²¹ Examples in *King Arthur*, Act III; *Dioclesian*, Act III (in canon form).

EXAMPLE 50

The Indian Queen, Act III

PURCELL

Bass solo *B.c.* Ye twice ten hun - dred dei - ti - es, to
whom, to whom we dai - ly sa - cri - fice, Ye
pow'rs, ye pow'rs that dwell with fates be -
- low and see what men are doo - m'd to
do, Where e - le - ments in dis - cord dwell,

occur, such as the introduction to the song "Ye blustering bretheren" in Act V of *King Arthur* or the famous "Cold" symphony and chorus "See, see, we assemble" from Act III—a scene perhaps suggested by the chorus of *trembleurs* in Lully's *Isis*.

The choruses in Purcell's operas contain some of his best music. Such numbers as "Sing Io's" from Act II of *Dioclesian*, with stately vigorous rhythms, brilliant voice groupings, orchestral interludes, and passages of harmony contrasting with contrapuntal sections, foreshow the broad, sonorous choral movements in Handel's oratorios. Other choruses in Purcell are more like those of Lully, in strict chordal style with piquant rhythms;²² still others show the influences of the English madrigal tradition.²³ Finally, there are the choruses of lamentation, such as "With drooping wings," from *Dido and Aeneas*, which (like many other features of this opera) has a worthy predecessor in the closing number of Blow's *Venus and Adonis*. Except for *Dido and Aeneas*, where the

²² E.g., "'Tis love that hath warmed us," from *King Arthur*, Act III.

²³ "In these delightful pleasant groves," from *The Libertine*.

chorus has a part in the action, Purcell's choral numbers usually occur in scenes devoted to spectacle or entertainment, corresponding to the ceremonies, ballets, and the like in French opera. There are scenes of this kind in *Bonduca* (Act III), *King Arthur* (Acts I and III), and *The Indian Queen* (Act V). The masques, of which examples may be found particularly in *Timon of Athens* and *The Fairy Queen*, also contain many choruses and dances; for parallels to these masques, with their fantastic settings and characters, we must look not only in the French opera but also in the contemporary popular plays of the Italian Theatre at Paris, which contain many scenes of a similar nature.²⁴

On the whole, it is difficult to accept Romain Rolland's estimate²⁵ of Purcell's genius as "frail" or "incomplete." It is difficult to believe that the composer of the closing scenes of *Dido and Aeneas* could not have created a true national opera in England if he had not been frustrated by the lack of an adequate librettist and by his apparently inescapable servitude to an undeveloped public taste.²⁶ As it was, however, Purcell's death in 1695 put an end to all hope for the future of English musical drama. London was even then full of Italian musicians; audiences became fascinated with Italian opera, and English composers did no more than follow the trend. The success of M. A. Bononcini's *Trionfo di Camilla, regina de' Volsci* in 1706 marked the capitulation, and the fashion was completely established by the time of Handel's arrival and the performance of his *Rinaldo* in 1711.

There was at least one Englishman who viewed this state of operatic affairs with regret. Joseph Addison in the *Spectator* frequently alluded to the absurdities of Italian opera in England and in one issue²⁷ wrote a long essay in criticism of Italian recitative, with acute observations on the relation of language to national style in music and an exhortation to English composers to emulate Lully by inventing a recitative proper to their own language: "I would allow the *Italian Opera* to lend our *English Musick* as much as may grace and soften it, but never entirely to annihilate and destroy it." That this was a vain hope, Addison had virtually admitted in an earlier letter which so well sums up the situation of opera in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century that it deserves to be quoted at length :

²⁴ Gherardi, *Théâtre italien*.

²⁵ In Lavignac, *Encyclopédie*, Part I, Vol. III, p. 1894.

²⁶ Cf. the preface to *The Fairy Queen*.

²⁷ No. 29, Tuesday, April 3, 1711.