

Fretwork

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& Richard Tunnicliffe, viols**

With Clare Wilkinson, voice

In 2009 we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the birth of Henry Purcell, one of the most strikingly original and individual musical voices.

Purcell was a chorister at the Chapel Royal until his voice broke in 1673, when he was 14; he had been taught by Henry Cooke and Pelham Humphrey, and now became assistant to John Hingeston, keeper of the Royal Instruments. He later studied with John Blow, who resigned his post as organist of Westminster Abbey in favor of this exceptional pupil in 1680, when Purcell was just 21. And in this glorious summer, Purcell undertook an investigation of music by previous English masters, notably Gibbons and Byrd. Then, on the 10th of June, he started a series of extraordinary compositions, completing the works sometimes in as little as a single day. He clearly had other things to do during July and rounded the group off with two masterpieces at the end of August. Interestingly, 18 months later, Purcell started another Fantazia, but clearly the mood had passed, and he abandoned it after the first section.

After the 3 & 4 part Fantazias, Purcell's manuscript reads: "Here Begineth ye 6, 7, & 8 part Fantazias," though after the 7-part In Nomine there are no more. This manuscript is all that survives of the 4-part Fantazias and the works for 5, 6 & 7 viols, which makes it very likely that the works were not performed during his lifetime. Perhaps he regarded the works as mere exercises to work out and explore 'old' contrapuntal techniques; perhaps the viols were too old fashioned for him after that summer. It has recently been established that Purcell wrote all his purely instrumental music during this period in his life: the sonatas of three parts, which he himself published in 1683, and the sonatas of four parts, which his wife published after his death, as well as all the various overtures and other miscellaneous music.

Having completed his thoughts on purely instrumental music, he moved on to the theatre, and it is here that many of his most famous songs were written and performed. Music for a while is a single song drawn from Dryden's 'Oedipus'; its function is merely to distract the audience from the tragedy, asking them to let music beguile all their cares.

Sweeter than Roses comes from Richard Norton's 'Pausanius, Betrayed of his Country,' another tragedy, and it is sung by the courtesan Pandora as a song of steamy seduction. O Solitude, on the other hand, is not from a play. The text is by Katherine Phillips, based on 'La Solitude' by Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant, and Purcell employs one of his favorite devices, the ground-

bass, where the same bass theme is repeated unchanged. Over this rigid structure a melodic line of extreme fluidity is spun, expressive and malleable, molded to suit the demands of the text.

The Evening Hymn is also constructed upon a ground bass, though in this case the bass theme changes key a few times. And the song lets us glimpse the sacred element in Purcell's work. It was printed as the first song in the first book of *Harmonia Sacra*, published by Henry Playford in 1688. The words are by Dr William Fuller, Lord-Bishop of Lincoln.

In great contrast to the serene majesty and seriousness of the hymn, *If Love's a Sweet Passion*, from *'The Faery Queen'* of 1692, is a delightful confection telling of the pain and pleasure to be had from carnal love.

Finally, Purcell's only complete opera, *'Dido & Aeneas'*, was composed in the early 1680s and probably performed at court; it was later revived at Josiah Priest's Girl's School in Chelsea in 1689. The libretto is by Nahum Tate and deals with Dido, Queen of Carthage and her lover Aeneas, who leaves her and goes on to found Rome. The rejected Dido, after her final encounter with her faithless lover, calls for Belinda, her servant, to steady her before her great dying lament: "Remember me," she says, "but ah, forget my fate."

All these songs, except for the last, were written for voice and continuo—i.e. the bass line 'figured' with numbers indicating the chords to be improvised by the keyboard or lute player. In order to be able to perform these songs with viols, this chordal accompaniment has had to be realized. Silas Standage made the arrangement of the Evening Hymn, which inspired me to realize the rest.

—Richard Boothby, 2008