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Martin Adams

Excerpt

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PART ONE

Stylistic development and
influences

CHAPTER ONE

Early years at court and home: developments to c. 1680

THE LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT survives suggests that Henry Purcell, arguably Britain's greatest composer, was born in 1659, probably in Westminster, then a more or less separate city some three miles west of London.¹ His father was one of two brothers, Thomas and Henry Purcell, both of whom earned a living as professional musicians (the balance of evidence favours Henry as the father). Both were on the King's musical establishment in 1661, just a year after the restoration of the monarchy and, while Henry died in 1664, Thomas continued to accumulate appointments and seems at the very least to have been responsible for young Henry during the boy's youth.²

We know practically nothing of young Henry's childhood, beyond some dates in archives of court and church which record his teenage rise up the ladder of appointments. He became a chorister in the Chapel Royal, almost certainly not later than his tenth year. His voice broke in 1673 and in that same year he was appointed assistant to John Hingston, keeper of the King's musical instruments: effectively this made him Hingston's unpaid apprentice.³ He must have done well in this work, for in 1675, and for several years thereafter, he tuned the organ at Westminster Abbey. In 1677, on the death of Matthew Locke at around fifty-five, the eighteen-year-old Purcell received his first major appointment. On 10 September he was admitted as one of the composers in ordinary for the violins. His duties involved writing music for the court's entertainment – Thomas Purcell had held the same post since 1671. Two years later, in 1679, young Henry's responsibilities were formally extended to church music, when he was appointed organist of Westminster Abbey.⁴

And what of composition during these years? Certainly the young Purcell was active. By 1679, and almost certainly for a few years before this, his verse anthems were in regular use in the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey;⁵ in tandem with these unusually accomplished sacred works there was a regular

output of consort music, remarkable for its technical skill and expressive profundity. As one might expect, these early pieces tend to imitate the sacred and consort music with which Purcell was most familiar; but it is still interesting to note how selective the precocious youngster was in choosing his models. Despite his later fame as a song composer, his early songs are generally less impressive than his instrumental and sacred music, though here too he made his mark early. The first reliable attribution is the five songs published in 1679, in the second book of *Choice Ayres and Songs to Sing to the Theorbo-lute or Bass-viol*. As the publication of this collection had been delayed, it is unlikely that any of them are later than 1678, and some could have been composed earlier.⁶

As a chorister Purcell received musical instruction under the supervision of the Master of the Children, Captain Henry Cooke (c. 1616–72). There is no obvious evidence in Purcell's music of the influence of Cooke's compositions; but two of Cooke's other pupils, Pelham Humfrey (1647–74) and John Blow (1649–1708) – both much better composers than their teacher and only a few years older than Purcell – were to become primary influences.⁷

On Cooke's death in 1672, Humfrey took over as Master of the Children. Although he was to hold the position for a mere two years – he died on 14 July 1674⁸ – it is certain that his influence on Purcell had taken root much earlier. Humfrey had been something of a prodigy. He was taken on as a chorister in the Chapel Royal and at around seventeen years old was sent to France and Italy by Charles II to study foreign musical practices. After his return in 1667, 'an absolute Monsieur' according to Pepys, his music became a regular feature of Chapel Royal services, so Purcell must have been familiar with – indeed have sung in – a number of his anthems.⁹ Also, it is possible that Humfrey taught Purcell while Cooke was Master of the Children, for senior musicians other than the Master did instruct the boys from time to time. Purcell's interest in his music is attested by the presence of five of his verse anthems in an early autograph score-book (Fitzwilliam MS 88) which, it seems likely, was assembled by Purcell between 1677 and 1682.¹⁰

Blow was born just two years later than Humfrey, and like him had been one of the boys in the early years of the re-founded Chapel Royal. As he took over the role of Master of the Children from Humfrey on the latter's death in 1674, he in turn became Purcell's teacher, in which role he is remembered on his memorial in Westminster Abbey as 'Master of the famous Mr H. Purcell'.¹¹ In Fitzwilliam 88 he is better represented than anyone other than Purcell himself, there being no less than eleven anthems of various sorts. He was a prolific, imaginative and versatile composer, whose relationship with Purcell was to prove mutually beneficial in the same sort of way as the much more famous one between Haydn and Mozart.

There is evidence that Purcell was also taught by Christopher Gibbons

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(1615–76), son of the famous Orlando. Gibbons junior, who appears to have been well known to the Purcell family, was a composer, organist at both the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey, and court virginalist. It seems likely that he taught Purcell on those instruments;¹² but here too there is little firm evidence of influence on Purcell's compositional practice.

A rather older man, Matthew Locke (1621/2–77), was not on the staff of the Chapel Royal, but on 23 June 1660 had been appointed composer in the King's private music. He would have been known to the Purcells in that capacity; also as one of the composers for *The Siege of Rhodes*, which was first produced in 1656 with Henry Purcell senior as one of the singers, and is often described as the first English opera. But he seems also to have been a family friend: in the diary entry for 21 February 1660, Pepys mentions that he had spent time with 'Mr Lock and Pursell' singing a 'variety of brave Italian and Spanish songs' while, rather less reliably, the nineteenth-century historians Rimbault and Cummings claimed that the former owned a letter from Locke to the young Henry, inviting him to join Locke and other musicians from the court in a little domestic music making.¹³ That Locke was acquainted with the family is confirmed by young Henry himself, for in the second book of *Choice Ayres* (1679) he published what might be the first of his large recitative songs, *What Hope for Us Remains?* (Z. 472), 'On the death of his worthy friend Mr Matthew Locke'.

As far as musical style was concerned, post-Restoration England was something of a melting pot. Throughout Europe, the Italian style was generally regarded as a standard bearer for innovation, to the chagrin of those who supported French practice. While Purcell was to draw extensively on French models, both he and Blow were to show a more profound interest in Italian music, by copying pieces for their own study, by imitating distinctive Italian practices and, in Purcell's case at least, by declarations in print.

It might therefore seem contradictory that both composers were also deeply affected by the work of the old-style English polyphonists. Around 1680–2 Purcell copied into his Fitzwilliam autograph three works by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), three by William Byrd (1542/3–1623), one by Thomas Tallis (c. 1510–85) and one by William Mundy (c. 1529–c. 1591). All had been Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, and Purcell would have known their music, for their anthems and services were still in use there. Nevertheless, this interest at a time when his own compositional style was well developed and when he was working on his earliest successful Italianate pieces, suggests a complex musical personality.

Even Purcell's earliest surviving works show this natural complexity. *The Stairre Case Overture*, which was discovered a few years ago, minus its viola part, is a well-wrought piece unlikely to be later than the mid-1670s, and shows

the imitation of established practices (in this case they seem to be those of Locke and contemporary French composers) which one might expect from a young composer eager to learn and to prove himself. The title almost certainly comes from the ascending and descending scales of the first section, which might owe something to Locke's music for the 1674 production of *The Tempest*.¹⁴ To accompany a storm, Locke provided a Curtain Tune which begins 'soft', works up 'lowder by degrees' to rushing scales and concitato repetitions as the storm is at its height, and becomes 'soft and slow by degrees' as it passes. Then there is the First Music, the independent part writing and general style of which are similar to those of Purcell's overture (cf. Ex. 1 and Ex. 33).

Such textures and those of the second and third sections can be found in French music, which seems another likely influence on this and other early orchestral pieces. But French influences could also have been received through Humfrey, whose music displayed a French affinity in keeping with the court's tastes. The dance-like, binary form, top-line-dominated second section of Purcell's overture, is in the same style as that often used by Humfrey in his symphonies to anthems and odes, the 1672 birthday ode *When from His Throne* (BL Add. MS 33287) for example; and Humfrey in turn might have been influenced by works such as the overture to the Prologue of the 1657 ballet *L'Amour malade* by Lully (1632–87).

The Stairre Case Overture has a long-range cogency very different from Locke's striking but somewhat quirky music. Its line-driven texture is remarkably economical in motivic material and has broad harmonic paragraphs. In the second section, the top line consists mainly of repetitions of just a few motifs, counterpointed against just a few more distinctive motifs in the surviving lower parts. Such economy was to become a hall mark of Purcell's style in all genres.

The Stairre Case Overture and other early overtures might have been played by a small group, in private gatherings of the Purcell family and friends, or of the musicians of the royal establishment, or even at court. Indeed, if the portrait (of unknown provenance and whereabouts, but reproduced by Zimmerman) of a young man holding a tenor violin is in fact of Henry Purcell, it raises the prospect that he played the missing viola part himself.¹⁵

This overture is unusual for combining technical complexity with expressive directness. The latter quality at least seems to have been a prerequisite for any music designed for Charles II, who 'had an utter detestation of Fancys' and, apparently, of any other music to which he could not beat time.¹⁶ It, or pieces like it, must have made an impression, for while Westrup plausibly suggests that Purcell's youthful appointment as composer for the violin owed something to 'the working of influence', it is doubtful that the honour was based entirely on preferment.¹⁷

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Early years at court and home

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Ex. 1 Locke, *The Tempest*, First Music: bb. 1–8

The musical score consists of three staves: Vln I, Vln II, and Bc. The key signature is two flats (B-flat major). The time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into three systems. The first system contains measures 1-2, with a first ending bracket over measures 1-2. The second system contains measures 3-4, with dynamic markings of *soft* and *loud* in the violin parts. The third system contains measures 5-8, with measure numbers 6 and 7 indicated above the staves.

Despite the young Purcell's success in a Francophile court and the fact that he later put himself forward as a champion of foreign, specifically Italian practice, he reserved his best efforts, in these early years at least, for the intimate, somewhat insular world of English consort music. He produced the final flowering of a tradition which had proved remarkably persistent and immutable – even esoteric: not only did it last through the Civil War and the Restoration into Purcell's lifetime but, in his hands and those of his immediate forbears, it also continued to use the Renaissance-based genres from which it arose, long after most of these and their equivalents had fallen out of use in France and Italy.

In 1667, in the second edition of *A Compendium of Practical Music*, which Purcell admired, Christopher Simpson (c. 1605–69) had recommended that aspiring composers of instrumental music 'need not seek [the example of] outlandish authors ... no nation in my opinion being equal to the English in that way'.¹⁸ He tells us what types of piece a composer of instrumental music could

use: 'the chief and most excellent for art and contrivance are fancies of 6, 5, 4 and 3 parts, intended commonly for viols. In this sort of music, the composer, being not limited to words, doth employ all his art and invention'; the next type in importance is the pavan, and this is followed by the galliard, allemande, courante, sarabande, jig, and other 'things so common'.

It is almost certain that not all Purcell's consort music has survived; but even so, the dominance in his output of the fantasia and pavan, in contrast with Simpson's list, is striking. Also, he wrote at least two *In nomine*s, a type so conservative that Simpson did not include it (though this might have been because he regarded it as a type of fantasia – '*In nomine fantasia*' was a common title).

The *In nomine* uses *cantus firmus* technique, but despite this and the long tradition of *cantus firmus* pieces in English consort music, there are no workings of popular melody, such as Thomas Simpson's *Ricercar* on 'Bonny sweet Robin'¹⁹ – though Purcell was later to do this in his odes. Nor are there any division pieces for bass viol, even though these were produced in large quantities by Purcell's distinguished predecessors, Christopher Simpson and the great John Jenkins (1592–1678).²⁰

The narrowness of Purcell's choices is underlined when we consider the retrospections of his contemporary Roger North, who recalled that some forty or more years before Purcell was composing his consort music

it became usuall to compose for instruments in setts; that is, after a Fantasia, [came] an aiery lesson of two straines, and a tripla by way of Galliard, which was stately, Courant, or otherwise, not unsuitable to, or rather imitatory of, the dance. Instead of the Fantazia, they often used a very grave kind of ayre, which they called a 'Padoana', or Pavan; this had 3 straines, and each being twice played went off heavily, especially when a rich veine failed the master.²¹

The rich vein did not fail in Purcell's pavans or fantasias; and his concentration on these serious, heavy-weight genres suggests a young man who took himself and his place in the English musical tradition very seriously indeed. And why should he not? He may well have realised that with the deaths of Locke in 1677 and Jenkins in 1678 he had become that tradition's sole surviving significant representative.²² Certainly there is something idealistic about his interest, for by the late 1670s such music had little public appeal: back in 1667 Simpson had lamented of fantasias that 'This kind of music (the more is the pity) is now much neglected by reason of the scarcity of auditors that understand it, their ears being better acquainted and more delighted with light and airy music.'²³

Some sources of Purcell's earliest consort music could date from 1676 or earlier. Five pavans are known to have survived complete, four in three parts

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and one, which might be slightly later than the rest, in four. Like similar pieces by Locke and Jenkins, they were probably intended for two or three violins and continuo.

There are clear similarities between Purcell's Pavan in A minor (Z. 749) and the pavan in the C major second suite of Locke's *The Little Consort* (Ex. 34 and Ex. 2), especially the parallel movement of the upper parts and the general rhythmic character. Both share a conservative characteristic which North, writing in the 1690s, described as 'a foible ... the English Nation in their musick are comonly accused of, and that is, the movement is for the most part up and downe, and downe and up, and so jogg on in comon measure'.²⁴

This tendency towards stepwise movement is partly a result of consort music's descent from *stile antico*. But even by Locke's standards, Purcell's pavan shows conservative traits: in particular, its insistent chromaticism, dissonance and false relations show an affinity with some Jacobean consort music.

As Westrup says, while such things were a feature of the time, Purcell's grip on them was unusually strong in that he was able to make captivating detail serve the purpose of the composition as a whole.²⁵ In this respect in particular, he was soon to go on to much better things in the fantasias.

It is likely that his earliest surviving fantasias are the three in three parts, all of which have sources dating from the mid-1670s. They too show conservative traits, such as the use throughout of time signatures of either C or C – a good instance of North's 'jogg on in comon measure' and different from the practice of most of the later masters of English consort music such as Jenkins, whose fantasias included sections in triple time. This increasing range of contrast was partly a response to continental developments, as in ensemble sonatas by composers such as Legrenzi and Biber. But such a progressive attitude seems to have held no interest for Purcell: here and in other respects the three-part fantasias perhaps show the influence of Coprario (c. 1570/80–1626) and Christopher Gibbons. Consort music by both men can be seen in a manuscript which seems to have been in Purcell's possession.²⁶ Other possible influences are the distinguished three-part fantasias of Orlando Gibbons, and Locke's consort music, much of which was then up to thirty years old, and which shows a similar disposition of sections, plus the use of 'drag' to indicate slowing down.

Whatever debt Purcell might have had to any of these men, he here emerges as a strikingly individual voice of consistently strong character. It is often the case for characters strong in their youth, that misjudgement can be as forceful as success; but these fantasias reveal discipline, single-mindedness and ambition, qualities which were to stand the composer in good stead in his later compositional struggles and which, some twenty years after Purcell's death, were remembered by his older contemporary Thomas Tudway (c. 1650–1726),

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Henry Purcell

Ex. 2 Locke, *The Little Consort*, Pavan from Second Suite: bb. 1–5

who ‘knew him perfectly well’, and declared that ‘He had a most commendable ambition of exceeding everyone of his time.’²⁷

The three-part fantasias tend to take the pavans’ extreme economy in thematic material much further. In the first section of *Fantasia No. 1* (Z. 732), for example, almost every note is derived from the opening point, for even when literal repetition of the point declines, the changes are carefully derived from it.

Even more striking proof of Purcell’s inherent conservatism is to be found in the *Fantasia upon One Note* and the *In nomines* of six and seven parts (Z. 745–7). In 1720, Roger North wrote of the *In nomine* as if it were a dimly remembered antique; but even by the 1670s it was well out of date. North found the pieces he had encountered to be ‘a sort of harmonious murmur, rather than musick ... not unlike a confused singing of birds in a grove’, and, with a fond musing on Elysian days gone by, thought them probably suitable to ‘a time when people lived in tranquility and at ease’. But with rather more realism he noted that they were part of consort music’s long tradition of *cantus firmus* writing, and that even in that context

that which was styled ‘*In nomine*’ was yet more remarkable, for it was onely descanting upon the 8 notes that which the sillables (*In nomine Domini*) agreed. And of this kind I have seen whole volumes, of many parts, with the severall authors names (for honour) inscribed. And if the study, contrivance, and ingenuity of these compositions, to fill the harmony, carry on fuges, and intersperse discords, may pass in the account of skill, no other sort whatsoever may pretend to more. And it is some confirmation that in two or three ages last bygone the best private musick, as was esteemed, consisted of these.²⁸

North also criticises ‘this kind of musick’ for its lack of ‘variety or what is called air’, and regards it as a relic which by then had nothing to offer him or his contemporaries. But Purcell had no such reservations, and must have wished to show that in this ultimate test of skill he could match his most distinguished predecessors, including Jenkins, who wrote at least two.

Purcell’s pieces lie at the most conservative end of *In nomine* practice, in that they show little absorption of modern instrumental styles, unlike many pieces by earlier seventeenth-century composers such as Alfonso Ferrabosco II and John Ward. It seems likely that he was responding to the methods of composers such as Bull and Jenkins, both of whom produced examples which show affinities with the genre’s vocal origins. Like Bull’s five-part *In nomine* (*MB*, vol.

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Ex. 3 Locke, *The Consort of Four Parts*, Fantasia from Fifth Suite: first section

IX), Purcell's *In nomine à 6* opens with a point derived from the *cantus firmus*, while the final closes of the *Bull* and of Purcell's *In nomine à 7* are set up by repetitions over a dominant pedal on D of almost identical motifs which suggest closure.

More modern is Purcell's tendency to periodic organisation. The regular switching between G minor and D minor in the *In nomine à 7*, the point's stress on the first and second pulses of the bar and the focus towards cadence points are all reminders that these pieces are not regurgitations of Renaissance practice, but examples of true Baroque *stile antico*.

Purcell's activities in consort music culminated in the work done during the summer of 1680, when the four-part fantasias reached their final forms and were copied into BL Add. MS 30930 on the dates inscribed. Their extraordinary technical skills and their sure-footed balance of stylistic contrasts, encompassing severe *stile antico* and almost late-Baroque-style fugal subjects, suggest that Purcell would have admired comparable works by Jenkins, such as his six-part Fantasia No. 2.²⁹ The opening section of this remarkable piece uses an almost exact inversion of the subject, while the final section (bb. 73–92) is based on the augmented subject in both prime and inversion, with technical display superbly