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INTRODUCTION

In search of Purcell's character

CURTIS PRICE

Any study of Purcell will always be hampered by lack of information about the man himself. His curriculum vitae – genealogy, court appointments, marriage, dates of major compositions and so forth – is fairly well documented, but little is known about his relationship to his contemporaries, his character or what he thought about the other arts and sciences flourishing simultaneously in post-Restoration England. His biography is as rich in anecdote as it is poor in primary sources but, since the appearance of Westrup's Master Musicians book in 1937, which largely rejected unverifiable tradition, scholars have shied away from making inferences about Purcell's character from the music, or even from considering how his life circumstances may have affected his art. Not unrelated to the void at the centre of Purcell's personality is the apparent gap between the high esteem in which musicologists and performers hold his music and the paucity of works in the standard repertory. Only Dido's Lament, 'Nymphs and shepherds' and the Trumpet Voluntary (actually by Jeremiah Clarke) have entered the canon. Roger Norrington crystallized these related issues in a pair of questions: 'was Purcell a "musician's musician"? is that why he is not very popular today?'[1] One cannot answer the first without attempting to define Purcell's musical personality, and I believe that a more general appreciation of his music will not arrive until that personality is better fixed in the public imagination.

It may be possible, without creating yet another myth, to sketch Purcell's character by re-examining the testimony of actual acquaintances – Thomas Tudway, Henry Playford, Henry Hall, John Dryden, Jacob Talbot and especially Roger North – filling in the details with some of the more plausible anecdotes. It is curious that, from the many lamentations, odes and other tributes which appeared shortly after his death, no clear personality

1 In a talk given at the Purcell Experience, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 20 November 1993.

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emerges; quite the opposite: only a 'God-like Man' worshipped by the 'learn'd' in the art. Henry Hall was one of the few to offer an earthly comparison ('Our first reforming Music's *Richelieu*'), which time has rendered inapt. The image of a peerless yet characterless genius was projected throughout the eighteenth century by the poems printed at the beginning of the first volume of *Orpheus Britannicus*, one of the most widely distributed of all collections of English music.[2] The only story about Purcell which seems to have lodged in the public consciousness is that concerning the circumstances which supposedly led to his death. The tale has always been prefaced by a disclaimer, as in H. C. Colles's entry in the third edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1927), which is also censored: 'there is no need to attach any importance to the tradition reported by Hawkins, that the composer caught cold from being kept waiting for admittance into his house late at night'. In 1937, Westrup recounted more of the story: 'Purcell was a man of intemperate habits and given to late hours, that his wife, indignant at these excesses, refused to admit him after midnight, and he consequently caught a cold which brought on his death.'[3] Its unjustly criticized first purveyor, Sir John Hawkins, freely admitted that the 'tradition' was inconsistent with firmer evidence of a lingering death, but his purpose for including it in *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776) was a well-intentioned attempt to move away from the panegyric and give Purcell a human face. Since the original version is often misrepresented, it is worth quoting *in extenso*:

> It is said that [Purcell] used to keep late hours, and that his wife had given orders to his servants not to let him in after midnight: unfortunately he came home heated with wine from the tavern at an hour later than that prescribed him, and through the inclemency of the air contracted a disorder of which he died. If this be true, it reflects but little honour of Madam Purcell . . . and but ill agrees with those expressions of grief for her dear lamented husband, which she makes use of to Lady *Elizabeth* Howard in the dedication of the Orpheus Britannicus.[4]

Here one sees a jovial pub-crawler but also a hen-pecked husband, the 'God-like Man' brought low by a scold and a cold. Hawkins does himself less credit in recording uncritically a second-hand account of Purcell's reaction to the news of Stradella's murder. When informed that 'jealousy was the motive to it', Purcell lamented Stradella's fate and, 'in regard of his great merit as a

2 From which the quotations earlier in this paragraph are taken.
3 J. A. Westrup, *Purcell*, rev. edn by Nigel Fortune (London, 1980), p. 40.
4 Sir John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 1776 (rev. edn London, 1853), vol. II, 748.

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musician, said he could have forgiven him any injury in that kind; which, adds the relator [of the story], "those who remember how lovingly Mr. Purcell lived with his wife, or rather what a loving wife she proved to him, may understand without farther explication"'.[5] The sting in the tail – the implication that Purcell was an adulterer and his wife a hypocrite – needs to be considered in light of the 'death by cold' tradition.

As is suggested below, Purcell was hardly a shrinking violet, but neither was he as socially gregarious as Dryden nor as publicly grand as Wren. The likeliest reason the composer did not cut more of a figure round and about London was his sheer prolificacy: on average, he must have produced more than one page of full score every day of his working life, an astounding achievement, considering the generally high quality of his output. If Purcell's labours kept him chained to his desk and prevented much contact with the chroniclers of the age, one can nevertheless reconstruct a distinctive personality from the writings of those few who knew him, as Tudway did, 'perfectly well'. Purcell possessed tremendous self-confidence and was well aware of his talent. He could be somewhat testy and irritable, not only with colleagues and his immediate superiors but even, on one occasion, with Queen Mary herself.[6] He may have had a certain contempt for his public, which is perhaps surprising for a composer who wrote so many popular tunes. He was, as Robert Shay argues below, a musical conservative, very proud of his mastery of the *stile antico*. He was also intensely interested in the latest French and Italian music but never followed fashion for its own sake; rather, he was confident that he could produce better music than anyone, English or foreign.

There is, then, a contradiction at the heart of Purcell's musical personality which may account for his wonderful synthesis of the traditional modal counterpoint in which he was trained and the modern Bolognese tonal style which he tried to emulate. Hence his obeisance to 'the most fam'd Italian masters' in the foreword to the *Sonnata's of III Parts* (1683) and other later acknowledgements of having drawn inspiration from foreign musicians, in contrast to his pride at having mastered double counterpoint, which is hardly a prominent feature of contemporaneous French and Italian music.[7] Further evidence of the ambivalence which characterizes Purcell's musical style is offered by the dedication to the score of the semi-opera *Dioclesian* (1690), an encomium to French and Italian music. Signed by the composer, it was

5 Hawkins, *A General History*, vol. II, 653–4. I am grateful to Peter Holman for pointing out the relevance of the Stradella anecdote in this context.
6 See below, chap. 7, p. 159.
7 See, for instance, the Dance for the Followers of Night in *The Fairy Queen*, which Purcell headed '4 in 2', drawing attention to the fact that it is a double canon.

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actually written for him by Dryden.[8] The rough draft included a passage which would have insulted Purcell's forebears and teachers ('leave the hedge notes of our homely Ancestours'). This was cut from the published version, presumably at the composer's insistence, since Dryden was notoriously plain-spoken in his contempt of earlier English music. Leaving aside the conventional politeness which prefaces and dedicatory letters required, what did Purcell really think about foreign music? His fellow Chapel Royal chorister and later the Professor of Music at Cambridge, Thomas Tudway, came close to giving an answer. In his *History of Music* he wondered what Purcell would have made of the introduction of Italian operas on the English stage had he lived to see them: 'He would have been so far from despiseing them, that he woud never have ceas'd, till he had equall'd, if not outdone them.'[9]

To complete this character sketch one must turn to Roger North who, if he knew Purcell little better than did Tudway, is the only writer to hint at a darker, brooding side to the composer. In a discussion, only recently available in print,[10] of the initial reception of the semi-operas, North wrote that these works were not 'susteined by performance', that is, they were badly executed. Implying, in contradiction to almost all other contemporary witnesses, that the semi-operas met with mixed success, he records the composer's own reaction: 'Mr Purcell used to mark what did not take for the best musick, it being his constant observation that what took least, was really best, and his freinds would desire him to touch those passages by that caracter.' (I interpret this to mean that Purcell could tell his best music by the coolest reception, and his friends would ask him to play the passages in question on the harpsichord.) The person North describes had evidently suffered some disappointment; indeed, the younger composer John Eccles may have challenged Purcell's popularity in the theatre for a while in 1694.[11] Yet, more significantly, one sees here a proud man who did not trust his audience to recognize the full sophistication of his music, an audience which instead applauded the easy melodies and catchy dance rhythms while ignoring those passages which had cost him much more labour. What is remarkable about Purcell's development as a composer is that he never compromised his gift for counterpoint, never completely gave in to French 'airyness' or to addictive Italian figuration and sequences.

Of course, we do not really know whether Purcell, when friends gathered round the harpsichord, pointed proudly to the bed-rock of fugue, the rich

8 Discussed in detail in Curtis Price, *Henry Purcell and the London Stage* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 264–5.
9 Christopher Hogwood, 'Thomas Tudway's History of Music', in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Christopher Hogwood and Richard Luckett (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 44–5.
10 *Roger North's Cursory Notes of Musicke (c. 1698 – c. 1703): A Physical, Psychological and Critical Theory*, ed. Mary Chan and Jamie C. Kassler (Kensington, N.S.W., 1986), p. 229.
11 See Price, *Henry Purcell and the London Stage*, pp. 164–8.

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dissonance and beautifully detailed inner parts which are so much admired in his music today. But North certainly does imply that the composer felt the need to draw attention to qualities in his music that most listeners could not fully appreciate. Here is a true child of the age of the Royal Society, when the mathematical underpinning, the scientific rationale of art, architecture and literature were meant to be understood by the consumer. Dryden was similarly proud of the web of classical allusion which gave force to his political writing, as was Wren of the classical geometry embodied within St Paul's Cathedral. Purcell was no theorist, but he too relied upon 'classical' Renaissance procedures to give integrity to music which, at its very best, may have met with uncomprehending silence.

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1

Purcell's great autographs

ROBERT THOMPSON

Purcell's three great autograph scorebooks – Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum Music MS 88, British Library Add. MS 30,930 and British Library, Royal Music MS 20.h.8 – are amongst the most studied of all English musical sources, and it may seem presumptuous to suggest that very much of importance remains to be learned about them.[1] Nevertheless, little if anything has been published on the physical make-up of the volumes and their relationship with other manuscripts, or on Purcell's handwriting in relation to the manuscripts' paper types and structure.[2] The tercentenary of Purcell's death is as good a pretext as any to investigate how these aspects of the manuscripts contribute to our understanding of the nature and purpose of the musical texts they contain.

The basic physical features of the three books are set out in Table 1.1 (p. 21). Like all large English music manuscripts of the period they are made of heavy, high-quality paper from the Angoumois region of south-western France. Mere identification of watermark types reveals nothing that is not already apparent, but two further aspects of their paper and structure are much more interesting.[3] First, the two sources in the British Library belong to a group of contemporaneous manuscripts containing identical paper, most of which show some connection with court musicians (see Table 1.2); secondly, there are significant differences in structure between Add. MS 30,930 and the other two sources.

[1] See for example Nigel Fortune and Franklin B. Zimmerman, 'Purcell's Autographs', in *Henry Purcell (1659–1695): Essays on his Music*, ed. Imogen Holst (London, 1959), pp. 106–21.

[2] Discussions of Purcell's hand, valuable even when some of their conclusions are no longer tenable, appear in Fortune and Zimmerman, 'Purcell's Autographs'; Augustus Hughes-Hughes, 'Henry Purcell's Handwriting', *The Musical Times* 37 (1896), 81–3; and G. E. P. Arkwright, 'Purcell's Church Music', *The Musical Antiquary* 3 (1910), 63–72, 234–48.

[3] Virtually all paper used for music in England between 1660 and 1688 came from the Angoumois: see Robert Thompson, 'English Music Manuscripts and the Fine Paper Trade, 1648–1688', Ph.D. thesis, King's College London (1988), pp. 31–60.

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The five manuscripts listed in Table 1.2 are all wholly or partly made of paper with a pair of fleur-de-lis watermarks and corresponding countermarks comprising the Jesuit symbol 'IHS' and the initials of the papermaker Etienne Touzeau.[4] The different manuscripts display slight variations in the marks, but there are enough similarities in the precise relationship between the marks and the chain lines on the mould and an unusual alternation of 'fat' and 'thin' forms of the letter 'S' in the countermarks to allow one to determine that all the paper came from the same pair of moulds, showing the inevitable wear and tear to be expected over the seven months or so a mould lasted.[5] Judging from some slight distortion apparent in the watermarks, the paper of Add. MS 30,930 was made later than that of Oxford, Christ Church MS Mus 628, R.M. MS 20.h.8 and John Walter's book, now at Chichester, which is dated 1680.[6] The Blow autograph, Christ Church MS 628,[7] is probably the earliest of the five sources in Table 1.2, but the appearance of the same paper type in Harleian MS 1501, copied by Pietro Reggio in 1681, argues not only against a date much before 1680 for the Blow copy but also against the assumption that this paper type was in some special way linked to the court musical establishment. Of the great Purcell autographs, only Fitzwilliam MS 88, which seems for other reasons to be the earliest of the three volumes, consists of different paper with a 'bend' watermark and the

4 Marks of the same general type are illustrated in E. Heawood, *Watermarks, Mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Hilversum, 1950), nos. 1760, 1784–8, 1795–6. At this time the watermark was normally placed in the centre of the left-hand half of the oblong mould and any countermark in the corresponding position in the right-hand half. Paper makers always used two moulds at each vat, so that two similar but not identical watermark and countermark combinations can be found in even a small quantity of paper produced in the same operation. See Allan Stevenson, 'Watermarks Are Twins', *Studies in Bibliography* 4 (1951–2), 57–92. The Jesuits at Angoulême were said to make 'the finest paper the world had ever seen'; see W. E. J. Berg, *De réfugiés in de Nederlanden na der herroeping van het Edict van Nantes* (Amsterdam, 1845), p. 142, quoting *Hollandse Mercurius* (1672), p. 30. In 1673, Dericq Janssen leased a paper mill called 'l'Abbaye'; see C. M. Briquet, *Les Filigranes*, facsimile edn by Allan Stevenson (Amsterdam, 1968), vol. II, 701. Etienne Touzeau was working for Dericq Janssen at the St Michel mill by 1671: see G. Babinet de Rencogne, *Recueil de documents pour servir à l'histoire de commerce et de l'industrie en Angoumois, Bulletin de la société archéologique et historique de la Charente*, 5ième série, tome ii (Angoulême, 1880), 103–14.

5 There is no direct evidence of the life of a mould in the seventeenth century, but the eighteenth-century English paper maker James Whatman, who would have used the same methods as earlier craftsmen, stated that his moulds had to be replaced after about seven months; see T. Balston, *James Whatman, Father and Son* (London, 1957), pp. 60, 120.

6 Walter's autograph inscription, 'Jo: Walther His Book Anno Domino 1680', is in fact on a cutout pasted into the modern cover, along with another reading 'Io Walter Ano 1630', which certainly came from a different source. Thus, although Walter copied some of the music in the volume, there is no proof that he owned it in 1680. John Walter's significance as a copyist is shown in Bruce Wood, 'A Note on Two Cambridge Manuscripts and their Copyists', *Music & Letters* 56 (1975), 308–12.

7 Discussed in H. Watkins Shaw, 'The Autographs of John Blow (1649–1708)', *Music Review* 25 (1964), 85–95.

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countermark of the unidentified Angoumois craftsman 'RC'. R.M. MS 20.h.8 and the Fitzwilliam source are similar, however, in being so regularly constructed that their collation can be treated like that of a printed book whereas Add. MS 30,930 defies bibliographical description, its early history apparently differing so much from that of the other two manuscripts as to suggest that Purcell did not commence the three as parallel volumes devoted to different kinds of music. Instead, each appears to have a distinctive character, perhaps not merely reflecting a conscious division of repertory into different genres but also illustrating either a different stage in Purcell's fast-moving professional career or a particular aspect of his musical life.

One of the Etienne Touzeau books, R.M. MS 20.h.8, provides the best starting point for a survey of the three big autographs because it contains a sequence of welcome songs which can be precisely dated (see Table 1.3): if Purcell entered these works either before the performance or as a record shortly afterwards, then R.M. MS 20.h.8 offers an invaluable guide to the development of his handwriting between 1681 and 1689. Although Purcell had already composed a few anthems with strings and, indeed, a welcome song for September 1680,[8] his commencement of R.M. MS 20.h.8 appears to coincide with the time when he began to be regularly entrusted with the composition of these large-scale works, and the book may have been issued to him so he could make fair copies in full score. Apart from its repertory, there are other indications that R.M. MS 20.h.8 was used by Purcell in the execution of his duties at court and that he may not have regarded it, at least at first, as his personal property: it is the only one of the three great scorebooks not to have his name on the flyleaf in a more or less ostentatious style and in which he quite regularly handed over part of the copying to two or more assistants. Perhaps significantly, his interest in the score, reflected in the diminishing amount of music added to it and his increasing use of sometimes unreliable assistant copyists, decreased after he lost the posts of organist and composer in 1685.[9] The status of R.M. MS 20.h.8 as a court music book is confirmed by its close relationship with a significant group of fair-

[8] *Welcome, Vicegerent.* Early anthems with strings include *My beloved spake*, found in an early autograph copy in British Library Add. MS 30,932 fol. 87 and *Behold now praise the Lord*, Add. 30,932 fol. 121, whose handwriting suggests that it is a little earlier than the first vocal music copied in Add. MS 30,930.

[9] Franklin B. Zimmerman, *Henry Purcell, 1659–1695: His Life and Times*, rev. edn (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 129. The main subsidiary copyist of R.M. MS 20.h.8 was also responsible for a manuscript containing anthems by Purcell, Blow and Gibbons which in 1896 belonged to W. H. Cummings: see Hughes-Hughes, 'Henry Purcell's Handwriting', p. 81. This was probably no. 25 in Cummings's sale catalogue of 1917, which was claimed to be an autograph in spite of being dated 'Saec XVIII': it was sold to Quaritch for £27. See British Library, S.C. Sotheby 1240, p. 3.

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copy scores, all in the same principal hand and containing what is undoubtedly a court repertory dating from the mid-1680s: a collection of Purcell anthems with strings in Royal College of Music MS 2011, originally in two volumes,[10] and British Library Add. MS 33,287, also once in two volumes, the first containing songs with instruments by Purcell, Blow and Turner and the second court odes and welcome songs by the same composers with the addition of Humfrey. For many of Purcell's works Add. MS 33,287 is the only source besides R.M. MS 20.h.8, from which they were often clearly copied.

The earliest dated work in R.M. MS 20.h.8 is the welcome song *Swifter Isis, swifter flow*, probably performed on the King's return by river from Windsor in late August 1681. The manuscript is neat and careful: the description 'fair copy' would seem to be fully merited, and the conclusion that this score is a formal record rather than an item of performing material is superficially attractive. But in several ways this conclusion is inadequate. For the last chorus of *Swifter Isis* Purcell provided only an outline score, suitable for rehearsing, directing or playing the harpsichord but hardly what is wanted in a formal record copy, and there are other places where messy or missing passages have not been corrected, as they easily could have been, with paste-overs.[11] The copyist of Add. MS 33,287, who only a few years later was to use the Purcell autograph as his main or only source, could not supply the missing bars. These problems, together with one or two details of instrumentation the later copyist apparently added from memory,[12] should serve as warnings against equating 'autograph' with 'definitive text', if indeed the concept of a definitive text is one that would have been recognized in 1681. At the same time the problems strengthen the autograph's claim to be regarded as a contemporary score serving some immediate practical purpose, rather than a retrospective fair copy, and therefore add to, rather than detract from, its authority. This evidence in turn has a bearing on the history of the other two great autographs.

10 Hughes-Hughes, 'Henry Purcell's Handwriting', p. 81. Royal College of Music MS 2011 is similar in style and quality to Add. MS 33, 287 and two subsidiary hands are common to both sources. The same principal copyist was responsible for British Library R.M. MS 24.e.5, a score of Purcell's *Raise, raise the voice*: a page of R.M. 24.e.5 is reproduced in *The Works of Henry Purcell*, vol. X, rev. Bruce Wood (London and Sevenoaks, 1990), xv.

11 What the composer actually wrote in this final chorus is shown clearly in *The Works of Henry Purcell*, vol. XV, ed. R. Vaughan Williams (London, 1905), 47–51. Elsewhere in R.M. MS 20.h.8 an extremely messy erasure on fol. 235v (inverted) makes it impossible to copy four bars of the treble voice part on fol. 235; there are also ugly and inconclusive alterations at the end of the symphony of the incomplete 'We reap all the pleasures', fol. 224 (inverted).

12 In *Swifter Isis* Add. MS 33,287 specifies flutes as the obbligato instruments for the bass solo 'Land him safely on her shore' and 'Oboe & 3rd treble' for what appears in the autograph simply as a third treble part in the ritornello before 'Welcome, dread Sir, to town'.

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Two features of Purcell's text hand change markedly during his composing career. Both Arkwright and Hughes-Hughes noted Purcell's use of a kind of reversed 'e' in what appeared to be early autographs such as Fitzwilliam MS 88 and the version of the funeral sentences in Add. MS 30,931.[13] This type of 'e' is entirely absent from both R.M. MS 20.h.8 and Add. MS 30,930, so we may conclude that by mid-1680 Purcell had abandoned it in favour of a more modern form. Another distinctive feature, a reversed 'r', is much in evidence in both of these manuscripts: a more modern form creeps in alongside the old in *Fly, bold rebellion* of 1683, but only after the 1684 welcome song *From those serene and rapturous joys* does this kind of 'r' become exclusive. Especially when other forms of evidence can be found to support them, these features of handwriting provide a useful insight into the history of Fitzwilliam MS 88 and Add. MS 30,930. (For the early 'e' and 'r', see ill. 2.3, p. 46 below.)

Add MS 30,930 appears to be the most personal of Purcell's early score-books, its earlier and principal contents consisting of devotional songs (some in Latin), seven sonatas and the fantazias. In contrast to the restrained and anonymous heading of R.M. MS 20.h.8, the inscription 'The Work's of Hen: Purcell Anno Dom. 1680' takes up nearly half a page; there is no professional reticence here. The manuscript's most striking physical feature is the evident disorder of its folios, with blank ruled leaves interrupting what are in fact complete pieces. The absence of any original pagination or quire numbering must have contributed to this problem, which dates from the nineteenth century: seventeenth- and eighteenth-century copyists appear to have had no difficulties with the now disordered vocal music section.[14] In 1849, Joseph Warren described the entire book in some detail without mentioning any misplaced blank pages.[15]

The British Library has no record of the work carried out when the manuscript was last re-bound in 1895, but a number of features enable one to establish the present collation with reasonable certainty and to make an informed guess as to its earlier arrangement.[16] In many places the stitches are

[13] Arkwright, 'Purcell's Church Music', pp. 241–3; Hughes-Hughes, 'Henry Purcell's Handwriting', pp. 82–3.

[14] Manuscripts demonstrably copied from Add. MS 30,930 include Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Mus.c.28 (discussed below) and Tenbury MS 1175 (housed at the Bodleian Library), which bears such inscriptions as 'Transcribed from the Original Score 1680 in the handwriting of the Author' (p. 242). Royal College of Music MS 517, in the hand of E. T. Warren Horne, might have been copied from either the autograph or Tenbury 1175, both of which belonged to him.

[15] William Boyce, *Cathedral Music*, ed. Joseph Warren (London, 1849), vol. II, 18.

[16] I am grateful to Mr Arthur Searle, Curator of Music Manuscripts at the British Library, for providing a great deal of information about the history of the manuscript after it came into the British Museum's possession in 1878. The current foliation apparently dates from September of that year when, according to a note on fol. 72v, there were 'ii + 72 folios', the present number of copied folios.

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