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HENRY PURCELL'S SOLO SONGS (1685-1695): PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

Presented by

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR PURCELL'S STYLE

Introduction

> Not mood in him nor meaning, proud fire or
> sacred fear,
> Or love or pity or all that sweet notes not
> his might nursle;
> It is the forgéd feature finds me; it is the
> rehearsal
> Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on,
> so throngs the ear.[1]

Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sonnet, "Henry Purcell," expresses his admiration for the composer, but more than that, in this second quatrain, he defines the qualities--the craftmanship ("the forgéd feature") which always bore his own unique stamp (his "abrupt self")--that caused Purcell's contemporaries to dub him "Orpheus Britannicus."

> The Author's extraordinary Tallent in all sorts of Music, is sufficiently known; but he was particularly admir'd for his Vocal, having a peculiar Genius to express the Energy of English Words, whereby he mov'd the Passions as well as caus'd Admiration in all his Auditors.[2]

In the preface to King Arthur, Dryden makes the following remark:

[1] Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (3rd. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 84-85.

[2] John Playford, "Preface" to Orpheus Britannicus (2nd. ed.; London: William Pearson, 1706), Vol. I.

> There is nothing better, than what I intended, but the Musick; which has since arriv'd to a greater Perfection in England, than ever formerly especially passing through the Artful hands of Mr. Purcel, who has Compos'd it with so great a Genius, that he has nothing to fear but an ignorant, ill-judging Audience.[3]

Although Purcell's "Genius" was extolled by his contemporaries and he enjoyed some degree of success during his lifetime, one hears very little of his music on the present day concert stage. My feeling is that the lack of understanding of Purcell's solo songs has created in turn misconceptions in the performance of this music. I intend in this paper to examine and analyze some of Purcell's solo songs with continuo which are not a part of any dramatic work. When his solo songs are considered in his total output they represent a large percentage. Westrup lists 107 solo songs, and this of course does not include any solos written for operas, masques or any of the welcome songs or odes. To my knowledge, no one has examined these songs from a musical and poetic point of view with any systematic approach to analytical techniques. I will, through analysis of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic elements, attempt to demonstrate the levels of dramatic nuance which developed

[3]John Dryden, Preface to King Arthur, Revised Version; as quoted by Jack A. Westrup, Purcell (London: J.M. Dent, 1937), p. 89.

in Purcell's later years. This study will focus on the songs written in the last ten years of his life which were included in the Third Edition of Orpheus Britannicus. Some obvious comparisons will necessarily be made to his earlier style, but I will deal primarily with the songs dating from 1685-1695.

One can gain important insights into the social and musical atmosphere in which Purcell worked through the important diarists of the period--Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn,who both give important information on the seventeenth-century musical scene. Roger North in the Musical Grammarian and Charles Burney offer interesting contemporary accounts of the musical life in England in the late seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century the scholarship of John Fuller-Maitland, John Hawkins, A. Hughes-Hughes, add still more to the understanding of this "Orpheus Britannicus." There are many accounts of Purcell's ability to set the English language to music, but not until the twentieth century with the work particularly of Holland, Zimmerman, Westrup, Arkwright, and Holst (to mention a few), do we begin to get a clearer picture and better overall view of Purcell's contribution to England's musical history.[4]

[4]For full titles of books to which I have referred, see bibliography.

In discussing the historic context out of which Purcell's music emerged, one twentieth-century scholar, Henry Davey, suggests, "It was Charles II who killed the older English School, vocal and instrumental alike, and who finally killed the pride of the English in their music."[5] Dr. Burney had earlier made the same pronouncement against Charles II's taste, saying, "The passion of this prince for French Music changed the national taste."[6] A.K. Holland alone suggests that perhaps Charles' influence here has been somewhat overrated.[7]

Charles II was certainly fond of music and was responsible for bringing many foreign musicians to his court. He brought Thomas Baltzar, the virtuoso violin player from Lübeck, to be a part of the Private Musick, the court musicians, and of course did have his "band of violins," obviously in an attempt to duplicate Louis' Violons du Roi. Holland calls Charles II the "first Dilettante of his age."[8] His efforts appear to be an

[5]Henry Davey, History of English Music (2nd. ed.; London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1921); as quoted by A.K. Holland, Henry Purcell (London: G. Bell, 1932), p. 35, note 1.

[6]Charles Burney, A General History of Music (London: 1789); as quoted by A.K. Holland, p. 35, note 1.

[7]Holland, Op. cit., p. 13.

[8]Ibid., p. 36.

attempt to create at his court a musical atmosphere of which he approved rather than to destroy the English musical scene. The very fact that Baltzar was there would necessarily have had an effect on the other players in the "band." For our purposes, it suffices to say that under Charles II's reign the musical scene was active and creative, even if it did change the directions of English music.

Another important factor which affected the musical scene was the beginning of public concerts after the Restoration. John Banister and Thomas Britton both contributed much in this respect. The series that Thomas Britton began lasted on into Handel's time, Handel himself performing on these concerts. When the theaters were opened again, the operas and masques which had been "underground" for so long took their place once again. So it is clear that the musical scene in which Purcell was learning and growing was a vigorous one. Composers like Blow, Wise, Humfrey, Tudway, Turner, Aldrich, Creyghton, Clarke, Golding, and Cooke, to mention a few, were all men of some talent. A look at the anthems and solo songs of some of these men reveal many of the same devices used by Purcell, though certainly with varying degrees of success. To be sure, some characteristic devices of the period became musical clichés, but it was Purcell's

unique and artistic way of handling conventional devices that made him great. It is not that he was necessarily innovative, but that he was a "man of his times" who, like Bach perhaps, was able to absorb and transform everything with which he came into contact.

We know from contemporary accounts that solo singing was very popular during the reigns of James I, Charles I, and Charles II; so the impetus for writing for the solo voice was there. It was obviously not a new idiom for the composer, but with the advent of public concerts and dramatic stage works, the time was ripe for the development of a particularly dramatic solo song.

Poetic Material

In a discussion of solo music for the voice a necessary consideration must be the text. The poetry of the Elizabethan Age established the lyric song in English literature. The search for free expression after the Middle Ages led Shakespeare, Campion, Spenser, Donne, Jonson and others into an art form that perhaps has not been equalled in English literature. Taine calls this time "the period of a Pagan Renaissance."[9] There was a spontaneity and an ease about the poetry that

[9]H.A. Taine, History of English Literature. Tr. H. Van Laun (New York: F. Ungar Publ. Co., 1965), vol. III, p. 11.

continued until the rise of Puritanism. Love was the first subject of the Elizabethans and remained so throughout the period. The joy of this new period in England was soon over and the weighty undercurrent of Puritanism began to make itself felt early in the seventeenth century. "The poetry becomes more subjective, more reflective, and more weighted with conscious meaning."[10] One begins to find odes and elegies as popular forms. Carpenter suggests that the sonnet was the linking form of the two stylistic periods.[11] Lyric love remains as a subject but grows more intense, while other subjects begin to enter the poetry--triumphs and tears, dirges, death, and sleep. The Puritan reaction sobered poetry and brought the "lyric-song" period to an end.

The poetry of the Restoration period offers no significant changes. Some of the transitional poets are Waller, Cowley, Denham, and Davenant; the chief lyric poets of the period being Dryden, Dorset, Sedley, and Rochester. Aside from Dryden's odes, the style and form shows a predominance of the rhymed couplet while descriptive and satiric verse took the place of the lyric poem. Toward the end of the seventeenth century,

[10]Westrup, Op. cit., p. 182.

[11]F.I. Carpenter, English Lyric Poetry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 92.

there was an attempt to break away from the strict poetic forms and move towards a freer style as evidenced in some of Cowley's or Dryden's "free" odes. But order, discipline, and the heroic couplet would not really be overthrown for another century. As one critic describes the Restoration poetry: "It appeals to 'the town', and not to the nation, and 'wit', regulated by judgment, rather than by imagination and fancy, becomes the measure of literary performance."[12] According to other critics of this period in England's literary history the great majority of poets were content to use the standard forms that were in existence, the most popular being the rhymed couplets in iambic and trochaic feet. But whatever the limits of Restoration poetry, it was not unconcerned with musical values.

The subjects for late seventeenth-century poetry were frequently part of a pastoral tradition dating back to the Renaissance when an attempt was made to create songs in the style and spirit of the ancient Greeks.[13] Nymphs and shepherds frolic freely through the entire seventeenth century in prose and poetry. The wounded

[12]J.C. Bicknell, "Interdependence of Word and Tone In the Dramatic Music of Henry Purcell" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Stanford, 1957), p. 83.

[13]Holland, Op. cit., p. 79.

lover (usually male) tells of his sorrow and unrequited love, and death (one of Purcell's favorite themes) is both welcomed and feared. This all followed in the wake of humanism, and a new subjective view of life and love was found in all the literature of this period.

Since spectacle became an important element in seventeenth-century England's literary and musical endeavors, the poet frequently had to think of his lyrics being "set" to music. In his book on Purcell, Holland says, "It is doubtful if in any other period English poets have made so serious an effort to write words for music."[14] Certainly there is no need to belabour the point that the importance of text was not a new idea to the late seventeenth-century musician. From the time of the Florentines, the madrigalists and the solo lute songs of the sixteenth century one finds displayed the same concern for the text, although couched in different harmonic and melodic terms.

We can accept as truth accounts of Pepys and Evelyn that this was a violent time, a period of passion and brutality, of loose morals, since all of that was reflected in the poetry of the time; it was, however, sometimes disguised in an extremely sophisticated language.

[14] Ibid., p. 74.

One finds in one of Purcell's songs:

> In vain we dissemble, in vain we do try,
> To stifle our flame and check our desire, . . .

But as Westrup suggests, " . . . there was really very little dissembling, and desires were as often fulfilled as checked."[15] Purcell entitled another song "Love is Now Become a Trade"; so all was not "languid-lost love."

J.C. Bicknell, in her dissertation, suggests that the most common meter in Purcell's texts is iambic (∪/).[16] That is not very surprising when one realizes that the most common meter of the whole period was iambic, the meter most poets of the seventeenth century preferred. Purcell consistently used poems of his contemporaries, the diction of which is usually natural and plain. His catches, of course, reveal an earthy, unsophisticated style of poetry, as in such songs as "Down, Down with Bacchus," "Drink on till night be spent," "An ape, a lion, a fox and an ass," or "Once, twice, thrice I Julia tried." A more formal and dignified style is apparent in songs like, "If Music be the Food of Love," or his Elegy on the death of Matthew Locke (1679), "What Hope for us Remains Now He is Gone?" As one would expect

[15]Westrup, Op. cit., p. 183.

[16]Bicknell, Op. cit., p. 83.

from any great composer, he is not limited to one style or one kind of text.

It is important to understand that Purcell was a composer very much of his own time and the limitations of his songs have to do more with the poetry than the music. The pastoral tradition, which was still very much present in the literature of the seventeenth century, is difficult for a twentieth-century performer or audience to approach and may negate what the music can offer. Purcell's imagination and creative genius as a melodist usually brought life to whatever text was there. This is not to suggest that Purcell is always successful in setting a very mediocre poem, and he did set many of this variety. But somewhere in all of them one finds that "forged feature."

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS OF PURCELL'S STYLE

Purcell was indeed a man of his times. He was schooled in the best tradition of the period and was exposed, in his position at the Chapel Royal, to some of the best music of the earlier seventeenth century. He never ventured far from his native England, but through his association with the foreign musicians brought to the court he became aware of the Italian and French styles of the time. His declamation is Italian in its stylistic basis and his instrumental style is based on the music of the Italians, but from the French he took the "air" and the use of the chorus. Although the foreign influence on Purcell's music seems apparent, Dryden said this of his colleague:

> What has been wanting on my part has been abundantly supplied by the Excellent Composition of Mr. Purcell; in whose Person we have at length found an Englishman, equal with the best abroad.[1]

[1]Kjell Bloch Sandved, ed., The World of Music: an Illustrated Encyclopedia (New York: Abradale Press, 1963), p. 1098.

It was perhaps Purcell's universality which makes him the great composer he was, for as Ernest Walker says, "Purcell touched, as no one else did, the music of his age at every point, and has left great works in every department."[2] While many generalizations about Purcell's compositional techniques have been made, critics have not dealt specifically with any particular grouping of songs to determine if there are patterns one can designate as being peculiar to Purcell and not just period devices. To address this particular problem I have chosen nine songs from the last ten years of Purcell's life to examine in order to determine whether or not one can isolate certain qualities which make Purcell's writing for the solo voice unique. My own conclusion is that although Purcell obviously was indebted to the conventional devices of the seventeenth century, it was his innovative combinations of these stylistic conventions which made him so distinctive. Eric Blom has recently asserted:

> To call him the greatest composer of the second half of the seventeenth century would be ridiculously obvious. . . . To speak of him as almost the only great composer of that age is scarcely an exaggeration. . . . We have only to

[2]Ernest Walker, A History of Music in England, (3rd. ed.; enlarged by J.A. Westrup; Oxford: 1952), p. 186.

> survey musical Europe from 1650 to 1700 to find that at any rate he stands isolated among the great as a master of all-around versatility.[3]

So it would seem that our task is to try to be more specific in suggesting certain qualities of the master of "versatility" that served his creative genius so well.

The compositional devices found in Purcell's solo songs are typical of the period, but seldom sound like clichés due to his originality in combining the various elements of style. We find Baroque "word-painting" in the solo songs, for example, but it is not standardized or predictable. In "Love Arms Himself" (1685) the word "alas" is repeated four times in three measures and always on a downward skip of a fifth, an interval used quite often by Purcell's contemporaries to show pain or grief. However, for the repeated lament, "in vain, in vain," in the song, "On the Brow of Richmond Hill," Purcell effects a subtle variation by using the intervals of a third followed by the conventional fifth. Later in the same song he combines a third and a sixth on the words, "cruel, cruel." He thus retains the conventional downward movement typical of word-painting in his day, but changes the intervals to achieve fresh dramatic effects.

[3]As quoted by Sandved, The World of Music, p. 1099.

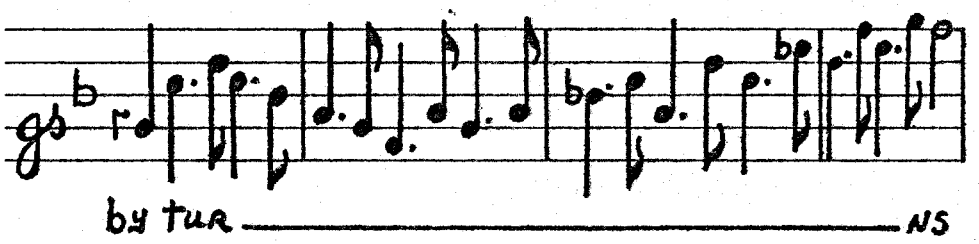
Although Guy Marco is primarily concerned with Purcell's anthems in his article, "The Variety in Purcell's Word-Painting," surely his comments apply to Purcell's solo songs: "In portraying human emotional states Purcell displays many facets of his genius . . . Purcell's use of realistic suggestion was far more subtle than is generally supposed."[4] In the solo songs certain stock words are not always set in the same way and emotions are expressed in more subtle ways than by some of Purcell's contemporaries.

The rhythmic devices Purcell used were perhaps not as unusual as was the combination of the rhythmic and melodic elements, but there are a few rhythmic patterns that help give Purcell's solo songs their dramatic impetus. Again anyone examining one of Purcell's songs must be warned that they look one way in manuscript but sound another in performance; for as Arkwright says, "No composer gains more by being performed."[5] The song "I Lov'd Fair Celia," dated 1694, is primarily made up of the rhythmic pattern,  broken with half notes. The basic rhythmic pattern lends itself to melodic "painting" of the text. For example, one phrase in

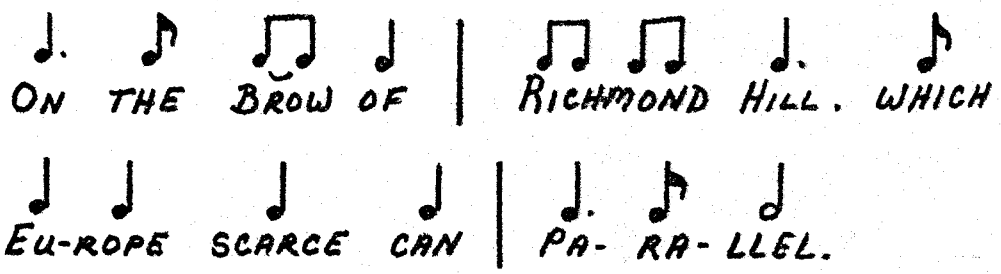
[4]Guy A. Marco, "The Variety in Purcell's Word-Painting," Music Review, Feb. 1957, p. 3.

[5]E.P. Arkwright, "A Note on Purcell's Music," Music and Letters, II (1921), p. 151.

particular on the word "turns" is a wonderful use of rhythmic and melodic elements to subtly suggest a "turn."

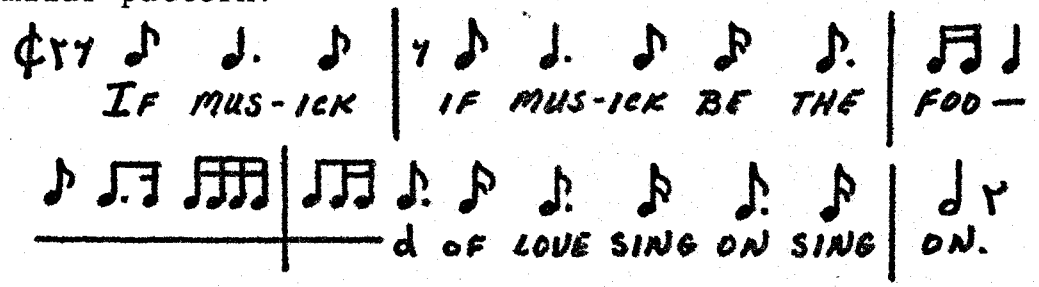


Purcell often begins his songs on a weak beat. Of the nine songs that I am discussing, six of them start on a weak beat of the measure and only three of them have any introduction; the other six begin with a chord or perhaps with a chord being given for pitch and the voice starts on the down beat. Perhaps one of the most important rhythmic elements in Purcell's solo songs is his ability to express the character of the song in the first few measures by the rhythmic gesture employed. "On the Brow of Richmond Hill" begins on a strong down beat with the following pattern:

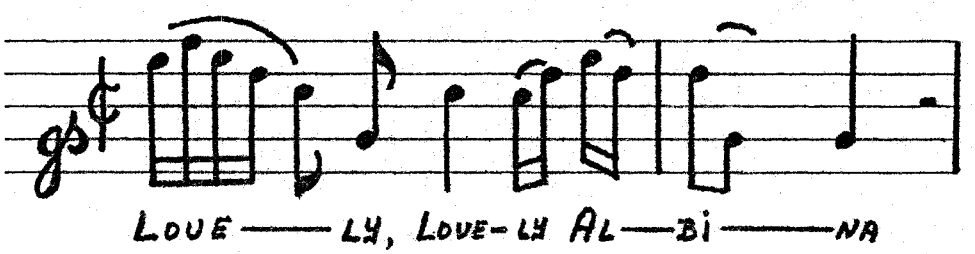


The rhythmic pattern alone is enough to suggest the heroic color of the text, but Purcell then couples that with an appeggiated melodic line which adds another

dimension of strength. In a song such as the third setting of "If Music be the Food of Love" we find a similar pattern:



Here, however, this rhythm coupled with an extremely melismatic melodic line creates a more melancholy mood than does the other song. In contrast, Purcell might also employ a melismatic figure for the opening sequence with dramatic effect. In "Lovely, Lovely Albina," "the last song the Author Sett before his Sickness,"[6] he sets the word "Lovely" on a sixteenth note pattern as follows:

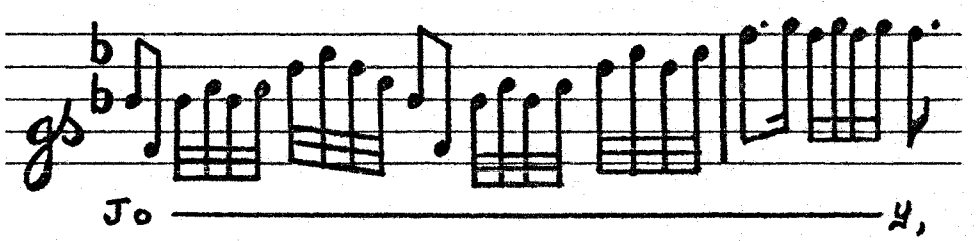


Purcell has used a melismatic style in both of these final love songs which he composed, but the character of the two songs is very different, and is established primarily, I feel, by the rhythmic device which opens

[6]Henry Purcell, Orpheus Britannicus, (Vols. I and II), 3rd. ed.; London: William Pearson, 1711).

each song. The approach in "Lovely Albina" is not common in Purcell's songs but certainly is effective in creating an air of ecstacy.

Of course, one finds the rhythmic patterns usual in songs of this period, such as a melismatic phrase for words like "flow"; the dotted eight-sixteenth pattern for words such as "rage" appears but not quite so frequently in these last songs. The word "joy" in "If Music be the Food of Love" is set to a melismatic figure on a rising melodic line as follows:



Such a line perhaps on the score looks much like any other song of the period, but when performed with the freedom suggested by the rhythm and the turn of the phrase, it is sheer "joy" indeed.

All the critics who have written on Purcell invariably say that his use of certain harmonic devices is very startling. Lewis Anthony in his article "The Language of Purcell: National Idiom or Local Dialect?" says,

> Purcell tends to turn away from the cadence that is too easy and predictable, that has the superficial grace of the courtly bow--and is just about as meaningful. Purcell's harmony never wears the smug smile of complacency; at its smoothest it is never empty, and when the giant nods--as all giants do from time to time--he is never pretending to be awake.[7]

Perhaps a little poetic, this passage does manage to sum up the essence of Purcell's harmonic technique. The "startling progressions" referred to by many critics are more commonly found in the earlier songs than the last ones with which I am concerned in this paper. Purcell himself says of his own style in the dedication to Dioclesian:

> Musick is but in its nonage; a forward child, which gives hope of what it may be hereafter in England, when the masters of it shall find more encouragement. 'Tis now learning Italian, which is its best master, and a little of the French air to give it somewhat more of gayety and fashion. Thus, being further from the sun, we are of later growth than our neighbor countries, and must be content to shake off our barbarity by degrees.[8]

Purcell's desire to "shake off our barbarity" would

[7]Lewis Anthony, "The Language of Purcell: National Idiom or Local Dialect?" (An inaugural lecture delivered at University of Hull, 1968), p. 6.

[8]Henry Purcell, Preface to "Dioclesian," as quoted in Westrup, Purcell, p. 86. (Note that Dryden wrote the dedication.)

seem to be the aesthetic reasoning behind his entire concept of style, particularly his harmonic structure. The structural combination of a tense chromaticism thrown into relief by a section of harmonic repose is as sophisticated as any found in music anywhere. For example in the third measure of "If Music be the Food of Love," the bass line moves in a chromatic ground below a very fluid melodic line, creating a tension that is resolved finally on a solid G major chord at the cadence. This stylistic device is found in most of the last songs to some degree.

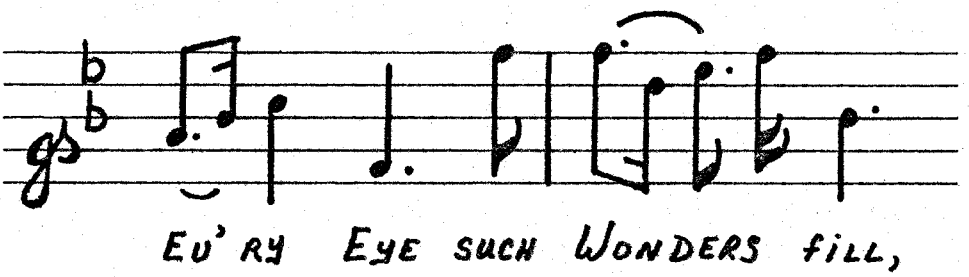
The harmonic and rhythmic devices used by Purcell point up and enhance the melodic line, which cannot be fully discussed or analyzed without considering the others. Another important aspect of his melodic invention is his use of intervals. One of the clichés of Purcell criticism is that his melodies are "angular" and employ "sudden leaps." I found more "angularity" and "sudden leaps" in the early songs than I did in these later ones. To make this more definite I counted the regularity and frequency of melodic intervals in the nine songs. In determining the frequency of certain intervals, I only included the measures in which the voice was involved and the intervals between phrases. I did not distinguish between major and minor intervals. In a total of 512 measures the following frequency of

intervals appeared:

thirds	302
fourths	187
fifths	103
sixths	35
sevenths	6
octaves	17

I feel these relationships are rather important particularly since Purcell's genius as a melodist is so often lauded. Certainly any conclusions one might draw from these figures is not all inclusive nor necessarily the only way of looking at the results, but it would appear that Purcell's melodic style becomes less disjunct toward the end of his career. The higher frequency of thirds would suggest a move toward more tonal music while the use of the fourth is almost always in a melodic pattern that sounds very much like a dominant-tonic progression. The fifth is more often than not used in a downward movement in typical Purcellian word-painting, on words such as "grief," "alas," "in pain" or other similar sentiments, while the majority of the thirty-five sixths are used to begin a new phrase. Purcell uses the sixth and the octave in much the same way in these nine songs. There are instances in which he uses the octave to get into a higher range for dramatic purposes. For example

in the song "On the Brow of Richmond Hill," on the phrase "every Eye such Wonders fill," the melodic line is designed so:



The question arises whether one is ever to know precisely what a composer means to convey, by what we see on the score. Some judgments can be made, however, and it would seem to be very unlike Purcell to place a word like "Wonders" on the lower octave. The octave leap here, I think, is made simply for dramatic effect. Peter Pears states in his essay that "when the text is explicit Purcell is at his best."[9] Of the six sevenths used, two are in a repeat of the same phrase on the word "melting." Three of the other four all move upward from an accidental; e-sharp to d, e-flat to d, and f-sharp to e. The fourth one is from d to c in a phrase change.

The tessitura of Purcell's songs demands some attention here, although that will be discussed more fully in the chapter on interpretation. It suffices

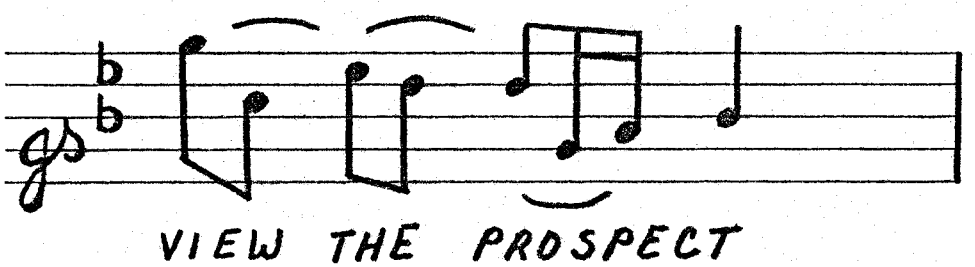
[9]Peter Pears, "Homage to the British Orpheus," Henry Purcell: Essays on His Music, Imogen Holst, ed., (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 12.

to say that the nine songs I am discussing have similar tessiture and that for the most part they stay in the upper notes of the staff, most of the notes falling in the range between third line b and g above the staff.

The keys of the individual songs I do not feel are too significant although there is a dominance of the minor; six are in minor keys and three major. Purcell does not do what might be expected in his choice of keys for all the songs. The texts themselves seem to suggest other possibilities, but Purcell often will use a minor key for joy and his major keys will at times create an atmosphere of sadness. For example a song such as "What Can We Poor Females Do?", which is so obviously "tongue in cheek," Purcell sets in a minor key and again in "What a Sad Fate is Mine," with its satirical sexual overtones, we find the parody heightened by a-minor again. "If Music be the Food of Love" is in g-minor but sounds quite joyous. The last song, "Lovely Albina," is in C-major, but has a sad melancholy sound because of its sensuous melodic line.

Word accents in Purcell's music in the later period is a difficult problem to deal with primarily because of the melismatic melodic line. There is much in print about Purcell's ability to set the English language, so this point need not be labored, but a few specific

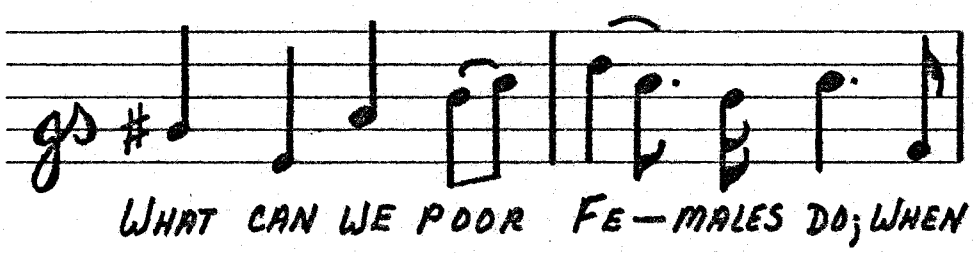
examples would serve well here. I mentioned earlier the characteristic rhythmic device which Purcell used at the beginning of his songs, i.e. beginning on a weak beat or a syncopated pattern. In "Love Arms Himself," he begins on the second beat but gives "Love" a full quarter note, following it with sixteenth notes on the word "arms." Here he uses length of note rather than accent to make his point. There is one measure where his accents break down and require that the singer change the rhythmic values to make the word shift less awkward. As I have stated before, Purcell's music looks different on paper than it sounds in performance and this is a good case in point. The singer must stretch the second beat of the measure to make it more musical. In the song "On the Brow of Richmond Hill," the same kind of thing happens in the seventh measure of the song; for example:



The stressed syllable of "prospect" is placed on the stronger beat but the voice drops from a "d" to a "g" and the performer must stress the "d" a bit longer and

be certain the vowel sound continues through the sixteenth notes or too much stress will be placed on the second syllable of "prospect." One of the songs that appears to have the most perfect word stress is "Corinna is Divinely Fair," dated 1692, which is a wonderful combination of syllabic and melismatic word setting.

Certainly there are some stresses that have to be left to the performer's musicianship, but for the most part the textual accents in Purcell's songs are without fault. In "What Can We Poor Females Do?" the second syllable of "females" should be put on the first of the sixteenth notes as follows:



This is one area of his craftmanship in which Purcell excels and one of the qualities that make his solo literature so dramatic and effective.

The important thing for the performer to remember when preparing these solo songs of Purcell is that the spontaneity of the moment is very important. The word stress, the beautiful melody, the rhythm, or the unusual harmonic stresses do not mean anything when left

isolated on the printed score, but it all must be brought to life by an imaginative and exciting performance.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION IN PERFORMANCE

> Style is not some vague aesthetic mystery. Style is mostly a matter of getting the details reasonably authentic. If we can do that, the genuine romantic feeling which is implicit in Purcell's music will emerge almost of its own accord.[1]

This statement by Robert Donington expresses where we must begin in any attempt to interpret Purcell's solo songs, and for that matter all other music from the late seventeenth century. Anyone who has made an honest effort to reproduce Purcell's music in performance has, at times, been overwhelmed by the difficulty of making decisions about tempi, texture, emotional intent and the general aesthetic quality for the song. Indeed we must have facts about general characteristics of the period in regard to all these problems suggested, but somehow this does not seem to be enough when preparing one of Purcell's songs. I think the key word in interpreting these songs is spontaneity. One usually associates spontaneity only with improvisation in early music, but it is an important factor when performing

[1]Robert Donington, "Performing Purcell's Music Today," Henry Purcell: Essays on His Music, Imogen Holst, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 76.

this repertory.

The performer is always faced with the question of interpretation and it obviously becomes more difficult in music in which we have so few musical directions given by the composer. There are some contemporary accounts concerning aesthetic ideals which do give us some idea of the attitudes toward performance in Purcell's time. The Baroque theorist, Charles Butler, said that a composer must needs "be transported with some Musical fury; so that himself scarcely knoweth what he doth, nor can presently give a reason of his doing. . . ."[2]

This concept has come to be accepted by scholars who work closely with this period, but it would seem that performers, particularly vocalists, do not consider this evidence when presenting this literature in recital. Certainly if the composer were "transported with some Musical fury," how much more should the singer be "transported" and in turn the audience. Too often this is not the case. The reasons for this should be examined. As was stated earlier, what one sees on the score should not necessarily be reproduced literally in a carefully prepared performance. Several technical aspects must be given particular consideration, such as tempo, voice

[2]Charles Butler was quoted in Appendix B of Robert Donington's article, "Performing Purcell's Music Today," p. 92.

types, rhythmic patterns, phrasing, texture and dynamics.

Donington says, "there is no such thing as a 'right' tempo in the absolute."[3] Many factors are important when considering the tempo of a Purcell song, and spontaneity must be of prime consideration, for the individual singer must bring something unique to the performance. The timbre and the size of the voice obviously would have an effect on the tempo for any given song. Given the lack of precise tempo markings, a coloratura soprano may well take a given song faster than a baritone and each arrive at a tempo that is appropriate. Donington says, "But it is from the music and not from the time-signatures that the performer has to find his tempo and his pulse."[4] This is presuming, of course, that the performer has studied the style of the period and is able to translate that style into a contemporary performance.

One of the biggest problems the performer must solve before he can translate the seventeenth-century style into his performance is that of the variety of signs and numbers used to designate meters. In the songs discussed in this paper, the inconsistencies found in the use of "C" and "¢" may create difficulty for the performer,

[3]Donington, Op. cit., p. 85.

[4]Donington, Op. cit., p. 86.

but should be dealt with before any other decisions about interpretation can be made. The problem of determining the "basic unit" is, of course, the most important factor in selecting tempo. The Baroque distinction between duple and triple becomes a problem in the Purcell songs also. Donington says that the change from duple to triple more often suggests an increase of speed, but because of rhythmic complexities and textual considerations, this is not always possible or advisable.

"Love Arms Himself" (1685) begins with the sign "¢", but changes to "3" for a final section. It would be impossible for a singer to perform this song in a fast duple and then increase the tempo for the triple section. The rhythmic complexities and the nature of the text demand a fast four-beat measure moving in the triple section to a three in which the quarter note remains fairly constant. There can be little increase of speed in the last triple section again because of the text. The accent shift creates enough variety and Purcell also changes the rhythmic style.

"On the Brow of Richmond Hill" again has "¢" for its signature and by my calculations falls very nicely into a relaxed two beat at a metronomic marking of ♩ = 60.[5] Although stylistically one could justify performing this song in a fast four which would give it a martial air, the text suggests a less well defined accent:

> Lovely Cynthia passing by,
> with brighter Glories blest my Eye,
> Ah! then in vain, in vain, said I,
> the Fields and Flow'rs do shine;
> Nature in this Charming Place,
> created Pleasure in Excess,
> but all are Poor to Cynthia's Face,
> whose Features are Divine.
> (On the Brow of Richmond Hill)

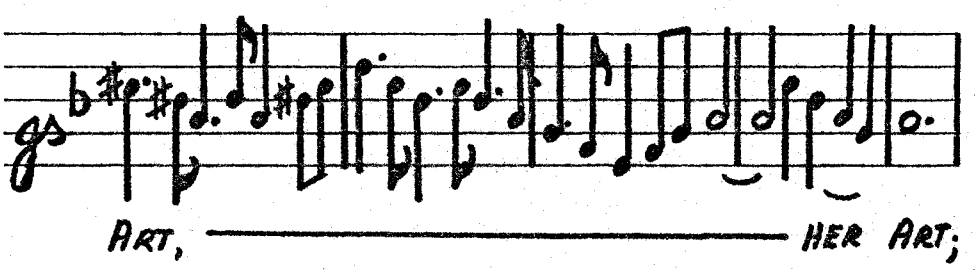
"Corinna is divinely fair" is a straightforward love song extolling the graces and charms of Corinna, and Purcell has suggested here a duple rhythm by again using the "¢". It would require a ♩ = 58 in order to keep the duple accent but a tempo not so fast as to destroy the plasticity of the line. There are a great many wide leaps and sinewy turnings of the melodic line and too fast a tempo would destroy the melodic movement. The triple section is much more diatonic and employs a great

[5]The tempo markings are obviously personal suggestions but are based on a study of the texts, the dramatic demands they make, and the rhythmic content of the songs.

many eighth notes, allowing it to be sung easily with one beat per measure.

"What Can we poor females do," which Purcell originally wrote for two voices, is again marked with a "𝐂" and must be sung in a duple measure with a strong two-beat accent, using ♩ = 86. Four beats to a measure would destroy the song as well as the singer.

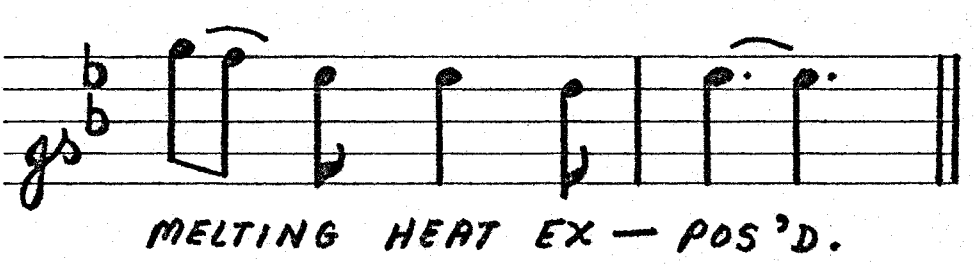
"I Lov'd fair Celia" has as its meter signature "3/4" which is somewhat misleading at first glance because the beat note is the half note and should be sung at 𝅗𝅥 = 84. This song is a good example of Purcell's extension of the text through melismatic patterns and repetition of words.



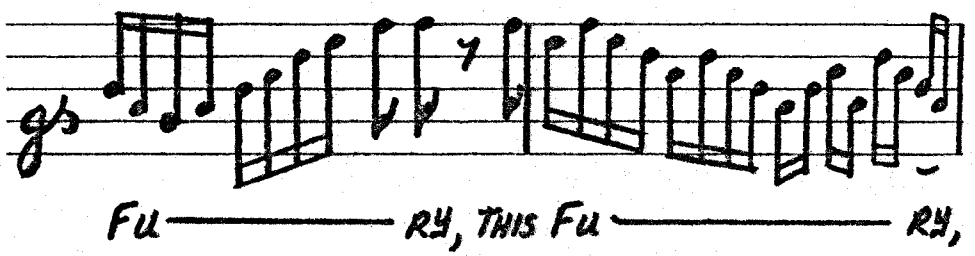
"What a sad Fate is mine" is marked 3/4 and falls easily into a triple pattern, a ♩ = 130. The recurrence of the rhythmic patterns makes a triple meter a necessity in this song and it keeps the three-beat pattern to the end with very little variance in tempo.

The longest of the nine songs being discussed is "Love thou can'st hear tho' thou are blind." There are

four meter changes with the signatures being 3, ¢, 6/4 and ¢. The last section is marked "brisk time" which is unusual for Purcell's songs, for few tempo indications are suggested anywhere in the collection. After the third section, section one is repeated, creating an A B C A D form. This song is somewhat more dramatic than other of Purcell's songs with melodic sequence as one of the compositional devices Purcell uses to extend the poetry and melody. The opening triple meter should move at ♩ = 116, the second section (¢) should be basically the same tempo, keeping the quarter note constant because of the rhythmic complexity. The 6/4 section has a text much softer and more delicate than sections one and two, and the six-beat measure works very well. The ♩. = 60 fits the text but creates some musical problems when returning to section one with the ♩ = 116. Purcell has written in a rhythmically extended cadence at the end of section three which should be embellished; the embellishment breaking the compound meter and making it possible to return more musically to the triple section.



The last section marked in "brisk time" has running sixteenth notes on the word "fury" and certainly must be done with a different duple than the second section because of the text.



I would suggest the ♩ = 120 for the opening section. The closing three measures are marked "slow," which proves to be somewhat awkward since the accompaniment has been in a moving sixteenth-note pattern and then comes to an abrupt halt. All the singer can do is to make a strong cadence and add a short fermata on the final note before the last three measures. This is an extremely dramatic song, almost like a scena, and well deserves attention from performing artists.

"If Music be the food of Love" is perhaps the most complicated of these nine songs in terms of tempo. It is marked "¢", but may be taken at ♩ = 84 for a basic unit, and the measures must remain in constant flux since the rhythmic patterns and the text require a great deal of movement. The second section is in 3/8 and should move at a quicker tempo (♪ = 168). Purcell has written

the first three measures in 3/8 and the following six in 6/8, returning back to 3/8 for a few measures. There does not seem to be any particular pattern in the changes, the last measure being in 9/8. The final short section is marked "¢" as at the first and should move in a four-beat, perhaps a little slower than the first section. This song requires a great deal of fluid movement in the rhythmic figuration, which then gives the melodic line a sense of horizontal movement with no sense of bar line at all until the 3/8 section. That should fall into an easy one-beat to the measure.

The final song, "Lovely, Lovely Albina," may seem to be somewhat awkward in its rhythmic movement. Like many of the other songs, it is marked with a "¢" but must be done in a four-beat with a great deal of rubato in the line to accomodate the text which actually does not have too much to recommend it. A tempo of ♩ = 94 creates enough movement and allows for the rubato without the tempo becoming too slow.

There are many aspects of singing a musical phrase that have to be considered in performing a Purcell song. If the score were taken as it appears, with no sense of the musicality intended, one would come to a dry and very uninteresting performance--too often the case with the performance of Purcell songs. But without meaning to

apologize for the performer, there is little help from the printed page. Modern editors may in fact do this music a disservice in offering too much "help" with editorial additions, for as I mentioned earlier, spontaneity is crucial in a good performance of Purcell. One must not be afraid to take liberties, even with the rhythms in Purcell's music. There must be fluctuation within a section. As Purcell's contemporary Thomas Mace insists,

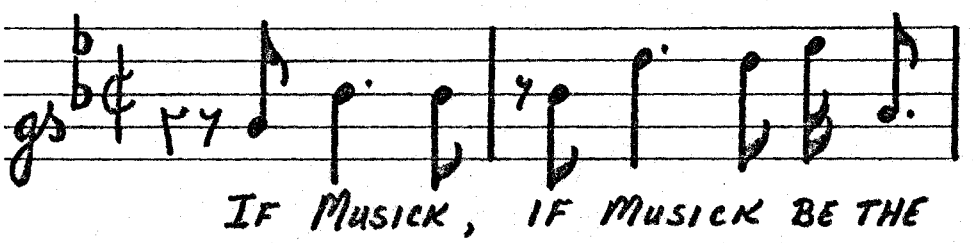
> When we come to be Masters, so that we can command all manner of Time at our own Pleasures; we can take Liberty, to Break Time; sometimes Faster, and sometimes Slower, as we perceive the Nature of the Thing Requires.[6]

Tempo becomes especially important when dealing with dotted rhythms and "inequality." Tempo is one of the factors in determining whether or not the notes should be uneven. To a performer in the Baroque period, rhythm was an expressive element, as Mace has made clear. Any contemporary singer, who desires to give a reasonably authentic performance cannot ignore the expressive element in a rhythmic phrase.

Many of Purcell's embellishments are written out but there are places where the cadences must be ornamented. This is, for the most part, left to the musical discretion of the performer.

[6]Thomas Mace, Musick's Monuments (London, 1676), p. 81.

It would seem that phrasing and articulation would not be a problem for a twentieth-century singer, but we are too much steeped in nineteenth-century tradition when we approach the late Baroque. Purcell often places an articulation before a syncopated note by putting a rest there, and the rests are as important in Purcell as his notes at times.



A sustained lyric line is a necessity. As Donington says, "The ability to sustain a smooth cantabile is as necessary in Purcell as in Bellini; but so is a sense of where to break the line."[7] This calls for some amount of innate musicianship but perhaps more than that a careful study of the song in all its aspects.

Texture and dynamics are important considerations in a performance of Purcell's solo songs. Donington says of this problem: "His romanticism is of a more aerated brand than Wagner's, and needs a lighter texture."[8]

[7]Donington, Op. cit., p. 86.

[8]Donington, Op. cit., p. 94.

If all the considerations that have been discussed above are handled correctly, the texture will almost take care of itself. When texture and dynamics become a problem, the chances are that the singer has ignored the printed score and only tried to observe the correct intervals. To suggest that Purcell's music should have a "lighter texture" than Wagner certainly leaves one with a great deal of room for experiment in levels of dynamics and varieties of texture. This is dramatic music and under no conditions should it be dull or uninteresting in terms of the amount of voice used or the intensity in the vocal line. Purcell's songs require a variety of color or texture and many times in the music, as in other vocal music of the late Baroque, it tends toward "sameness," unless brought to life by an exciting performance.

The accompaniment is affected by the text and melodic line and in turn affects the texture of these solo songs. With this as well as the solo line, spontaneity is the key. Benjamin Britten suggests that there is no ultimate realization and that the accompaniments were originally intended to be improvised and should be "personal and immediate."[9] The primary consideration in preparing the continuo is to be sure to observe the notes that

[9]Benjamin Britten, "On Realizing the Continuo in Purcell's Songs." Henry Purcell: Essays On His Music, Imogen Holst, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 38.

are written, and fill in the harmonies that are indicated in the figured bass. From that point, the decision must be made as to the desired texture of the song, which decision is also affected by the text and melodic line. The style of the accompaniment should not be that different from other songs in the period. A few things to be considered are adding dry arpeggios, grace-notes, octave doublings where needed, short staccato and sudden contrasts in dynamics or range.

There are several modern editions which have been realized and for the most part are usable. Sergius Kagen has realized forty of the solo songs for International, and these are adequate although they do not capture the freedom of expression that I feel Purcell intended. The realizations by Michael Tippett and Walter Bergmann are a good attempt to realize the figured bass in the style of the late Baroque and give the singer much more freedom within the melodic line. Benjamin Britten has embarked on a project to realize all the songs from the Orpheus Britannicus in good modern performing editions and has been quite successful with the songs he has already finished. They possess a quality of spontaneity that is lacking in the other realizations. All these realizations are done for harpsichord and anyone using them on piano should keep this in mind and try to adjust

them to the heavier instrument.[10]

In teaching and in preparing recital literature, the question of choosing the proper song for the right voice is always a problem. In the matter of Purcell's solo songs customarily a light-high voice has been stereotyped as the appropriate voice to sing Purcell. Granted the ranges of the songs in the original are high; there are modern editions which offer varied keys. When one examines the types of voices who probably sang Purcell's music, we find that tenors played a less important part than did counter-tenors and basses. Women's voices are seldom mentioned but that, of course, is not a surprise, given the place of women in music in this period. Many of the singers who performed Purcell's songs were members of the Chapel Royal and were probably some of the most accomplished singers in all of England. Some of these singers were Anthony Robert, John Abell and John Howell, high counter-tenors; John Gostling, Leonard Woodson and Daniel Williams, basses, and a few tenors. We have evidence, of course, that Purcell himself was a very expert singer, as in the following:

[10]Sergius Kagen, International Editions; Michael Tippett and Walter Bergmann, Schott of London; Benjamin Britten, Boosey and Hawkes.

> The following Ode was admirably set to Music by Mr. Henry Purcell, and performed twice with universal applause, particularly the second Stanza ['Tis Nature's voice], which was sung with incredible Graces by Mr. Purcell himself.[11]

The point should be made that the lower voices or high baritone and mezzo-soprano should not be ignored when choosing voices for Purcell's solo songs. The texts certainly are an important consideration if that problem should be a concern to a performer, but the question of masculine or feminine texts has become less of a problem in the last few years. The important question is whether or not the singer is truly skilled enough to do justice to the music in terms of the dramatic intent and the special problems of the fioriture.

[11] Gentleman's Journal, November, 1692, as quoted in Holst, Op. cit., p. 60.

CHAPTER IV

Summary

Purcell's music enjoyed a success in his own time, but in recent years has been neglected on the recital stage. When one considers the amount of good solo song literature Purcell wrote one wonders why this should be. The difficulty of the music is a factor but one certainly that an artist could overcome. The poetry of the late Baroque is one consideration which creates difficulty for most singers of our time, but the hardest problem to overcome is interpreting the printed score as it appears in Purcell's manuscript, which involves an understanding and knowledge of the entire Baroque performance practice. The other difficulty is merely being able to interpret the literature giving it an energetic and enthusiastic reading.

Purcell was not terribly cosmopolitan and seldom traveled out of London, yet he absorbed the Italian and French style and made it his own and in fact made it "English." The solo style which Purcell developed was a combination of the Italian recitativo secco, the French air and his own "abrupt self." The recitativo secco was not considered to be well suited to the English

language; so a kind of arioso, fluctuating between speech, rhythmic recitative and a formal melodic line became the English equivalent in Purcell's hands.

If the foreign influence on his musical style was important, certainly the literary environment in which he lived was nothing but English with a strong theatrical history behind it. The early seventeenth-century poets and dramatists were without equal. Although the same cannot be said of the Restoration dramatists, there were some men of great literary merit at the time; particularly Shadwell, Dryden and Tate, the three poets-laureate during Purcell's lifetime. Nahum Tate was the weakest of the three in terms of any lasting literary value, but the association of Purcell and Tate was an extremely happy one.[1]

Purcell's musical style was one that transcended the period and went beyond the clichés of his contemporaries. He was not especially innovative in his view of rhythm, melody and harmony, but his use of the standard devices was what made him unique. His melodies are so tied to the rhythmic element that they can hardly be

[1]While there is some question as to the literary value of Tate's texts, Westrup says this of his libretto for Dido and Aeneas: " . . . whatever the literary quality of Dido--and it is on the whole poor--there is no doubt that the text is thoroughly suitable for musical setting." Westrup, Op. cit., p. 135.

discussed as separate units. The harmonies "point up" the text and support the melody.

Not since Schütz had there been anyone to set his native language so successfully. What the Germans did in the Romantic period with the lied, Purcell, to some extent did with the solo song in the seventeenth century. His songs can be recited and then sung and the accents fall the same. There are perhaps a few awkward word accents, but very few.

By very simple means Purcell created a dramatic technique that perhaps has never again been equalled in solo song literature in England. He is able to create an atmosphere and character by a simple rhythmic pattern or the turn of a melodic line. The contour of his melodies creates a character all its own.

The difficulty of the coloratura in Purcell's songs often drives less adventurous singers away, but for those who want to study his style and come to grips with the problems on the page, it is a musical experience that is very worthwhile. Purcell deserves more of a hearing than he presently receives. It is dramatic music that can hold an audience for in it we find that "forged feature" which compels us all to think here indeed is the "Orpheus Britannicus."

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