

Scintillating baroque..



.. Serious **fun**



Director from the Continuo
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Early Harps & Research

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Early Opera &
Historical Productions



Action! Action! Action!

Mr Priest's Triumphant Dance
Airs, Grounds & Dances by Henry Purcell

Suite from Dioclesian (1690)

First Music - Second Music - Dance of the Furies
Symphony - Paspe - Jig

The Masque of Britannia

A Scotch Tune

Fairest Isle (King Arthur, 1691)

A new Irish Tune

Suite in D minor (Abdelazar, 1695 & Amphitryon, 1690)

Overture - Rondeau

Air - Minuet - Hornpipe - Bouree

Sons of Art

The Witches: *Symphony - Echo dance of the Furies* (Dido & Aeneas, 1689)

The Sailors: *Sailor's Song - Sailors' Dance* (Dido & Aeneas)

The Sons of Art (Birthday Ode for Queen Mary, 1694)

Diana in the Forest: *Symphony, Minuet* (Dido & Aeneas)

Timon of Athens: *Allegro - [Jig] - [Allegro]* (Timon, 1678)

INTERVAL

Orpheus Britannicus

Pavan (Z752)

Chacony (Z730)

Hornpipe (King Arthur)

Air on a Ground

A new Ground

Fantasia: Three Parts upon a Ground

Holy Ground

Two Parts in One upon a Ground

Curtain Tune on a Ground

The Triumph of Love

Canon: 7 parts in one

The Triumphant Dance (Dido and Aeneas)

Mr Preist's Minuet

Chacony: *Triumph Victorious Love* (Dioclesian)

Music is “nature’s voice” sang the counter-tenor Henry Purcell – according to the *Gentleman’s Journal* “with incredible graces” – in his own composition, the 1692 Ode *Hail, bright Cecilia*. Still today, Purcell is celebrated as *Orpheus Britannicus*, the composer who gave musical voice to the English language. His word-setting captures the essence of spoken drama of the time, the noble tradition of William Shakespeare’s plays, the sharp wit of restoration comedies and the grandeur of John Dryden’s heroic verse.

In the late seventeenth century, English musical establishments were recovering from the disruptions of the Civil War and Commonwealth. Purcell’s music is rooted in the English traditions of conservative polyphony and strange chromaticism (the latter championed by William Lawes, composer of *The Harp Consorts*, who was tragically killed defending the city of Chester for King Charles I). The Restoration court grafted onto this root new continental styles: Italian grounds and French dances. King Charles II liked “to play the Monsieur”, wearing his powdered wig and waving his elegantly gloved and ring-laden hand to the ‘swung’ rhythms of the French style. From France were imported also the “incredible graces” of vocal and instrumental ornamentation. As Dryden wrote in the preface to *Dioclesian*, English music was “now learning *Italian*, which is the best Master, and studying a little of the *French Air*, to give it more of Gayety and Fashion”.

As Purcell excelled amongst English musicians of his time, so Dryden and his followers dominated the literary scene at the end of the seventeenth century. Dryden wrote the epic history drama *King Arthur or the British Worthy* to be set by Purcell, who also wrote incidental music for Dryden’s mythological play *Amphitryon*, in which Jupiter disguises himself in order to seduce the protagonist’s faithful wife. *Abdelezar or the Moor’s Revenge* was the work of Dryden’s disciple, the female playwright Aphra Behn, employed by King Charles II as a spy in Antwerp during the war against the Dutch.

Thomas Betterton, the greatest actor of the age and author of *The Prophetess or The History of Dioclesian*, was also closely acquainted with Dryden. He performed as a member of the D’Avenant company at Lincoln’s Inn Fields: D’Avenant and Dryden had collaborated on an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in 1667. The choreographer for *Dioclesian* and *King Arthur* was Josias Priest, at whose Chelsea school *Dido and Aeneas* was performed. The only surviving example of Priest’s work is *Mr Preist’s Minuet for Twelve Women*, set to an anonymous tune (perhaps composed by Priest himself, but possibly by Purcell: the orchestral reconstruction is mine).

However exotic the plots of these dramas might be, much of Purcell’s incidental music is in the conventional baroque forms of French *overtures* and dances, especially *minuets*, *chaconnes* and *hornpipes*. In Purcell’s time, as today, his theatre music was frequently brought out of the playhouse to be presented as chamber music. Songs and instrumental *airs* made popular by the success of a particular play were frequently published separately, re-arranged for different forces, and collected together to form loose suites.

In spite of the success of *Dido and Aeneas*, opera remained foreign to English taste. Nearly all Purcell’s dramatic compositions consist of incidental music to spoken plays, masques and ballets, and the peculiarly English genre of Semi-Opera. In such works as *King Arthur*, most of the drama is spoken, but there are extended sections of continuous music for suitable scenes. Music was conventionally accepted to depict the battlefield, the pastoral grove, the mysterious wood, or the lover’s tryst; for scenes of feasting, courtly ritual, witchcraft or for the appearance of gods or demons.

Purcell composed for the church, for the royal court, and for the theatre; for public ceremony, for private devotions, and for pleasurable diversion; for the artificiality of the Theatre Royal, for the solemnity of Westminster Abbey, for the splendour of the Chapel Royal, but also for the bawdy humour of the tavern and the glee-club. His achievement was not only to set the particular speech patterns of the English language, but to combine this word-setting with the fashionable rhythms of French baroque dances, with the solid structures of Italian music, and with the convoluted counterpoint and dark harmonies of his English predecessors. By mixing his native musical inheritance with Italian and French influences, Purcell found a musical voice that is at once typically English and highly individual.

Andrew Lawrence-King