

Spring Choral Concert – May 22, 2010

Seth Lachterman

Music of Purcell and Haydn

. . . Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,

*. . . to our high-raised phantasy present
That undisturbed song of pure concent,
Aye sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
To Him that sits thereon,
With saintly shout, and solemn jubilee,
Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
Their loud uplifted angel-trumpets blow,
And the Cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just Spirits that wear victorious palms,
Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly:
Thus we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise[.] . . .*

— John Milton, “At a Solemn Music”

Juxtaposing music of Joseph Haydn and Henry Purcell seems an exercise in disparity, since far more than mere centuries and culture separate their genius. Both were matched, though, with the unassuming nature of their compositional lives: the steady, workmanlike production, the fastidious mastery of forms, and an aperçu for innovating and evolving new forms. Yet, each would “answer that melodious noise” with a conscious homage to the past and an unostentatious piety and humanity.

Henry Purcell’s musical ascent during Charles II’s reign was unparalleled by any other musician in his time. By the age of twenty, he had written over one hundred anthems, five semi-operas, much string music, and incidental music for some forty plays. Indeed, one can think of only two subsequent geniuses, Mozart and Schubert, who, like Purcell, were to write so much before such an early demise.

Henry Purcell: Full Anthem: Man That Is Born of a Woman, Z.27

This profoundly elegiac work, a setting of the Funeral Sentences, was composed in 1680, two years before the Service in B-Flat, but seems a world apart from the later work’s stately purity and spirit. In the four textual sections, we hear much of Purcell’s signature melodic chromaticism and attending harmonic dissonances. Such traits flourish in Purcell’s late, great string works, like the Fantasia, or in his Sonata, Z.809, also presented in today’s concert. Throughout the anthem, Purcell underscores the penitential text with musical analogues of rising and falling intervals, rhetorically motivated pauses, and poignant dissonance. The phrase “deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death” conveys an almost comfortless and anxious supplication, as do the anthem’s haunting words, “suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.” Some fifteen years later, Purcell would reuse this work for the Funeral Music of Queen Mary at her obsequies in Westminster Abbey, March 5, 1695. Purcell added a famous March framing the verses of “Man that is born,” and interspersed brass canzone between the anthem’s solemn sections. In the final section, “Thou knowest, Lord,” before the reprise of the March, trombones and cornets double the choral voices, giving the anthem a dark splendor.

Purcell: Evening Service: Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in B-Flat, Z.230

The Complete Service in B-Flat (Z.230, Z.232), 1681–82, is a full suite of ten canticles for Morning Worship, Communion, and Evening Worship. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) – the Song of Mary – and the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29–32) – the Song of Simeon – form one set of alternatives for the Evening Service. These canticles are written in a hybrid of choral styles that Purcell developed in these years. The “Full Anthems,” works written in a fully contrapuntal way, revealing their Old Church heritage, eschewed the encroachment of Baroque techniques that Purcell would reserve for his more progressive “Verse Anthems.” The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis are stylistically conservative (like the Full Anthems); however, they clearly show Purcell’s “Baroque” regard for the precedence of the shifting rhetoric of text over the complexity of purely musical invention (like the Verse Anthems). Subtle word painting – for example, the unified ascent of voices in “My soul doth magnify the Lord” – while present in each phrase, never vitiates the classic dignity of the magnificent old-style choral texture. Coloristic variety is achieved by ingenious contrasts of soloists with choir. These soloists are combined in two groups: one with two sopranos and alto, and another with alto, tenor, and bass. The doxology appended to the texts (“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son. . .”) is given purposely archaic treatments in both works: a canon for three voices in the Magnificat, and a double canon for four voices in the Nunc Dimittis.

Purcell: Trio Sonata No. 8 in G-Minor from “Ten Sonatas in Four Parts,” Z.809

It’s a puzzling bit of Baroque math that terms a work for two solo instrumentalists a “trio” but uses four performers on stage. The trio sonata, a popular form of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, calls for two obbligato soloists (frequently violins) and a thematically independent bass line. Hence there are three musical lines, or a trio of parts. In addition, the bass line in the Baroque era was “figured” with numbers indicating harmonic progressions to be supplied by yet an additional keyboard or plucked instrument, thus, ultimately, requiring four performers. Bach was always fond of this “trio” form, even in the cantatas where two solo voices are heard over an accompanying bass line; so fond, in fact, that he wrote a series of “Trio Sonatas” for solo organ, thereby allowing him to indulge in trios alone without any additional performers.

The Ten Sonatas in Four Parts (Z.802–Z.811) were composed in the 1680s while Purcell was engrossed in writing string music: the Sonatas in Three Parts and Fantasias also date from this period. Published by Purcell’s widow, Frances, in 1697, the Ten Sonatas were dedicated by Frances to Lady Rhoda Cavendish. Frances states that Henry had had “the Honour to be [Lady Cavendish’s] Master,” and indicated, as well, that the dedicatee had been one of Purcell’s most gifted students. These highly contrapuntal sonatas, like the fantasias, are full of striking harmonic progressions and chromatic episodes. One is tempted to say how “modern” these works sound. In fact, though, Purcell’s style here is appropriately termed “Mannerist,” a backward-glancing style, since it attempts an “affect-laden” revisionism of earlier Renaissance polyphony. The G-Minor sonata’s Adagio doesn’t waste much time before indulging in bracingly ascending chromatic scales and quickly concluding with descending ones. The Canzona-Allegro, rhythmically incisive using two melodic subjects, is even more hair-raising in harmonic daring and textural knottiness. There is a brief, unexpected respite in F-Major, only to be cranked back to the mayhem in minor. The ensuing Grave, while only seven measures long, squeezes the dissonant knot further: in an almost unbearably painful sequence, the instruments clash B-Natural, C, D, followed by a G-A combination on the next strong beat – a sort of one-two punch from Purcell. There follows a magnificent and solemn Largo – a chaconne with a lopsided syncopated harmonic sequence, in which languid and arching sevenths mingle with quicker dotted figures. It’s a movement whose insistent sevenths and seeming ceaselessness might have inspired Purcell’s nineteenth-century musical scion, Edward Elgar, in the beautiful “Nimrod” of the Enigma Variations. The concluding Allegro is itself a miniature chaconne with a more conventional eight-bar pattern, and it provides a simple harmonic conclusion to the preceding complexities.

Purcell: Evening Service: Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in G-Minor, Z.231

The dating of this Evening Service in G-Minor remains obscure. Also, the concluding Gloria of the Nunc Dimittis was probably not written by Purcell, but by Ralph Roseingrove (1695–1787). Purcell goes to greater lengths here than in the B-Flat Service to paint the text while dwelling in a darker key. For example, the emphatic dotted rhythms (“rejoiced”) convey textual emphases; “the lowliness of his handmaiden” is symbolized in a low tessitura; and the thrice-uttered “holy” is a common scriptural musical illumination.

Haydn: Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano in G-Major, Hob.XV:15

Much has been written about the way Haydn’s piano trios differ from, say Beethoven’s, or Mozart’s[1] works in the same genre. Haydn’s greatest innovation in chamber music was in the evolution of the string quartet, per se. In Haydn’s hands, the string quartet became a distinct formal genre in four movements, in which each instrumentalist has a significant melodic, hence contrapuntal, role. While the first violin was to be *primus inter pares*, much thematic development is democratically distributed to the other parts. In the piano trios, however, works written late in Haydn’s life, a different approach is adopted: the piano heavily dominates, while the violin (or flute) acts as a mere secondary obbligato; the cello is relegated to being only slightly more than an accompaniment, sometimes doubling the piano’s lowest notes, or providing a bass line for the few times the violinist flies solo. The Trio in G-Major of 1790, scored either for solo flute or violin, while still belying this asymmetric part writing, demonstrates how Haydn’s genius imparts textural variety, color, and balance to a work in which violin and cello largely play follow-the-leader to the piano. For example, on inception, the lovely first subject of the opening Allegro movement is generously handed to the violin. First impressions quickly fade, since the piano commands the movement, with the violin, as it were, playing second fiddle. Furthermore, the piano part’s figurations – textural fillers – provide all of the rhythmic momentum for this movement. The second movement, an Andante with sectional variations, is remarkably colorful and expressive. Much of the delight in the final rondo, Allegro, is owing to a playful four-note rhythmic cell that dominates the entire movement. At times the motif propels broken scale passages, in which the string instruments underscore the melodic contour, while the piano obsessively generates all the rhythmic energy. In Haydn’s quick rondos, one usually expects a contrasting section in a minor key, often of a more serious, or contrapuntal, character. Instead, Haydn has some fun giving us a brief, almost perfunctory bluster of gravitas before we are enveloped, once again, in the toe-tapping ritornello.

Haydn: Four-Part Songs for Voices and Piano, Hob.XXVc

“Die Beredsamkeit,” Hob.XXVc:4 (“Eloquence”)

“Abendlied zu Gott,” Hob.XXVc:9 (“Evening Song to God”)

“Warnung,” Hob.XXVc:6 (“Warning”)

“Die Harmonie in der Ehe,” Hob.XXVc:2 (“Harmony in Marriage”)

The part songs for mixed voices and piano accompaniment are fruits of Haydn’s old age, published in 1802, and were written at a time when the composer, occasionally depressed, felt that his creative prowess was waning. Yet Haydn observed of himself, “I sit myself at the keyboard and start hammering. Then, praise God, it all comes back again.” The simple delights found in vocal ensemble writing must have been a curative for the anxious, aged genius. His contemporary biographer G. A. Griesinger noted that “these songs were composed purely *con amore*, in happy hours, and not on order.” The charm of this genre was more notably indulged in, much later, by the aging Gioachino Rossini in *Miscellanée de musique vocale*, part of his “*Péchés de vieillesse*” (“Sins of Old Age”). Written, as well, towards the end of the Italian composer’s life, they are scintillating celebrations of the human condition cast in a conservative madrigal-like style. Haydn’s part songs, while not especially scintillating, nonetheless offer humor, irony, and pungent humanistic insight. However, true to Haydn’s unflagging faith, these songs also reflect his heartfelt, simple devotion. In “Harmony in Marriage,” the notion of an equal playing field for gander and goose is posited with pairs of voices, in alternating genders, echoing each other’s text. “Scorpions crawl underneath every stone,” illustrated with an appropriately niggling

and squirming motif, becomes a fugal countersubject in the song “Warning.” Haydn had more fun with fugues in the drinking song, “Eloquence.” Here, Rheinwein (Rhine wine) is seen as the catalyst for talk, argument, and, yes, contrapuntal exchange; water, though, the sobering aqua vita for fish, will assuredly make us “stumm,” i.e. “mute.” A paradoxically “eloquent” utterance of “stumm,” merely whispered, has the last word. In complete contrast to the frivolity of these Sings of Haydn’s Old Age is the beautiful and unassuming prayer “Evening Song to God.” With its eloquent and stately subject and countersubjects, Haydn’s writing here recalls the masterful double counterpoint of J. S. Bach’s great motets.

—Notes by Seth Lachterman

[1] The interested listener should read Charles Rosen’s *The Classical Style* (New York: Norton, 1972), one of the great books written on the period, which provides an unparalleled synoptic analysis of the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.