

Henry Purcell

Michael Burgess



2009 is the 350th anniversary of the birth of Purcell. He was born in London in 1659 and died just 36 years later in 1695.

His obituary in the Flying-Post proclaimed him as 'one of the most celebrated masters of the service of music in the kingdom, and scarce

inferior to any in Europe.' His epitaph in Westminster Abbey reads, 'Here lyes Henry Purcell Esqre, who left this Lyfe and is gone to that Blessed Place where only his Harmony can be exceeded.'

In 1692 he set the words of Colonel Heveningham, 'If Music be the food of love,' and certainly much of his work celebrates love in all its forms, from scurrilous catches to more intense songs. But Purcell would also have said that music was the food of faith: in his short life anthems and devotional songs flowed from his pen. St Cecilia, the patron saint of music, inspired not just four odes composed to celebrate her feast day, but a vast range of vocal and instrumental works.

In April 1694 Purcell presented Queen Mary with a glorious birthday ode, 'Come ye Sons of Art, away.' It includes a wonderful duet for two countertenors, 'Sound the trumpet', a haunting melody, 'Strike the viol' for soloist and two recorders, and ends with a rollicking 'Thus nature rejoicing.'

That ode shows how words could inspire Purcell to compose of his best as he responded to events and commissions around. It might be music for a coronation, and his settings of 'I was glad' and 'My heart is inditing' must have resonated through Westminster Abbey at their first performance for James II's coronation in 1685.

Three years before that, his first child and a much loved uncle died: the loss of their lives found expression in the moving 'Let mine eyes run down with tears.'

Purcell shows us how music can express the gamut of emotions experienced in life and somehow through the music make that life richer and more bearable. So his church music can be full of rejoicing and celebration as in the ten-part setting of 'Blow up the trumpet' of 1678.

I should imagine that most of us will know his hymn tune Westminster Abbey: a majestic, but buoyant and harmonically exciting setting for the words: 'Christ is made the sure foundation.' As the melody moves from bar to bar, it can produce that tingle down the spine. Purcell lived through the reigns of three monarchs, and during that time composed a wealth of music, not just for his royal patrons, but for church, theatre and domestic use.

It can be intense with the cry of petition as in 'Hear my prayer, O Lord.' It can paint words with new insight as in the anthem 'My beloved spake.' It can express individual grief and the grief of a nation as in his moving and heart-rending music composed on the death of Queen Mary in December 1694: a sombre funeral march, two elegies and the anthem 'Thou knowest, Lord.'

Purcell died a year later. Some eight years earlier he had composed 'An Evening Hymn': over an evocative bass line, the singer adds a beautiful melody, especially expressive in the repeated words 'soft' in the line 'to the soft bed my body I dispose.' The day ends – a life ends – but the composer points us to the 'sweet security' of heaven with serene alleluias.

To mark the anniversary, the choir will sing a number of pieces by Purcell at Choral Evensong on Sunday 15th – the nearest Sunday to the anniversary of his death.