

Purcell Fantazias - Booklet text

Fantazias

From the first uses of the word to describe this type of music, in Italy in the late 15th century, Purcell's spelling was one of many. Alone in England we encounter *fancie*, *fancy*, *fansye*, *fantasy*, *fantazia*, *fantazie*, *phansie*, *phantasy*, *phantazia*. (Perhaps this should not surprise us: at various times Shakespeare wrote his own signature as Willm Shaksp, William Shakespe, Wm Shakspe, William Shakspere, Willi Shakspere, and William Shakespeare – none of these being the spelling now universally attached to his name).

As the name implies, the early musical fantasia was improvised, or at least, improvisatory in character, a display of “the play of imaginative invention”. Two elements emerged very early in its history: the presence of counterpoint, and the absence of words. Already in 1565 Tomas de Santa Maria stressed the importance of counterpoint in “fantasia-playing”, and Zarlino, writing in 1573 of point-of-imitation technique, remarked: “Such a manner of composing is demanded by the practitioners in composing a fantasia”. Regarding the absence of words, Mersenne wrote in 1636 that the musician was free “to employ whatever inspiration comes to him, without expressing the passion of any text”.

By the 1560s fantasias from Italy and France were being performed and published in England, almost all either for lute or keyboard. By the end of the 16th century William Byrd, having already excelled in his keyboard “fancies”, had established the ensemble fantasia as the “chiefest kind” of chamber music in England. Byrd's ensemble fantasias range from three to six parts, and display his mastery of the compositional possibilities of the genre: they include a five-part piece where two of the parts are in canon throughout, and two magnificent six-part works “in whose highly individual structures such diverse elements as romanesca bass and galliard measure, imitative counterpoint and antiphonal homophony combine”. Thus by the end of the 16th century the fantasia had already become a type of music where the art of free improvisation had joined with the science of learned counterpoint, and added elements of dances to the mix. It is difficult to imagine any but the most skilled and experienced ensembles improvising more than the simplest examples of such music: ensemble fantasias had become compositions, “wrought with no small industry”.

The early 17th century saw the appearance of a particularly English genre, known to modern writers as Fantasia-suite. The 24 such works by John Coperario all consist of three movements: fantasia, almaine and galliard. They were probably composed for the

private music of the future King Charles I while he was still Prince of Wales. This model was further developed by William Lawes and John Jenkins, among many others. Some prefer a single movement form, but in clearly distinguished sections. Others combine fantasias with one or more dance movements. Jenkins composed four-, five- and six-part fantasias "distinguished by their spaciousness of form, ease of counterpoint, and melodic eloquence". He uses augmentation, diminution and inversion much more than earlier composers. By contrast, Lawes's "for the Violls" offer boldness of gesture, adventurousness with instrumental colour and texture, rugged angular lines, pungent augmented and diminished intervals and unexpected turns of expression.

Among the many composers of fantasias in the middle of the 17th century one name stands out: Matthew Locke. Fantasias are the predominant movements in his consort collections. Noteworthy is his interest in preceding the "fantazie" proper with a slow introduction. Locke composed for a variety of ensembles, ranging from pieces for two bass viols to the "Flatt Consort" for various three-part groupings of viols, to the "Consort of Fower Parts" and the "Broken Consort" for two violins, bass viol and theorbo. Especially the three- and four-part works show his mastery of exuberant fugal writing set off by passages of homophony or more grave counterpoint, and clear contrasts of tempo and "humour" between sections.

The domestic nature of such chamber music increased considerably in importance during the civil war which led to the execution of Charles I, and during the Puritan Commonwealth which followed. As Roger North wrote: "During the troubles, and when most other good arts languished, Musick held up her head, not at Court nor Theatres, but in private society, for many chose to fiddle at home, than to goe out, and be knocked on the head abroad". With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 Charles II returned from exile in France, and cultural life became once more overridingly centered on the court. The king, however, did not share his father's sophisticated taste. According to Roger North he had an "utter detestation of fancys", "could not forbear whetting his witt upon the subject of the fancy-musick", and "could not bear any music to which he could not keep the time". Writing in 1667, Christopher Simpson, himself a composer of fancys, commented on the rapid decline into neglect of fantasias "by reason of the scarcity of Auditors that understand {them}".

Instruments

On May 1st 1540 a group of six Jewish string players from Venice were appointed to the court of Henry VIII. They were probably the first violinists to set foot in England. At first,

the violin – that is, the instruments of the violin family: violin, viola, cello/bass violin – was used almost entirely for dance music. Professional string players used viols for contrapuntal music and to accompany singers. During the reign of James I (1603-1625) a repertoire of contrapuntal music with violins among the specified instrumentations was developed by such composers as Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Lupo and, in particular, John Coperario, perhaps the main pioneer of the use of violins in contrapuntal music. One of the best-known early examples of the appearance of violins as an option for the performance of consort music is John Dowland's famous set of "Lachrimae Pavans" dated 1604: on his title page Dowland lists "violons" among the possible instrumentations, as alternatives to lute or viols – violins being the option we chose for our recording (ECM 2189). One of the significant aspects of the Dowland Pavans is the mixing of a dance form - associated with violins - with complex counterpoint - associated with viols.

William Lawes composed "fantazies" for 2 Violins, 2 Base Violls and 2 Theorboes" (written for the Royal Consort of Charles I) and "for the Harpe, Violin, Base Violl and Theorbo". As well as his considerable output of music for viols, Jenkins composed many works for two trebles and bass, where the style of writing makes clear that the treble parts are intended for violins.

Incidentally, it should be remembered that the Puritans were not against music as such, only against elaborate church music, theatres and dancing. Indeed, Oliver Cromwell maintained a musical establishment at Whitehall during the 1650s. The Dutch ambassador reported that Cromwell's musicians "played all the while we were at dinner" one day in 1654: in his outstanding book "Four and Twenty Fiddlers: The Violin at the English Court 1540 - 1690" Peter Holman suggests that their repertoire may have consisted of fantasia suites for violins and combinations of two to six viols.

The 1650s saw two other important developments: the "Broken Consort" by Matthew Locke, which followed the pattern of Jenkins's similarly scored fantasias and airs, and is also the name of the ensemble which had already performed such music involving violins in the pre-war court; and the arrival in England of the violinist Thomas Baltzar. Baltzar immigrated to England from his native Luebeck in 1655/6. After his appearance at a Musical Meeting at Oxford University in 1658, Anthony a Wood wrote that "viols began to be out of fashion and only violins used, as treble violin, tenor and bass-violin". Baltzar enjoyed a brilliant, but brief career in England, including an appointment at court to lead the Broken Consort. He died in 1663. Among many other musical immigrants to follow in his footsteps was another, perhaps even more brilliant violinist: Nicola Matteis.

The diarist John Evelyn heard him perform in November 1674: "a stroke so sweete and made it speak like the voice of a man....he did wonders upon a Note". Writing later, Burney reported that Matteis "polished and refined (English) ears, and made them fit and eager for the sonatas".

Purcell's Fantazias

In 1677 Matthew Locke died, and Purcell was appointed in his place as "composer in ordinary with fee for the violin to his Majesty" – meaning that in addition to the responsibility he already had for maintaining and tuning court keyboard instruments, and, annually, the organ of Westminster Abbey, he would now provide music for the Chapel Royal and the "24 Violins", the Court Orchestra. He was 18 years old. He had been born into the world of court music: both his father and his uncle were court musicians. He was thus personally acquainted with many of the best musicians of the time, and had no doubt made good use of many opportunities to hear, and learn from them. His principal teacher was John Blow, himself a distinguished composer, who wrote and taught archaic counterpoint – the technique of creating harmony not by building up chords from a bass note, but by combining musical lines that retain their own form and direction. Purcell's early church music shows clear signs of Blow's influence, and of the emergence of a student who would soon surpass his teacher.

In the summer of 1680 the court made a longer than usual visit to Windsor castle. Purcell may or may not have been among the musicians who attended: his name is not among those listed. Either way, he seems to have had a lull in his formal responsibilities, and chose to fill the time in a most remarkable way: he composed fantazias. Given the fact that this was a musical form which had come to be regarded as hopelessly old-fashioned, and for which the foot-tapping King would have no use at all, the question must arise: why? Since they turned out to be the very last ensemble fantasias to be published in England, it is tempting in retrospect to see their brilliant distillation of the very best of Byrd, Lawes, Jenkins and Locke as a personal farewell to a kind of music which in Purcell's own chamber music would very soon be superseded by sonatas. In the absence of any concrete evidence, one can only speculate, and wonder at his achievement.

In his biography "Purcell: an extraordinary life" Bruce Wood gives us a description of these works which can hardly be bettered: "These are astonishing pieces. They are among the most profound and searching counterpoint of the 17th century – indeed of any period.....Purcell displays a formidable command of all the ancient techniques of

polyphony, including inversion (turning a melodic idea upside down), augmentation (increasing its note values), and diminution (reducing them). Two of the fantasias....(Nos 8 and 11) present us with mirror-image pairs of inverted entries in their opening bars, while No 4 contrives to cram into its first fifteen bars no fewer than 24 entries of the opening idea, not merely inverted but also cunningly halved in length, stretched out into double note-values and even doubled again. The musical miracle, though, lies not in this manipulation of line and rhythm but in the fact that the harmony, far from being shackled by it, is instead set free to move in patterns of wrenching expressiveness". Only just out of his teens, Purcell already shows his extraordinary ability, shared by few other composers of any era, to walk the fine line between joy and sorrow, to beautifully express the melancholy which was such a characteristic mood of his times; and all this within the strictest self-imposed disciplines of complex counterpoint. Nowadays we regard J. S. Bach as the greatest of all contrapuntists. He would have been immensely proud to have composed this music, and had he encountered it, would certainly have acknowledged it as equal to his finest achievements in this art.

John Holloway, 2023