

A classical oil painting of George Frideric Handel. He is depicted from the waist up, seated and leaning back. He has a large, voluminous white wig and is wearing a bright yellow silk jacket over a white shirt with a ruffled collar. A blue velvet cloak is draped over his left shoulder and arm, which is extended and pointing towards the right. His right hand rests on a scroll. The background is a dark, atmospheric landscape with trees and a distant building. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the textures of his clothing.

Purcell
Songs and
Sacred Arias

The
Deller
Consort

Regis

This classic recital from the great English counter-tenor Alfred Deller marks an important period in the performance of Purcell's music. So-called period performance practice is a fully integrated part of the musical landscape in the twenty-first century, and the counter-tenor voice has been accepted as more or less essential in the recreation of music from the era of the castrato. A foundation for this development was laid by Deller's pioneering performances, as well as a revival of the voice in new operas – Britten scored the role of Oberon in his 1960 opera of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* especially for Deller. It was the composer Michael Tippett, meanwhile, who christened Deller with the now-ubiquitous vocal category. Tippett recalled how, on first hearing Deller sing 'Music for a while' in Canterbury Cathedral Song Room in 1944, he 'recognized that this was the voice for which Purcell had written'. A near obsolete vocal category, in which Purcell himself had once sung and which had existed alongside the more celebrated castrato tradition, had found in Deller a perfect singer to stage its revival. Others have described Deller's vocal manner as mixing seemingly irreconcilable characteristics: an emphasis on vibrato-less delivery learnt from the English cathedral tradition, a passionate belief in communicating with an audience, and a powerful musical instinct. Deller's wide repertoire presented unique editorial problems. These problems were largely left to colleagues – Tippett, as well as two artists featured on this collection, the harpsichordist Walter Bergman and bass Maurice Bevan – but the singer's musical instinct always held sway.

Purcell, as arguably England's greatest composer, was far from unknown in the middle of the twentieth century. However, Ralph Vaughan Williams had introduced eight concerts of the composer's music given in the 1951 Festival of Britain as follows: 'We all pay lip service to Henry Purcell, but what do we really know of him?' While his genius was never in doubt, many of his works would be 'improved' and tinkered with to fit the prevailing tastes. Deller's importance in changing the course of Purcell's reception during the second half of the twentieth century is therefore impossible to overestimate, and he was instrumental in a Purcell revival that started shortly after the Second World War, singing the composer's 'Come ye sons of art, away' on the opening concert of the BBC's Third Programme in 1946. His legacy is still important today, for if much regarding the composer's life still remains unknown and questions regarding the performance of his works can only be answered speculatively, Deller was instrumental in broadening the possible answers. Stories abound, too, regarding the prejudice that Deller encountered (one famous story tells of the leader of an orchestra in the 1950s referring to him as the 'bearded lady'), but his determination in the face of such resistance cleared the way for a growing interest in the counter-tenor voice, which continued to blossom after Deller's death in 1979.

The present collection brings together material originally released on the Vanguard label in the US (and Top Rank in the UK) around the time of the Purcell bicentenary in 1959. It was welcomed at the time, among more monumental anniversary events, for its focus on intimacy of expression, and demonstrates a fluidity

of style that developments in period performance would tend to replace with academic austerity in the subsequent decade. Of course, the recital features primarily Deller in a series of performances with his long term musical partner Walter Bergman. It starts, appropriately enough, with the hauntingly evocative ‘Music for a while’, with which Deller became inextricably linked throughout his career. One of several pieces conceived for the stage, it was composed in 1692 as part of the music of Oedipus, and in its original context is sung in an attempt to evoke music to save Laius from the Furies.

‘Thrice happy lovers’ and ‘Fairest Isle’ both appear in Masques in their original contexts (the former is sung by Juno in The Fairy Queen’s act-five Wedding Masque; the latter, which has almost attained the status of folk song, sung by Venus in King Arthur’s concluding masque). They both represent stylized treatments of a subject that dominates: that of love. Love, too, echoes through the flowing melody of the Shakespearean ‘If music be the food of love’ and the powerful recitative of ‘Not all my torment’. In ‘Sweeter than roses’, sometimes referred to as ‘Pandora in her apartment’, the temptress prepares to seduce Argilius, while the music suggests a far from cynical anticipation of a breathless first kiss.

By contrast, ‘The fatal hour comes on apace’ is an emotional attempt to delay a loved one’s departure, while ‘What shall I do to show how much I love her’ is a more straightforward expression of love. The fluid melodic writing and ostinato bass of ‘Crown the altar’, meanwhile, show Purcell at his more ceremonious. ‘I attempt from love’s sickness to fly’ is one of several pieces composed for the teenage Letitia Cross, as was ‘O lead me to some peaceful gloom’, in which she played Bonvica, Boduca’s (or Boadacea’s) daughter, and here sings before killing herself rather than submit to Roman slavery. Cross was famed, too, for her account of ‘From Rosy Bowers’, sung by Altisadora in an attempt to lure Don Quixote from Dulcinea. This mad-song, according to Orpheus Britannicus, an early collection of Purcell’s songs, ‘was the last Song that Mr Purcell Sett, it being in his Sickness’.

Among the other pieces sung by Deller’s colleagues, similar themes abound. ‘I love and I must’ uses repetition to emphasise the inconstancy of man, while there’s nobility in the famous Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation, a work that demands great dramatic presence from the performer in its sudden, shockingly realistic changes of mood. The sheer variety of ‘Let the dreadful engines’ presents, by contrast, challenges of a more technical sort, as the character Cardenio realises his sanity is deserting him. Sanity it very much in evidence, though, as the disc concludes with Purcell at his most urbane in two works for strings: the so-called ‘Golden Sonata’ and a gentle ‘Pavan’.

Hugo Shirley

Purcell Songs and Sacred Arias

1. 'Music for a while' from Oedipus (1692) 3.58
Alfred Deller (counter tenor), Walter Bergmann (harpsichord)
2. 'I love and I must' 2.54
April Cantelo (soprano), George Malcolm (harpsichord)
3. 'Let the dreadful engines' from Don Quixote, Part I (1694) 7.39
Maurice Bevan (baritone), George Malcolm (harpsichord)
4. Epithalamium – 'Thrice happy lovers' from The Fairy Queen (1692) 3.01
5. 'If music be the food of love' (1st Version, 1692) 2.32
Alfred Deller (counter tenor), Walter Bergmann (harpsichord)
6. The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation – 'Tell me, some pitying angel' (1693) 7.45
April Cantelo (soprano), George Malcolm (harpsichord)
7. 'Not all my torments' 2.18
Alfred Deller (counter tenor), Walter Bergmann (harpsichord)
8. Upon a quiet conscience – 'Close Thine Eyes' (1688) 4.16
April Cantelo (soprano), Maurice Bevan (baritone), George Malcolm (harpsichord)
9. 'Fairest Isle' from King Arthur (1691) 2.37
10. 'Sweeter than roses' from Pausanias (1695) 2.29
11. 'The fatal hour comes on apace' 4.15
12. 'Crown the altar' from Ode on Queen Mary's Birthday (1693) 2.45
13. 'I attempt from love's sickness to fly' from The Indian Queen (1695) 2.14
14. 'O lead me to some peaceful gloom' from Bonduca (1695) 3.05
15. 'What shall I do to show how much I love her' from Dioclesian (1690) 3.46
16. 'From Rosy Bowers' from Don Quixote, Part III (1695) 7.10
Alfred Deller (counter tenor), Walter Bergmann (harpsichord)
17. Sonata No. 9 in F ('Golden Sonata') from Sonatas of 4 Parts 7.32
18. Pavan for 3 Violins and viola da gamba 3.20
Neville Marriner, Peter Gibbs and Granville Jones (violins), Desmond Dupre (viola da gamba)

Total time: 75 minutes

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'Alfred Deller...the most remarkable counter-tenor of the 20th Century'

Sir Michael Tippett



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