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FAIREST ISLE

THE TIMELESS MUSIC OF PURCELL

"Fairest Isle, all isles excelling,
Seat of pleasure and of love..."

— JOHN DRYDEN
(FROM KING ARTHUR)





Henry Purcell 1659-1695

- 1 **Fairest Isle** from King Arthur, Z628 4'19
Sara Macliver *soprano*, Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, Paul Dyer *director*
- 2 **Round O** from Abdelazar, ZT684, ed. David Watkins 1'28
Marshall McGuire *harp*
- 3 **Thy Hand, Belinda...When I am Laid in Earth (Dido's Lament)** 4'55
from Dido and Aeneas, Z626
Fiona Campbell *mezzo-soprano*, Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker *conductor*
- 4 **Curtain Tune** from Timon of Athens, Z632 2'15
Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, Paul Dyer *director*
- 5 **One Charming Night** from The Fairy Queen, Z629 2'20
Paul McMahon *tenor*, Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker *conductor*
- 6 **Ayre ('Ah, Belinda')** from Dido and Aeneas, Z626 3'04
Tasmanian Symphony Chamber Players, Geoffrey Lancaster *director*
- 7 **If Love's a Sweet Passion** from The Fairy Queen, Z629 5'27
Sara Macliver *soprano*, Cantillation, Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker *conductor*
- 8 **Symphony** from Now Does the Glorious Day Appear, Z332 3'19
Tasmanian Symphony Chamber Players, Geoffrey Lancaster *director*
- 9 **Music for a While** from Oedipus, Z583 3'31
Sally-Anne Russell *mezzo-soprano*, Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker *conductor*
- 10 **Dance for the Chinese Man and Woman** from The Fairy Queen, Z629 2'54
Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker *conductor*
- 11 **A New Ground in E minor, ZT682**, arr. Marin Marais/Arcangelo Corelli 2'49
Genevieve Lacey *recorder*, Linda Kent *harpsichord*

12	Hush, No More, Be Silent, All from <i>The Fairy Queen</i> , Z629 Stephen Bennett <i>bass</i> , Cantillation, Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker <i>conductor</i>	4'45
13	Rondeau from Second Music from <i>The Fairy Queen</i> , Z629 Sirius Ensemble, Anna McDonald, Erin Helyard <i>directors</i>	1'17
14	Ground in D minor from <i>Celebrate This Festival</i> , Z222, ed. David Watkins Marshall McGuire <i>harp</i>	1'45
15	O Let Me Weep from <i>The Fairy Queen</i> , Z629 Sally-Anne Russell <i>mezzo-soprano</i> , Orchestra of the Antipodes, Antony Walker <i>conductor</i>	8'04
16	Symphony while the Swans Come Forward from <i>The Fairy Queen</i> , Z629 Sirius Ensemble, Anna McDonald, Erin Helyard <i>directors</i>	2'04
17	March – Canzona – March from <i>Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary</i> , Z860, arr. Graham Ashton The Graham Ashton Brass Ensemble	5'40
18	Minuet from <i>The Double Dealer</i> , Z592 John Champ <i>piano</i>	0'38
19	Fairest Isle from <i>King Arthur</i> , Z628, arr. Marshall McGuire Marshall McGuire <i>harp</i>	2'16
	Total Playing Time	64'52

To listen is to share an experience, to catch some of his glancing fire and to have a part of his aching regret. He was a man of changing moods and sympathies, ready to boast, to worship, to sigh and to lament. He could bid the trumpets to sound for majesty, or seeking flight from love's sickness find the fever in himself.

Sir Jack Westrup

Henry Purcell was born into the unsettled times which are so vividly detailed in Samuel Pepys' Diary. The dramatic social and political background to Purcell's life had a more direct influence on his musical creations than is usually the case. Perhaps his unique musical style and innovatory approach would never have flourished to the same degree at any other point in Britain's history. Circumstances demanded a fresh and flexible approach, and an ability to write for markedly different occasions.

In the century leading up to the Civil War in 1641, England was a leader in church music, producing composers like Byrd, Tallis, Gibbons and Morley, famous across Europe. The Chapel Royal was a centre for much of this activity. With the coming of Cromwell and the Puritan movement, cathedral organs were destroyed, music burned, choirs disbanded, and church music was pared back to mere unaccompanied congregational psalm-singing.

In 1660, with the Restoration of the monarchy and the coronation of Charles II, Britain found

itself trying to claw back its glorious musical tradition which had been repressed for a generation. The quiet hero of the hour was Captain Henry Cooke (1616-1672), who as Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal began rebuilding English church music almost from scratch. He trained boy choristers including Pelham Humphrey, John Blow and later Blow's student Henry Purcell, who all grew up to be leading composers. This Chapel and others like it, such as those attached to the major university colleges, were then the only significant training institutions for musicians. Their 'graduates' were therefore found working across all areas of music, from low comedy to high church.

Throughout the period of Charles II and James II, and into the reign of William and Mary, the newly invigorated theatres displayed an exuberance and extravagance which was surely a direct reaction to the previous austerity. Post-Civil-War society had a vested interest in entertainment which suggested both the rightness and the stability of the monarchy, and which also reflected contemporary Britain as it wished to see itself – prosperous, blessed, and part of an unending historical flow of triumphs, reaching back to the mythological past. Such themes are found in many of the public performing arts of the time.

John Dryden's *King Arthur* is a fine example. A play with music by Purcell, it interspersed speeches with songs and dances, rather in the

manner of a Tudor court entertainment or masque. It premiered at London's Dorset Garden Theatre, a venue equipped to provide audiences with the latest thrilling innovations in moveable scenery, special effects and other such gimmicks to get the punters in. After Arthur unites Britain, Merlin orders a celebration, which provides an opportunity for a song-and-dance episode. There follows a sequence of events (potentially amusing to a modern Antipodean) where Aeolus fixes the weather, and various entities praise British produce such as wool and fish. The goddess Venus literally drops in to sing **Fairest Isle**, announcing that she will now be taking up residence here.

Purcell also wrote the incidental music for *Abdelazar*, a 'lewd play', probably early in 1695. London was coming out of mourning for Queen Mary, the theatres were opening again, and Drury Lane presented Aphra Behn's rather blood-soaked tragedy. It was not a raging success, though many of the wonderful tunes had a second life, published after Purcell's death. Indeed, the music could be said to have had a third shot at immortality, as Benjamin Britten adopted the **Round O** [or Rondeau] for his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. It is heard here adapted for solo harp.

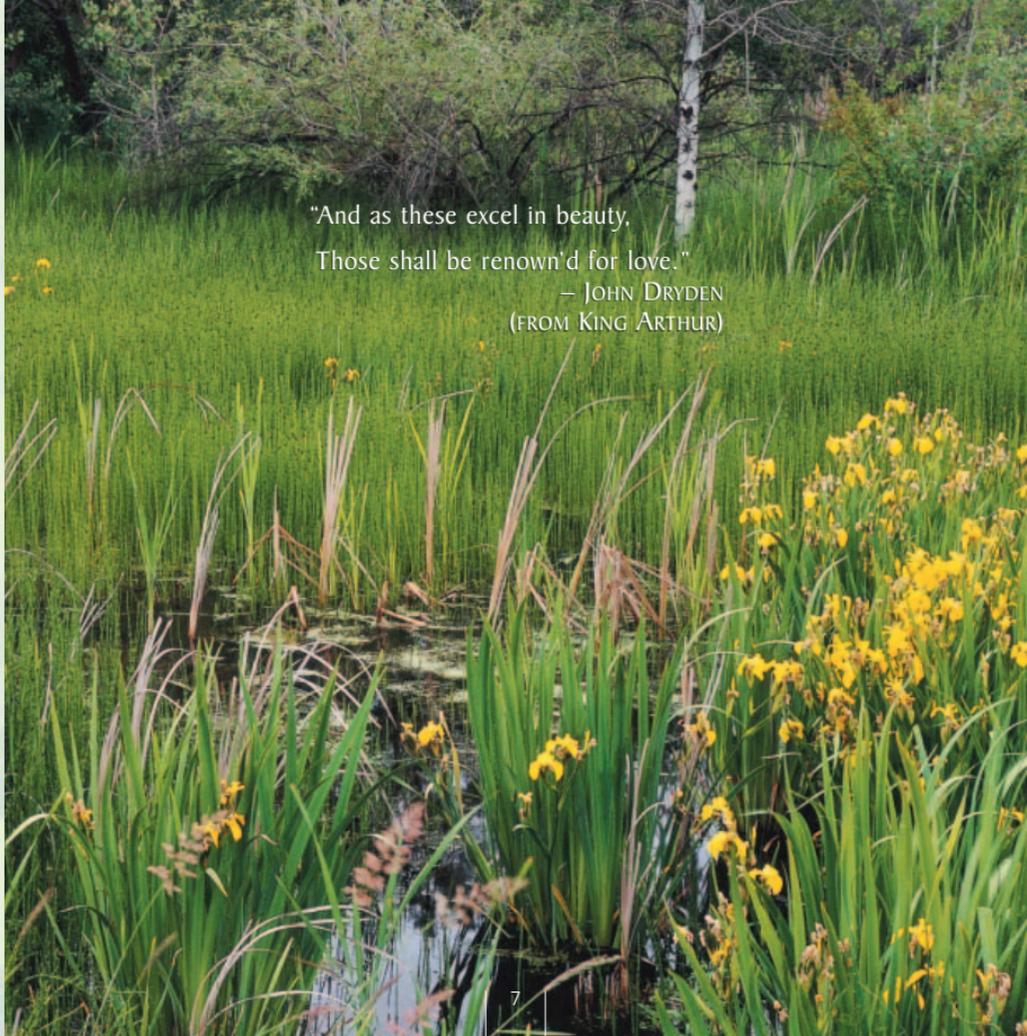
Unlike these free combinations of speech and song, *Dido and Aeneas* is considered a genuine though small-scale opera, and perhaps Purcell's greatest masterpiece. Thought to have been

written for a performance in 1689 at Mr Josias Priest's school for young ladies (the presence of male voices has never been conclusively explained), it culminates in the most famous item, **Dido's Lament**. The dying words of the forsaken queen Dido are highlighted by exquisite dissonances in the accompanying strings. Purcell uses one of his favourite devices, a ground bass – a repeated pattern of notes in the lowest part – which here droop downwards to increase the sorrowful effect.

The same technique is used more vivaciously in the **Curtain Tune** from *Timon of Athens*. The lowest string part presents the 'ground' or pattern, over which Purcell weaves an enchanting series of variations. Thomas Shadwell had in 1678 adapted Shakespeare's play to 'modern' tastes, but today only the added masque is regarded fondly, because of Purcell's lovely music.

The same cavalier approach to Shakespeare can be found in *The Fairy Queen* (1692), an anonymous hack job based loosely on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Once again, Purcell's music lifts the text to something greater than it perhaps deserves. The character Secrecy steps forward (here performed by a tenor) to sing **One Charming Night** in praise of the pleasures of love.

Purcell's music, like Shakespeare's plays, was not considered sacrosanct. The tune or Ayre



"And as these excel in beauty,
Those shall be renown'd for love."

— JOHN DRYDEN
(FROM KING ARTHUR)

Ah, Belinda, drawn from *Dido and Aeneas*, is heard on this disc arranged for strings in a way which would have been completely acceptable to the composer's contemporaries and indeed himself. In the days before recordings such transcriptions were often the best way for a tune to be reproduced for a wider audience.

If Love's a Sweet Passion returns us to the world of *The Fairy Queen*. It is one of the better-known examples of Purcell's charming habit of contrasting a solo voice with the full chorus using the same thematic material. Similar effects appear in his verse anthems and also call to mind the 'terrace dynamics' so beloved of Baroque composers.

The other queen who features strongly in any biography of Purcell is of course Queen Mary II. Thomas Shadwell (by then Poet Laureate) wrote a *Birthday Song for Queen Mary* which was set by Purcell for a court performance in April 1689. The two movements for strings heard here, associated with the chorus **Now Does the Glorious Day Appear**, display an Italian influence.

Music for a While is one of Purcell's greatest songs. Originally appearing in the play *Oedipus* (with texts freely adapted by Dryden and Lee), it picturesquely refers to the snake-covered head of Alecto, one of the Furies, not merely in words but also in the writhing melodic line; and is another fine example of a ground bass.

The theatre-going public's thirst for the exotic and the new was grist to the mill of the London producers. Not content with gods, goddesses, chariots drawn by peacocks, fairies, etc, the creators of *The Fairy Queen* added a **Dance for the Chinese Man and Woman**. Tea was introduced to Britain in the 1600s and it was Charles II's wife Catherine who established its social success in the 1660s, although it only became widely available in the 1680s. Perhaps this is why China was on the minds of English writers and musicians, who had probably never seen anyone from that country.

A New Ground, another work using Purcell's preferred device of a ground bass, was originally written for keyboard alone. It is adapted from the song 'Here the Deities Approve', which features in the *Ode for St Cecilia's Day*. The addition here of a recorder brings out the poignant melodic line and refers neatly back to the original song texture of voice and accompaniment. Another song/keyboard transcription is found at track 14. Interpreted in this case on harp, the **Ground in D minor** has a close relationship with 'Crown the Altar, Deck the Shrine', a song from *Celebrate This Festival (Birthday Song for Queen Mary)*.

We return to *The Fairy Queen* for 'Hush, No More, Be Silent, All', 'O Let Me Weep', 'Rondeau', and 'Symphony while the Swans Come Forward'. The delicious baritone solo

written for the character of Sleep was a huge success. Roger North recalled in his journal the tremendous effect created by the pauses in between the sung words **Hush, No More, Be Silent, All**. 'Even [the] silence kept the time...'. The *Plaint, O Let Me Weep*, was added by Purcell for a revival in 1693. Once again the use of a descending ground bass lends a particularly despondent quality to this tiny, touching masterpiece. *The Fairy Queen*, like most such entertainments, is full of short contrasting items. The patience of the audience was never tested too far, and a taste of this variety is given on this disc. The **Rondeau** would have covered stage or scenery movement; and the **Symphony while the Swans Come Forward** was part of an amusing sequence of character dances.

Purcell was eventually appointed Master of the King's Music, a role which then (as now) saw him provide music for State occasions as the need arose. The death of the popular Queen Mary from smallpox on 28 December 1694 gave him one of his greatest challenges and produced some wonderful pieces for her *Funeral Music*. The solemn **March** (contrasting with the quiet valour of the **Canzona**) gives us some indication of the atmosphere of general mourning that existed over London at the time of her funeral.

Besides his royal duties and his theatrical pursuits, Purcell, like most of his colleagues, taught a number of private students. The

minuscule second **Minuet** from *The Double Dealer*, played here on piano, is thought to have been written for this purpose. A copy in Purcell's own handwriting was discovered in 1993, as part of a collection of 18th-century manuscripts sold at a London auction. There are only about 16 Purcell autograph manuscripts extant, so the appearance of an entire book of harpsichord music, including some completely unknown works, created much excitement. It seems to have been a teaching manual, and certainly the simple structure and relatively easy fingering of the Minuet would suit such a purpose.

This selective survey of one of England's finest composers ends as it began, with a solo harp tribute to his beloved **Fairest Isle**.

K.P. Kemp



"...his music is full of movement, of dance."

– GUSTAV HOLST

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