BMC 9 - HENRY PURCELL (1659-1695): NINE TRIO SONATAS (1697) from the set of Ten

Born in 1659, Henry Purcell was the finest and most original composer of his day. Though he was to live a very short life (he died in 1695) he was able to enjoy and make full use of the renewed flowering of music after the Restoration of the Monarchy. As the son of a musician at Court, a chorister at the Chapel Royal, and the holder of continuing Royal appointments until his death, Purcell worked in Westminster for three different Kings over twenty-five years.

In addition to his Royal duties he also devoted much of his talent to writing operas, or rather musical dramas, and incidental stage music; but he would also write chamber music in the form of harpsichord suites and trio sonatas, and became involved with the growing London public concert scene. Indeed one of the most important musical developments in Restoration London was the gradual establishment of regular public concerts. Even the few meetings that began as private concerns were eventually prevailed upon to admit the general public, such as the group that gave concerts in the Castle Tavern. Whereas other organizations charged only a shilling, their admittance fee was more than twice that sum, and before long they had enough capital to equip a music room in York Buildings.

By the time Henry Purcell began to attend such concerts in the 1670s there were many highly skilled players of the violin, cello, and flute, as well as exponents of the (for London) relatively new art of playing continuo instruments, the most usual being the organ and the harpsichord. For a newly created London Musical Society he produced Odes to celebrate Saint Cecilia's Day (the Patron Saint of Music) - which any music-lover so desirous may still celebrate on November 22^{nd} , and it was in gatherings such as these that the present Trio Sonatas would have been performed.

This second set of Trio Sonatas (the first having been published in 1683) consists of ten works, nine of which are recorded here. They were offered for sale in 1697 by J. Heptinstall on behalf of Purcell's widow, and since the publication took place after the composer's death, it is not surprising to find that the edition is considerably less accurate than the first set. It has been carefully corrected and revised for the present recording by Denis Stevens, and suitable ornamentation has been introduced.

SONATA I in B Minor. An Adagio proceeding at a dignified and imposing pace acts as a curtain-raiser for this work, whose principal movement is the scintillatingly Italianate Canzona. In the Largo which follows, Purcell extracts the last ounce of pathos from a descending sequence full of fine clashes between violins on the one hand and cello and harpsichord on the other. Another motive involving falling sequences pervades the Vivace, which later exploits a bell-like arpeggio figure, retained even in the Grave section which brings the work to a sonorous conclusion.

SONATA II in E-Flat. The violins, suavely paired throughout most of this opening Adagio, are played off one against the other in the sprightly Canzona, which shows us Purcell in his element combining the brilliance of individual soloists with the blend of concerted counterpoint. A quiet, relaxed Adagio leads to a song-like Largo and a fugal Allegro, both in three-time yet well-contrasted and complementary in mood. The final echo passage is typical of Purcell the dramatic composer.

SONATA III in A Minor. The Grave begins with a hint of one of those canons by augmentation found in Sonatas VI and VII in the first (1683) set. But the dominating idea turns out to be an angular yet expressive figure heard first in the first violin part, then in the second violin and cello. In the Largo, reminiscent of a binary-form dance type, the main key is retained but without its usual tension. An Adagio of solemn character successfully conceals more of Purcell's augmentation canons and melodic inversions, leading to a Canzona whose subject is outstanding in its combination of motive power and inherent contrast. For sheer excitement this movement is probably unsurpassed in the entire set. As a foil Purcell gives us a jig-like movement full of subtle harmonic turns, and as a coda a Grave with more surprises than one would expect in so brief a movement.

SONATA IV in D Minor. Instead of the usual homophonic, overture-like introduction, Purcell here allows himself an extended movement of fantasia proportions, in which the chromatic nature of the main

theme is put to work in a highly successful and memorable manner. The following *Allegro*, also highly imitative in style, provides the instrumentalists with greater opportunities for brilliance and display. A modulatory *Adagio* links up with a *Vivace* characterized by a subject of great energy and drive, enabling the composer to develop his lively ideas at greater length than usual. The final *Largo* is a genuine slow movement in which all the instruments are of importance, and near the end certain phrases are heard first *forte* then *piano* in an alternating pattern of statement and echo.

SONATA V in G Minor. A pleasing interplay of motives carries this opening movement through to the dramatic start of the Canzona, built unusually for Purcell on a double subject of great harmonic strength. In the Largo, pervading imitation does not lessen the lyrical appeal of the main theme and its offshoots, nor does the following (unmarked) movement lack in emotional depth. Suddenly a Presto in vigorous three-time intervenes, but its headlong career is stopped short by an Allegro launching a theme of peculiar and arresting cast. An Adagio coda brings us another of those extraordinary chromatic ascents over a tonic pedal.

SONATA VI in G Minor. This is totally unlike the other Sonatas in that a five-bar *Chaconne* bass pervades the entire work, and although there are clearly defined subsections and changes of time and mood, Purcell has here been clearly concerned with a large-scale integrated structure of unusual beauty and ingenuity. Verbal analysis can do little to explain the extraordinary nature of Purcell's modulations, all of which take place legally and logically within his self-imposed framework.

Repeated listening and study of the score is the key to genuine understanding of this undeniable masterpiece.

SONATA VII in C Major. A cheerful, extrovert *Vivace* leads to an unconventional *Largo* which begins in A minor and proceeds by way of a roundabout, echo-prone modulatory scheme to a totally unexpected cadence on C. A short *Grave* leads to a *Canzona* of irrepressible good humor and brilliance. For his last two movements Purcell chooses an *Allegro* in a jaunty, Scotch-snap style and an *Adagio* that almost misses its way to the final close.

SONATA VIII in G Minor. This is the third G minor work in the second set, suggesting that Purcell felt particularly at home in this key. His opening *Adagio* is in fact highly impressive in its use of rising chromatic sequences, and even the *Canzona* leans to an unusual degree on this type of inflexion in part of its main theme. A linking *Grave* introduces a theme whose falling contours - a step and a seventh in sequence - remind us more of Elgar than of Purcell, though both were English and may well be considered to share something real but indefinable in the history of musical style. This sublime movement is developed at great length and with remarkable concentration, and the motto-theme re-appears at the very end as if to sum up the mood of the whole. The *Vivace* finale is Purcell's answer to the *perpetuum mobile*.

SONATA IX in F Major. Known for centuries as the 'Golden Sonata' (though Purcell did not give it such a name) this has been the most famous of the 22 Trio Sonatas of his that have come down to us. The first movement has no tempo marking, but proceeds at a leisurely and dignified pace, with exchange of motives between bass and treble. In his *Adagio*, Purcell makes use of the sequential sighing motive already encountered in the first sonata of this 1697 set, though here the chromatic implications are more obvious. The *Canzona*, a classic of its kind, possesses all the elements of an early fugue, not excluding the excitement of a *stretto*. Turning to the relative minor for his *Grave*, a movement full of touching pathos, Purcell returns to the key of F for his final *Allegro*, a lithe and delicate farewell. **Denis Stevens**