

Tafelmusik

THE TAFELMUSIK PURCELL PROJECT

TEACHER AND STUDENT MATERIALS

This guide was created by Alison Mackay to accompany Tafelmusik's music education initiatives.

The CD referred to in this guide is:
Purcell: *Ayres for the Theatre* (CD# SK 66169)
Sony Classical: Vivarte 1995
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, Jeanne Lamon, Music Director

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A Note for Teachers:

The following pages present background material about Henry Purcell and musical life in seventeenth-century London, followed by a brief introduction to the pieces which the student groups will be learning.

The accompanying CD may be used to introduce students to the sound of a baroque orchestra and to the broad repertoire of Purcell's music for the theatre. Some of the pieces to be learned in the school ensembles appear on the CD although only in orchestral versions.

The Tafelmusik live performance which will come at the end of the project will use full orchestra, choir, solo singing and a baroque dancer to present the students with a fuller experience of how the music which they are learning might have been performed.

Henry Purcell, the great genius of English baroque music was born in London in 1659. For his entire life he lived within walking distance of Westminster Abbey, the church where English kings and queens are crowned and where the funeral of Princess Diana was held. Purcell became the organist of Westminster Abbey just before his twenty-first birthday and when he died at the tragically young age of 36 he was buried there at the foot of the organ.

Purcell's London was an exciting, crowded and dangerous city with noisy street vendors, cobblestone streets and wooden houses. When Henry was six, 70,000 people died in the plague which swept through the unsanitary city in the heat of the summer. A year later, in September of 1666, the great fire of London burned for five days and destroyed 13,000 houses and 87 churches including the great cathedral of St. Paul's. Many buildings were rebuilt by the famous seventeenth-century architect Christopher Wren, including a new St. Paul's and two new theatres, Drury Lane and Dorset Garden at which many works by Purcell were performed.

The main highway through London at this time was the river Thames, which cut through the middle of the city. It was easier to go by boat from place to place and then walk than to struggle through the narrow, crowded and dirty streets. When Purcell wanted to travel from his house near Westminster Abbey to the Dorset Garden Theatre for a rehearsal of one of his works, he could catch a river taxi and be rowed to the theatre steps which went right down to the water. The water-taxi union was so powerful in Purcell's lifetime that it was able to prevent bridges from being built across the river; there was only London bridge which was covered in houses and stores and which displayed the heads of convicted traitors on spikes at the gateway.

Henry Purcell's musical life was profoundly affected by political events in England. He was born just after the death of Oliver Cromwell, the puritan ruler of England who had executed Charles I, prohibited instrumental music in churches and closed down all the theatres in London. During his rule most musicians were unemployed and it was impossible for children to receive a formal music education because most teaching was done in schools associated with church choirs, which no longer existed. Cromwell's soldiers had been housed in Westminster Abbey and they had destroyed the organ and pawned the organ pipes to buy beer.

When Purcell was a year old, Charles I's oldest son was brought back from exile in France and was crowned Charles II. He was an enthusiastic lover of music and he particularly admired the orchestra and choir of Louis XIV of France (the young king portrayed in *Man in the Iron Mask*). Charles set about establishing a special royal choir for his private chapel and his own orchestra of 24 string players to perform at special

ceremonies and to entertain the king at dinner with a kind of music called "Tafelmusik" or table music.

When Henry Purcell was eight or nine he was chosen to sing as a boy treble in the king's chapel. He attended school there, was clothed and fed and was given lessons in singing, violin, organ and composition. The boys were also taught Latin, reading, writing and arithmetic.

Purcell's voice broke when he was 14, an unusually early age at this time of late puberty due to poor nutrition. He had to leave the choir but was given the job of repairman and tuner of instruments and music copyist. He began to show such talent in composition that when he was 18 he was appointed special composer to the king. He remained in the employ of the royal family until his death, through the reigns of Charles II, James II, and William and Mary.

Henry Purcell's compositions include hundred of works for every type of musical occasion. He wrote anthems and cantatas for church services, birthday odes and welcome songs for the royal family, songs for solo singers and instrumental works for organ, harpsichord and string ensembles.

Towards the end of his life he began to compose more and more music for the theatre. The monarchs at this time, William and Mary were not very interested in music and although they kept Purcell in their employ, they did not require him to write as much music for their daily activities at court. He used his free time to compose songs, dance music, choruses and instrumental interludes for new theatrical productions at the Dorset Garden theatre.

At this time there wasn't a strict line dividing drama, opera and ballet; play performances often included large amounts of singing and dancing. This had partly to do with the design of the theatres. In Shakespeare's time, a generation or two earlier, the audience had sat around the stage and were aware of any set changes. By the time of Purcell, the audience sat in front of the stage in a shoe-box shaped theatre and an arch over the stage blocked the backstage workings from the spectators. This helped to create a greater emphasis on illusion, and stage machinery was used to create magical scene changes as sophisticated as anything we know today. The audiences loved these spectacular effects and demanded more and more of them; therefore more and more incidental music, songs and dances were needed to cover the workings of the machines as the sets were changed.

The repertoire which the students will hear in the Tafelmusik concert is from Purcell's greatest works for the theatre, including *King Arthur*, *The Indian Queen* and

The Fairy Queen, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* which contained two hours of incidental music.

The program will include a wide variety of music, from energetic dances, to sad and tender love songs. In his own time, Purcell was renowned for his ability to use beautiful melodies and unusual harmonies to express strong emotions. His seventeenth-century publisher, Henry Playford, said that in his vocal music "he had a peculiar genius to express the energy of English words, whereby he moved the passions of all the auditors."

Midsummer Night's Dream was not Shakespeare's most popular play during Purcell's lifetime; the language was considered a bit uncouth and earthy. Yet because of its magical setting and exotic characters it lent itself to the spectacular stage effects described above. Of the 2100 lines in the original play, 950 were cut by the anonymous adaptor and 450 new ones were inserted to be spoken or sung. Changing Shakespeare's text seems like sacrilege to us today, but he simply was not revered at this time in the way that he is today.

The revised play was divided into five acts and at the end of each act new lines were inserted which allowed Titania or Oberon to introduce large musical interludes featuring rustic, magical or exotic characters who sang and danced. These interludes usually had little to do with the characters or action of the play and were really an excuse for lavish dance routines with astonishing scenery changes, much like the musicals of today.

Pieces for String Orchestra

1. Rondeau (*Fairy Queen*) Tafelmusik compact disc # 27

This beautiful piece with its tender returns to the opening material was played near the beginning of the play. The performance began with two sets of music called the "first music" and the "second music". The musicians assembled 20 minutes before the play began and played two pieces (the "first music"). Then the audience chatted for a while and two more pieces (the "second music") were played. Then after more chatting there was a grand overture with trumpets and drums. This rondeau was the second piece of the "second music".

2. Entry Dance (*Fairy Queen*)

This lively and angular dance was played in act V of the play in which Juno appeared in a machine drawn by peacocks. After some dialogue between Juno and Oberon, Juno sang an exquisite song called "The Plaint". Then the "entry dance" was played and danced to cover the darkening of the scene and the changing of the set to a spectacular garden in China.

3. Chaconne (*Fairy Queen*) Compact disc #39

This noble dance, one of the most wonderful of Purcell's compositions, comes at the end of the play and is danced by Chinese dancers in the garden.

Pieces for Choir

Purcell's vocal music in *The Fairy Queen* and *King Arthur* demonstrates many of the characteristics which have made him one of the most beloved composers of all time. He set poetry to music with imagination and expressiveness, using melody and harmony to change mood in a flash from tender pathos to sparkling wit. His seventeenth-century publisher, Henry Playford, said that "he had a peculiar genius to express the energy of English words, whereby he moved the passions of all the auditors."

1. "If love's a sweet passion" (*Fairy Queen*) CD # 31

Like many of Purcell's theatre songs this piece existed in several versions. In the original play it was introduced by the orchestra, sung by a soloist in verse 1 and sung by the choir in verse 2. In Purcell's time it was also published as a solo song and as an orchestral piece, as it is played on the Tafelmusik CD. In this version for choir, both verses have been set chorally and a keyboard reduction has been provided for rehearsal.

The song appears near the beginning of Act III of the play and is sung by a troop of fawns, dryads and naiads who have entered into a beautiful wood. Two great dragons make a bridge over the river; their bodies form two arches through which two swans are seen at a great distance. This is the song which Titania asks to have sung to entertain her new-found love, Bottom, who is in the form of a donkey.

2. "Now the night is chased away" (*Fairy Queen*)

This song is sung by soprano solo and chorus to welcome the dawn of King Oberon's birthday. The solo may be sung by a single voice or by the entire soprano section and the keyboard should play throughout.

3. "How blest are shepherds" (*King Arthur*) CD #16

Like "If love's a sweet passion" this song existed in several versions. It was sung by a shepherd (a tenor soloist) and by a chorus in a pastoral scene in the middle of Act II of the original play. It also existed in an orchestral version, which may be heard on the Tafelmusik CD.