

PROGRAM NOTES

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) is perhaps best remembered as a composer of music for the London stage, including one of the earliest fully-sung operas in English, *Dido and Aeneas*. Yet Purcell's involvement with theater was concentrated during the last five years of his brief life, after the accession of the monarch William and Mary heralded substantial cutbacks in music at the court, until that time Purcell's main source of employment. And music for the court was in large part sacred music.

Purcell was the son of a musician, but the father's early death in August 1664 probably meant that Henry's earliest musical tutoring came from his uncle Thomas Purcell, a prominent musician with appointments at court. Henry Purcell's most substantial early musical education came as a chorister at the Chapel Royal from 1669 to 1673. On 10 September 1677, Purcell was appointed to his first court position, as "composer in ordinary for the violin" for King Charles II. Added to this were appointments as organist for Westminster Abbey in 1679 and for the Chapel Royal in 1682, all posts he held for life.

The most voluminous genre of Purcell's music for the church is the anthem in English (some sixty-five of these pieces have survived). So it is somewhat of a surprise to encounter Purcell's settings (from around 1680) of scripture in Latin. For the two settings on our program, there may be two explanations. In the summer of 1680, Henry Purcell married Frances Peters, the daughter of Catholic parents, for whom the Latin text of *Beati omnes qui timent Dominum* would have seemed quite appropriate as a wedding song. Its text from Psalm 128 has lines—for example "Thy wife shall be as the fruitful vine upon the walls of thy house"—that are compelling evidence that Purcell may have written this piece for his own wedding. The motet *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*, on the other hand, may have been composed for the religious observances of Charles II's Catholic queen, Catherine of Braganza.

Eric Van Tassel has offered another reason why *Beati omnes* could be a wedding song: "the translucent gaiety of the music." He wrote further that

the motif on 'Ecce, sic benedicetur' runs through the texture, descending again and again like a rain of blessings; still more playfully pictorial are the two solo passages, with swirling sixteenth notes 'in lateribus' that portray the vine climbing around the house, and ornate filigree in the soprano solo to depict children dancing around the table.

Van Tassel finds more pictorialism in *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*: "One example, to stand for many, is the paragraph 'Voca mea ad Jehovam': the cry of the faithful is in block chords, expressing unanimity, but the reply is in five-part imitation, the voices seeming to enter from all sides because God is, of course, everywhere."

The New Year of 1718 found George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) in the midst of a gradual turn in his career. Almost seven years after achieving a sensational success with *Rinaldo*, his first opera for the London stage, Italian opera in England was an increasingly risky financial proposition: it was losing much of its audience to the increasingly popular English operas by the likes of John Christopher Pepusch, and—without sold-out houses and multiple performances—the sets, costumes, and star singers of Italian opera were impossible to support. Beginning in June 1717, there was a hiatus in performances of Italian operas at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, with no likely prospect of early resumption. Around the same time, Handel—temporarily forsaking opera—went into the service of the Earl of Carnarvon at his mansion Cannons, north of London.

It was there that Handel composed two works that were potentially viable alternatives to Italian opera, the masque *Acis and Galatea* and the oratorio *Esther*, both with texts in English. (The genre of the masque—very popular in 17th-century England—was intended as an entertainment for a social occasion, so its production values were not nearly as elaborate as fully staged opera.). The Earl of Carnarvon was a friend of the Earl of Burlington, patron of the poets John Gay, Alexander Pope, and John Hughes, so these men were called upon to fashion a libretto for *Acis and Galatea* from a story in Book XIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Winton Dean has summarized the plot:

The shepherd Acis and the nymph Galatea are in love, but Acis has a rival in the giant Polyphemus, who pays clumsy court to Galatea. Though warned by the chorus of nymphs and shepherds, and despite the pleading of Galatea ..., Acis defies the giant. While the lovers pledge eternal faith the furious Polyphemus kills Acis with a massive rock. The chorus suggest to the disconsolate Galatea that she use her divine powers to make him immortal. She changes him to a fountain, and the chorus bid her dry her tears: he will flow on forever, 'murmuring still his gentle love.'

Little is known of the 1718 performance of *Acis and Galatea* at Cannons, but Handel revisited the work in 1732 after the Little Theatre in the Haymarket—a rival of the King's Theatre—gave two staged performances of *Acis* without Handel's collaboration or permission. Handel retaliated a few weeks later by performing *Acis* at the King's Theatre in

a greatly expanded version that interpolated numbers from ten other works and was sung in a mixture of English and Italian. In 1739, nearing the end of his career as an opera composer, Handel pruned the 1732 version of *Acis*, restored its text to English-only, added some extra instrumental parts, and composed a few new passages. Handel's last performance of *Acis and Galatea* in Dublin in 1742 presented the work as it is known from most modern performances. Then John Walsh published the full score in 1743. *Acis and Galatea* remained extremely popular, receiving 106 performances during Handel's life.

Winton Dean writes that, despite the work's designation as a masque, the music of *Acis and Galatea*

is intensely dramatic and seems to yearn for the theatre, not surprisingly because Handel was before all else an opera composer. From the chorus 'Wretched lovers' to the end the score constantly suggests physical action and the clash of personalities: the giant strides of Polyphemus, the clumsiness of his wooing, his fury cutting across the lovers' congruence in the trio ..., the vividness and pathos of Acis's dying recitative, the sudden interruption of Galatea's lament, where the chorus becomes an active participant in the drama.

With such music, it is no wonder that Handel's first dramatic work in English is as beloved and frequently performed as his best known oratorios, *Messiah* standing as the single exception.

John Shepard
Head, Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, UC Berkeley