

В СОЮЗЕ СО СЛОВОМ IN ALLIANCE WITH THE WORD



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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

IN THE SECULAR SOLO SONGS BY HENRY PURCELL

The subject of the article is the texts of the poets of Purcell's contemporaries, which served as a literary basis for the secular non-theatrical songs of the "British Orpheus". The list of masters of the word includes names very well-known to lovers of poetry during the Restoration – these are Abraham Cowley, Charles Sedley, Katherine Philips, Thomas Stanley, playwrights George Etherege, William Congreve, Nahum Tate, Thomas D'Urfey, as well as lesser-known poets – Matthew Prior, editor of the popular London Gentleman's Journal Peter Anthony Motteux, Anne Wharton and others.

The author believes that the dominant factors in the selecting of text were the popularity of the poet and the ease of setting the poetic lines. Nevertheless, for the modern reader and listener, the lyrics of the Restoration have an undoubted artistic and historical value, reflecting, sometimes in seemingly unpretentious poems, the tastes and aesthetic priorities

of the era. The article highlights the main figurative spheres of Purcell's songs, connected, on the one hand, with the erotic poetry of 'court wits', and, on the other hand, with the theme of nature and loneliness, with motives of sadness and loss, with mourning symbolism.

The poems are replete with allusions to the poetry of Shakespeare and the Cavalier poets of the first half of the seventeenth century, evoke associations with Greek and Roman poetry, building invisible bridges between the writings of Anacreon, Theocritus and Horace and the educated listeners of the second half of the seventeenth century, who probably knew ancient works by heart. Intellectuals from Purcell's surroundings could certainly appreciate direct quotations from Shakespeare, as in the case of the song "If music be the food of love".

Keywords: Restoration poets, Henry Purcell, secular solo song, Libertinage.

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АНГЛИЙСКАЯ ПОЭЗИЯ XVII ВЕКА

В СОЛЬНЫХ СВЕТСКИХ ПЕСНЯХ ГЕНРИ ПЕРСЕЛЛА

В статье исследуются тексты поэтов современников Перселла, послужившие литературной основой для светских внетеатральных песен «Британского Орфея». Список мастеров слова включает имена, весьма известные любителям поэзии времен Реставрации, – это Абрахам Каули, Чарльз Седли, Екатерина Филипс, Томас

Стэнли, драматурги Джордж Этеридж, Уильям Конгрив, Наум Тейт, Томас Дурфи, а также менее известные сочинители – Мэтью Прайор, редактор популярного лондонского журнала «Gentleman's Journal» Питер Энтони Матто, Энн Уортон и др. Автор полагает, что доминирующими факторами в выборе текста являлись

популярность поэта и легкость переложения стихотворных строк. Тем не менее, для современного читателя и слушателя поэтическая лирика Реставрации обладает несомненной художественной и исторической ценностью, отражая, порой в незатейливых на первый взгляд стихах, вкусы и эстетические приоритеты эпохи. В статье освещаются основные образные сферы песен Перселла, связанные, с одной стороны, с эротической поэзией поэтов-остроумцев, а с другой, – с темой природы и одиночества, с мотивами печали и утраты, с траурной символикой. Стихотворения изобилуют намеками на поэзию Шекспира и поэтов-кавалеров первой

половины XVII столетия, вызывают ассоциации с древнегреческой и древнеримской поэзией, наводя невидимые мосты между сочинениями Анакреона, Феокрита и Горация и образованными слушателями времен Перселла, которые, несомненно, знали античные произведения наизусть. Интеллектуалы из окружения Перселла наверняка могли оценить и прямые цитаты из Шекспира, как в случае с песней «Коль музыка есть пища для любви».

Ключевые слова: поэты Реставрации, Генри Перселл, сольная светская песня, английский либертинаж.

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Purcell composed several hundred secular songs, a considerable part of which belong to music for the theatre. In the authoritative thematic catalogue of the works of Purcell by Franklin Zimmerman [1] around two hundred secular songs are divided into the independent rubric 'Songs', another roughly one hundred songs are classified as 'Theatre Music'. In the catalogue a distinct section for 'Operas' appears, into which songs (they are called arias in the catalogue) from the opera *Dido and Aeneas* and five semi-operas are included.

The subject of analysis of the present article are songs included in the twenty second volume of the Complete collected works of Purcell, published by the Purcell Society, edited by Margaret Laurie. Only solo songs were included in this volume. The complete collection of the works, presented in the edition, reaches 130, including three versions of the song 'If music be the food of love' and several so-called 'mock songs', which were the result of the sub-text of instrumental compositions. Ninety songs from the Twenty-Second volume are 'independent songs' which do not belong to the theatrical music.

One must admit that the authorship of the texts of solo secular songs by Purcell has only been established for half of them. However, this does not prevent us from noting certain names of poets and to characterise those enlightened spheres which were primary for the composer. English texts alone always served as the poetic basis for the songs of the master. The sole exception comprises 'Incassum Lesbia, incassum rogas' (1695), whose words were written by R. Herbert in Latin. Almost nothing is

known of the author of the text. Robert King found it necessary to specify that Mr. Herbert had no connection with the famous George Herbert, who had already died in 1633 [2, p. 43]. The song was composed on the death of Queen Mary II and first appeared with the sub-title 'Queen's Epicedium' in the anthology 'Three elegies upon the Much Lamented Loss of Our Late Most Gracious Queen Mary sett to musick by Dr. Blow and Mr. Henry Purcell', published by Henry Playford (1695). Robert King notes that "Purcell's setting of the last phrase, 'Stella sua fixa coelum ultra lucet' ('Her star, immovable, shines on in the heavens') is quite magical" [see *ibid.*].

The number of creations, comprising Purcell's immortal glory include songs to poems by Abraham Cowley, 'How delightful's the life of an innocent swain', 'I came, I saw'; 'She loves and she confesses too', 1683; 'They say you're angry', 1685. In the Seventeenth Century Cowley was not just in fashion, he was really famous. His poems from the anthology 'The Mistress' (1647) were often used by a series of composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: John Blandeville, William King, Robert King, John Blow, William Turner, Francis Pigot etc. Even the outstanding Italian, Pietro Reggio (1632–1685), who served the English court, left several songs to metaphorical poems from 'The Mistress'.

Peter Holman assumes that "Cowley appealed greatly to serious-minded Restoration composers because he retained the lofty tone and extravagant images of the Metaphysical, but developed a simple, bold, and informal style" [3, p. 44]. And although nowadays literary criticism is not unanimous

in the evaluation of Cowley's creations, his contemporaries, on the other hand, considered him as very talented. In the collection *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey (1626–1697), the historian and memoirist, and no less important, "the fellow drinker and gourmet of many distinguished personalities of the Seventeenth Century" [4, p. 277], has reported an interesting fact from the life of A. Cowley: the Duke of Buckingham bought an estate from the Queen Mother "and then freely bestowed it on his beloved Cowley" [5]. The fact that after his death he was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, alongside Geoffrey Chaucer, also suggests the great respect felt for the poet. In the National Portrait Gallery in London a portrait of Cowley, attributed to the brush of Charles II's court painter, Peter Lely (1618–1680) is preserved. During his lifetime this very poet was so popular that he eclipsed the fame of Milton.

The love lyrics of Abraham Cowley are full of childish humour, sharp sighted details and references familiar to everyone. His even and sweet poetry, so prized by the classicists is bereft of real passion, but impresses by its expressiveness and its refined relation to love, as a Platonic feeling, which does not lead to fatal disappointments.

Amongst those poets to whose poems Purcell wrote were also the so-called 'court wits', sharp-tongued courtiers. This refers to George Etherege and Charles Sedley, who were members of the 'Merry Gang', described as such by the great poet Andrew Marvell. Apart from Etherege and Sedley, Henry Jermy, John Sheffield, John Wilmot, Henry Killigrew, the dramatist William Wicherley, and also George Villiers belonged to this group. Without dwelling on each one individually, we would say that all of them were of titled family, belonging to the closest circles of King Charles II; they were considered libertines. One of their 'innocent adventures' is described thus in the book *The History of the Western European Theatre from its Origins up to 1789*: "They hired a roadside inn on the outskirts of London; there, cross-dressed as publicans, they beat into unconsciousness men visiting them with their wives and daughters, and molested the women" [6]. The chronicles of those days are coloured with scandalous anecdotes about their adventures, though they were all talented people. Sir Charles Sedley (1639–1728) went down in history as a satirist, a playwright and a politician (Speaker of the House of Commons). Sir George Etheridge deserved respect as a dramatist. As the inventor of the comedy of intrigue he laid down a path for the outstanding plays by William Congreve. In their poems, the 'Merry Gang' celebrated the physical-emotional nature of love. The simple and occasionally indecent verses about Celias, Lucindas, Dorindas, shepherds,

nymphs and so on rested on a particular aesthetic platform, which was later characterised as literary libertinage.

The poetry of the libertines was undoubtedly far from an elevated feeling of love. "Indeed, the most immediate and contemporary, which the literature (culture) of libertinage embraces for us today", – writes the philologist and translator E. E. Dmitrieva, – "is that it touches on those aspects of the affective, physical, physiological life of man, which the 'classical' chaste literature in general and on the whole barely touches ... In these texts there is present a simultaneously joyful and sad exposure of how far our feelings are produced by the circumstances around us and therefore how ephemeral they are, how ephemeral therefore is that theatrical decoration, which generates them. But exactly this fugitive beauty also seems achingly attractive" (cited in: [7, p. 96]). And although Dmitrieva's statement relates directly to the French libertine poets, it is entirely just for English erotic poetry also.

Purcell did not belong to the iconoclasts of the old philosophy of moral values, but he did not account himself as one of the anchorite either. His many catches (rounds), genuine witnesses of the morals of that period, confirm the latter. Sharp jokes and unambiguous parodies impregnate their texts.

Cocerning the poetry of Sedley, Etherege and authors like them, Purcell selected texts, deprived of that shocking eroticism, which was characteristic of the poems of the majority of the libertines. The shapes of the traditional lovers, whether Phyllis, Aminta, Celia or Lucinda, the presence of the verbal clichés 'cruel world', 'golden joys', 'the god of love', 'her smile and touch', for Purcell this was just a textual backdrop for the creation of emotional, expressive and variegated musical forms.

Purcell turned to that formal structure more than once. Such songs as 'I loved fair Celia', 1694, to Bernard Howard's poem, 'Musing on cares of human fate' 1685, to the poem of Thomas D'Urfey, 'Sylvia, now your scorn give over', 1688, 'When first my shepherdess and I', 1687, 'Love is now become a trade', 1685, to the poems of unknown authors and many more.

Speaking of poems which were set to Purcell's music, it is important to remember that many of the authors were not professional poets at all. Belonging to a certain social stratum and being well-educated people, they composed poems, thereby filling their leisure time. The poems were re-written, manuscripts circulated from hand to hand. Even the great Andrew Marvell (1621–1678) did not take his poems seriously and therefore did not publish them. It is quite likely that they would have remained that way, had it not been for the fact, that three years

after his death, his housekeeper, claiming to be his widow, undertook their first edition.

All things considered, for the composer, as also for the performer of the second half of the Seventeenth Century, the authorship of the text of a solo song, was actually, not that important. The theme itself and the means of realising it were much more important. As J. A. Westrup writes, "the whole temper of the times was subjective. The lover, the mourner, the penitent – each was deeply conscious of his personal relationship towards the object of his passion, his tears or his worship; and whether the theme was the cruelty of a reluctant mistress, the bitterness of inexorable fate or man's humility before God, the single fount of melody and harmony supplied them all" [8, p. 162].

Several of the poets were published under pseudonyms. For example, Katherine Philips (1631–1664), the poetess famed in intellectual circles, signed herself as 'Matchless Orinda'. Her close friend was the celebrated metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan (1622–1695), Abraham Cowley mourned her death in an elegy, and a century and a half later the Romantic poet John Keats was delighted by her poems. K. Philips mastered several languages and apart from the composition of poems (there are more than one hundred of them) she occupied herself with translations. One of these translations from French came to the attention of Henry Purcell. This concerns the poem 'La Solitude' by the French poet Marc-Antoine Girard de Saint-Amand. This elegant composition became the basis for the spritual song 'O Solitude, my sweetest choice', 1687. The introductory phrase of the song opens with a descending seventh on the words "O Solitude", after which a softly unravelling descending roulade follows on the word "sweetest". These two motifs develop in a composition of unrepeatabe beauty and depth of feeling. The minor key, the reserve and a certain hesitation in the expression of emotion permit the discovery of the sub-text of the content of the song: behind the acknowledged solitude of the rural estate, far from fuss and noise, behind a love of the greenery of the trees and the peaks of the mountains lies a deep feeling of loneliness.

The motif of solitude in Purcell's songs co-exists with the motif of loss. According to the traditions of the time both these motifs are expressed in terms of pastoral symbolism and are encompassed in the framework of the genre of a poetic elegy. One of these lyrical compositions, in which the emotion of shame predominates is the song 'Draw near, you lovers' to the text of Thomas Stanley's poem 'The Exequies'. Thomas Stanley, poet and translator from Greek, Latin, Italian and Spanish, was a well-known person. They knew his poems, eagerly set them to

music and included them in numerous song books of the time.

To the songs of similar content can be attached 'A pastoral elegy on the death of Mr. John Playford', 'An elegy on the death of Mr. Thomas Farmer, B. M.' The author of the words of the song has been definitely established as the well known dramatist and Poet Laureate, Nahum Tate (1652–1715). The authorship of the words of the second song is also ascribed to him, though a unanimous opinion on this question has not yet formed amongst investigators. One could write more than one page on the close collaboration between Purcell and Tate. Their joint creativity was undoubtedly crowned by 'Dido', however this was not the only fruit of their collaboration. As a poet, Nahum Tate earned much criticism, but whatever the literary merits of his poems, they were entirely appropriate for their musical realisation. The editor of the Twenty-Second volume of the complete works of Purcell, Margaret Laurie, who laboured over the decoding of the songs of the English master, called 'An Elegy on the death of Mr. John Playford' a masterpiece on a technical as on an emotional level [9, p. 22].

The majority of the texts of the songs abound in the names of personalities of antique poetry, well known to the intellectuals in the circles of the composer. One even encounters direct quotations of Shakespeare, as in the song 'If music be the food of love', 1692. The first line of this poem is borrowed from the comedy 'Twelfth Night' (Duke Orsino's soliloquy, Act 1, scene 1). The poetical elegance of the form of the music as "food of love" was the impulse for the creation of poetry fully in the spirit of the age of Purcell, where the sensitivity of the perception of the form of the real lover entices more strongly than the fleshless "spirit of love".

The literary source of this song was a poem by Purcell's contemporary, Colonel Henry Heveningham [?] (1651–1700). All things considered Purcell surrendered to the spell of these lines: if it were only him! The poem literally intoxicated composers of the Twentieth Century. In 1933 a song cycle 'Old Wine in New Bottles: Four Restoration Songs' were published by the English composer Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889–1960). As Number three in this cycle a song is marked with the title 'If music be the food of love'. There is a song by the contemporary Danish composer Wim Zvaag (b. 1960) with this text. The song is a part of a vocal cycle 'Music for a While' (Four Songs for high voice and cello), 2003.

It would be wrong to consider that all the poetry selected by Purcell for music was mediocre. In the majority of cases he gave preference to English lyrics by his contemporaries. In these poetical compositions a pastoral thematic was widely

represented, which gave way to motifs of pure innocence, and ill concealed candour, exceeding the limits of the permitted. The palette of poetical forms contained motifs of melancholy and sadness, solitude and the tragedy of loss, complaints and of ill-concealed shame.

There is no doubt that Purcell's texts are no random selection. However, the composer did not

always demonstrate scrupulosity in relation to the high artistic value of the poems. The predominant factor in the selection of poems was rather the popularity of the poet and the ease of matching the words to the music. All the same, the poems chosen by him were masterfully polished, purged of heaviness, which gave Purcell an opportunity to create enchanting music on their basis.

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