

## Baroque spaces

UCL CMC concert on Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023

### A note on the accompaniments

An essential part of almost all accompaniments in the Baroque era was the continuo – a line played by a bass instrument over which a harmony instrument (e.g. organ, harpsichord, lute) would improvise; often, but not always, the notation would include numbers to indicate chords, hence the term ‘figured bass’. (So common was the continuo that when it was not present in a composition this might be stated on the title page – see the Telemann trio at the end of today’s concert: ‘without bass’.) The continuo on its own frequently constituted the accompaniment to vocal and instrumental solos; such is the case with Purcell’s ‘Music for a While’ – the original score would have consisted of just the vocal line and a bass line. Versions for piano accompaniment which ‘realise’ the continuo’s implied harmony have varied in approach over the years, and views of what is appropriate have developed and changed. Two of the outstanding English composers of the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett, were great admirers of Purcell, and both produced versions for voice and piano of various of his songs including ‘Music for a While’. Tippett’s, from 1947, was for a long time the standard arrangement; it is still serviceable, but perhaps over-elaborate, with a too active right-hand part – it is as if Tippett was attempting to provide the upper instrumental parts that Purcell didn’t write. Britten’s version of 1945, with detailed markings of dynamics and articulation, very full chords and octave doublings, is pianistic in the extreme, at times feeling closer to Rachmaninov than anything Purcell might have recognised! Nowadays a simpler style seems appropriate: it should not be forgotten that the essential musical content is a duet between the vocal and bass lines. Nor should it be forgotten that while the bass line is crucial a realisation (i.e. basically what the right hand is given to play) is not sacrosanct – it is simply one arranger’s idea of what works. A pianist should be prepared to make adjustments – unless, that is, one is setting out to perform, say, ‘Purcell arr. Britten’, which is a rather different matter from performing ‘Purcell’.

But of course the piano accompanist for e.g. Baroque arias is quite likely to be faced with a piano reduction of an orchestral score, as in the Handel and Bach vocal contributions to this evening’s concert. Handel’s ‘Dolci chiodi’ is relatively unproblematic: the scoring is quite transparent, consisting simply of first and second violins plus continuo. The texture is uncomplicated and a piano reduction can contain all the notes of the string parts in a playable format. By contrast, the accompaniment to Bach’s ‘Vergnügte Ruh’, with three upper parts (first and second violins and viola) plus continuo in typically full contrapuntal textures, transfers much less gratefully to the keyboard. While a piano reduction can, in principle, contain all the notes that Bach wrote, the result of such literalness is awkward for the player and potentially confusing for the listener; and, I would argue, it does not resemble what Bach would have written had he been composing a genuine keyboard accompaniment, as indeed he did for some of his instrumental sonatas. (A reduction for organ would be a different matter, with the possibility of the parts being distributed over two manuals plus pedals.) It is not only so as to make the music easier to play but to clarify its

essentials for the listener that the pianist is, I think, justified in simplifying and leaving things out: sometimes, as the saying goes, 'less is more'.

*Roger Beeson*

### **Johann Sebastian Bach, 'Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust'**

'Vergnügte Ruh' is the opening movement of J.S. Bach's solo cantata for the sixth Sunday after Trinity, first performed in Leipzig on 28 July 1726. The words are by Georg Christian Lehms (1684-1717), a quite prolific literary figure in various genres, several of whose cantata texts Bach set.

Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust,  
dich kann man nicht bei Höllensünden,  
wohl aber Himmelseintracht finden;  
du stärkst allein die schwache Brust.  
Drum sollen lauter Tugendgaben  
in meinem Herzen Wohnung haben.

*Pleasant rest, beloved delight of the soul, you cannot be found among the sins of hell, but indeed in the concord of heaven; you alone strengthen the weak breast. Therefore nothing but the gifts of virtue shall have a dwelling in my heart.*

### **Henry Purcell, 'Music for a While'**

Purcell composed 'Music for a While' for a revival of the tragedy *Oedipus* by John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee. It forms part of the 'incantation' scene: a priest attempts to soothe the Furies so that they will allow the ghost of the murdered king Laius to appear from the depths.

Music for a while  
Shall all your cares beguile:  
Wond'ring how your pains were eas'd  
And disdain'g to be pleas'd  
Till Alecto free the dead  
From their eternal bands,  
Till the snakes drop from her head,  
And the whip from out her hands.

### **George Frederick Handel, 'Dolci chiodi, amate spine'**

Handel spent much of the period from 1706 till 1708 in Rome where his principal patron was the Marchese (Marquis) Francesco Maria Ruspoli. It was at the latter's residence that the Italian-language oratorio *La resurrezione* was performed on Easter Sunday 1708, with an orchestra of forty-five players led by Arcangelo Corelli. Part 1 of the oratorio is set on Holy Saturday (the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday); in the duet 'Dolci chiodi' the women followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleophas, lament his death and express their devotion.

**Magdalene:**

Dolci chiodi, amate spine,  
da quei piedi e da quel crine,  
deh passate nel mio sen.

*Sweet nails, beloved thorns, from those feet and from that brow, ah! enter into my breast.*

**Cleophas:**

Cara effigie adolorata,  
benché pallida e piagata,  
sei mia vita, sei mio ben.

*Dear sorrowful countenance, though pale and wounded, you are my life, you are my love.*

**Georg Philipp Telemann,**

**Sonata for three treble recorders without bass No.3 in D minor**

This sonata is from a set of trios for flute, violin or other instruments without bass, published in Paris about 1740. In the case of those for flutes (or recorders) only the second flute part has survived. The other two parts have been reconstructed by Winfried Michel and the movements have been transposed up a third for recorders as is customary.