

Purcell's Early Years

Background

Henry Purcell is believed to have been born in 1659 near Westminster Abbey in London England. Henry's parents are believed to be Henry the court composer, Senior, and his wife Elizabeth. Little is known about our hero's childhood, as might be suggested from the speculation over his origins. Many of the following statements are based on related facts that given time and place, may be used to hypothesize the specifics of where and what Henry was doing at a specific point in time.

Henry Senior and his brother Thomas were both actively involved as court musicians in London. Henry Senior died early, likely as a victim of the plague that devastated much of London in 1666. Thus, Thomas Purcell, our hero's uncle, had more influence on the early years of the young musician than did his father. Thomas must have exposed Henry to music thus prompting Henry's mother, Elizabeth, to send her son off to become a choirboy in the Chapel Royal: "Elizabeth Purcell was a single mother on a limited income□so the opportunity for one of her boys to be given a decent education, clothed and fed must have been most welcome." (King, 59) It was common for a boy between the ages of eight and nine to become a chorister and continue his training until puberty when the voice began to break.

Probable Training

In 1668 at the age of about eight Henry became a member of the boy's choir at the Chapel Royal under the supervision of Henry Cooke, Master of the Children. Cooke was in charge of the boys' musical training which included violin, bass viol, theorbo, virginals, organ, and music theory. (King, 60) He also supervised other aspects of their young lives such as:

1. Other non-musical forms of education
 - a. Latin, b. reading, c. writing, and d. arithmetic;
2. Health;
3. Living environment. (King, 60,62)

Life did not always go smoothly for pupils or master. In June 1670 Cooke submitted a petition to the King which read: "The children not receiving their liveries as usual, are reduced to so bad a condition that they are unfit to attend his majesty, or walk in the streets. Begs an order for their liveries, the charge not being great." (King , 60)

Cooke often used his own funds to provide for his choirboys in hopes to be repaid by the King. With the financial status of the Royal Court, Cooke was frequently owed large sums of money throughout his career. In fact, at the time of his death the Court still owed Cooke 1,600 pounds. (King, 64) In spite of his financial concerns, Cooke was a wonderful choirmaster, and was also noted as a wonderful musician with a good voice. It must have been a blow to the boys when Captain Henry Cooke died in 1672 and his son-in-law, Pelham Humfrey, took over his position as Master of the Children of the Royal Chapel. Humfrey was well-liked at court. He, along with Henry's uncle Thomas Purcell, was a court composer. Humfrey was well known for his compositions for voice and violin. (King, 64)

Other Activities of the Chapel Royal Choirboys

Late in 1671 members of the Chapel Royal began to perform in public theaters in London. Purcell is believed to have performed with William Davenant's company. The choirboys were expected to participate in various musical stage performances.

(Zimmerman, 30) These performances may have been an extremely important influence in Purcell's career as a composer for the London theaters. (King, 63)

Choirboys were encouraged to compose while at the Chapel Royal choir school. Purcell's "first occasional work," written for King Charles II is believed to be "the 'Address of the children of the Chapel Royal to the King, and their master, Captain Cooke, on his Majesty's birthday, A.D. 1670, composed by Master Purcell, one of the children of the said chapel.'" (Zimmerman, 29) Unfortunately, none of Henry Purcell's compositions from this time period survived.

Other Musical Influences

In 1673 Henry Purcell's voice began to break, ending his career as a choirboy for the Chapel Royal. Humfrey helped him to obtain an apprenticeship under John Hingeston. Hingeston repaired and tuned the instruments of the Chapel Royal. Henry was unpaid, but upon the death of John Hingeston he would assume the position and payment of his late supervisor. This was a great job for Henry in which to make good connections at the Royal Court. (King, 66).

John Blow followed Humfrey as the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal. Blow was a friend and teacher of Henry Purcell, and had a great amount of influence on Purcell's compositional skills. Blow used two methods of teaching: "Rules for playing of the Thorough Bass upon Organ and Harpsichord" (rules for accompaniment), and "Rules for Composition." (Zimmerman, 40) A man by the name of Christopher Gibbons was also highly influential on Henry Purcell in the area of Keyboarding skills. (King, 61)

One of the great composers of the 17th Century English Court was Matthew Locke. Locke was a friend of Henry Purcell's father and uncle, Henry senior and Thomas Purcell. Henry sang many of Locke's pieces as a choirboy of the Chapel Royal. Henry also may have heard and possibly performed Locke's music for the London theaters in the 1670's. It is not certain whether Purcell was an actual pupil of Locke. However, it is certain that Locke had a great deal of influence on the works of Henry Purcell. (King, 72-73).

Locke died in 1677 and Henry Purcell about eighteen years of age replaced him as a court composer for King Charles II. Many of Purcell's early compositions at court were for performances in the Chapel Royal. (King, 75) Purcell composed secular music as well as sacred. It is believed that the first Purcell works ever printed were secular songs. (King, 82). In 1679 Purcell left his position as court composer for an appointment as the organist at the Westminster Abbey. It is possible that his former friend and teacher John Blow suggested Purcell for the appointment. (King, 81)

Henry Purcell grew up in a time of devastating plague and an era of war; he lived in a nation that faced a series of financial crises (in which bankruptcy loomed large as a possibility) and in a single parent household. Certainly, his future prospects must at times have seemed quite dim. Yet, Henry Purcell managed to overcome these obstacles to become one of the greatest composers of the seventeenth century.