

Programme notes by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) A selection of Fantasias (1680)

Fantasia 7 in C minor, Z.738

Fantasia 8 in D minor, Z.739

Fantasia 11 in G Major, Z.742

"The poet wishes well to the divine genius of Purcell and praises him that, whereas other musicians have given utterance to the moods of man's mind, he has, beyond that, uttered in notes the very make and species of man as created both in him and in all men generally." Gerard Manley Hopkins' dedication to his poem Henry Purcell.

Purcell wrote his fifteen or so Fantasias & In Nomines when a young man of 21. Three years earlier, around his 18th birthday, he had replaced Matthew Locke as composer for the 24-strong violin band at court and two years later had replaced John Blow as organist at Westminster Abbey. He probably wrote the Fantasias as contrapuntal exercises, with no expectation of their being published and little of their being performed. Indeed, publication had to wait almost 250 years for Peter Warlock to edit their manuscript in the British Library. They can be regarded as a tribute to a dying style that had flourished with Simpson and Locke. Grove's Dictionary: *"After 1660 the English repertory of viol fantasias quickly fell into neglect 'by reason of the scarcity of Auditors that understand it' ". Purcell is unlikely to have been able to assemble a suitable consort of viols to play his Fantasias.*

The technical expertise of their composition however is remarkable. Grove again: *"In form, instrumentation and style these are closely patterned on fantasias of Locke; but Purcell's mastery of the techniques of contrapuntal elaboration (augmentation, inversion, double and triple 'fuge') and the highly expressive use of chromaticism and dissonance in his slow sections give these last examples of the genre a unique brilliance and intensity."*