

Henry Purcell's Dynamics and Articulation:

O God, thou hast cast us out

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When we look at articulation and dynamics in the Baroque era, there was a big transition from the renaissance era to the later Baroque era. Choral music was starting to be more efficient in church choirs and tonality was starting to be well known in different pieces of music literature. In Henry Purcell's piece titled "O God, thou hast cast us out," it really invites a whole new meaning of the Baroque sound. How did the number of voices affect dynamics and even text painting as a whole? As a future choral director, it will be my responsibility to bring these things into light, but what was Purcell thinking that could affect his audience to draw closer to God? By studying Purcell's personal life, his ability to show a call and response between voices alongside text painting, and understanding his organ career, Purcell's intention for "O God, thou hast cast us out" becomes clear.

Purcell had a very interesting life to start out with. Growing up, his dad passed away in 1664 while Henry was only 5 years old. However, his uncle, Thomas Purcell, took him under his wing and was later appointed chorister at the Royal Chapel. He also started composing at the age of nine and eventually made his way into the opera scene. During that time and his later life, he composed a lot of choral pieces that were implemented in church choirs and eventually became a part of the cathedral that he worked at. In accordance with all of this, there is a PH-D scholar named Percy A. Scholes who stated that "Purcell [was] able to care for himself [at six years old]."¹ All of Purcell's achievements and status was because he had to grow up more than his peers at the age of six. That means he was gaining experience from other composers and other

¹ Scholes, "Henry Purcell: A Sketch of A Busy Life" 446.

well-renowned individuals to dive into his own composer regime especially in opera and his choral arrangements. In “O God, thou hast cast us out” we’re going to see that there is a performance perspective that came about from one of his operas that he composed as a kid titled, “Dido and Aeneas Act 3, Conclusion.”

There is a specific spot in Dido and Aeneas Dido’s overture that is very similar to the song “O God, thou hast cast us out.” In Dido’s Lament, there is a part in the chorus where there are tons of imitation between the soprano and tenor. In the sheet music, it states as follows:

In the squared off boxes, each melodic line is performed with pervasive imitation in the soprano, tenor, and bass. However, you notice that the sopranos and tenors start on a D while the basses start on a G. That’s because the basses start a fourth above what the tenors and sopranos do while still doing the same descending line in measure 2 onward.² I think Purcell was trying to

² Purcell, “Dido and Aeneas Act III Conclusion” 56

implement imitation in his writing to make sense between the chorus and characters of the opera. In the words of Scholes, “it [was] quite evident that the young musician’s powers were generally recognized in theatrical circles.”³

In relation to Purcell’s *Dido’s Lament*, the main objective that is going to be discussed is “O God, thou hast cast us out.” He was not well known for his choral arrangements, but some of his style was engraved into what music is today. His operatic style is noticed in this piece when we talk about imitation between voices. However, in this piece, there are six voices which is common in today’s choral medium. This was crucial thing during the Baroque era because there were more melodic harmonies and dynamics that became commonplace between choral composers. In the sheet music of “O God, thou hast cast us out”, it states as follows:

The image displays a page of sheet music for the piece "O God, thou hast cast us out, Z 36" by Henry Purcell. The score is arranged for six voices (Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Alto 1, Alto 2, Tenor, and Bass) and a Cello/Bass line. The Soprano 1 and Tenor parts are highlighted in green in the first two measures, illustrating imitative intervals. The lyrics are: "O God, thou hast cast us out and sent us to a bread".

In the green highlighted sections, we see that the soprano 1 and tenor are imitating the same exact intervals at the beginning of this piece. In measure 2, the sopranos are taking the melody

³ Scholes, “Henry Purcell: A Sketch of A Busy Life” 444

while the tenors take over the exact same melody in measure 4.⁴ This makes the performance aspect more interesting even though Baroque music can be sluggish and uninteresting at times. Purcell does an excellent job executing the six voices in accordance with imitation throughout the whole piece. We could also see text painting play a key role in this piece. All the voices say “O god” in either a third or a fourth interval above. This sounds like Purcell was looking to aim for a higher rank in Gods kingdom.

In relation to both pieces, Dido’s Lament and O God, thou hast cast us out, it created a different perspective in how we should perform these pieces. Purcell was very vocal and open with his compositions in both his personality and the way dynamics were played. These songs not only influenced the baroque style of music, but it created a distinct sound that vocal music was during this time.

As we dig further into Purcell’s choral piece of O God, thou hast cast us out in a biblical sense, it comes from Psalms 60: 1-2, 11-12. Purcell was a religious man that sought for greater power in all the pieces he composed. But, as a future choral conductor, these older pieces are opportunities for me to conduct the piece in a way that allows for the music to have flow while still having that baroque sound. In the words of Joseph Bennet, a music critic in the late 19th century, he stated that Purcell’s ability to “[invigorate] the imagination” was a strength that he built upon when writing these anthems about God.⁵ One part in the piece that is performed to the utmost peak of the baroque style is when there is a call and response between the upper voices

⁴ Purcell, “O god, thou hast cast us out” 1

⁵ Bennet, “Henry Purcell: An Appreciation.” 727

and the lower voice. Here is the music as follows:

The image shows a musical score for six voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and two lower voices (A and B). The lyrics are "O, O be thou our help in trou-ble: for". The score includes a "Forte" dynamic marking and is numbered 33 and 39. The lower voices begin to sing in measure 33, while the upper voices wait for their turn.

In measure thirty-three, the lower voices begin to sing while the upper voices wait for their turn. In a performance standpoint, it sounds like a cry for help and each voice is balancing their own part by creating a crescendo and decrescendo at this certain part. In the letter O, each voice starts soft and builds up to the trouble as if Purcell was thinking how to implement cries into his performance.⁶ During this time, sacred music was very personal to the person both performing this piece and listening to it. Purcell’s idea was to penetrate his religious beliefs into the music which ultimately created a feeling of warmth between each other.

However, this still doesn’t answer the question about how the six voice parts created dynamics and text painting in a performance setting? The answer is that the dynamics and text painting were initially put in place to bring life into the congregation of the Royal Chapel. In Bennet’s educated knowledge of Purcell, he goes on to state that, “[he came] into the world about

⁶ Purcell, “O god, thou hast cast us out” 6

the time when the great Lord protector went out of it.”⁷ It’s important to note that Purcell’s puritan background helped bring God and music back together during a time of famine and infamy. We see this in the next part of the piece when we consider text painting. Here is the music as follows:

The image shows a musical score for a motet by Henry Purcell. It features seven staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and a basso continuo line. The lyrics are: "and it is he that shall tread down our enemies, and down, that shall tread down our enemies, and it is he that tis he that shall tread down our enemies, and it is he that shall tread down our enemies, shall tread down our enemies, mica, and it is he that shall tread". The music is in a minor key and common time. The lyrics are written below the vocal staves, and the basso continuo line is at the bottom.

Each part has the words “he that shall tread down our enemies” meaning that the melodic and harmonic parts are descending just like the words say.⁸ I consider this word painting because it shows how Purcell’s imagination and timing was perfect during the hard times of the puritan reign.

In correspondence to these things, let’s look at the cadences that Purcell uses in this motet. We are specifically looking at the strong cadences that mark the section ending. This is important to know because there are many melodic factors that lead to a strong cadence. By

⁷ Bennet, “Henry Purcell: An Appreciation” 726

⁸ Purcell, “O god, thou hast cast us out” 10

understanding this, it brings a whole new meaning into why you're singing the piece. This also helps us as future educators look for the right things when cutting people off at a big cadence. There aren't a whole lot of sources that talk about Purcell's cadences but, J. A. Westrup, an English Musicologist, talks about how Purcell's organ career took off from the Chapel Royal which ultimately brought him as a musical composer. Westrup talks about in his article how Henry Purcell was needed in the Westminster Abbey to perform the organ for the choir he joined for as kids.⁹ This is when he started writing his Psalms of worship for all to hear. In O god, thou hast cast us out, my favorite part are the cadences at the end of each phrase. Here it is as follows:

it is he that shall tread down our e-nem-ies. A-men.
 shall tread down, tread down our e-ne-mies. A-men.
 it is he that shall tread down our e-ne-mies. A-men.
 and it is he that shall tread down our e-ne-mies. A-men.
 tread down our e-ne-mies. A-men.
 down, tread down our e-ne-mies. A-men.

5 2 1 11 5 4 2 10 1 11

© (Pub.) G. Schirmer, Inc. to the Rev. Henry Purcell

At the end of the piece, we see that it ends on a C major chord but, we are in C minor the whole time. This is what is called the parallel minor of each other. It has the whole song in this eerie state while still feeling fulfilled. Then, at the end we reach the “Amen” cadence which

⁹ Westrup, “Facts and Fiction about Purcell.” 103

sounds like a Picardy 3rd cadence.¹⁰ This brings me a solid understanding that in a performance setting, each section has its own harmonic motion which is pulled out in each of the six voices. Purcell, who was mainly an organist, understood how to bring each part out on its own. It takes a lot of skill and music comprehension to make music like that.

In conclusion, Purcell's dynamics, and text painting through the six voices is prevalent in his piece O god, thou hast cast us out. Through his use of pervasive imitation, speaking between voices, and using his organist techniques, he was able to overcome many battles by composing the music he wanted to compose. Although most of his choral compositions are not well-known, there are many performance and compositional techniques that he used from his operas and or sonatas and implemented them into a choral setting. As a future choral educator, it will be a privilege to direct older pieces of music that have meaning today.

¹⁰ Purcell, "O god, thou hast cast us out" 10

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