

Out from the shadows: the individuality and inventiveness of John Blow

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In spite of various attempts to bring his music to greater prominence, John Blow remains a peripheral figure. He stands in the shadow of the only composer of his time and place to have gained full acceptance into the Canon: his friend and ‘pupil’, Henry Purcell. Blow’s relinquishing in 1679 of the post of Organist at Westminster Abbey in favour of Purcell only serves to perpetuate the idea of Blow as a good, but not great musician: good enough, at any rate, to recognise both Purcell’s superiority and the comparative modesty of his own talents. Having made this sacrifice, Blow then resumes the post when – in a turn of events conveniently consonant with ideas of Genius as both a blessing and a fatal affliction – Purcell died in 1695. Blow’s musical reputation is thus degraded not only by his alleged selflessness, but also by his longevity – only the truly great die young.

On closer examination, there is evidence that belies this romantic interpretation of events. For a start, Blow did not have a reputation for self-effacing modesty, if Hawkins’s description is to be believed: ‘a man of blameless morals and of a benevolent temper, but ... not so insensible of his own worth, as to be totally free from the imputation of pride’.¹ No sooner had Blow begun work at Westminster Abbey than he began to accrue roles in the royal household: in 1669, the year following his appointment to the Abbey, he became ‘royal musician for the virginals’; he was sworn in as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1674, becoming Master of the Children of the Chapel later that year, and Organist in 1676. For the increasingly busy Blow to relinquish his Abbey post in Purcell’s favour was perhaps less an act of self-effacement, more a convenient round of musical chairs. The collaborative nature of the creative process in the world of Blow and Purcell has been firmly established,² and we might readily imagine two musicians, whose relationship encompassed the copying, completion and even revision of each other’s music, exchanging professional appointments with an informality that subsequent generations have found difficult to comprehend.

Blow’s reputation was further assaulted by the dismissive judgment of Charles Burney, writing in the third volume of *A General History of Music* (1789): ‘Some of his choral productions are doubtless in a very bold and grand style; however, he is unequal, and frequently unhappy, in his attempts at harmony and modulation...’. Burney goes on to ‘point out a few instances of [Blow’s] great, and, to my conceptions, unwarrantable licentiousness, as a contrapuntist’, ‘confused and inaccurate’ harmony, and ‘confusion and crudities in the counterpoint ... It does not appear that Purcell ... or Croft, or Clark, his pupils, ever threw notes about at random, in his manner, or insulted the ear with lawless discords ...’.³

¹ Sir John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music, Volume IV* (London, 1776), 494.

² Rebecca Herissone, *Musical Creativity in Restoration England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); in particular 209-59.

³ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, from the earliest ages to the present period, Volume III* (London, 1789), 447-8.

Burney's critique should not be taken at face value, but rather as the product of its time: clearly in play here, post-Enlightenment, are the opposing categories 'natural' and 'artificial' (which are also the defining terms of the notorious critique of J.S. Bach's music published by his former pupil, J.G. Scheibe, in 1737). Burney's idea of 'lawful' harmony does not admit the dissonant, voice-led counterpoint of Blow's music, which owed much to pre-Commonwealth models (a classic example being his 'Short' Evening Service in F, the final section of which reworks the same passage of the 'Short' Service in the same key by Orlando Gibbons). Burney's criticism extends to Purcell, in a passage confirming the historically contingent nature of his remarks: 'Many of his melodies are, however, now become wholly obsolete and uncouth, from the temporary graces, with which he overloaded them ... if these were taken away, and the melodies of Purcell simplified and reduced to elementary sounds, by the rules of harmony and good taste, they might, in every age, be rendered elegant and pleasing.'⁴ Burney's attempt to conform the music of Blow and others to supposedly universal norms demonstrates a critical attitude that persists somewhat today. Scholars have perhaps been unwilling to accept Blow's music on its own, pre-modern terms; at any rate, the extraordinary fertility of his imagination has not been celebrated as fully as it deserves.

Blow was the quintessential Church musician of the Restoration; unlike Purcell, he showed very little interest in the theatre. Recruited – or, more accurately, imprest – from Newark as a Chapel Royal chorister in 1661, he spent the remainder of his life associated with the court, and was continuously employed by one or more ecclesiastical foundation. He witnessed the generous restocking of the court's musical resources under Charles II, and their subsequent dwindling under James II (who established a separate, Roman Catholic, Chapel, with its own musicians) and William and Mary. As Almoner and Master of the Choristers at St Paul's from 1687, he watched the rebuilding of the Cathedral by Wren. Blow evidently composed less toward the end of his life, but the late symphony anthem *O sing unto the Lord* (1701) shows him moving at least a little with the times, marrying a breezily modern Italianate style with his characteristic modal harmony, the latter a legacy of his engagement with the pre-Commonwealth sacred music he first encountered as a treble.

God spake sometime in visions was by far the grandest of three anthems composed by Blow for the coronation of James II and Mary of Modena on 23 April 1685. It is lavishly scored for choir in eight parts, with instruments playing both independently and *colla parte*. A number of sections are sung by smaller groupings, perhaps reflecting the layout of the performers in galleries above the sacrum of Westminster Abbey; Purcell's companion-piece, *My heart is inditing*, shares these features, though its symphonies are more discrete. The opening quasi-symphony of *God spake* immediately announces the work's scale and affect, its broad phrases and bold voice-led dissonances evoking a particular majesty, distinctively of the English tradition, and (unlike Purcell's anthem) leading directly to the choir's first entry without an intervening instrumental *tripla*. Blow introduces triple time for the first reduced section ('I have found David my servant'), returning to a duple metre as the texture again becomes full. This procedure he repeats for the transition into 'and in my name shall his horn be exalted', and again at 'higher than the kings of the earth'; Blow then tellingly recapitulates the opening symphony, before once again employing triple-to-duple metric modulation in the final verse and closing Amen-Alleluia. There are several

⁴ Burney, *A General History, Volume IV* (London, 1789), 12.

excursions away from the overall G major tonality, perhaps most tellingly in the peroration, where the music swings decisively flatward, only to be returned to the home key moments before the final cadence by a triumphant F sharp.

The majority of Blow's symphony anthems were composed between his swearing-in as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1674 and the death of Charles II eleven years later. This was the busiest period of Blow's career – indeed, the first three years appear to have seen the most intense activity. In addition to the composition of liturgical music and secular court Odes (at least one per year from 1678), he was responsible for the domestic arrangements of the children of the Chapel, and from 1682 shared with Nicholas Staggins a role as 'musician in ordinary for the composition and practice for the [24] violins'. It was a considerable workload, though one possibly ameliorated somewhat by the court musicians' freely collaborative, even promiscuous attitude to the production of music.

Not all of the thirty or so anthems of this period can be dated with total accuracy, but, like many of the anthems on this disc, *Hear my voice, O God* is an exception. It was performed on 18 July 1683, between the conviction and sentencing on the 12th, and execution at Tyburn on the 20th and 21st, of three of the 'Rye House' conspirators. Their plot, foiled in March of that year, was to assassinate both the King and the Duke of York (the heir to the throne) outside Rye House in Hertfordshire, as they returned to London from horse races at Newmarket; like the fictitious 'Popish Plot' of 1678-81, the motivation was anti-Catholic. Blow's anthem, which must have been composed at some speed, sets nine consecutive verses of Psalm 64 – a stern rebuke to those who doubted the legitimacy of the crown and succession, and a fierce depiction of the violent reward for treason. The opening of the anthem, by contrast, evokes an intimate scene; a lone supplicant, praying for preservation from 'the enemy'. The bass voice denotes authority; we might imagine the King himself, kneeling in his chamber. The same voice – which must originally have been 'that stupendious Base', as Evelyn described John Gostling⁵ – returns later with a catalogue of the various misdeeds of 'the froward', reaching from a low D to the E two octaves above; then the three remaining verse singers join him to relate the sudden vengeance visited on 'wicked doers', God's 'swift arrow' vividly depicted by string ricochets in the subsequent ritornello.

Many years after his most fertile period of composition, Blow responded to a commission from a lawyer named Cavendish Weedon, for an anthem to be performed in a charitable concert on 31 January 1701 at Stationers' Hall, close to the still incomplete St Paul's Cathedral. *O sing unto the Lord* is a work of impressive scale, featuring three virtuosic verse sections (two for countertenor, one for bass), and choral writing that ranges from the brilliant virtuosity of the opening (which has been reconstructed by Bruce Wood) to the gentle expressivity of 'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness'. The expansive multi-sectional structure is saved from incoherence by a strong tonal plan, centred on D major but with significant weight placed on areas reached by flattening the leading note – the G major of 'O worship the Lord' and A minor of 'Tell it out among the heathen'. This flatward tendency, articulated even in the plagal preparation of the final cadence, is balanced by the effusive central chorus 'Let the heavens rejoice', which travels away from D in a mostly sharpward direction; and the whole is unified by the 'Alleluia' refrain, which occurs three times.

⁵ E. S. de Beer (ed.), *The Diary of John Evelyn* (Oxford, 1955), 404.

In addition to his large-scale concerted music, a large quantity of Blow's 'Full', 'Verse' and 'Full with verse' anthems survive. *When the Son of Man* is one of many that have never been published, perhaps because some reconstruction is necessary. The Contratenor Decani part, one of three solo voices, is extant in neither of the two sources (one from the Tenbury collection now housed in the Bodleian Library, one at York Minster, both in the hand of John Gostling, the famous singer who was also a prolific and accurate copyist). This verse anthem most likely postdates the majority of Blow's symphony anthems; the more modest scoring would have been appropriate to the reign of James II or later, when string instruments were rarely heard in the Chapel Royal. (It is also possible that these anthems also existed in lost instrumental versions, since several extant symphony anthems are represented in organbooks, with their symphonies abridged for organ solo.) The reduction of instrumental forces did not inhibit Blow's vocal writing: here, significant demands are made of the three soloists – notably, the rapid *coloratura* on the word 'glory' in the opening verse – while the chorus is called upon only for a brief closing paragraph. The same goes for another unpublished anthem copied by Gostling, *The days of man are but as grass*. This time the chorus makes two brief contributions, with material derived from the preceding verse sections. The solo vocal writing is highly ornate, full of decorative melismata and graces; and there is a declamatory bass paragraph, the wide range of which once again suggests that Blow had Gostling in mind.

The earliest anthem in the present selection has been dated to 5 April 1674, just a few weeks after Blow's swearing-in as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal on 16 March: *When Israel came out of Egypt* sets Psalm 114, traditionally associated with Easter, which fell on 19 April in that year.⁶ No doubt anxious to impress on his debut as a Gentleman (though since 1661 he had never really been away from the Chapel), Blow's music does full justice to the mysterious supernatural events surrounding Israel's escape from captivity. The opening is pregnant with anticipation; despite a move to triple time, it is only in bar 98 ('the sea saw that and fled') that the music really begins to move forward. Most striking is the sudden halt – rhythmically and harmonically – at 'tremble, thou earth'; a mystical tremor rather than an ear-splitting earthquake. Also notable is the length and frequency of the symphonies, a feature of Blow's earliest symphony anthems that reflected the taste of the monarch himself; Charles was said by Roger North to prefer music to which he could beat time, and had 'an utter detestation of Fancys' (i.e. imitative contrapuntal pieces).⁷

The official opening of the chancel of St Paul's Cathedral took place on 2 December 1697, though the building – walled up at its west end, but nevertheless of imposing size – had been in use for some time (work on the new organ began in 1694). The occasion was also a thanksgiving for the Peace of Ryswick, so Blow's anthem *I was glad* may have been conceived to do double duty, notwithstanding the presence of a second anthem, *Praise the Lord, O my soul* (with organ) explicitly linked to the Peace; this would explain the portmanteau text, which lurches from the dedication theme to verses extolling the King and damning his enemies. Two trumpets are added to the usual string band; the instrumentation is the same as Purcell's *Te Deum and Jubilate*, first performed in 1694 for

⁶The date is given in one early source, the scorebook transcribed around 1700 by Charles Badham, described by Bruce Wood as 'a thoroughly careless copyist'; Badham dates another anthem appropriate to Eastertide, *When the Lord turned again*, to 29 March 1675, again just before the date of Easter that year, 4 April.

⁷Peter Holman, *Life After Death: The Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 5–6.

the St Cecilia commemoration, but said by Thomas Tudway to have been conceived 'principally against the opening of St Paul's', and included in the service, two years after the composer's death. In writing for what must have been an incomparably generous (and therefore potentially problematic) acoustical environment, Blow wisely keeps the harmonic tempo relatively slow, and makes use of silence to grand rhetorical effect. But this most public and stately work also includes the most ravishingly intimate music in all Blow's symphony anthems, the countertenor duet 'One thing have I desired of the Lord'.

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