Benjamin Britten-Henry Purcell realizations: musical language correlation with original compositions

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ABSTRACT

English music and literature has deep traditions. In twentieth century the composers had the idea to refresh English music and literature, to show the beauty, freedom, and vividness of the English language. Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was inspired by Henry Purcell’s (1659–1695), the Baroque composers, musical language, which made use of texts in an expressive and free manner and was very modern in his living time. The identified patterns will be used to explain the linkages between the musical text in Britten’s realizations of several of Purcell’s, which were expressive and free, more like improvisations, filled with strong notes diatonically and chromatically. The paper will analyze the parallels between Britten’s realizations of Purcell’s songs Not all my Torments, Mad Bess, If Music Be the Food of Love (1rst and 3rd versions) from Orpheus Britannicus and the deep connection with original songs from vocal cycles by Britten Winter Words op. 52 and Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente op. 61. Some interpretation ideas of the realization If music be the food of love (3rd version) from Orpheus Britannicus Seven Songs are also included.

Keywords: henry purcell, benjamin britten, realization, musical analysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to Joseph N. Straus, “In notes as in words, twentieth-century composers misread their predecessors in accordance with their own conceptions of musical structure Furthermore, a different artistic impulse gives rise to the twentieth-century recompositions” (Straus 1990: 44). The renaissance of past music ideas was felt in post-war England too and composers were inspired by native Baroque music. They brought the personality of Henry Purcell (1659-1695). Purcell wrote more than 100 secular and extended songs, most for theater. The phonetics and intonation of the native language in the vocal music made an impact on Purcell’s music character, and the use of texts in an expressive and free manner helped him to understand the music. There were many unexpected harmonic and rhythmic changes in the compositions. For example in the song Mad Bess the composer uses unexpected dissonances, sounds like out of tune to express the madness and crazyness of Bess (mm. 43, 46). “In Purcell’s keyboard temperament most of the chords in such remote keys would have sounded distinctly out of tune, and this
is clearly a calculated part of the effect” (Laurie 1984: 19). The melismas and figurations he used to express the feelings, ideas, or even realistic sounds, for example duet Sound of the Trumpet. Purcell regarded melody as the most important element in music.

2 THE INFLUENCE OF PURCELL’S MUSIC

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), Michael Tippett (1905-1998), and others were inspired by English Baroque music. They brought the personality of Purcell and both composed the arrangements and realizations of Purcell’s songs. But they took and adopted some composing ideas in their subjective way. Britten was one of the few twentieth-century composers who regarded melody, like Purcell, as the most important element in music. He applied and synthesised the essential features of both Purcell’s and various other compositional styles or compositional techniques.

By composing realizations of Purcell’s Orpheus Britannicus (two settings and other songs, more than 40 compositions) the echoes of Purcell’s melismas could be clearly traced in Britten’s realizations of Purcell’s songs and even in Britten’s original vocal pieces, including the song cycle Winter Words Op. 52 (1953). By comparing Britten’s realizations of several of Purcell’s songs from the period preceding the composition of Winter Words with the songs from the cycle analyzed, it has been shown that Winter Words was directly inspired by the musical language of Purcell, especially the experimental aspects of Britten’s musical language such as the invention of a lively figuration. The use of melismas and appropriate textures has been drawn from the musical legacy of Purcell. There are three parallels between Britten’s realizations and two vocal cycles Winter Words op. 52 and Sechs Hölderlin—Fragmente op. 61:

- Melismas’ importance in the music;
- Harmony, tonality instability;
- Piano/harpsichord manner of execution composing.

I will compare realizations Not all my Torments, Mad Bess, If Music Be the Food of Love (1rst and 3rd versions) from Orpheus Britannicus with the original Britten’s songs from the vocal cycles Winter Words op. 52 and Sechs Hölderlin—Fragmente op. 61.

3 BRITTEN-PURCELL REALIZATIONS

Britten started to realize Purcell’s songs from 1943, which had a huge impact on his original musical language. Britten composed 45 realizations of Purcell’s songs in that period. Purcell wrote two settings for Orpheus Britannicus (1698 and 1702). Britten composed realizations and put them in his own

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1 Realize - to give full artistic life to music left by the composer in the contemporary style, to fill out the continuo bass line of a 17th or 18th century composition (Kennedy 1996: 595).
order of not only *Orpheus Britannicus*, but also composed *Harmonia Sacra, Odes and Elegies*, Duets. In his realizations of Purcell’s songs, he added to the bass and harmonies prescribed by the figured bass and filled in gaps, but only with material that he had. In the realizations, Britten was writing idiomatically for the modern piano or using voice fully in the freely sung manner of the most standard repertoire, as opposed to the restrained tone that was often used in early music. “Britten fully exploited the lower range of the modern 20th-century piano, which of course Purcell did not have at his disposal (…)” (Hendsbee 2007: 202). We will analyze some songs from *Orpheus Britannicus* and compare them to the song cycles *Winter Words* op. 52 and *Sechs Hölderlin–Fragmente* op. 61. We already notice that the realizations were composed in 1943-45, the cycle *Winter Words* in 1953 and *Sechs Hölderlin–Fragmente* in 1962. So we agree that those compositions were not written at the same time. However, there are very clear parallels in between these songs.

4 THE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE REALIZATIONS AND THE VOCAL CYCLE *WINTER WORDS* OP. 52

In the Baroque period, composers used effects to raise and render the feelings of the listeners. For example, they illustrated sounds from reality and used rhetorical figures with specific meaning and special tonalities. It is interesting that Britten adopted the idea about musical illustrativity from Purcell too. In the song cycle *Winter Words* op. 52 every song is very illustrativy and has its own character and mood. In Baroque-period rhetorical figures, illustrativity was very commonly used to express the music more clearly and deeply. Britten borrows this idea in the vocal cycles *Winter Words* op. 52. “Britten’s music is itself a kind of wordless language—a characteristic way of presenting and shaping the interplay of essentially musical ideas (themes, rhythms, motives, or keys) within an unfolding discourse. The sounds of music (…) themselves have properties usually ascribed to speech—expression, eloquence, a rhetorical force” (Rupprecht 2002: 1). In this paper I discover the connection in aspects of manner of execution composing and melody. The song *Sweeter Than Roses* from the setting *Orpheus Britannicus* originally had an accompaniment of harpsichord. In those days the interpreter played the basso continuo and made it in their individual manner. Britten realized the bass line. But what we notice in the next song from *Winter Words* the same model of accompaniment.
Example 1. Britten-Purcell *Not all my Torments* from *Orpheus Britannicus* (mm.1-2), 1943.

Example 2. B. Britten song *At the Railway Station, Upway* from the vocal cycle *Winter Words* op. 52 (mm. 1-2), 1953.

*Not all my Torments* originally had an accompaniment of harpsichord. In those days the interpreter played the basso continuo and made it in their individual manner. Britten realized the bass line. But what we see in the next song *At the Railway Station, Upway* from the vocal cycle *Winter Words* we notice the same model of accompaniment. It is not the only one example of this composing model; it is the same in the realization *Mad Bess* too. But the most similarities can be found in the aspect of melody.

Example 3. Britten-Purcell *Mad Bess* from *Orpheus Britannicus* (mm. 108), 1945.

Example 4. Britten song *At the Railway Station, Upway* from the vocal cycle *Winter Words* op. 52 (mm. 11-12), 1953.
There are even more connections with the original song *At the Railway Station, Upway* from the vocal cycle *Winter Words* op. 52 with the realization – there are correlations with *If Music be the food of love* (3rd version) from *Orpheus Britannicus Seven Songs* too.

### 5 THE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE REALIZATIONS AND THE VOCAL CYCLE SECHS HÖLDERLIN-FRAGMENTE OP. 61

Britten composed the realizations and put them into different settings in his own order. I present the melody comparison results of analysis from *Orpheus Britannicus Six Songs* and the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61 by Britten.

Example 5. Britten-Purcell *If Music Be the Food of Love*, first version (mm. 1-3), 1945.

Example 6. Britten’s song *Die Jugend* from the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61, 1958.

In the examples (5-6) we can find the same melody in the same notes, but in the realization this line has a vocalist, although in Britten’s original song this melody has a right hand. The realization *If Music Be the Food of Love* has more than one correlation with this cycle. In the realization the melody starts from a stronger D tone and the melody goes diatonically five notes down. However, in the song the melody starts from a stronger tone F and the melody has a line down with a small modification (permutation). In these examples, we notice a very similar melody composing model.

Some words for the interpreters about Britten’s realyzations. I’m a pianist so I will focus more about piano part interpretation in this song. The main aspect and the question for the musician is how to understand and interpret the realizations: like a Baroque piece or like music from the twentieth century. The pianist faces even more questions for interpretation, for example, to open or close the piano, to use a huge scale of dynamics or only piano and forte (like with harpsichord), to use the pedal or not. In this case it should be will analyzed in the aspect of pedalization too. The realization *If music be the food of love* (3rd version) is very interesting, developed, expressive and difficult to perform. It is a two-part composition with coda. But the code may be treated as a compressed third part: *Recitativo animato*,...
Allegretto, *Recitativo animato* (mm. 1-29, 30-59, 60-65). *Recitativo* parts are like recitative for the singer, but piano part is much more improvisando – there are a lot of short running notes, pretenting the harpsichord playing. So the pianist should play in a well-articulated sound, in baroque manner, as the composer has written many quick passages like a harpsichord, as well as a rich *staccato* or fast-paced notes episodes.

The pedalization should be kept to a minimum while maintaining a harpsichord sound. One should get more sound retention more with fingers than in the pedal (examp. 7).

Example 7. Britten-Purcell *If Music Be the Food of Love*, third version (mm. 59-65), 1945.

The synergy of realization *If music be the food of love* (3rd version) from *Orpheus Britannicus Seven Songs* and the Neo-Baroque performance presuppose should be performed like a historically informed interpretation.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In Purcell’s vocal music the intonations of the language and phonetics made an impact on the music’s character; the use of texts in an expressive and free manner made a specificity in the music understanding. In flying from the poetry and symbols in the compositions, we can find many unexpected harmonic and rhythmic changes. Britten adopted some ideas, so in that way we see a deep connection. There are some important aspects that connect Britten to Purcell:
• melody is one of the most important structural elements in music;
• music form, music speech, accompaniment, vocal line, intervals and etc. aspects;
• poetic text or musical elements combining parallels.
REFERENCES


