H Purcell: 'Music for a While' (For component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

Henry Purcell (1659–95) was an English Baroque composer and is widely regarded as being one of the most influential English composers throughout the history of music. A pupil of John Blow, Purcell succeeded his teacher as organist at Westminster Abbey from 1679, becoming organist at the Chapel Royal in 1682 and holding both posts simultaneously. He started composing at a young age and in his short life, dying at the early age of 36, he wrote a vast amount of music both sacred and secular. His compositional output includes anthems, hymns, services, incidental music, operas and instrumental music such as trio sonatas. He is probably best known for writing the opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). Other well-known compositions include the semi-operas *King Arthur* (1691), *The Fairy Queen* (1692) (an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and *The Tempest* (1695).

'Music for a While' is the second of four movements written as incidental music for John Dryden's play based on the story of Sophocles' Oedipus. Dryden was also the author of the libretto for *King Arthur* and *The Indian Queen* and he and Purcell made a strong musical/dramatic pairing. In 1692 Purcell set parts of this play to music and 'Music for a While' is one of his most renowned pieces. The Oedipus legend comes from Greek mythology and is a tragic story about the title character killing his father to marry his mother before committing suicide in a gruesome manner. This song features the character Alecto, who was one of the Furies in Greek mythology. She was a goddess whose job was to punish those who had committed sins, specifically the crime of killing a parent. She was a terrifying Medusa-like creature who had snakes for her hair, a dog's head, bat's wings, blood dripping from her eyes and was armed with a whip. In this aria, it is the music which calms Alecto until she drops her whip and the snakes fall from her head.

Performing forces and their handling

'Music for a While' was written for voice (most usually a tenor) and **continuo**. This particular edition is scored for **soprano**, **harpsichord** and **bass viol** and has been transposed from the original key of C minor to A minor.

The right hand of the harpsichord part is an elaborate **realisation** and is highly decorative and embellished with frequent dotted rhythms and ornamentation such as upper and lower mordents, grace notes and appoggiaturas. At the time, this would have been improvised by the

Note: *These set works guides are Pearson's interpretation of the set works and every effort has been made to ensure these are appropriate for use in the classroom.*

There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.

player rather than being notated. Chords are frequently arpeggiated or spread rapidly from the lowest to highest note (e.g. bar 13).

The left hand of the harpsichord plays the **ground bass**.

The ground bass is also played by the bass viol. This is a bowed, fretted, stringed instrument used during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Although resembling the modern cello, it has many differences. The bass viol generally has six strings which are tuned in fourths with a third in the middle. It is tuned to the notes D, G, C, E, A, D and the seven stringed bass viol has an additional low A string. In comparison to the cello, it has a flat rather than curved back, sloped rather than square shoulders, C rather than F holes and frets. The player uses an underhand rather than overhand bow grip.

Text setting and word-painting

- The vocal line is mainly **syllabic** following speech rhythms.
- There are paired slurrings (e.g. in bar 5 on the words 'for' and 'a').
- There are melismatic moments (e.g. bar 10 on the word 'wond'ring').
- There is an extended **melisma** in bar 20 on the word 'eternal'.
- Repetition of text is used, such as the word 'Music' at the start or in bar 23 the word 'drop' sung nine times.

There are many examples of word-painting in this aria. Word-painting is the technique of writing music that reflects the literal meaning of a song. Below are some examples:

- Appropriately the word 'pains' in bar 12 features a **dissonance** of E in the melodic line against D in the bass part.
- In the phrase 'pains were eas'd' dissonance and resolution is presented on the word 'eas'd' as it falls in a descending **sequence**, bars 13-14
- The word 'drop' is presented in a descending pattern on the weak off-beat and is sung with unusual levels of repetition nine times, bars 23–25. This represents the snakes dropping from Alecto's head.
- The word 'wond'ring' in bar 10 captures the mood of the word and shows a wistfully descending legato melismatic melody.
- The word 'eternal' in bar 20 is set to a lengthy melisma with repetitive alternating notes showing the everlasting atmosphere of this word.
- The phrase 'free the dead' is in the bright key of G major containing rising melodies, bars 16–17.
- In general the predominantly minor key suits the sombre nature of the play and the text.

Note: *These set works guides are Pearson's interpretation of the set works and every effort has been made to ensure these are appropriate for use in the classroom.*

There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.

Melody

- The soprano line has a range or compass of a ninth (apart from the ornamental G in bar 36) from the lowest note of E just above middle C to F just over an octave higher.
- Much of the music is **conjunct** or stepwise.
- **Passing notes** are frequent. For example, the E and C on beat 4 of bar 5 are non-harmony notes and do not belong to the chord but link to notes from the chord.
- Any leaps are small and generally no greater than a perfect fourth (e.g. bar 7).
- Rests are used to break up phrases.
- There are some descending sequences (e.g. bar 20).
- There is extensive use of **ornaments** in both the soprano line and the right hand of the harpsichord:
    - Trills (e.g. bar 13)
    - Appoggiaturas (e.g. bar 35)
    - Grace notes (e.g. bar 6)
    - Upper mordents (e.g. bar 22)
    - Lower mordents (e.g. bar 1).

Structure
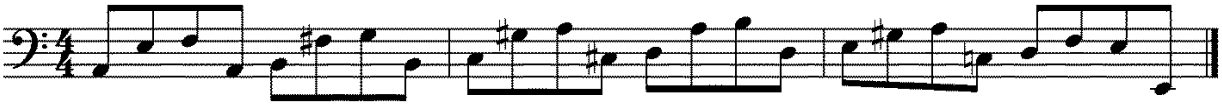
This piece follows a ground bass structure. This is a short, recurring melodic pattern in the bass part that acts as the principal structural element, whilst melodic parts above change. It is also known as a basso ostinato and was developed into forms such as the Chaconne and Passacaglia. It was a common device in the Baroque period and Purcell is regarded as a master of the ground bass and used this technique extensively. His best known ground bass aria is 'Dido's Lament' from the opera *Dido and Aeneas*.

Features of the ground bass in 'Music for a While' include:

- It is three bars long.
- It consists entirely of quaver rhythms.
- Its melodic shape is arpeggio based.
- It makes use of semitone intervals.
- It has a rising line, starting on A then moving up to a B, C, D and E before falling at the end of the phrase.
- At the end of the ground there is a characteristic fall of an octave.
- The ground sounds incomplete as it ends with chord V but a sense of a perfect cadence is achieved with chord I at the start of the next repetition of the ground bass.
- The Ground bass is heard 4 ½ times in the Tonic key before it starts to modulate in bar 14, using motifs from the original ground bass. The ground returns in the original key in bar 23 beat 3 for a three-bar reminder. It returns, complete in bar 29 and is heard a further three times before the close of the piece.

Note: *These set works guides are Pearson's interpretation of the set works and every effort has been made to ensure these are appropriate for use in the classroom.*

There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.



In addition to the ground bass structure, there is a sense of forward looking by Purcell with signs of what was to become the popular ternary form da capo aria structure used in operatic arias later in the Baroque period. This is seen at bar 29 where there is a reprise of material from the opening in identical form with just slight extension to conclude the work.

Texture

- The texture is melody and accompaniment/**melody-dominated homophony**.
- The accompaniment is provided by the ground bass in the left hand of the harpsichord and the bass viol.
- The right hand of the harpsichord is an elaborate realisation and provides some **counterpoint** with the vocal line.

Tonality

- The music is in A minor (coloured by a Tierce de Picardie).
- The tonality, however, is sometimes ambiguous due to the **chromatic** and non-diatonic nature of the ground bass.
- The central section **modulates** to closely related keys. These include E minor (bar 14), G major (bar 16), C major (bar 21), A major (bar 23), E minor (bar 27).
- The music returns to the tonic key of A minor in bar 28 until the end.
- Modulations are confirmed by perfect cadences.

Harmony

- Chords are **diatonic** and **functional**.
- **Perfect cadences** are achieved from the chord V at the end of the ground to the chord I at the start of the next playing of the ground bass (e.g. bars 3–4). This is a Ic–V–I cadential 6–4.
- **Suspensions** are used very occasionally. For example, there is a 4–3 suspension in bar 3 beat 4½ in the harpsichord part.
- Dissonances are infrequent but examples can be seen on the word ‘pains’ in bar 12 with a D in the bass against and E in the voice and on the word ‘eas’d’ in bars 13–14 where there is dissonance followed by resolution at the start of each repetition of the word.
- Another type of dissonance used is **false relation**, which can be seen in bar 1 with an F♯ in the ground bass and a F♮ in the right hand of the harpsichord (although strictly not adjacent to each other, they do colour adjacent chords).

Note: *These set works guides are Pearson’s interpretation of the set works and every effort has been made to ensure these are appropriate for use in the classroom.*

There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.

Tempo, metre and rhythm

- There is no tempo indication but a slow tempo would be appropriate for this piece.
- The metre is 4/4 **quadruple** time.
- The piece uses a wide variety of rhythms but quavers and semiquavers are the most predominant.
- Dotted rhythms are sometimes used in the vocal part (e.g. bar 10) but used more extensively in the right hand part of the harpsichord.
- There is only occasional syncopation (e.g. bar 20) and off-beat rhythms (e.g. bar 24).
- The ground bass is presented entirely in quavers.

Note: *These set works guides are Pearson's interpretation of the set works and every effort has been made to ensure these are appropriate for use in the classroom.*

There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.