

## Apollo's Fire: Splendour in London at Church of the Gesu (Oct. 15)

by Daniel Hathaway



After the dreary and destructive 17th-century Puritans had committed regicide, pillaged churches, padlocked theaters, and nearly succeeded in quashing all culture in England, Britain was thirsty for some public grandeur once the monarchy had been restored in the 1660s. At Westminster Abbey, the Chapel Royal, and in London's newly reopened theaters, Henry Purcell was ready to supply it.

On Sunday, October 15 at Gesu Church in University Heights, Jeannette Sorrell led Apollo's Fire and Singers in "Splendour in London," a smorgasbord of Royal music by Purcell and his equally celebrated 18th century successor, George Frideric Handel.

Purcell, who made his premature exit in 1695 at the age of 35, a hundred years before Mozart and a year younger, was celebrated by a handful of selections from a royal birthday ode and the funeral music for Queen Mary, and from the theatrical works *Dido & Aeneas*, *Oedipus*, and *King Arthur*. Handel was represented by the Coronation anthem *Zadok the Priest*, and by his 1717 *Water Music*, whose numerous dance movements have been gathered into three suites by other hands.

Sorrell introduced the afternoon's sonic splendor with music featuring trumpets and drums. A bit of theater — processing the chorus down the center aisle to timpani strokes — led to an outburst of fealty in "God save the King" from Handel's *Zadok*. The entire anthem, written to be sung during the anointing of the sovereign at a coronation service, would later end the concert.

Congratulatory music dedicated to Queen Mary featured sopranos Josefien Stoppelenburg and Andréa Walker, mezzo-soprano Rhianna Cockrell, tenor Jacob Perry, and baritone Edward Vogel in Purcell's *Celebrate This Festival*. After her premature demise, her funerary music — still in use as recently as last September for the obsequies for Elizabeth II — introduced Purcell's more solemn compositional voice. A highlight was the motet "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts," sung with lovely blend by the unaccompanied chorus.

Sandwiched between birthday and funeral music came a few of Purcell's compositions for the theater. Sopranos Elora Kares and Ashlee Foreman delightfully took the parts of nymphs in excerpts from *King Arthur*; Foreman returned for the striking continuo aria *Music for a While* with its amusing treatment of snakes dropping from the head of Alecto, and Stoppelenburg reappeared in the guise of Dido for perhaps Purcell's most affecting aria, *When I am laid in earth*. Apollo's Singers responded with the equally heart-rending chorus, *With drooping wings, ye Cupids come*.

Part two introduced the first of four hornpipes, this one courtesy of the raucous sailors who suddenly come ashore to hasten the plot of *Dido & Aeneas* along. Egged on by Jacob Perry, singers stepped briefly out of choral character to cavort to the music.

Then, poof! We found ourselves on barges enjoying a cruise on the Thames with King George I and his retinue, beginning with indoor music (the Suite in G for flutes and strings, featuring Kathie Stewart on traverso and Joshua Stauffer on lute), then adding horns (Sara Cyrus and Alexandra Cook for the Suite in F), and finally, oboes (Debra Nagy and Gaia Saetermoe-Howard), bassoon (Marc Vallon), trumpets (Steven Marquardt, Perry Sutton, and Ryan Berndt) and timpani (Matthew Bassett) for the Suite in D.

King George made his musicians repeat Handel's music three times, but we heard it only once through on dry land on Sunday. Unfortunately, at times the wide separation between sections of the orchestra played havoc with ensemble and balances.

Then, poof again! We ended the afternoon back in Westminster Abbey with *Zadok the Priest*, remarkable for the long instrumental introduction leading to its striking choral outburst.

Hopefully, this program offered a useful introduction to Henry Purcell for patrons unfamiliar with his music or will have inspired deeper excursions into his world. The Handel selections are well-known, but may not have achieved on Sunday the level of

splendor listeners have in their mind's ear from performances by larger ensembles in more favorable acoustics. Afterward, I heard one audience member express a fondness for the Handel orchestrations of Sir Hamilton Harty (1879-1941). Definitely non-period, but they *are* thrilling.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 18, 2023.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)