
WHAT WE SING

at Saint Bartholomew's

No. 5 Hear my prayer, O Lord

by Henry Purcell (1659-95)

sung on Sunday 8 March 2009 by the girls and men



WHAT WE SING is a scheme that is designed to enhance and complement the music sung by the church choirs throughout the year. We hope that it will help the whole church community to achieve a greater understanding and appreciation of the music that is heard each Sunday. It will also form an integral part of the education and training of the boy and girl choristers, helping them to understand what they are singing about and to discover the lives and stories behind the music itself.

The hope is that **contributions** will be forthcoming from many different people within the church community. We'll always be delighted to hear from those who wish to write an article for the series. Please contact Fraser Wilson or Fr Andrew McCroskery if you would like to know more.

You can find current music lists and details of future issues on the table at the back of church and also on the internet at **www.stbartholomews.ie**. In the fullness of time we will also begin to archive the issues there too.

Forthcoming issues

Sunday 22 March: ***William Byrd*** Mass for five voices *by Des Ryan*

Sunday 5 April: ***Pergolesi*** Stabat Mater *by Fraser Wilson*

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Considered by many to be the greatest of all English composers, Henry Purcell showed a flair for music from a very young age and by the age of eight had already begun to compose works. He began his musical career as a chorister in the Chapel Royal and at the age of 19 was appointed Organist of Westminster Abbey, where - as legend would have it - John Blow resigned to make way for a greater talent. By the time he reached his mid-twenties, Henry Purcell was considered to be an accomplished composer and a prominent figure at the Chapel Royal, in the London Theatre and at court.

Henry Purcell died at his house in Dean's Yard, Westminster, in 1695 while he was still at the height of his career. There is uncertainty surrounding the cause of his death, but a rumour persists that he was accidentally locked out of his house after a night at the theatre and subsequently caught a chill which killed him! He is buried adjacent to the organ at Westminster Abbey.

During his lifetime Purcell had a profound effect on musical composition and exerted considerable influence over his peers and students of music. He is thought to be the first to have composed an orchestral accompaniment to the 'Te Deum' in England, which was written for St Cecilia's Day in 1693. After his death he was to continue to have a strong influence on the composers of the English musical renaissance of the early twentieth century. Benjamin Britten was inspired by Purcell's operatic works when composing *The Young Person's Guide to the*

Orchestra and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Michael Nyman has also borrowed heavily from Purcell's musical style to create works such as *Memorial* and film scores with Peter Greenaway (most notably *The Draughtsman's Contract*). Purcell is also one among a number of baroque composers who have had a direct influence on modern rock and roll, influencing bands such as Queen and the Who.

Hear my prayer, O Lord is one of nearly seventy anthems and services composed by Purcell (most of them for the Chapel Royal). These works were composed over a fifteen-year period from 1679 until his death, but *Hear my prayer* is probably a fragment of a greater work that was left unfinished. Nonetheless, it packs a dramatic and focused intensity into thirty bars of music.

Regardless of whether or not it is a complete work or not, the work is performed both in concerts and liturgically with great regularity. It sets one verse only of Psalm 102 ("Hear my prayer, O Lord: and let my crying come unto thee."), the words being repeated by all sections of the choir at different times. It begins softly with a slow but tentative pleading; rising into a crescendo of lament that rises out of the very depth of the soul. If we consider this as a work in its own right, it is a remarkable piece of profoundly expressive music that taps into a deep-seated agony of the universal condition. It is a work that is well suited to a liturgical setting within the season of Lent, as we join the choir's lament, to plead our cause to God and beg his mercy and attention.