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It is no wonder that Henry Purcell and John Dryden came together for *King Arthur*. The baffling clutch of 60 notation manuscripts and the missing libretto mean that the origins and intricacies of the collaboration remain elusive (Winn 33), but it is clear from what we do possess that Purcell's music and Dryden's words synthesised with marked artistic cohesion. Indeed, the language of Dryden's odes and satires is consistently inflected with a composer's

sensitivity to orchestration, whereby sound and syntax weave together like instrumental timbres. Although some lucid comparisons between Dryden and composers contemporary to his time can be found in the wealth of criticism on his work, this essay deliberately merges technical musicianship and verse, providing a rare perspective on Dryden's poetry.

Where better to begin any exploration of this topic than "An Ode, On The Death of Henry Purcell," in which Dryden turns composer in imitation of his subject. The music of Dryden's verse is the kind that emerges from finely tuned close reading that we come to by using our ears as much as our eyes. The first stanza is baroque chamber music incarnate, the details of which shall be laid out quickly for the sake of brevity, but with an attempt at accuracy and wholeness:

I

Mark how the Lark and Linnet Sing,
 With rival Notes
 They strain their warbling Throats,
 To welcome in the Spring.

But in the close of Night,
 When Philomel begins her Heav'nly lay,
 They cease their mutual spite,
 Drink in her Music with delight,
 And list'ning and silent, and silent and list'ning,
 And list'ning and silent obey.

We are tuned into the work with an imperative: “Mark.” This arresting tonic is then tied to “Lark,” which begins an ornithological strain carrying through alliteratively into “Linnet.” The verb “Sing” calls backwards—by virtue of also being a verb—to “Mark,” and before we know it, we have something that resembles a periodic, melodic subject, “in the key of birds,” perhaps. As is typical of baroque chamber music, evidenced in Corelli’s violin sonatas and Telemann’s Paris quartets, or perhaps more relevantly in Purcell’s viol fantasias, the subject is then meticulously unraveled outwards across the rest of the stanza, while being inflected with various twists of intonation; however, it strictly maintains itself as a conceptual development of the opening material (this was later taken to its farthest extreme in eighteenth-century piano sonatas, typified by Mozart). As these birds turn the verb “sing” into “strain” (phonologically close yet conceptually in friction), they locate themselves in “Spring” and lose their “Spite.” The ‘s’ sounds concatenate throughout the stanza and bring about a sonic unity between the birds, the season, and their mood. To accompany this, as a kind of counter-melody, ‘w’ sounds on “with,” “welcome,” and “when” synchronize alongside the main narrative ‘s’-sound arc and set up a kind of linguistic counterpoint, whereby ‘w’ and ‘s’ flit between one another to mimic the trilling melodies of the singing birds. As though the complex texture of musical imitation was not technical enough by now, the final two lines become transcendent of necessarily monophonic verse and branch into harmony: the retrograde

repetitions of “list’ning and silent” set up a pattern identical to a cycle of fifths—a little twist on the common chiasmus. This harmonic technique works by making dominant chords repeatedly jump to one another underneath the main melody, which not only creates a plangent, stable base from which the ornamentation can spring but also gives baroque music its color, its overall tonality. Silence and listening, of course, are integral to an ode in precisely the same way that the cycle of fifths is the harmonic bedrock of baroque counterpoint. The final swish, which links all of these intricacies together, is the plan of the stanza, whereby the ornamental trills and subjects occur at the top (opening lines), the developments and counter-melodies in the center, and the verbal cycle-of-fifths at the bottom, which directly replicates both the setup of sheet music and the roles each instrument would play on the page. It is a masterpiece of musical imitation, if one unpicks the initially deadening tones of lament.

It seems, then, that it is possible to read Dryden in this way. A deliberately experimental close reading, as above, where the intricacies of musical composition are sought in a Pindaric ode, seems to work. But the imitative delicacies of finely tuned language, as exhibited in the Purcell stanza, are everywhere in Dryden’s oeuvre, and potently draw out the life of his subject matter. As put by Earl Miner in *Dryden’s Poetry*, the musical quality of the verse is “rather an intellectual articulation of feeling than an emotional development of ideas” (231). This seems right, landing squarely on the way in which Dryden’s verse can feel both stale and enlivened at once, especially to

postmodern audiences unaccustomed to the formal rigor of Augustan verse. To this section of “An Evening’s Love,” in which the fuzziness of experience is figured through exquisite ambiguities of sound:

When, with a sigh, she accords me the blessing,
 And her eyes twinkle ‘twixt pleasure and pain,
 Ah, what a joy ‘t is, beyond all expressing,
 Ah what a joy to hear: “Shall we again?”
(13-16)

Of course, the ecstatic sensuousness of the repeated “ah” sound is prominent. Not only does this abstract syllable begin two adjacent lines, but it emerges from the end of innocuous words like “hear” and “pleasure” upon re-reading: the half-aspirated, half-growled openness of this syllable is both mimetic of mid-coital enthusiasm and post-coital release. Dryden is having some fun here. Once the “ah” is heard, it cannot be unheard in open-ended words like “hear” and “pleasure,” which take on a palpable sexual quality where it once existed in mere semantics. But this is not all: there is something strangely both sharp and blunt in the prefix “tw,” which quickly prods akimbo with “twinkle ‘twixt.” It stabs, but with a cork. It jabs but it doesn’t hurt. We are, as in the verse itself, “‘twixt pleasure and pain.” This kind of awkward paradox also exists in the repetition of “what a joy,” which questions itself by assertion one time too many. The repetition brings about a strange musical hook of monotony, of things being oddly familiar, of being

overly assertive and unable truly to give way to ecstatic lyricism. Dryden's soundscape of sexual experience then neatly captures a kind of delusional optimism, where the constantly affirmative presentation of "joy" and "pleasure" is tarred with "pain" and plangent repetition. This is what Miner means by an "intellectual articulation of feeling": this clamping of experience into highly wrought verse on the one hand deadens the vitality of lived experience, but on the other allows a patterned ekphrasis to occur from within this strict framework.

The heroic couplet, however, is occasionally broken to allow a more "emotional development of ideas." Christopher Ricks draws our attention to Dryden's triplets as being form-defying and of exceptional merit. The thesis of his article is that Dryden's triplets are not only "little intended to," but carry a wealth of meaning in their breaking of the heroic couplet—primarily by the virtue of being bond-breaking. His systematic working through of the seven triplets in "Absalom and Architophel" (with occasional glance at "The Hind and The Panther") leads him to the following conclusion: the triplet "resists or tempers the despotism of the couplet" and it has a "particular finality of emphasis." Of course, Ricks' way of reading Dryden's triplets is pertinent and illuminating, but the musical essence of the triplet could be pushed a lot further. In chamber music, for example, one searches in vain through Purcell's viol fantasias without a single authentic triplet. Similarly, in Corelli's violin sonatas, they simply do not exist. The baroque composer seems to have considered compound time

to be the way into triplets, and their only rightful place. With no surprise, then, the search becomes abundantly successful when we turn to something like Corelli's Trio Sonata in D Major, Op.3 no.2 (the *Allegro*), which by virtue of being in compound time (6/8) is a sea of triplets. But is there any crossover, as with the injection of triplets into "Absalom and Architophel"? Cue Purcell's famous *Abdelazer* Overture, where triplets are whispering their influence in the main melody of the second subject. After the stately climb of the first subject, the second exhibits a falling sequence that bounces between crotchets and pairs of quavers:



Look at that first violin. Purcell employs triplet groups about as often as Dryden—that is, hardly ever—but when they do occur, they irreversibly change the essence of the music. In this section of the *Abdelazer* Rondeau, the string voices are consistently “iambic”: that is, straight-laced, only crotchets and quavers and the occasional minim. The regular denominations and groupings of notes bring about this stilted and corseted temperament, which create, like Dryden's highly wrought heroic couplets, a system of intense formality from which the energy can emerge. When we enter the more whimsical second subject (pictured), however, the groups of crotchets and quavers find themselves triplet-ing

up and creating that gigue-like skip we know about from compound time. It is like a processing regiment of soldiers that suddenly decide to hop, skip, and jump: the illusion of triplets begins to lift the mood into something quirkily bright.

This precise technique, of superimposing compound-time triplets onto ostensibly common time, sounds-off the opening to Dryden's "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham":

Farewell, too little and too lately known,
Whom I began to think and call my own,
For sure our souls were near allied, and thine
Cast in the same poetic mould with mine.

In the first two lines, we have a tripartite configuration of "too," where the third part is "to." Just like a crotchet and two quavers, perhaps? Moreover, the alliteration on 's' occurs three times with "sure," "souls," and "same," which is also a crotchet and two quavers of 'sh' and 's', 's.' Further spread out, "farewell" (with the stress on 'w'), "whom," and "were" is another crotchet and two quavers of 'h' and 'w', 'w.' The essential beauty of these *three* (!) triplet configurations? They are almost entirely unstressed, with the exception of the "well" in "farewell," which we suppose has to be stressed because it is the opening exclamation. Here Dryden presents a delicate and complex imitation of that identified Purcellian technique of slotting triplet groups into common time; in doing so on (almost) entirely unstressed syllables, he allows it to guide the meanderings of the

verse without taking over as the overbearing feature. The exceptionally rich detail of these first four lines, musically speaking, is in friction with the almost coyly simple conceit, in which Oldham is not quite a Dryden, but a lamentably worthy heir to the Dryden throne. The technical complexity continues: to assess the number three in this poem could be an endless spiral of observation. The three primary tenses are used to set up the lineage of great poetry; there is a real “Ricks-ian” triplet late on that imitates the idea of “generous fruits” and “maturing time” by transcending formality and expectation; and alliterating sounds seem always to be in a crotchet/two-quaver trinity, in some way or other (“poetic,” “cast,” “common”; “slippery,” “race,” “ripe”). But though this can go on (seemingly) forever, it is the sonic quality of the triplet that truly cements our impression of Dryden’s verse, which unifies the web of the meter in a way that is manifestly life-giving. In which case, even though Ricks picked up on an endlessly fertile subject in Dryden’s triplets, he did not make quite the fullest of its musical implications that he could. When we look at a music composer’s use of triplets, as with Purcell’s famous *Abdelazer* Rondeau, we can see that the baroque conception of the tripartite microstructure was felt more deeply than just “three lines together,” more deeply than just “compound time.” It seems that the musicality of triples extends into being a unifying feature of melody and rhythm where the restrictions of the form should not strictly allow so. Dryden loved this.

Thus, a musical reading of Dryden reveals several nuances of his verse that evidence an eccentric but sensitive

poetic wit. Whether he is imitating the graphics of sheet music in the first stanza of the Purcell ode, complicating pure ekphrasis in “An Evening’s Love” and mimicking difficult emotional ambiguity, or having a distinctly Purcellian swing at fusing musical modes and phrasing, he is always in tune with how form and language can be instrumental as musical aids to his grander scheme of meaning. As a final blazon of musicality, consider the last line of the ode on Purcell, which is entirely built with monosyllabic, resonant, dark vowel sounds like a last chord on the organ, Purcell’s instrument and the site of his final resting place:

The gods are pleased alone with Purcell’s lays,
Nor know to mend their choice.

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