



REVIEW: RECORDING

## The Hibernian Muse: Music for Ireland by Purcell and Cousser

Johann Sigismund Cousser (1660–1727), Henry Purcell (1659–1695)  
Irish Baroque Orchestra / Peter Whelan (conductor)  
Linn CKD 685, 2022; one disc, 70 minutes

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This disc is a well-thought-out and imaginative coupling of two odes written for specific performing occasions in Dublin, one by Henry Purcell in 1694 and the other by Johann Sigismund Cousser in 1711, the former for an institutional and the latter a royal birthday celebration, and neither with any prospect of a further performance. All credit must therefore go to Peter Whelan and Linn for producing this engrossing disc in their ongoing series of music with an Irish connection.

Purcell's *Great Parent, Hail!*, z327, is one of his least-known odes. Previously recorded by Robert King on Hyperion (CDA 66476, 1991), it has been comprehensively discussed elsewhere, notably by Helga Robinson-Hammerstein ("With Great Solemnity": Celebrating the First Centenary of the Foundation of Trinity College, Dublin, 9 January 1694', *Long Room* 37 (1992), 27–38) and Martin Adams ('Purcell's "Curiously Poor and Perfunctory Piece of Work": Critical Reflections on Purcell via His Music for the Centenary of Trinity College Dublin', *Irish Musical Studies* 10 (2009), 181–202). It was commissioned by Trinity College for its one-day centenary celebration on 9 January 1694. Nahum Tate, a BA graduate of this institution, was invited to write the text, and Purcell was a natural choice for composing the music because of his existing collaboration with Tate, not least in *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). The text refers to Elizabeth I ('Blest Eliza'), who founded the College, to William III and Mary, and to the First and Second Dukes of 'Ormand', who were both Chancellors of Trinity in turn (although the CD booklet only mentions the First Duke). However, the focus is on the College itself, and primarily expresses thanks for its now settled status following the recent Williamite Wars. Much criticized and 'dismissively described as sub-standard by virtually all College historians' – a judgment which has unfortunately sealed the work's subsequent fate – 'the text in fact follows the contemporary poetic convention [here a Pindaric ode] for academic eulogies on such occasions' (Robinson-Hammerstein, 'With Great Solemnity', 34). The music is muted in relation to that for Purcell's most famous odes: simply scored for a pair of recorders, strings and continuo, it lacks, for example, the brilliant trumpet writing so often associated with him. The reason for this is probably quite simple: he never visited Ireland and so did not know the capabilities of the instrumentalists who were to perform the ode. The same applies to the four solo singers and chorus: they are believed to have been members of the choir of Christ Church Cathedral, which had strong ties with Trinity and was probably the location for the ode's first airing prior to its official College performance on 9 January. Purcell's ode – named in the Register of that day's events as 'Ode Eucharistica' or 'thanksgiving ode' – was performed in the afternoon at an unknown College location, while John Blow's verse anthem *I beheld and lo, a great multitude* (c1683) was heard in the College chapel in the morning.

Purcell's music transcends Tate's text. The lively symphony is succeeded by a well-crafted and musically varied series of movements: chorus (with a solo trio), alto solo, alto and tenor duet, bass solo, tenor solo with echo (labelled a 'duet' here) and chorus, alto and bass duet, chorus, a

second symphony leading into an extended soprano solo (both featuring the two recorders in a solo capacity), and a concluding soprano solo and chorus. Whelan's excellent soloists are Maria Keohane, Anthony Gregory (though he is a 'high tenor' rather than an alto), Christopher Bowen and Aaron O'Hare, with the vocal ensemble Sestina. The accompanying strings (three violins, one viola, three cellos and one double bass) may well approximate those of the original ensemble, but the continuo for both secular odes would have surely utilized only the harpsichord (played by Whelan) and not the organ also used here, not least given the original performing venues. It is possible, though, that the lute and bassoon (the latter sparingly) would also have made an appearance. The author of the booklet text, Samantha Owens, observes 'it is not inconceivable that other wind instruments doubled the strings in parts (particularly in the opening symphony)' (5). And it is here that Whelan's interventionist tendencies, noted in my review of his previous recording of music by Matthew Dubourg (*Eighteenth-Century Music* 17/2 (2020), 281–285), come to the fore, with the use of oboes in instrumental sections of various movements. Purcell's scoring was presumably prescribed by Trinity (although their records are silent on this aspect). Purists may prefer Robert King's recording, but there is so much to admire here that this recording should not be dismissed on these grounds.

John (or Jean) Sigismond Cousser (Johann Sigismund Kusser) is a name not unknown in this publication. Eventually settling in Dublin in July 1707 and moving in establishment circles from the outset, he wrote his first ode for the Irish celebration of the ruling monarch's birthday in 1708. This was a year after the first-ever such ode, *Hail happy day*, by Charles Ximenes (possibly the Irish State Musician violinist Charles Christmenes or Kemenis, who was still employed there in 1725 – 'X' being an abbreviation for Christ). Between 1708 and 1727, the year of his death, Cousser composed birthday odes for Queen Anne and George I and II in turn, in addition to a coronation ode for George I in 1714. He also wrote the June 1713 'serenata teatrale' celebrating the Peace of Utrecht, *Happy Queen, in whose calm bosom tender goodness always reigns* and the 'serenata' (the term he preferred over 'ode') *No! He's not dead*, which Rebekah Ahrendt has convincingly dated to 1708 (*Eighteenth-Century Music* 19/2 (2022), 214–216); this latter work may have formed part of the annual birthday celebration held on 4 November for William III, an event not mentioned in contemporary newspapers but more commonly reported in later years along with regular accounts of the Dublin royal birthday celebrations (see *George Faulkner: The Dublin Journal* (2–6 November 1731) or *The Dublin Gazette* (2–6 November 1742, 4–7 November 1752 and 3–6 November 1753)). Recordings of both works have been released by Hungaroton (HCD 32633, 2010), making this present recording of the only other extant ode setting an invaluable addition to the discography of Cousser's output. (Other recordings of his music include the 1694 Hamburg opera *Erindo* (Opus 9110 0991-92, 1981), his six *Festin des Muses* suites (in two volumes on Hungaroton, HCD32337, 2005, and HCD32552, 2008) and his *Six Ouvertures de Théâtre 'Apollon enjoué'* (on the label K617, K617032, 1993).) Wordbooks have been reported for all the royal birthday odes for which Cousser composed the music except for the 1713 (Queen Anne) and 1720 (George I) ones that the existing Cousser literature fails to mention, as if he didn't compose an ode in those years (a newspaper report of the 1713 ode occasion is discussed below). Several ode texts are entitled 'serenata teatrale', although only the 1709 (not labelled thus) and Utrecht odes were performed at the Theatre Royal in Smock Alley, while the remainder were given at Dublin Castle. The CD booklet suggests that the ode on this recording may have been semi-staged (6), although the wordbook lacks any stage directions, as are found in other odes that clearly were either staged or semi-staged.

The present work, *The Universal applause of Mount Parnassus* ('Such harmony, as crowns th' Olympick revels'), performed on 6 February 1711, is a 'serenata da camera', presumably confirming that its performance was non-theatrical, and it is far longer than the ode by Purcell. It was performed before the 'Lords Justices' (the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons and the Archbishop of Armagh, the all-Ireland primate of the Church of

Ireland) probably around noon, as in 1710 and 1713. At this time Cousser was ‘Chappel-Master of Trinity-Colledge’ (wordbook), not attaining the position of ‘Master of the Musick attending His Majesties State in Ireland’ until 12 November 1716, following the death of William Viner. The most extensive newspaper report on the events of the day appears in *The Dublin Gazette* of 3–7 February 1712/1713, but reports from surrounding years follow a not dissimilar course. They describe a procession of ‘nobility, judges and gentry’ from the Lord Chancellor’s house to the Castle around 11 a. m., then the ‘Birth day Song in Honour of Her Majesty [being] perform’d by the best of Masters’ about noon, following which the Castle cannon were fired and responded to by regiments drawn up on College Green. Lunch for the men was held at the Lord Chancellor’s around 2 p. m. and an entertainment was provided for the ladies at the Archbishop of Tuam’s residence. There was a play at 6 p. m. followed by fireworks on the Custom House Quay, bell ringing, illuminations ‘and all other Demonstrations of Joy’. Other entertainments and a dinner for ‘persons of Quality’ and army officers took place elsewhere.

The ode manuscript is preserved in the St Michael’s College Tenbury collection at the Bodleian Library (Oxford). Its ownership has been traced back to the music editor Joseph Warren (1804–1881), and it was possibly purchased by Frederick Ouseley at the sale of Warren’s collection of English music manuscripts in 1881, whence it eventually entered the Tenbury collection. The text (with unknown author) is a continuous paean to Queen Anne’s greatness, with a single reference to ‘Eliza’ (Elizabeth I) and one to ‘Hibernia’. It is scored for ‘Apollo with the Nine Muses’ (the latter individually named) and chorus, although there are no stage directions for a theatrical performance in the wordbook as there are for a number of other ‘serenatas’. The present recording adds the mezzo-soprano Sinéad O’Kelly and alto Sarah Thursfield to the soloists named earlier and economically assigns more than one role to three of them, although several numbers are scored for all nine female roles in turn or combination. Apollo, originally scored for alto, is sung by Anthony Gregory. The opening ‘French’ overture is followed by a succession of Italianate recitatives and arias, a substantial sung ground, three choruses (with or without soloists) and a brief minuet scored for oboes and bassoon. The musical style is lyrical, euphonious and upbeat, as befits such an ode of praise.

Although the majority of movements are relatively insubstantial in length, they are varied in structure and musical style. Most of the eleven recitatives are of below thirty seconds’ duration and only three of the eleven arias are longer than two minutes in length, with the opening words generally reprised at the end. The scoring also offers considerable variety. The aria ‘Anna’s deathless acts rehearsing’ (track 18) imaginatively features a solo violin, ‘Future ages’ (track 20) an oboe, ‘Our Britain never gained’ (track 27) a cello, ‘Fortune caressing’ (track 29) recorders and ‘Laurels that adorn her’ (track 32) a pair of voice flutes (mostly doubling the violins). The most virtuosic aria is ‘In fortune’s chariot riding’ (track 25). The punctuation of the text in the booklet does not always match that of the generally more grammatically accurate wordbook, and the final word of the Chorus (track 38) should read ‘prevail’d’ rather than the non-rhyming ‘prevail’.

As with the Purcell ode, and ignoring any artistic licence in relation to the original score, this performance is exemplary. Whelan first aired it with Ensemble Marsyas at Dublin Castle as far back as 2015, and so this recording is long overdue. His generally brisk and buoyant tempos, and his immaculate shaping and phrasing of the music, are combined with the audible exuberance and enjoyment of the musicians in performing what on the face of it is a lengthy but comparatively inconsequential series of mostly brief movements. Given the place of the ode in the day’s extensive programme of festivities, these would surely have satisfied everyone at the time – though possibly not listeners today wishing for more in the way of substance, especially within the arias. But this should not detract from listening to such delightful music.

Two brief ‘fillers’ are frankly unnecessary and detract from the odes: three and a half renditions of Purcell’s *A New Irish Tune* (‘Lilliburlero’), Z646, arranged by the lutenist Pablo FitzGerald, and the unaccompanied Irish ‘sean nós’ song, *Sín síos agus suas suas liom*, included simply because of its

appearance in a bowdlerized version in Cousser's *Commonplace Book* (see page 406 as numbered in the online digitized version from Yale University Library – Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, entitled *Chanson Irrlandois*: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2019775>).

To summarize: this recording presents two *pièces d'occasion* that have somehow survived the ravages of time. Although both texts lack any contemporary resonance, the music is of fine quality, and, reflecting as they do the age of Queen Anne, these odes are of far greater interest and musicological importance than mere curiosity value. Perhaps Peter Whelan could next turn his attention to Boyce's substantial, but hitherto unrecorded anthem *Blessed is he that considereth the sick and needy*, composed for Mercer's Hospital, Dublin, and first performed at a benefit concert attended by Handel on 10 December 1741.

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