Review of The Sonatas of Henry Purcell: Rhetoric and Reversal. By Alon Schab

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Reviewed by John Cunningham[i]

1. Introduction

Although Henry Purcell is perhaps more readily thought of as a composer of vocal music, among the most enduring elements of his legacy must be his trio sonatas. They have been recorded many times and easily stand alongside those of "*the most fam'd Italian masters*" of whom he sought to compose a "*just imitation*."[ii] As such the musical subject matter of Alon Schab's monograph will arguably be familiar to many readers. It will be especially useful for anyone coming to Purcell's music for the first time.

Purcell's two sets of trio sonatas roughly bookend his tragic yet brilliant career. The first collection was 'printed for the Author' in 1683, when Purcell was in his early 20s. He chose the *Sonnata's of III parts* as his first publication. The folio set of parts were elegantly engraved by John Cross, replete with Purcell's portrait and title-page confirmation of his status as "*Composer in Ordinary to his most Sacred* Majesty, *and* Organist of his *Chappell Royall*." Down to the ordering of the twelve sonatas in a "tonal scheme of rising and falling thirds" (22), the *Sonnata's* was clearly intended as a carefully constructed and calculated statement of intent, "an act of self-promotion" (20). Twelve short years later he would be dead. In the years that followed Purcell's enterprising widow, Frances, published several collections of his music, hoping to capitalise on his popularity and reputation. A second set of *Ten Sonata's in Four Parts* was issued in 1697. Printed in moveable type and in no clearly discernible tonal scheme they seem to have met with little commercial success they have generated much scholarly debate over when they were composed and what relationship they have with the first set. Although not discussed in this book, the sonatas remained clearly influential to those English composers of the early eighteenth century, especially William Corbett (the most prolific English composer of trio sonatas, who once owned the British Library copy of the 1683 sonatas) and William Williams. However, they lacked the spark of genius so evident in Purcell's much and tastes of the day drew them more obviously towards the Corellian model.[iii]

Given the esteem in which Purcell's sonatas are held and the wealth of musical genius and craft they contain it is perhaps surprising that Schab's book is the first to be dedicated wholly to them. It was followed in 2019 by Alan Howard's, *Compositional Artifice in the Music of Henry Purcell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Howard's work is itself highly influential and there are many references to it in Schab's work.[iv] While much ink has been spilt attempting to identify Purcell's models for his sonatas, both Howard and Schab are concerned with the music itself, on its own terms. Schab sets out his underlying research question early on: "what are Purcell's sonatas 'about'?" (3). It is a seemingly innocuous and deceptively simply question: Schab's monograph-length answer has many profound implications. His approach throughout the book is underpinned by the listening experience, and often ponders those grey areas between what we hear, what we are meant to hear, and what is fundamental and yet largely imperceptible. In this he acknowledges his debt to the work of Leonard B. Meyer (especially his 1956 book *Emotion and Meaning in Music*). The insights Schab generates are often highly original, and will be as much of interest to performers as auditors.

2. Rhetoric and Reversal

The book comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the two sets of sonatas, which (as Schab points out) are often discussed alongside Purcell's fantazias for viol consort; he argues that the latter are ignored by "viol scholars" suggesting that their reluctance may be "to keep him from indirectly eclipsing Coprario, Lawes, and Jenkins" (19–20). It is a strange and unworthy remark, which looks back to Charles Burney in the tacit perpetuation of the notion that Purcell is the only English composer of the seventeenth century worth talking about. Nevertheless what Schab is essentially arguing for here is an emancipation of the sonatas; they can sound less daring than the fantazias when heard side-by-side, but heard and understood on their own terms the sonatas reveal much of Purcell's genius. The rest of the chapter offers an excellent introduction to the sonatas themselves, including discussion of the sources (and the textual challenges surrounding the 1697 set), and how Purcell assimilated his potential models (Italian and English) through imitation (*emulation*).

The remainder of the book may be summed up as elucidating aspects of the sonatas that are heard and meant to be heard, and those that are not and yet which are fundamental to the work's organisation (and thus perception). What is meant to be heard Schab terms 'rhetoric', discussed in Chapter 2; here Schab draws his evidence from a wide range of sources to demonstrate that such techniques while heard primarily in the sonatas are an essential part of Purcell's works in general – he shows how Purcell played with audience expectation by establishing norms and deviated from them, on the local and global compositional levels. These aurally obvious aspects include "rotation" or the ordered introduction of contrapuntal ideas in a canzona, and "cumulation" or the process of "postponing the boldest and most sophisticated ideas to the end of a movement" (51). His carefully worked analyses demonstrate that such ideas extended to harmonic and cadential patterns. Schab also argues that temperament also has significant rhetorical implications for Purcell's sonatas, concluding that Purcell may in the

1683 sonatas have knowingly included "technical problems that the average amateur would find hard to overcome" (89).

The next four chapters discuss compositional aspects that are often imperceptible to listeners and yet which are essential organisational structures. He explains the concept in Chapter 3 (the shortest in the book) through reference to the tradition of cantus firmus composition using typically complex counterpoint resulting in combinations that are difficult to perceive aurally, such as in Purcell's In Nomine (Z.746). However, Purcell often combines these arcane contrapuntal features with elements designed to pique the listeners' attention, such as quotation of a popular tune. The following chapters expand on this idea through what Schab distinguishes between "symmetry" (or rather "proportional symmetry") and "reversal" (or rather "mirror symmetry"). Proportional symmetry (Chapter 4) essentially refers to aspects such as strain / section lengths and how they relate. Here Schab shows how Purcell gradually changed phrase lengths and how there can be a symmetry between movements as the result of a fundamental tonal structure. The next two chapters deal with mirror symmetry, instances of "exact correspondence in size and position of opposite parts", which Schab argues is an essential part of Purcell's compositional process; moreover, that it "plays a lead role among those indiscernible levels of order with which his scores are overflowing" (137). The final chapter presents a case study in which Schab demonstrates how we might apply the two aspects – the rhetoric and reversal of his title – in understanding a single work, in this case the sonata Z.807, "Purcell's only sonata based on a ground bass and his only sonata *à due*" (203). It is a well-chosen example, which shows how Purcell was able to transcend the potentially limiting stricture of ground bass composition. Schab founds part of the analysis on William Bathe's table for composing canons on a plainsong (from his *A Briefe Introduction to the Skill of Song*, 1596).

3. Conclusions

Alon Schab's book is not a casual, easy-listening guide that takes the reader through each of the sonatas. The analytical descriptions are often detailed and rooted in theoretical discourse; for full absorption they require looking carefully though the examples and tables alongside the prose. Most revealing, however, is listening back to these sonatas with and without a score: while some of the less discernible procedures remain such, Schab offers many fresh insights into Purcell's compositional process and how his music is perceived, consciously and unconsciously. However, while the book is in part concerned with how these sonatas (and other works) are perceived aurally, it is not always clear who the listeners were. We do not know where Purcell's sonatas were heard; Schab cites the only recorded example from the diary of Purcell's friend, Roger North. As late as 1711 (around the same time as North was writing), the cleric and writer on music Arthur Bedford was still urging English composers to study the trio sonatas of Henry Purcell alongside those of Corelli and Bassani, in the hopes of writing sonatas that blended English elements with those of the Italian style.[v] Was it this kind of reader, studying the scores, that Purcell could have had in mind? When James Sherard (who published two sets of trio sonatas in the Corelli mould, 1701 and c.1714) scored up excerpts from the 1683 sonatas, he was concerned with short progressions and cadential formulas.[vi]

Such quibbles aside, the overarching impression is of an intense engagement with this music intellectually and emotionally, living up to the description of offering a "middle ground between historical musicology and analysis" (15). Schab's ability to access a wide bank of reportorial knowledge and to articulate hidden structures and compositional methodologies is hugely impressive, and clearly the result of the internalisation of a great deal of music. His prose is thoughtful and engaging; the division of the chapters also allows one to digest readily the material (typically after turning back to a recording) without getting bogged down in an analytical quagmire. The book itself is handsomely produced, as one expects from a Boydell imprint. There are copious music examples and tables, beautifully presented and carefully constructed and annotated. Schab describes the book's purpose as "to encourage readers from outside the Purcellian circle, who seek inspiration and models of compositional craftsmanship, to study Purcell" (3). He certainly makes his case persuasively and convincingly. This book will be essential reading (and re-reading) for anyone interested in baroque music, and how we might more thoughtfully perform it and to listen to it.

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[ii] The quotes are taken from the (oft-quoted) preface to the 1683 collection; scholars debate whether it was written by Purcell or as marketing on the part of John Playford.

[iii] See, John Cunningham, "'Faint copies' and 'Excellent Originalls': The Creation and Consumption of Trio Sonatas in England, c.1695–1710", in Inga Mae Groote and Matteo Giuggioli (eds), *Eine Geographie der Triosonate*, Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft: Serie II (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 111–38.

[iv] Primarily to Howard's 2006 doctoral dissertation, which forms the basis for his recent monograph.

[v] See Cunningham, "'Faint copies' and 'Excellent Originalls'.

[vi] Sherard's commonplace book in the Bodleian Library contains over 100 excerpts from a range of composers: see, Stephen Rose, 'James Sherard as Music Collector', in John Cunningham and Bryan White (eds), *Musical Exchange between Britain and Europe, 1500–1800: Essays in Honour of Peter Holman* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 357–79