

TO what blest genius of the isle
Shall gratitude her tribute pay
Shakespeare Ode, David Garrick 1769

Introduction

There are very many ways of celebrating the genius of Shakespeare, but I thought it would be interesting to try to follow the responses of composers to Shakespeare throughout the centuries. The plays of Shakespeare show that he inhabited a very musical world, so I have included a couple of pieces with which he would be familiar, although the evidence for settings which were used in his plays are thin. So it is that this evening's music comes from six centuries, with the earliest piece composed by William Cornysh (1465-1523) and most recent piece composed by John Tavener in 2007. I have had great enjoyment in investigating a wide range of music, and a lot of it I have arranged especially for this evening for the forces we have.

Notes on the programme

We start off with the beautiful *Ah Robin*, the story of a lover complaining about his mistress. Dating from before Shakespeare's time, it is very likely referred to by Feste in Twelfth Night:

Hey Robin, jolly Robin, tell me how thy Lady does.

We then have two pieces by Thomas Ravenscroft, a younger contemporary of Shakespeare, and a chorister across the river at St. Paul's Cathedral when the Globe was being built. He published three collections of songs and tunes, most of which were traditional rather than composed by him (for example, the first appearance in print of the tune *Three Blind Mice* is in one of his publications). We have here the *Fayries Daunce*, followed by a traditional song, the *Wooing song of a Yeoman of Kent*. This has been chosen not only to recall Shakespeare's provincial roots but also because the third line is likely to be the origin of Petruchio's lines in Taming of the Shrew:

*Signor Baptista, my business asketh haste,
And every day I cannot come to woo.*

Morley was another of provincial origin who made good in London as a publisher and as Master of the Choristers at St. Paul's. There is no evidence that he wrote music for any of the plays but he was a near neighbour of Shakespeare, at one stage living in the same parish. We have two of his most famous works, *O mistress mine*, sung as a solo song and the song *It was a lover and his lass* arranged as a madrigal.

At the Restoration, when theatrical performances were no longer banned, Shakespeare was once again staged, but often in revised versions that conformed to the changed tastes of the audiences, such as Tate's notorious happy ending to *Lear*. A taste for opera from the court of Louis XIV in Versailles combined with the native tradition for the masque resulted in extensive sequences of music for plays. These were usually performed not by the main actors but by separate singers and musicians. We have two examples this evening – two pieces from Purcell's relatively well-known *Fairy Queen*, the play being an adaptation of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the lesser known *Tempest* with music primarily by Matthew Locke but with some songs by other composers. Locke was an older contemporary, teacher and family friend of Henry Purcell. Indeed, Purcell succeeded him to the post of Composer for the Violins to Charles II. While both composers show the same interest in plangent harmony, Locke's is perhaps the more extraordinary and gives us an idea of where Purcell's style was forged. For both works, we include an instrumental and vocal piece.

From the *Tempest*, we have the opening music – played as the audience settled down, followed by *Eccho song* between Ferdinand (tenor) and Ariel (soprano) as Echo teases Ferdinand. With Purcell, we celebrate the birthday of King Oberon, introduced by soprano soloist before chorus and then orchestra take over in a sprightly mood. The orchestra then plays a Chaconne, a dance, from near the end of the work. The music for the *Fairy Queen* is reasonably substantial in itself, but it does not amount to an opera. The whole work included a reworked version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* making it a very substantial evening's entertainment.

The eighteenth century was not much better at respecting the words of Shakespeare on stage. Scholars, however, were interested in looking critically at the actual words – notably Nicholas Rowe in 1709, Alexander Pope in 1725 and the 'Oxford Edition' in 1744 and some composers at least took the actual words and set them. Maurice Greene, born the year after Purcell died, was a respected establishment figure – for many years holding simultaneously the

post of organist and master of the choristers at St. Paul's and the Chair in Music at the University of Cambridge. Greene's *Orpheus with his lute* seems not to have been connected with a stage production but was published with a handful of other songs. Listen out for the 'billowing waves' depicted in the accompaniment. Thomas Arne was never an establishment figure due to his Roman Catholicism, but he had great popularity. He knew what people liked and had great success, both in the theatre and at the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens where he took charge of the music in 1745. *Where the bee sucks* comes from incidental music to a production of the *Tempest* in 1740.

It was somewhat later, in 1769 at the great Shakespeare Jubilee, that Arne wrote his song in praise of Stratford's river. The words were by the actor and theatre impresario, David Garrick, who was the driving force behind the Jubilee. Reading contemporary accounts, it all seems to have been pretty shambolic, although it was not helped by a massive downpour. Charles Dibdin collaborated with Garrick in the London theatre world and helped him compose some popular songs for the Jubilee, but Arne provide the more significant musical contributions in the form of his oratorio *Judith*, performed here in Holy Trinity, and the Shakespeare Ode. It seems that Dibdin felt slighted and he only turned up with the songs tucked under his arm at the very last moment. As was the case for the whole Jubilee, there was not a word of Shakespeare (a similar charge has been laid at the door of the BBC this time around) and such verse as there was was doggerel. However the tunes were received with great enthusiasm by the people then and are still attractive.

*** INTERVAL ***

Thomas Linley had the misfortune to be drowned in a boating accident at the age of 22. Had he not met with this fate, he would, undoubtedly have been a major name. While studying in Florence, he met Mozart who was born in the same year as Linley. All of Italy talked about them in the same breath; the historian Charles Burney wrote '*The Tommasino, as he is called, and the little Mozart, are talked of all over Italy, as the most promising geniuses of this age.*' and Linley has earned the soubriquet 'The English Mozart.' In 1776 he composed his own ode for Shakespeare. The two choral movements we hear this evening are a little old-fashioned, harking back to Handel's oratorios. The first invokes Shakespeare, and the second ends with the plea '*Bring another Shakespeare to our isle.*' which seems to be a good way to end the concert. *For who can wield* is more modern in style, very tuneful, with a delightful interplay between the two soprano soloists.

We follow up with some responses to Shakespeare for solo voice. With the advent of the romantic movement, Shakespeare began to become better known on mainland Europe. The first European composer to pick up on him was Haydn: on one of his visits to London, he published a set of 'original canzonettas' in 1795 to English texts. Unusually, the words *She never told her love* are not a song in a play but are from a scene between Viola and the Duke in Act II of *Twelfth Night*. The setting is restrained. Schubert wrote *An Silvia* (*Who is Sylvia?*) some thirty years later in 1826. It is a typically simple strophic song with interest provided by the melodic bass line. We then jump 100 years to a setting of the same text by Roger Quilter. He set a number of Shakespeare texts for voice and piano; this one, from his third set, shows a fluent, melodic style with sensitive word setting. The final song of the group is by the contemporary composer, Ian Higginson, who is based in Cheltenham. The piece is in a simple, contemporary style.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw an explosion of settings for choirs. Charles Wood is best known for his church anthems (for example, *O thou the central orb*); in this setting of *Full Fathom Five*, dating from 1890, he enjoys portraying the ringing of bells which he would have known from his days as a choirboy at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. Robert Lucas de Pearsall was born in Bristol but spent much of his life abroad. He never studied music formally but wrote a number of madrigals and part-songs of which *Lay a garland* and his arrangement of *In dulci jubilo* have remained in the repertoire. *Lay a garland* is richly scored in eight parts and contains many suspensions, suggestive of grief and sorrow, but much enjoyed by singers. *Tell me where is fancy bred* dates from 1990 and is one of a group of Shakespeare settings by the New York-based composer Matthew Harries. He writes in an accessible style that takes on board influences from music Broadway as well as the classical canon. John Tavener has been a huge presence on the English choral scene, with a number of works already earning the status of classics. After earlier extrovert works, his conversion to Greek Orthodox Christianity resulted in spare, serene music although not always short: his *The Veil of the Temple* (2007) lasts for more than seven hours. The same year saw the first performance of *Fear no more the heat o' the sun*. It is a much more modest piece, but it does have a long final note to the syllable OM, the Sanskrit syllable representing the infinite.