

Henry Purcell – ‘Music for a While’

Analysis & Questions

This resource explores ‘Music for a While’, an aria by Henry Purcell, offering a summary of the song and a bank of quick and in-depth questions aimed at GCSE-level students (it appears on the Edexcel syllabus). This resource accompanies the London Philharmonic Orchestra’s performance and analysis video of the piece, which can be found on our website. You will need the Peters Edition/Faber Music edition of the score (printed in the Edexcel anthology) to complete the questions.

Henry Purcell (1659–1695)




Henry Purcell was an English Baroque composer. He grew up in an extremely musical family – all his male relatives were professional musicians or composers. He spent his life working at Westminster Abbey in service to royalty. All of his music was written ‘for a purpose’; he wrote theatre music, music for religious worship and royal anthems. Purcell died at the age of just 36 and is still regarded as one of the best composers Britain ever produced.

‘Music for a While’ (1692)

- Form:** Song, written for a play called *Oedipus* by John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee, based on Sophocles
- Instrumentation:** High voice (treble, countertenor or soprano), harpsichord, bass viol (cello in our film)
- Structure:** Ground Bass structure – based on a repeating bassline that forms the basis of the melody above. Also called basso ostinato
Reprise of opening material in final section is a very early example of a ternary shape that was to become known as ‘da capo aria’ in Mozart’s day
- Texture:** Melody and accompaniment / melody-dominated homophony
- Bassline is played by cello/bass viol and left hand of harpsichord
 - Right hand harpsichord fills in the harmony, adds countermelodies. This would have been improvised by the player at the time, not notated. The bassline would have had numbers underneath, or ‘figures’ which tell the player how to harmonise the bassline. This is called **figured bass**
 - Voice sings melody
- Subject matter:** Sung to a horrendous creature called ‘Alecto’ to distract and calm her

Analysis:

Bar 1	<p>Key: A minor</p> <p>Three-bar ground bass establishes the key. This pattern is made up entirely of quavers and divides into four-note phrases, each one a note higher than the last (i.e. it is a sequence). An octave leap at the end creates a perfect cadence with the beginning of the next repeat of the ground bass:</p>  <p>Right hand harpsichord features many ornaments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grace notes (bar 1) • Appoggiaturas (bar 2) • Mordents, upper and lower (bar 11) • Spread (arpeggiated) chords (bar 13)
Bar 4	<p>Vocal line begins.</p> <p>Melody is mostly conjunct and stretches over a 9th.</p> <p>It is mostly syllabic but also features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paired syllables in bar 5 (for... a....) • Melisma in bar 11 (won... d'ring) • Extended melisma in bar 20 (e-ter.....nal) <p>Purcell uses word painting (words are set to sound like their meaning):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'pains' forms a dissonance with the chord beneath (bar 12) • 'eas'd' creates a series of resolutions to clashes (bar 13) • 'eternal' lasts a long time! (bar 20) • 'drop' placed on the off-beat and moves alternately down and up in pitch (bars 24–25) – could be to represent snakes dropping from Alecto's head!
Bar 14	<p>Ground bass develops after 4½ repeats, starts to modulate.</p> <p>Music moves through E minor, G major, C major, A major, E minor.</p>
Bar 23	<p>Original ground bass returns but not at beginning of bar.</p> <p>It continues to develop at bar 26.</p>
Bar 29	<p>Return to opening material.</p> <p>Ground bass returns without development, opening melody and lyrics return.</p>
Bar 38	<p>Song concludes with a perfect cadence in the tonic key of A minor.</p>

Find the bar

In which bar can you find... (give beat number where appropriate, e.g. Bar 1, beat 1)

1. The first time we hear a lower mordent?	
2. Where the vocal line begins?	
3. The first time we hear paired syllables?	
4. The first time we hear a spread chord?	
5. The first time we hear a trill in the voice part?	
6. The first place where the repeating ground bass changes?	
7. A perfect cadence in G major?	
8. An extended melisma?	
9. Where the voice sings a series of offbeat quavers?	
10. Where the music from Bar 1 returns?	

Quick Quiz

1. What is the ornament in bar 1, beat 3 of the right-hand harpsichord part called?	
2. What is the ornament in bar 2 of the right-hand harpsichord part called?	
3. What is the length of the ground bass pattern?	
4. In what year was this song written?	
5. The bassline is played by which instrument(s)?	
6. What note value does the bassline entirely consist of until the final bar?	
7. Purcell reflects the meaning of some of the words in the vocal melody. What is the technical name for this?	
8. Originally, the harpsichord player would not have had the right-hand part notated, but the harmony would have been indicated on the bassline. What is this called?	
9. At the end of bar 20, the voice part sings a D, which is tied into the next bar, creating a brief dissonance with the bassline which plays an E on the first beat of bar 21. What is this called?	
10. In the final beat of the penultimate bar, the voice sings four notes on the syllable 'be'. What is the note value of these notes?	

In depth

1. Describe the ornaments used in this song. How are they notated and how are they performed?
2. Find three examples of melisma in the vocal line.
3. What is ground bass? Describe how it is used in this song.
4. Describe how Purcell conveys the mood of the words through the music.
5. What features show you that this song is from the Baroque period?