

Henry PURCELL (1659-1695)

The Double Dealer, Z.592 [1693]

- I Overture
- II Hornpipe
- III Minuett
- IV Aire
- V Hornpipe
- VI Minuett - Slow Aire
- VII Minuett
- VIII Aire
- IX Aire

Henry Purcell is widely regarded as one of England's finest composers who, in a short life, excelled with a distinctive and idiosyncratic musical voice across a broad range of genres. As was common in the 17th century, his compositional activities were largely determined by his official duties, and so the range of purposes for which his music was written appears quite bewildering - from sacred music for the church (he was the organist of Westminster Abbey from 1679), to ceremonial music for royal functions, and music for the theatre, both tragedy and comedy. The Double Dealer is emphatically a comedy.

The Double Dealer, produced in 1693, was just the second play of the young William Congreve. As the title suggests, its plot is a web of lies, deception and adultery, practised by nearly all its characters, although two of them do remain virtuous, keeping the play just within the rather loose bounds of acceptability. It did not initially meet with much public success; according to John Dryden (another playwright with whom Purcell collaborated), the problem for Congreve was that 'the women think he has exposed their bitchery too much; and the gentlemen are offended with him for the discovery of their follies and the way of their intrigues under the notion of friendship to their ladies' husbands.'

You might think that Purcell would only concern himself here with writing some light, fluffy background music, but instead we have this beautifully crafted suite that can stand alone without the play. The overture is the longest movement, followed by various short - often very short - dances and airs that would've taken place at appropriate breaks in the action. The music is beautiful, but that doesn't just mean pretty and polite; we find Purcell occasionally deviating from our usual expectations of which notes are 'allowed' to sound together. Working in four voices, he is more concerned with each line's individuality, resulting in the occasional amusing disagreement between parts. Because of this, the musicians of the Tuckwell Chamber Orchestra have each rehearsed from a full score of the work, ensuring they are aware of the other parts' deviations. Purcell's exemplary contrapuntal skill (he was obviously enjoying himself while writing this) allows even the oft-overlooked violas to vie with the first violins for who has the most interesting part!

© David Lang