

William Turner (1652-1740)

A Brief Biography

Turner is one of the more interesting, if least known and documented, of the prominent group of Restoration composers that included Purcell and Blow. His sheer longevity, 88 years, is remarkable as it spans English music from Henry Lawes to Handel. Although he continued as a performer into the first decades of the eighteenth century, he seems to have given up composing around 1705 at the height of his powers (for reasons one can only speculate about).

In about 1662, Turner was among the second set of choristers conscripted by Henry Cooke, organist of the Chapel Royal, for that institution, having sung under Edward Lowe at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, where he was born. After his voice broke in 1666 he was maintained by the Chapel Royal until his appointment as Master of the Choristers at Lincoln in November 1667 (at the tender age of 15 or 16!). After two years he was recalled to the Chapel Royal as a counter tenor, becoming a 'Gentleman' thereof and remaining one for the rest of his life.

The first evidence of Turner as a composer is his modest contribution to the so-called 'Club Anthem,' *I Will Give Thanks Always*, a collaboration with Pelham Humfrey and John Blow, his fellow and senior choristers. He seems, not surprisingly, to have written anthems for the Lincoln choir – eight or nine have survived in the Bing-Gostling part books at St. Paul's. He was made a Member of the King's Private Musick in 1672. His first really productive period seems to be towards the end of Charles II's reign, culminating in the two anthems commissioned for his successor's (James II) coronation in 1685. The bulk of this work was presumably written for the Chapel and favors the 'Verse Anthem' genre. Two of these, however, *Lord What is Man* and *Lord, Thou Hast Been Our Refuge* were widely disseminated to British cathedrals.

After 1685 the Chapel Royal went into decline as successive monarchs had less and less interest in or need for it. Turner, in common with his contemporaries, wrote for and performed in plays and court entertainments, as well as subsidizing his income through teaching. His becoming a Vicar Choral at St. Paul's in 1687 had the effect of boosting his finances and broadening his creative scope, no doubt influenced to some extent by the experience of singing in the nave of Wren's new structure. Turner enjoyed increasing recognition and exposure in the 1690s, culminating in the conferral of the Doctor of Music degree at Cambridge in 1696. He was, with Purcell and Blow, very active in the Cecilian celebrations, composing morning canticles for the 1696 festival service, and an anthem *The King Shall Rejoice* for the same occasion in 1697, also writing the ceremonial ode for that year's celebrations, which, unfortunately, is lost. The compositions that survive from this period show Turner at the peak of his achievements. In 1699 he joined the Westminster Abbey choir as a lay vicar, earning him the singular distinction of serving in the three leading London churches simultaneously. At this time, also, Turner's presence appears much more prominently on the London musical scene where, primarily as composer and performer of songs, he was active in the newly opened concert rooms.

Turner's music is distinguished by fine craftsmanship and an approach that is both respectful of tradition and forward-looking. He absorbed French and Italian influences, particularly in his

instrumental ritornelli, and was greatly influenced by his eminent contemporaries, especially Purcell. The early works, in the more conservative style, demonstrate a more than adequate technique displaying skill in harmonic progression, voice-leading, and sensitivity to word settings. In the 1680s, as he favors the 'Symphony Anthem,' his style becomes more compact rhythmically, with less use of the imitative style, and more frequent cadences. His work of the 1690s clearly shows Italian influences. It may be said that Turner's work becomes noticeably less inhibited after Purcell's death (1695), under whose shadow he had lived for so long. Although the scholarly consensus nowadays considers Turner's work greatly underestimated, ultimately his music lacks, in Ian Spink's phrase, sufficient 'strength and energy'.ⁱ

Turner's surviving corpus includes 40 or so anthems, four services (three full), hymn tunes, chants (Spinkⁱⁱ regards him to be, if not the inventor, the father of Anglican chant), ceremonial odes, songs, and a couple of keyboard pieces. Turner died a mere four days after his wife and they are buried together in the west cloister of Westminster Abbey.

ⁱ Spink, Ian. *Restoration Cathedral Music 1660-1714*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 145.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 15.