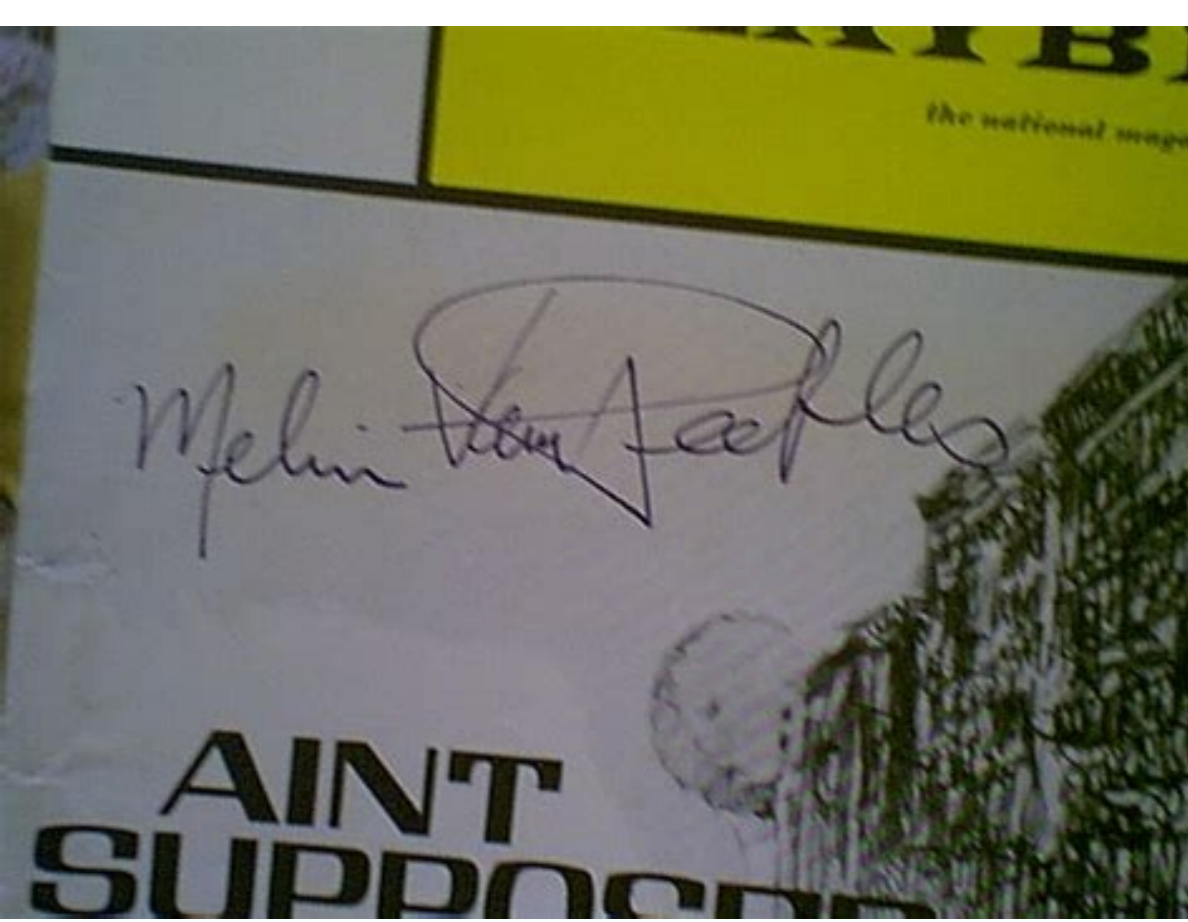


I'm not robot!





When Henry Purcell died (on 21 November 1695 - 325 years ago today) he was probably one of the best-known composers in England - honoured with a burial at Westminster Abbey no less. But a reputation will only take you so far, and the fact that his music lives on all these years later is thanks in part to it being preserved in sources that have been interpreted and reinterpreted over time. Autograph manuscript of Henry Purcell's Sonata in F major (Z. 810). BL Add MS 30930, f. 37v. This evidence of Purcell's music comes in different forms, from scores in the composer's own hand to printed editions produced for wider circulation. A multitude of manuscript copies, made for all sorts of purposes, enriches the story even more - often giving us a sense of the ways in which the music was actually played by the composer's contemporaries, and therefore how people would have known it. Later sources can also demonstrate the various routes of dissemination and transformation his music has taken in the centuries since, reflecting changing tastes and viewpoints over time. From 19th-century manuscript copies of Dido and Aeneas to Michael Tippett's and Benjamin Britten's arrangements, these all tell us something about how Purcell and his music has been understood - and provides a context for how we interpret it today. Autograph manuscript of Benjamin Britten's realisation of the Purcell sonata in the first image above. BL Add MS 60626, f. 1r. Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM) - finding printed and manuscript musical sources Last month the new RISM UK catalogue was launched, providing everyone with the ability to search for the location of pre-1850 printed and manuscript music sources in libraries, archives and other repositories around the UK (for more information, see our blog post announcing it here). A quick search for Henry Purcell shows that plenty of material can be found all around the country. In fact, Purcell is the composer with the second highest amount of material preserved in British institutions, second only to Georg Friedrich Händel (excluding the ubiquitous Anonymous). Among more than 2,500 results are around 150 autograph scores. The posthumously published collection of Purcell's songs, Orpheus Britannicus, is particularly well represented as well, with copies of the first and second volumes of the first edition (1698 and 1702) in 19 and 21 institutions respectively - and with the second, expanded, edition of 1706 to be found in a whopping 28 institutions. The first edition of 'Orpheus Britannicus', a posthumously published collection of Purcell's songs (1698). BL G.100. 'Ah! Belinda' as printed in Orpheus Britannicus. The first part of Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas to appear in print. BL G.100. The RISM UK catalogue is a subset of the international catalogue, and this provides a perspective on the transmission of Purcell's music around the world - with material preserved all over Europe as well as in Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. The Library of Congress (US-Wc) holds the largest number of Purcell sources outside of the UK, and in fact around a dozen of these sources are printed editions that can only be found there. The Royal Conservatory of Belgium (B-Bc) also houses a significant amount of music by Purcell, largely thanks to the music collector Guido Richard Wagener (1822-1896): in the manuscript anthologies with shelfmarks 25590, 14981 and 15139 one will find sonatas, keyboard pieces, and overtures by Purcell. Purcell at the British Library 25 years ago the British Library put together an exhibition to mark the 300th anniversary of Purcell's death, and it's great to see that a digital trace of that can still be found online - now almost a historical source in its own right! At the time of the exhibition in 1995, a relatively recent acquisition was the newly discovered autograph manuscript of Purcell's keyboard music (MS Mus. 1). This was digitised along with two other major manuscript sources in Purcell's own hand in 2012 - a blog post from the time provides a bit more information about these important volumes. Since then we have also digitised the autograph score of Purcell's 'The Yorkshire Feast Song' (Egerton MS 2956). A particularly stormy passage in the autograph manuscript of 'The Yorkshire Feast Song' (Z. 333). BL Egerton MS 2956, f. 13r. There have also been several new Purcell-related acquisitions since that volume of keyboard music in the 1990s - copies of songs from 'The Fairy Queen', for example, as well as contemporary copies of the songs 'She who my poor heart possesses' (Z. 415) and 'Cease anxious world' (Z. 362) (Mus. Dep. 2016/52). The most recent acquisition came last year. This is a substantial volume of music mostly for the flute or for the violin and includes what is the only known source for Purcell's Sonata in G minor (Z. 780). It is currently awaiting attention from our conservation team, but this seems a good time to introduce it and to provide a sneak peak inside. Henry Purcell. Sonata in G minor (Z. 780), as copied by Edward Finch. BL MS Mus. 1851. The volume had passed through the hands of several collectors in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries and had been last seen in the early years of the 20th century, when an edition was made of the Purcell piece, very much in the style of the time. Frederick Bridge's 1903 edition of Purcell's Sonata in G minor (Z. 780). After failing to sell in an auction in 1935, the manuscript disappeared. Despite attempts by Thurston Dart and others to reconstruct the original Purcell piece (free from the idiosyncrasies of the early 20th-century edition), the volume's whereabouts remained a mystery until 2012, when Peter Holman found it at Spetchley Park.[1] The volume is known to be the work of two people: William Armstrong (d. 1717) and Edward Finch (1664-1738), both well-connected personalities in musical life of the 1600s and early 1700s. Not much is known about William Armstrong but he certainly played viola in the orchestra in the early days of the Italian Opera at the Haymarket theatre, around 1710, and we know he undertook work as a copyist for various theatres in the early 1700s too. Edward Finch was from a wealthy family and, among other things, seems to have been a proficient player of wind instruments. In particular he was a relatively early adopter of the 'German flute', predecessor of the modern flute (the recorder, known then as the 'common flute', or 'English flute', had been more popular before that). As part of the volume is in the hand of Armstrong, and the other in the hand of Finch, it has become known as the 'Armstrong-Finch' manuscript. The volume is dated 1691 at the beginning, but it is clear that Finch was still adding to it up to at least 1720. William Armstrong's inscription at the front of the volume. BL MS Mus. 1851. A sonata copied by Armstrong and Finch's characteristic sign-off, from Christmas 1717. Besides the Purcell piece, the volume as a whole is of interest especially because of the connections between Finch, Armstrong and some of the prominent musicians they would have known and whose music is represented in the volume - from Purcell and Gottfried Finger to Francesco Geminiani a bit later. Given these connections, it is also an important source of information about all sorts of other things, from the use of ornamentation at the time, to the establishment of the flute as a popular instrument in professional and amateur circles. We hope, as Peter Holman says at in his introductory article to the manuscript, that it will "continue to yield up its secrets for a long time to come".[1] Chris Scobie (Curator, Music Manuscripts, British Library) and Jennifer Ward (Editor, RISM Zentralredaktion) ---- References [1] Holman, Peter (2012). 'A Purcell manuscript lost and found'. in *Early Music*. 40/3. pp.469-487. Preview Preview Working with historic sheet music. I come across autographs almost every day. This doesn't surprise me, as most of the books on my own bookshelf have my name written inside. Likewise, sheet music was intended to be used frequently, making the contents of any historic sheet music collection far from 'mint condition'. Instead, most of our songs exhibit all the signs of loving use—small tears, separated pages, pencil markings, slightly discolored sections where a performer might have frequently turned the page. And lots of autographs. And every time I find one, I get to scrutinize it to determine if it's just the signature of the song's owner or if it's signed by a celebrity. Most fall into the former category, like the song below (quick note here—I'll be using the terms 'signature' and 'autograph' interchangeably, recognizing that a signature functions more as a legal entity). This one isn't too difficult to decipher as an owner's autograph, as Annetta's name appears in three different places on the cover in pencil—twice as Nettie, with one instance mostly erased. It's also easy to tell that Annetta is not the composer of the song (Irving Berlin) or the performer pictured at the bottom (Sadie McDonald). However, autographs often turn out to be from someone of note, and the resulting scrutiny can become much more difficult. Most sheet music covers in the mid-19th century onwards were printed using the process of lithography—basically, the artist would draw a design on limestone with an oily pencil. The stone would then be dampened so any oily ink applied afterward would stick to the pencil and not the wet stone, as oil and water don't mix (the Museum of Modern Art has a terrific demonstration of the process here). Using this pencil, a celebrity could 'sign' the original stone and have their autograph automatically printed on every copy. Alternatively, photolithography could be used to photograph any image (such as an autograph) and duplicate it. For example, the signature on the above song from 1912 appears to be handwritten. However, zooming in, the ink appears almost pixelated—clearly not done with fresh ink. In combing through Lester Levy's fifteen boxes of correspondence, I happened to find a short letter mentioning a song with Amelia Earhart's signature on the cover. Sure enough, the cover (above) appeared to have the signature just to the left of Earhart inside the oval. The signature resembled a verified autograph found online, so my next step was to find a copy of the song in another repository. A copy in the Owl's Head Transportation Museum does not have the signature, so we know the autograph was not part of a lithograph and is likely authentic. Other signatures can be verified with historic context. For example, we know from his correspondence that Levy was acquainted with popular composers Ira Gershwin and Irving Berlin, so it's not surprising to find their signatures throughout the collection. The above song, 'Our Candidate March', presented a significant challenge in verifying the supposed signature of President William McKinley. An initial search didn't turn up any other editions of the song, so I took a fieldtrip down to our conservation lab to examine the signature under a few different microscopes. However, it was almost impossible to tell if the signature is unique or part of an original lithograph. There were a few clues it may be authentic—there is a slight smudge on the "L" and the "y" does cover the "e" in the composer's name. There is also the slightest bleed of ink through the page, but no impression from a writing implement. Eventually, I managed to track down another edition of the song at the New York Public Library. They confirmed that their edition does not have the signature, meaning ours is most likely legitimate. Of course, proving the signature was made with unique ink doesn't prove it was McKinley himself holding the pen. Nowadays, there are even autograph machines that can hold a pen and be programmed to reproduce a signature. Regardless, each venture down an autograph rabbit hole inevitably yields more insights than I thought I'd find (for example, I now know all of the variations of "I" dotting in McKinley signatures). And, the next time you scribble your name on the inside of a book cover, you can wonder if future researchers & historians will be examining it under a microscope to determine if it was truly your hand that put pen to paper. As the curator of the Lester Levy Sheet Music Collection, a phrase I hear often is "I didn't know sheet music could be used to study..." Levy collected 30,000 songs over 50+ years not to perform, but to use as a lens for studying history. To make this easier, Levy organized his collection by subject, rather than title or composer. As a result, there are hundreds of unique subjects that can be used to filter the collection. So, I thought I'd take the opportunity to dive into some of the more fascinating, obscure, and strange subject headings in the collection. Each week, I'll focus on a different subject - stay tuned for more deep dives! You can view the entire digitized collection here.

