

## *Hail! Bright Cecilia* (z.328) by Henry Purcell (1659–1695)



*St. Cecilia* by  
Artemesia

In 1683, the 24-year old Henry Purcell, organist at Westminster Abbey and composer in the Chapel Royal, together with other professional musicians and “gentleman lovers of musick” established a Musical Society in London to organize annual celebrations in honour of the feast day of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians. Similar traditions had existed in most continental European countries for some time.

Cecilia was an “early adopter” of Christianity who lived either in Sicily in the 2nd century or in Rome in the 3rd; the historical record is ambiguous. The Roman authorities were not sympathetic to her proselytizing and she was executed. It was reported that, even as she died a martyr’s death, she sang praises to God. Legend considerably expanded her musical capabilities: by the 16th century, she was painted by Raphael holding a small organ, by Artemesia playing a lute, and by other artists playing a violin or a bass viol or composing music. When an Academy of Music was founded in Rome in 1584, Cecilia was adopted as their patron saint and November 22nd established as the date of her festival.

The most important component of the Cecilian festivals in London was a first performance of an ode commissioned for the occasion. Purcell himself contributed the first such ode, *Welcome to All the Pleasures* (z.339) in 1683. By the 1690s, the Cecilian festival had become one of the most significant events in London’s musical life and in 1692 Purcell composed the ode *Hail! Bright Cecilia* (z.328) for extraordinarily large forces: six vocal soloists, six-part chorus, recorders, oboes, trumpets, drums and strings. The text was written by Dr. Nicholas Brady, an Anglo-Irish poet and clergyman, based on a poem by John Dryden. The performance took place at the Stationers’ Hall (a venue which still exists) on November 22nd.

According to P. A. Motteux, a contemporary observer, it met with “universal applause” and had to be repeated. He noted that the audience was particularly impressed by the countertenor recitative *Tis Nature’s Voice*, for which “incredible” ornaments had been composed by Purcell himself, rather than left for the singer to improvise.

In all, Purcell composed four Cecilian odes. But on the eve of St. Cecilia’s day in 1695, Purcell died, probably of pneumonia; he was just 36 years old. He is buried close to the organ in Westminster Abbey; his epitaph reads: “He is gone to that blessed place where only his harmony can be exceeded.”



*Henry Purcell*

## *Organ Concerto No. 2 (HWV 290) by G. F. Handel (1685–1759)*

Johann Mattheson, an 18th century composer, diplomat and music historian, described Handel as the foremost organist of his time, comparable only to Bach. In a competition with Domenico Scarlatti in 1707 (both were 23 years old), Handel was judged to be the better on the organ. Nevertheless, because of his focus on Italian-style opera and chamber music, the only works by Handel specifically for organ are a number of concertos for chamber organ and strings, which were apparently composed as a desperate measure to preserve an audience for his oratorios.

The story begins in 1733, when a new opera company was established in London and poached the best singers from Handel's company. In 1734, the rival company also managed to hire from Italy the celebrated *castrato* Farinelli and soprano Francesca Cuzzoni, who proved to be sensations in London:

All the Royal Family were at the Opera, when Signior Farinelli perform'd, with prodigious applause. The Theatre was exceedingly crowded.



*G. F. Handel* by  
B. Denner (1733)

Handel reacted by hiring Marie Sallé, a famous French ballerina, and incorporating dance movements into his Italian operas; but this wasn't enough to attract more of the fickle London audience. To avert a financial disaster, Handel decided that *he* would have to be the celebrity to compete with those of the rival company. He would be the virtuoso soloist in "organ concertos" performed in the intervals of the oratorios planned for the new year.

So, in the first three months of 1735, Handel composed four such concertos (HWV 290 to 293), working at his usual super-human pace and in his usual economical way: of the 16 movements in these four concertos, ten are re-workings of earlier music by him; only six are mostly new. These concertos were performed by Handel in revivals of *Esther*, *Deborah*, and *Athalia* in 1735. Two more such organ concertos were composed for a new oratorio, *Alexander's Feast*, in 1736. The concertos must have been popular; two years later they were published by John Walsh as Handel's Opus 4.

In all, 18 such organ concertos were published and for twenty years "concertos by Mr. Handel" were a popular "additional entertainment" in the intervals of oratorio performances, including *Messiah*, until he was no longer able to play because of failing eyesight.

## ***Bringet dem Herrn Ehre seines Namens* by J. S. Bach (1685–1750)**

It is thought that this cantata (BWV 148) was performed in Leipzig on September 19th, 1723, the 17th Sunday after Trinity in the church calendar. However, the dating is uncertain because the text, which celebrates the Sabbath, seems to be based on a poem by Picander that was published in 1725; perhaps Bach had access to an earlier version.



*J. S. Bach*

If the dating is correct, this cantata is just one of 21 that Bach composed, rehearsed, and conducted in 1723 after his arrival at Leipzig in May. In those 7 months, Bach also re-arranged, rehearsed, and conducted 10 cantatas composed earlier, and composed, rehearsed, and conducted the first version of his familiar *Magnificat*. He also composed, rehearsed, and conducted secular cantatas for university events, weddings and funerals, kept the organs in tune, and taught the ablest students. It was Bach's own initiative to produce a body of "regulated" liturgical music; his primary responsibility as cantor was to conduct music for church services, whether or not the music was his or new.

One might conjecture that producing such an extraordinary quantity of new music while there were so many other demands on his time could only have been achieved by compromising on quality, but there is no evidence of that in this cantata. After a brief instrumental *sinfonia* and homophonic choral introduction, the first movement becomes a glorious two-subject choral fugue; Bach took advantage of the availability of Gottfried Reiche, the celebrated Leipzig town trumpeter, to write a prominent and virtuosic independent part for *clarino* (i.e., natural valveless trumpet). This is followed by a tenor aria with a florid violin accompaniment and a mystical alto recitative and aria accompanied by low oboes (likely two oboes *d'amore* and an oboe *da caccia*). The cantata concludes with the chorus singing a chorale accompanied by all the instruments; the Leipzig congregations would also have joined in.

## ***Ascribe unto the Lord* by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876)**

S. S. Wesley was an English organist, choir director and composer whose bicentenary is being celebrated this year. He is considered the best English choral composer between Purcell and Stanford. His father was composer Samuel Wesley (1766–1837), known as the "English Mozart" and a fervent admirer of J. S. Bach's music, hence his son's middle name. The anthem *Ascribe unto the Lord* was composed in 1851; the text is based on Psalms 96 and 115. Like Mendelssohn, Wesley was strongly influenced by the structures of Bach's music, but the harmonic language is Romantic rather than Baroque.