

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Purcell's Playhouse & The Alehouse Sessions: Double Bill

Friday 23 September 2022, 9pm & 10.30pm

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

About the music

The last couple of years, I have been very interested in a certain period of time in London. A time where professional musicians were roaming the streets without a venue to play their music – because all theatres were closed and making money on performing music was prohibited. I picture these grey-cloaked figures; how they're hiding their instruments to protect them from the rain and wind – but also to avoid confrontations with the authorities – and then moving into the town's taverns or alehouses to meet friends, drink and most of all to play and sing music. These gatherings of professional musicians became so popular that some of these places turned into so-called musick-houses; and thus became the first public concert-halls in the history of western music. Famous composers like Henry Purcell took part in these sessions, and composed lots of music for the occasions. It must have been an incredible atmosphere in these places – overflowing with music, alcohol, sex, gossip, fights, fumes, shouting, singing, laughing, dancing...

The pub has since the earliest of times been the English people's second home. The establishments can be divided into three categories: the inns, taverns and alehouses (later known as public houses). In these establishments one would meet to eat, drink and sleep, but, especially after 1660, one would also hold political meetings, feasts, balls, concerts, gambling events, flower shows, etc. And, of course, these houses were the main venues for the extreme consumption of alcohol in the 17th century. By 1630, more than 30,000 alehouses, 2,000 inns and 400 taverns were registered in England and Wales.

With the outbreak of the English Civil Wars in 1642, the Puritans had the Commonwealth parliament closing all theatres. The music masters of London's

churches and courts were scattered and left to fend for themselves. Some went to the countryside, serving as light entertainment for the aristocracy and tutoring their children, some joined the military and some church musicians stayed in London to become teachers. But with the closing of all theatres, most of the musicians ended up living rootless lives that amounted to not much more than begging.

Music-making during the period of the Civil Wars and Commonwealth was therefore largely divided between those who 'chose to fiddle at home' (either in their own home or in the homes of the gentlemen that could afford to employ them) and those professional musicians forced to make a living playing in taverns and alehouses.

With all the professional musicians, singers and actors now entering pubs and joining in with the locals in musical sessions, one saw a significant rise in the quality of music-making, with the result being that these alehouse sessions grew in popularity across the classes. A new type of tavern emerged – the Musick House. One such venue was the Black Horse in Aldersgate Street, London, where prior to 1654 one Edmund Chilmead ran a Musick Meeting – it has since been suggested that it was these meetings at the Black Horse that were the earliest public concerts in Britain.

In fact, these musical gatherings became so popular, that Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, in 1657, sent out a new decree 'against vagrants and wandering idle dissolute persons...commonly called fiddlers or minstrels; who were warned that if at any time they were 'taken fiddeling, and making music, in any inn, alehouse or tavern.. or intreating any person to hear them play or make music in any of these places' they were to be adjudged 'rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars, and proceeded against and punished accordingly'.

This made it more difficult for musicians to bring their instruments, but the demand for entertainment at the drinking houses was high, so instead people performed vocal music like part-songs, catches and canons.

With the reinstatement of the monarchy and Charles II in 1660, everything changed for the musicians in London. Charles was a music lover and reopened theatres. He reinstated church musicians and wanted his own orchestra. But the King constantly had to deal with the never-ending fights between Catholic and Protestant, Whig and Tory, city and court – and also with the Parliament that kept a very close eye on the country's economy – so he simply couldn't afford to offer full-time employment for artists, musicians, dancers, actors, etc.

Charles II had, like his ally Louis XIV, a regularly hired group of musicians – the so-called 24 violins. But unlike those of the French court, Charles' musicians had to take extra jobs at the theatres and participate in the city's public concerts in order for them to make a living.

However, even with the opening of theatres and building of new opera houses, the popularity of the alehouse sessions didn't die out. In the 18th century it gradually became more common for promoters to advertise their tavern concerts in the press, and tickets were sold through subscriptions, in stores or at the door. The ticket sales were open to everybody – listening to concerts was not an activity reserved for the aristocracy alone. So, to be a musician in London back then meant to have an extremely varied form of employment with enough activity to work the whole year through. But, for most people, it also involved lousy payment, resulting in having to play music around the clock in order to put food on the table. Musicians had no security, and often they played for free with hopes that some rich gentleman would take pity on them and toss them some coins. Not unlike the situation for many freelancers across Europe today. What strikes me, is that despite the authorities' attempts to censor, prohibit and control music-making, the music and artists survived, prevailed, adapted and transformed.

Purcell's Playhouse

9pm, Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Bjarte Eike *violin, artistic director*
Mary Bevan *soprano*
Fredrik Bock *guitar*
Judith Maria Blomsterberg/Siri Hilmen *cello*
Per Buhre *viola, vocals*
Johannes Lundberg *double bass*
Naomi Burrell *violin*
Helge Andreas Norbakken *percussion*
Berit Norbakken Solset/Tom Guthrie *lead vocals*
Steven Player *dance, vocals*
Hans Knut Sveen *harmonium, harpsichord*

Music is 'nature's voice'. Thus sang the countertenor Henry Purcell in his own composition from 1692, the ode *Hail! Bright Cecilia* – and he did it with 'incredible Graces' according to the *Gentleman's Journal*. Even until today, Purcell has been celebrated as Orpheus Britannicus – the composer that made the English language come to life through music.

His musical style catches the essence of the contemporary drama, the noble plays by Shakespeare, the sharp humour of the Restoration comedy and the greatness of Dryden's tragedies. The theatrical genius of Purcell also gives a real sense of dramatic presence when he writes music to religious texts.

In all of his works he mixes his natural musical heritage with Italian and French traditions – unifying them to a unique style that on one hand is typically English and on the other is completely personal.

Purcell composed music for church feasts, for the royal court, for public ceremonies, private devotions and pleasant entertainment – music fit for the solemnity of Westminster Abbey and the splendour of the Chapel Royal – but also popular melodies for the rough humour of taverns and catch clubs.

He is not only one of England's most famous composers, but also the most English of them.

The Alehouse Sessions

10.30pm, Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer

Bjarte Eike *violin, vocals, artistic director*
Fredrik Bock *guitar, charango, vocals*
Per Buhre *viola, vocals*
Tom Guthrie *lead vocals, violin*
Johannes Lundberg *double bass, vocals*
Helge Andreas Norbakken *percussion, vocals*
Steven Player *dance, guitar, vocals*
Hans Knut Sveen *harmonium, harpsichord, vocals*

I launched The Alehouse Sessions project in 2007, as a concert form where the music found in the English public houses during and after the Commonwealth was explored. It was an immediate success and has gained popularity with audiences and promoters within a wide field of music. Ever since 2007, the project has been in constant development.

Even if the music, the stories and the dances get their inspiration from historical events, the project has now developed into being the essence of what Barokksolistene's operation aims to be – a creative energy centre, where powerful, virtuosic individuals meet to create something unique, timeless, current and genre-breaking – something that resonates with a modern and diverse audience.

The Alehouse Sessions is flexible and can be presented in many different forms and settings. It can be an enlightenment project, music theatre, an improvised happening, a show or an educational event – I see it as an organic, living organism that never stands still, a creative room that I keep refurbishing, rather than a fixed project or concept. It started as a fun, clever musical idea – fitting a festival with an English theme – but has now become something more profound; it's all about the individuals that contribute on stage, with everyone being outstanding soloists and team players, and how we have all invested ourselves in the project.

By Bjarte Eike