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Introduction

Amanda Eubanks Winkler, Alan Howard, and Estelle Murphy

John Eccles’s active theatrical career spanned a period of about sixteen years, though he continued to compose occasionally for the theater after his semiretirement in 1707. During his career he wrote incidental music—ranging from a single song in some cases to multiple songs with instrumental music in others—for more than seventy plays, in addition to the twelve larger-scale theatrical entertainments that he set either himself or in collaboration. Eccles’s success at meeting the demands of these larger genres, combined with the undeniable glamour of dramatick opera and the monumentalizing tendency of later generations, inevitably results in a privileging of these genres as a measure of the composer’s achievements. Yet in reality most of his output was conceived on a much smaller scale: no doubt a large part of his popularity among audiences and literary collaborators alike was the result of his unerring ability to provide songs that fit perfectly within their dramatic contexts, offering carefully tailored vehicles for his singers’ talents while remaining highly accessible—dare one say it, popular—in tone.

It is this eminently practical, yet no less skillful or attractive, part of Eccles’ output that makes up the contents of the three volumes of incidental music within the series The Works of John Eccles, dividing the music alphabetically according to the names of the plays for which the music was written. Like the larger dramatick operas and related genres, these plays were fundamentally collaborative ventures, with contributions of course from playwrights, actors, scene designers, and costumers, and furthermore from multiple composers in addition to the various singers, actor-singers, and instrumentalists required for the musical parts of the performance. As a reflection of this aspect of music in late-Restoration theater, the decision was taken to include, in addition to Eccles’s music for a given play, all the known songs and instrumental items for the same play by Eccles’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Not only does this mean that all surviving music for productions involving Eccles has been collected together, but also that music written for earlier productions has been included. This inclusive approach seemed by far the most pragmatic solution, since in many cases it is not known whether Eccles’s music replaced or supplemented the existing items.

Background

Eccles began his theatrical career with Christopher Rich’s United Company, which had formed in 1682 as a result of the merger between the two patent companies, the King’s and the Duke’s. His first known composition for the theater dates from 1690: “Ah, whither shall I fly,” performed in Elkanah Settle’s Distressed Innocence: or, the Princess of Persia. The text of the song, which was not printed in the playbook, also appears in William Congreve’s novel Incognita, which although published in 1692 appears to have been written in 1689 or 1690. The relationship between Eccles and Congreve proved fruitful for both parties, as Eccles wrote music for many of Congreve’s plays and set his libretti for The Judgment of Paris (1701) and Semele (1707; never performed).

During Eccles’s tenure with the United Company, he also worked with Henry Purcell; the composers divided songwriting duties in Thomas D’Urfey’s The Richmond Heiress (1693) and The Comical History of Don Quixote, Parts 1 and 2 (1694). Some contemporary audience members preferred Eccles’s direct dramatic idiom to Purcell’s thornier one, particularly when Eccles’s tuneful melodies were performed by the actor-singers in the company. In a letter to publisher John Walsh, John Dryden described the audience reaction to the singers in The Richmond Heiress:

Durfey has brought another farce upon the Stage: but his luck has left him: it was sufferd but foure dayes; and then kickd off for ever. Yet his Second Act, was wonderfully diverting; where the scene was in Bedlam: & Mrs Bracegirdle and Solon

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2. In the GMO article on Eccles, Stoddard Lincoln lists The Richmond Heiress as the first production for which Eccles wrote music, but it was more likely Distressed Innocence; or, the Princess of Persia. In Eccles’s Collection of Songs for One Two and Three Voices (London: John Walsh, 1704), 140, the header to “Ah, whither shall I fly” reads, “A SONG in the Princess of Persia.” Settle’s play, according to the London Stage, was performed in 1690, three years before The Richmond Heiress (LS I, 390).

A swain long slighted and disowned

John Eccles

A swain long slighted and disowned, Of cruel, cruel Cinthia, of cruel, cruel Cinthia’s scorn and pride, To an old trusty friend, to an old trusty friend complained, Who well, well and wisely, who well, well and wisely thus, thus complained, Who well, well and wisely, who well, well and wisely thus, thus complained.
Fill all the glasses

John Eccles

Soprano

Bass

Basso continuo

Fill, fill, fill all the glasses, fill 'em high, fill 'em high, Drink, drink, drink, drink, drink, drink,

Fill, fill all the glasses, fill 'em high, fill 'em high, Drink, drink, drink, drink, drink,

Drink and defy all power but love, love, all, all, all, all, all,

Drink and defy all power but love, but love, but love, but love,

all, all, all power but love, defy all, all, all, all, all, all

love, defy all power but love, defy all, all, all, all, all, all

B.c.
Instrumental Music

I. Overture

Gottfried Finger