

Iestyn Davies & the viol consort Fretwork in Michael Nyman & Henry Purcell at Temple Church



Iestyn Davies & Fretwork

Michael Nyman, Henry Purcell; Iestyn Davies, Fretwork; Temple Church Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 26 March 2019 Star rating: 4.0 (★★★★)

Ancient and modern intertwine as a counter-tenor and five viols perform English music from the Baroque and the Contemporary periods

[Michael Nyman](#) is best known for his film scores, and when his music does come into the concert hall there is often an electronic element to it such as in the performances with his own band. But his interest in the processes of music of the past means that heard acoustically we can appreciate it in a different way.

For the [Temple Music Foundation](#)'s concert at [Temple Church](#) on Tuesday 26 March 2019, it wasn't just the pairing of the music of Michael Nyman with that of Henry Purcell that was striking, it was that it was performed by the viol ensemble [Fretwork](#), Asako Morikawa, Richard Boothby, Joanna Levine, Emily Ashton, Sam Stadlen (playing on instruments that were falling out of fashion even in Purcell's day) with the counter-tenor [Iestyn Davies](#). The result was a seductive combination of ancient and modern, pairing Purcell's *Fantasias*, *Music for a While* and *Evening Hymn* with Nyman's Robert Herrick setting *No Time in Eternity*, his Roger Pulvers settings *If* and *Why* (from the film *Diary of Ann Frank*), plus *Music after a While*, *Balancing the Books*, and *The Self-Laudatory Hymn of Inanna and her Omnipotence*. A programme which Davies & Fretwork has recorded for Signum Records [under the title of *If*](#).

We started with Nyman's *No time in Eternity* from 2016 which sets seven short poems by the 17th century poet Robert Herrick, performed by Iestyn Davies with Fretwork playing two treble viols, an alto and two tenors. The accompaniment was throbbing chords with subtle changes of rhythm, and the lyrical vocal part was very free with uneven phrase lengths so that we were very aware of Nyman's interest in our perception of metre and cadence in the music, something that cropped up quite a lot in the music during the evening. Throughout the piece the rhythmic patterns in the music changed and adjusted, with occasionally a phrase in the treble viol answering the voice. The result was to give the solo line a sort of independence from the accompaniment with a creative dissonance which was fascinating.

This was followed by a pair of *Fantasias* by Purcell, numbers seven and eleven, played by four members of Fretwork. No. seven started all plangent tone and false relations, and the sound of the viols took on a rather chewy, yet refined quality. It is worth bearing in mind that when Purcell wrote this music the idea of a viol consort must have seemed very old-fashioned, yet he brings something new to the music. Here we had delicacy, plangency and dancing lines, but melancholy too. For No. eleven, the slower opening section had a remarkably vocal quality to it, yet the faster music was full

of Purcellian modernisms.

More Purcell followed, a beautiful account of *Music for a While* in a version for counter-tenor and four viols (the published original is just a vocal line and a bass line), a wonderfully rich sound with Davies' apparently effortless, yet beautifully phrased vocal line floating over the top. Nyman's *Music After a While* for the viols alone took elements from Purcell yet created a very contemporary sound with the lyrical treble viol line over a slowly throbbing accompaniment, with changes of metre and speed varying the textures. For all the contemporary nature of Nyman's writing, it was clear that he also relished the particularity of the sound of the viols. The first half ended with a beautiful account of Purcell's *The Evening Hymn* with the voice surrounded by a web of sound from the five viols.

The second half opened with Nyman's *Balancing the Books* a piece originally written, without words, for The Swingle Singers and here heard in a version for viols. The books of the title are Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*, which Nyman uses fragments of in a series of fascinating textures including moments which were positively catchy. Nyman wrote the songs *If* and *Why* for the sound track of an animated Japanese film *The Diary of Ann Frank*. *If* started with voice and two pizzicato tenor viols, a striking texture. This was a very effective and engaging piece, without the metrical experiments of some of Nyman's writing so that the combination of melodiousness and strict form moved it a little close to the popular. *Why* was a bit freer in its use of rhythms, and with a very mobile writing for the viols.

Next came a further pair of Purcell *Fantasias*, no. six and the *Fantasia on one note*. Again we could appreciate the remarkable invention of Purcell's music and the striking range of writing for the viols. This was music probably written for personal consumption, rather than concert use, yet the lovely interweaving lines flowed round us beautifully in the acoustic of the Temple Church.

Nyman's *The Self-Laudatory Hymn of Inanna and her Omnipotence* was originally written for the counter-tenor James Bowman. It sets Samuel Noah Kramer's translation of an ancient Sumerian hymn, a remarkably self-important piece of writing which Nyman treats in a strikingly dramatic way. The incantatory nature of the repeated lines of the text is reflected in the music, there are few metrical games here, and Nyman uses plenty of interesting techniques in the viols such as scrubbing and strumming. A remarkably free piece, complex and challenging.

The church was full to overflowing and the audience very appreciative; we were treated to an encore, Purcell's *O Solitude* which was first published by Thomas Playford and sold at his establishment not far from Temple Church!