

## TALES from the STAVE

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'Tales from the Stave' is the title of a BBC Radio 4 series in which an autograph manuscript has provided the focus for a discussion about a composer's life and work. For each programme a performer, conductor, musicologist or writer associated with the composer were assembled with the librarian in the presence of the actual manuscript. This generated much excitement, and I was invited as a graphologist to provide a different perspective on the man who wrote it.

The opportunity to see for myself the handwriting of so many great composers has been a moving experience for me, and in November 2008 I gave a presentation at a B.I.G. meeting about Elgar, Handel, Purcell, Byrd, Mozart and Beethoven. This article includes some of the material explored on that occasion, but obviously not the musical extracts that accompanied my talk!

### EDWARD ELGAR 1857 – 1934

The first composer to be featured back in 2004 was Elgar, and the manuscript being scrutinised by his biographer Michael Kennedy and the violinist Tasmin Little was the autograph score of his Violin Concerto (the fair copy in Elgar's hand from which the first edition was prepared). We were in a small room 'backstage' at the British Library and the large volume was wheeled in on a trolley by the then curator of music manuscripts, Chris Banks, who placed it reverentially onto cushioned blocks. Tasmin immediately began to notice places where the violin part differed from the version she was used to (since revisions were made after its first performance by Fritz Kreisler) and, peering at the tiny notes, proceeded to play the unfamiliar passages at high speed.

This reminded me of a scene described by W. H. Reed, a violinist friend of Elgar's, who was invited to his house to try out some of the music while composition of this great work was in progress (it is scored for full orchestra and lasts nearly an hour). Reed recalled that pieces of manuscript were stuck to the backs of chairs and on the mantelpiece, and how he struggled to make out Elgar's musical scrawl while grappling with the fiendish technical difficulties of the piece. When a passage didn't work well, Elgar just rewrote it there and then!

By contrast, the music in the score we were looking at was quite clear, though quickly written, with only a few patches stuck in where Elgar had apparently made some last minute changes. He preferred to write with a simple dip-in pen since he found the movement helped to alleviate writer's cramp, and cleaned the nib by stabbing it into a raw potato! Elgar said that 'the actual writing was always a trial' as all the excitement was in its creation. No doubt it was with relief that he signed and dated this work 'Aug 5 1910', adding the name of his home at the time: 'Plas Gwyn'. He was a restless man who moved more than twenty times in his lifetime, living mostly in rented accommodation apart from the London years at Severn House.

Elgar's signatures became simpler over the years but they are characterised by: large (copymodel) ε capitals (wants recognition and approval), the first of which is usually larger than the second (self-assertive); a braced d that plunges below the baseline (stubborn, needs security); huge differences in MZ size (unpredictable, moody); and connected letters (persistent, single-minded). As he gradually established himself in social and musical circles the relatively large size of the capital letters and number of underlinings were reduced.

In this sample<sup>1</sup> the '99' is a publisher's pencil mark, also the diagonal line crossing through 'Elgar' and the curved line crossing through '1910'.

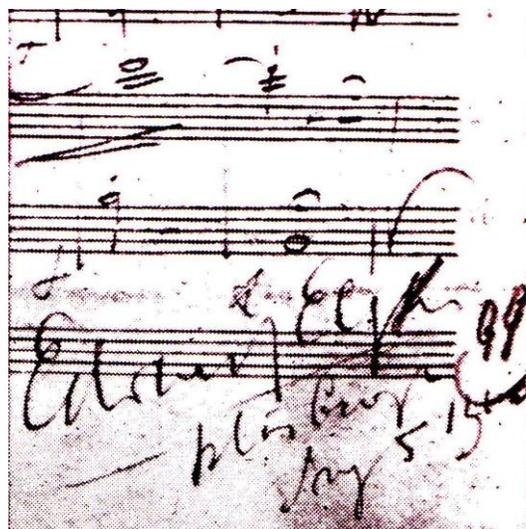
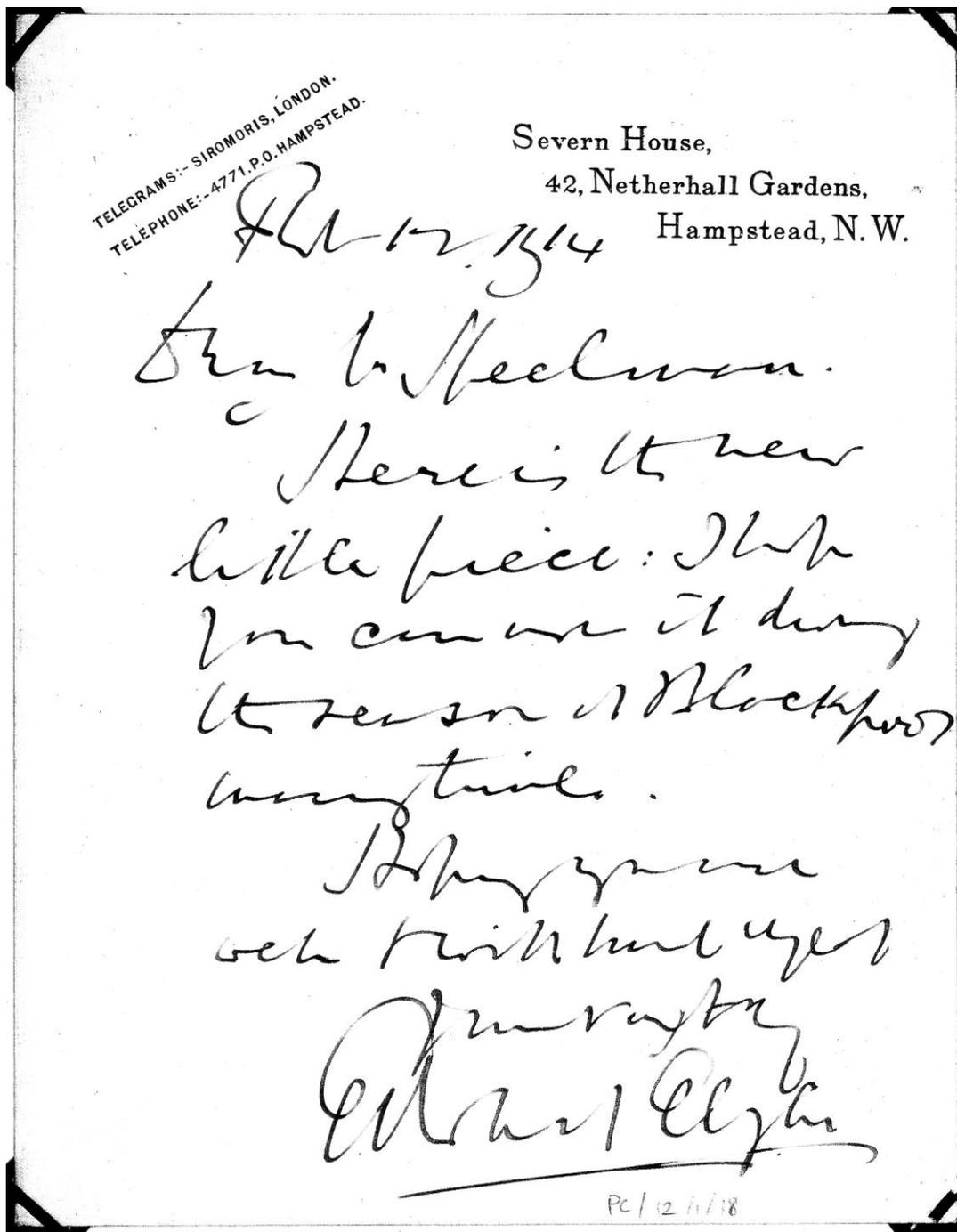


Fig. 1

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board

Fig. 2



Feb 17. 1914

Dear Mr. Speelman.

(The M of 'Mr' starts below 'Dear' and connects with a faint diagonal line)

Here is the new little piece: I hope you can use it during the season at Blackpool many times.

Hoping you are well & with kind regards (?)

Yours very truly

Edward Elgar

This letter<sup>2</sup> is written in blue black ink with medium / light irregular pressure.

It is addressed to Mr. Speelman who was at that time the principal viola player in the Hallé orchestra and conductor of the Blackpool North Pier orchestra.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced by permission of the Hallé Concerts Society

I myself played the viola in the Hallé orchestra for many years and feel a particular affinity with Elgar as we played so much of his music. The Hallé under Hans Richter gave the first performance of his 1<sup>st</sup> symphony in 1908, paving the way for its triumphant success, and the tradition continues to this day. Also, when I was a student in London, I learned to my amazement that Elgar used to visit the house near Hampstead where I lived, to play billiards *in my room* with a fellow member of the Fabian society!

**Fig. 2 Elgar's handwriting**

<i>Dominant movements</i>	<i>Secondary movements</i>	<i>Miscellaneous movements</i>
R slant (varying) + R tends LZ	pasty stroke	sig. underlined, congruent
Large/medium size + small MZ	poor legibility	PPI curved inwards
FOC threads, arcades, angles	original	large capitals, some elaborate
Pressure medium/light irregular	broad + narrow	i dots high, R, dashed
Quick speed	secondary width	t bars long, sharp, pointed,
Simplified	line direction rising	clever linking                      missing
LM widening	+ drooping line ends	endstrokes variable
Connected + words connected	word/line spacing aver/close	triangles MZ
	good layout	MZ extended to LZ
	impulsive rhythm	

N.B. Although single handwriting movements may point to the existence of certain personality traits, it is a basic precept of the B.I.G. (Hilliger) method that the validity of any interpretation depends on the context and the presence of other supporting movements.

*Right slant + large size + quick + irregular pressure* = restless, nervous, excitable temperament  
 Elgar loved diversity and excitement so always had to be doing something: whether cycling, walking the dogs, gardening, talking, motoring, going to the races, gambling or playing with chemistry equipment in his shed.

*R slant + left margin widening + irregular + pasty* = sensitive, responsive, emotional, impulsive  
 He was a romantic, alive to the grandeur and changing moods of nature as he took long walks or cycled round the Malvern hills, when ideas might come to him 'on the wind'. He was also inspired by beautiful women, several of whom became lifelong admirers. The violin concerto has a dedication in Spanish 'In here is enshrined the soul of .....'. The five dots may represent his 'windflower' sweetheart *Alice* Stuart Wortley.

*Large size + threads + irregular + i dots high / dashed* = loves freedom, dislikes routine, impatient  
 After leaving school at 14, Elgar was employed briefly in a solicitor's office where he was forced to do routinely detailed work, but found this so tedious he took up peripatetic teaching. Already an accomplished musician, he sang and played the violin, piano, organ, bassoon and trombone, and later taught composition and conducted local choirs and orchestras (including one at a lunatic asylum for £32 per annum). By such modest means he managed to scrape a living for more than twenty years, although he disliked teaching and had little patience with amateurs, composing when he could in his spare time.

*Large size + small MZ + underlined large signature* = compensates for anxiety and insecurity  
 Although the Elgar birthplace museum is in the village of Broadheath, the Elgars lived for most of the time above their music shop in Worcester High Street. A family crisis was precipitated by the death in quick succession of Edward's two older brothers, which affected them all deeply and caused his father to take to drink. Much was now expected of Edward as the eldest son (though only 9), responsible for his three sisters and younger brother. Anxious and insecure, he always felt he had to prove himself and many of his early works feature a hero struggling against the odds.

*Right slant + connected + angles + rising lines* = ambitious, determined, goal oriented  
 Visiting great houses to teach and tune pianos with his father fired social as well as musical ambitions. Incredibly, Elgar was largely self-taught but said 'I saw and learned a great deal about music from the stream of music that passed through my father's establishment.....I read everything, played everything, and heard everything that I possibly could....'. Fortunately a local bookseller also stored books in their attic, which Elgar treated as his personal library, and his mother encouraged him to study and better himself.

*Large size + large capitals + MZ extended to LZ* = wants social recognition and material security

In 1889 Elgar married a piano pupil, the daughter of General Roberts. Caroline Alice was nine years older than him and her family not surprisingly opposed her marrying an impoverished teacher and as yet unknown composer (the Enigma Variations that brought him to the attention of the public were not published until 1899). Alice was Edward's emotional anchor and all his best works were composed during the thirty years of their marriage. Buoyed up by her belief in him and sustained for a while by her independent means, they went to London, but Elgar was unable to break into established musical circles so they returned home.

*Straight though widening L Margin + good layout + large capitals* = observes social formalities

Elgar eventually overcame academic and social prejudice to win the highest honours – he was knighted in 1904 and became master of the King's Musick in 1924. He liked to play the part of the country gentleman, but aspiring to be accepted in polite society proved a mixed blessing. One of his friends remarked that it was 'both his gaol and his goal'.

*Simplified + quick + original + clever linking* = rapid thinking, alert, witty and clever

He delighted in such a play on words. They christened their daughter 'Carice' (after Caroline Alice) and called one house 'Craig Lea' (anagram of Elgar and C.A.E.). He could also amuse a child with a funny drawing and humorous doodles appear among his manuscripts. Well known as a raconteur, in old age he became a friend of G. B. Shaw and Lawrence of Arabia.

*Connected + simplified + angles + braced strokes + some blunt ends* = intellectual, argumentative, curt

He loved an intellectual argument but sometimes caused offence with ill-timed remarks. When he gave his inaugural lecture as Professor of Music at Birmingham University he horrified everyone by criticising the establishment and the very people who had secured his appointment.

*Mixed FOC including threads + original + illegible + secondary width* = unconventional, elusive

While Elgar tended to relate socially in an apparently conventional but rather superficial way, he remained elusive and deeply unusual as a person, communicating profoundly through his music. Ironically, the fact that he was self-taught, which initially put him at a disadvantage, meant that his creativity was not stifled by prevailing musical disciplines and enabled his highly individual style to develop.

*Medium/light irregular pressure + irregular MZ + rising lines + drooping ends* = moody, prone to depression

He was always a moody man, prone to depression when alone or not doing something, particularly after his wife died. Joking one minute and serious the next, he was unpredictable and full of contradictions.

**Counter-dominants** pinpoint inner conflicts:

*Right slant + connected* = an emotional nature + a logical mind

He was swayed by feelings when it came to making tough decisions, and often experienced conflict between what he wanted to do and what he knew he should be doing.

*Large size / capitals + small MZ* = social ambitions + little desire to relate on a personal level

He had a burning desire for recognition and enjoyed prestige when it came but was easily bored with people, and while he appeared confident, his self-belief would waver. In later life he talked about himself a lot and some people thought him boastful. This was the Elgar of the 'Pomp and Circumstance' marches.

*Right slant + arcades* = outgoing + protects his privacy

He was an extremely active and productive man, hyper-active at times, who enjoyed a big social occasion. Few people got to know the other side of him, the private, spiritual person, though they sensed that he was not always at ease in company. This was the enigmatic Elgar of 'The Dream of Gerontius'.

*Broad + connected* = impulsive instincts + mental control

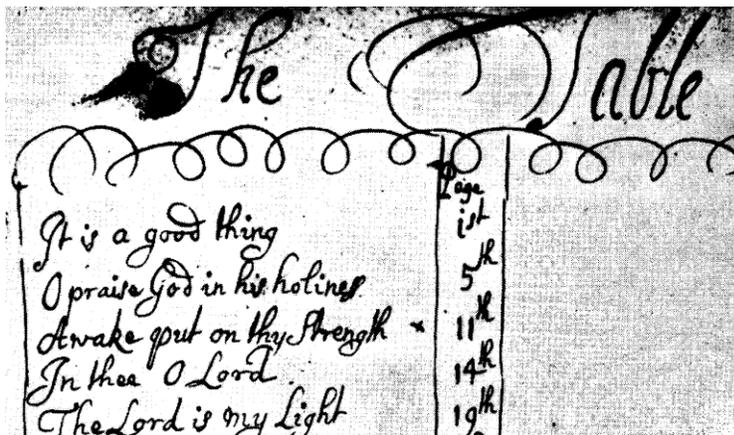
Exercising self-restraint was often difficult and some impulses proved irresistible. He had a volatile temper, was susceptible to feminine charms, and gambled his money away. At the end of his life George Bernard Shaw lent him money and managed to secure an advance from his publishers on the 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony that he never managed to complete.

In his lifetime Purcell was the most important composer in Europe, yet despite the fact that his music has remained in the repertoire of church choirs for more than 300 years, few pieces are very well known today. The lament from Dido and Aeneas, often played at funerals, is perhaps his most famous work.

The manuscript under discussion for this programme was Purcell's volume of Anthems and Odes compiled between 1680 and 1695. Handsomely bound in red leather and decorated with gold lettering, this book was tall enough to accommodate staves for two choirs and instruments as well as words (41 x 25 cms). Amusingly, 'Anthems' was tooled on the front cover and 'Odes' the other way up on the back, so you could start reading it from either end. Unfortunately this had obviously proved too much of a challenge for the 18<sup>th</sup> century binder, so blank pages now appear at random rather than all together in the middle as they would have been originally.

Luckily I was able to examine the book closely by myself on this occasion, as the conversation between Purcell experts Curtis Price and Edward Higginbottom was recorded separately. Opening the book with excitement, I found on the first page<sup>3</sup> a list of contents headed 'The Table' in very big letters, and underneath a line of loopy arcades that looked distinctly playful but quite incongruous in such a grand volume. It has been suggested that Purcell was simply trying out his quill here, but I see this as a fascinating graphic gesture - part doodle, part decoration - freely and spontaneously drawn without much conscious thought, and therefore affording insight into Purcell the man.

Fig. 3



These large looped arcades were executed with an easy fluency of movement that has a lively rhythm. They are connected in a single stroke, with pressure exerted on the horizontal as well as the vertical axis. Height, width, slant and spacing are all irregular. Most loops are full and rounded but some are narrow and one is angular at the bottom, and the first loop is the largest. The baseline is uneven and convex.

This suggests that, at the age of 21, Purcell was physically well-coordinated, able to relax and generally in good health (*good currency and rhythm*). He was able to be spontaneously creative while respecting conventions of the time, and worked in a methodical progressive way (*fluent arcades*). Logical thought progression was strong and he put a lot of energy into purposeful activity (*connected + lateral pressure*), starting confidently and with enthusiasm (*large + initial emphasis + convex*). He was highly emotional but knew how to contain his feelings (*loopy rounded arcades*), and underneath his cheerful manner were undercurrents of mixed feelings and anxiety (*irregular + uneven convex baseline*).

Similar writing features appear in his music manuscripts: quavers and semi-quavers are joined by arched rather than straight strokes; the slant of note stems varies slightly; overall spacing is well-judged although bar-lines drawn free-hand down the length of a page are not consistent; notation is often simplified, with a single stroke forming note-head and stem. Some notes resemble a tear drop, as does the letter O in his writing. As a rule his manuscripts are clearly legible and well-presented, in a style that looks unhurried but without undue concern for perfection, though some recently discovered manuscript sketches show that he could write with a swift assurance that looks surprisingly modern.

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board

The following letter<sup>4</sup> is a rare example of Purcell's handwriting. It was written in 1686 when Purcell was 28 to the dean of Exeter asking for his help in the recovery of a debt.

Fig. 4

Westm<sup>e</sup> No. 2. 2d. 1686

S

I have wrote severall times to Mr Webber concerning what was due to me on Hogg's account and reced no answer, which has occasioned this presumption in giving you the trouble of a few lines relating to the matter, It is ever since the begining of June last that the Money has been due: the sum is 27, viz. 20 for half a Years teaching & boarding the s<sup>r</sup>erra Bill of 7 for necessary<sup>s</sup> wh<sup>ch</sup> I laid out for him, the Bill Mr Webber has; Compassion moves me to acquaint you of a great many debts Mr Hogg contracted whilst in London and to some who are so poor 'twere an act of Charity as well as Justice to pay'em I hope you will be so kind to take it into your consideration and also pardon this boldness from

Yo<sup>r</sup> most obliged  
humble ser<sup>v</sup>  
Henry Purcell

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral

#### Fig. 4 Purcell's handwriting

Purcell wrote a 'current' hand that resembles a 1619 copymodel of Richard Gething. This is illustrated in 'Penmanship of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries' by L. F. Day on page 88. It is characterised by: arcades forms + garland connectives; 'braced' connections to the UZ that form an inverted V; t bars connected from the base of the stem; full left tending d loops returning to the right; full and narrow loops; and an r similar in form to this font – all features that can be observed in Purcell's writing of 1686. However, in his youth he wrote a 'square' r with two fine points, which suggests that this was a feature of the actual copymodel prescribed for him.

Note that the sign above the numbers 27, 20 and 7 in the letter is the contraction 'lb' = £.

<i>Dominant movements</i>	<i>Secondary movements</i>	<i>Miscellaneous movements</i>
Large size + dom UZ	fairly regular	variable size PPI
Right slant	speed slightly quick	sig. sl. larger, far R, congruent
Distinct pressure + lateral	full loops UZ/LZ	clever linking, s as 8
Close word/line spacing + tangling	width copymodel/broad	some capitals small
Wide straight LM + narrow RM	originality	MZ extended to LZ
Arcades + garlands + few angles	some simplification	arcade/angle starting strokes
Baseline direction varying (falling, concave, rising, closer on R)	good legibility	heavy round i dots
Half connected + false connections	layout quite good	closed ovals
	harmonious rhythm	tapering words / m
	ends extended or short	pseudo-arcade looped r

*Large size + close spacing + right slant + fairly regular + extended ends* = sociable, warm, affectionate, friendly, happy to work closely with people, a team person, cooperative, also a leader.

Not a lot is known for certain about Purcell - even the date of his birth and which of two Purcell brothers was his father. However, it appears that as a young boy of 7 or 8 he became a chorister in the Chapel Royal: the body of musicians who were engaged to provide music for the monarch at services and mealtimes and to entertain the royal household. Henry was the third of six children, so whether he boarded at school or lived at home, he grew up accustomed to living in a community and cooperating with others.

*Right slant + arcades / garlands + straight L margin + extended ends* = wants to please and win approval

A disciplined boy, Purcell must have impressed people with his obliging manners as well as his talents, for by the age of 14 he was being given extraordinary responsibilities as 'keeper, maker, mender, repairer, and tuner of the regalls, organs, virginals, flutes and recorders and all other kind of wind instruments....without fee', including tuning the organ at Westminster Abbey!

*Distinct/lateral pressure + concave/rising lines + regular + R slant* = persistent, prepared to apply himself, puts energy into reaching objectives

Children of the Chapel Royal grew up in an educational hothouse: they learned to play various musical instruments and studied singing, composition, reading, writing, maths, Latin and probably French. They were encouraged to compose anthems, as Charles II liked to hear new ones in the services, and Henry must have distinguished himself at this because he became official composer at the age of 18. About the same time he also won a scholarship to further his education at Westminster school, where Dryden and Wren had been pupils.

*Large size + full UZ/LZ + half connected + original + clever linking + s as 8* = creative, imaginative, resourceful, ingenious, adaptable, good at problem solving

Looking after the instruments in times of financial crisis and extreme weather conditions (the Thames froze solid in 1684) must have called for practical ingenuity, resourcefulness and inventiveness. It proved an invaluable experience for Purcell as it brought him into contact with players and gave him a working knowledge of what they and their instruments were capable of.

*Arcades + regular + tall UZ + arcade starting strokes + heavy, round, close i dots* = loyal, dutiful, takes pride in his family, conservative, methodical, careful, attends to details

Purcell followed in the footsteps of his uncle Thomas by becoming a gentleman of the Chapel Royal, playing the harpsichord and singing in the choir, and, like his father before him, became a copyist for Westminster Abbey. Methodically working at a steady pace, he paid meticulous attention to detail and layout as he carefully wrote out parts or scores, and in addition copied pieces by composers he admired for his own enjoyment and instruction.

*Close word and line spacing + distinct pressure + long LZ + narrow R margin + signature far R* = active, busy, energetic, gets involved, takes on a lot, not afraid of a challenge

Members of the Chapel Royal journeyed with the king and Purcell would have had many daily duties to perform in his various roles. Fortunately his appointment as organist of Westminster Abbey in 1680 freed him from travelling and allowed more time for composition. This was the year he began the 'Anthems and Odes': sacred and secular music commissioned for special occasions such as a coronation, royal birthday or Christmas.

*Arcades/angles + straight L margin + distinct pressure + regular* = self-controlled, sturdy, resilient, reliable, firm  
Purcell lived in very troubled times and in 1683 he was required to demonstrate his loyalty to the crown by publicly taking communion in an Anglican church. Then when James II came to the throne in 1685 it was the turn of Protestants in office to watch their backs. Fortunately Purcell was a sturdy, self-controlled and resilient person who could keep his nerve under pressure, which also helped him when he had to perform.

*Lines concave / falling + uneven baseline + arcades + closed ovals + looped r* = weighed down by gloomy feelings or pessimistic thoughts, underlying weariness or sadness that he keeps to himself

Apart from political concerns and money worries, Henry and Frances were still childless in 1687, their first four sons having died in infancy. Purcell was a private person who would have shared his innermost feelings with only his closest friends, expressing the inner pain he felt through his music.

*R slant + arcades / garlands + half connected + closed ovals + extended ends + tapering words* = a good listener, interested in others, supportive, helpful, discreet

Musicians were suffering a lot of hardships as royal finances continued to be precarious and the Chapel Royal was not important to James II. By 1686 they were collectively owed a staggering £2,484.16s.3d! Purcell himself was relatively well off but he still had to take in pupils and was owed money for their upkeep. He petitioned the king on behalf of other musicians and his personal suffering increased his sympathetic concern for others.

*Lines concave/falling + uneven baseline + MZ extended to LZ + looped r + some variation in MZ* = prone to anxious and depressive moods, more insecure than he likes to appear

It is likely that lack of financial security and sadness over losing his children would have triggered more deep-seated anxiety stemming from early life experiences. Henry's father died when he was 5, leaving the family homeless in mid-winter. Uncle Thomas took them in, but the following year the plague struck. They stayed in London while thousands decamped or died round about them every day, and by a miracle they all survived, but they probably lost friends and little Henry at 6 surely witnessed some harrowing sights. Then in the next year came the terrifying fire of London. This was the stuff of nightmares that must have haunted Purcell.

*Rising lines/line ends + R slant + some broadness + full + original* = good-humoured, tries to look on the bright side, finds ways to enjoy himself

Coffee houses and taverns were places where people went to meet, exchange news, do business and entertain each other with songs and stories. Purcell composed innumerable 'catches, songs and glees' that were sung there, some quite erotic, and also started writing incidental music for the theatre. His music bridged social and cultural divides and had enormous appeal because it had the power to move people and also lift their spirits. Eventually 'Lilliburlero' became so popular it was adopted as a signature tune by William's troops in Ireland.

*Large size + R slant + narrow R margin + signature far R + tall UZ* = self-confident, ambitious, has aspirations

By 1690, when Purcell was 31, he owned several houses, had new music appearing in print, and four theatre productions and an opera running simultaneously. He was on a high and justifiably proud of his achievements. His reputation was made, his position secure and he was blessed with two children.

*Good legibility + some simplification + small MZ + signature similar to text + capitals copymodel or small* = a genuine person, conventional manners but otherwise unaffected, quite modest

As a composer, performer, colleague and teacher, it seems that Purcell was admired, respected and loved.

*Close line spacing + tangling + half connected + narrow R margin + spacing closer on R* = some poor planning and management of time or money, liable to get sidetracked or overtaken by events

As his fame grew, so did demand for his services. New commissions would come along to disrupt plans, but, like a true professional, he could set trite verses to good music, or be inspired to write an opera like 'Dido and Aeneas' for schoolgirls to perform. Versatile and extremely productive, it has been calculated that Purcell actually composed more music than Mozart, who shared the same short lifespan of 35 years.