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# Book Reviews

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**Mad Songs** (1993) Catherine Bott, Soprano.  
London: Editions L'Oiseau Lyre (433 187-2).  
The Decca Record Company.

The Mad Song was a device widely used on the late seventeenth century stage which reflects the contemporary interest in madness. It seems to have its formal origins in the fragments sung by the disturbed Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and was subsequently developed into a complex musical aside to illustrate the mental state of a given individual, usually a victim of unrequited love. Whereas 'Mad Scenes' and their associated songs in much later Italian and French opera often use the mad as objects for ridicule, the Mad Songs of the English Restoration are generally sympathetic in their portrayal of the mad and their references to straw, chains and dismal cells suggest that their composers, including Purcell, Blow and Eccles, were among the many visitors to London's Bethlem Hospital:

Must then a faithful lover go,  
scorned and banished like a foe?  
Oh? let me rave, despair,  
curse my fate, yet bless the fair;  
For oh! in spite of her disdain,  
I must still love and hug my chain.  
*John Eccles*

Among this collection is a remarkable description of melancholia which is further enhanced by Purcell's skill in setting text to music:

Ah, 'tis all in vain:  
death and despair  
must end the fatal pain;  
cold despair,  
disguised like snow and rain,  
falls on my breast;  
bleak winds in tempests blow,  
my veins all a shiver  
and my fingers glow;  
my pulse beats a dead march

for lost repose,  
and to a solid lump of ice  
my poor fond heart is froze.  
*Henry Purcell*

The quality of Catherine Bott's performance is generally satisfactory though it occasionally leaves the impression that the emotional content of the lyrics could have been conveyed more effectively. Comparison with an earlier recording of 'Bess of Bedlam' and 'Not All My Torments' made by Emma Kirkby on the same label and under the same producer (reference below) will illustrate this criticism, and also highlights the fact that although Catherine Bott uses a wide range of musical affect, its inconsistent application to the content of the lyrics tends to deprive them of some of their emotional impact and does not do full justice to Purcell's settings. The accompaniment, on period instruments or copies, is well balanced and the technical standard of the recording is high.

The accompanying booklet gives an interesting introduction in English and translations into French, German and Italian and then falls short of the usual standards of this publisher by presenting the lyrics in English and French only, and by omitting the final verse from the text of 'Mad Maudlin'.

This is an unusual, interesting and enjoyable recording, though one is left feeling that occasional shortcomings in the performance might make repeated listening less than satisfying and that it can only be recommended with some reservation.

## References

PURCELL: SONGS AND AIRS (1985) Emma Kirkby, Anthony Rooley and Christopher Hogwood. London: Editions L'Oiseau Lyre (417 123-2). The Decca Record Company.

I. P. C. COLLINS, 14 Derby Street, Newnham, Cambridge CB3 9JE