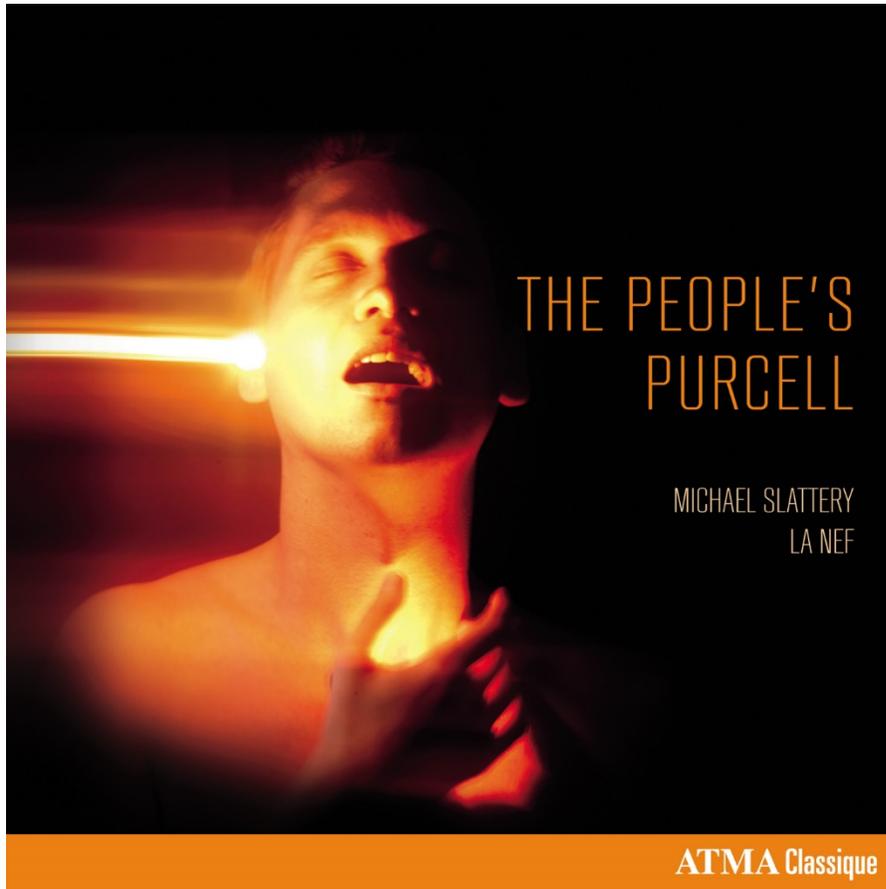




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First Play: La Nef and Michael Slattery, *The People's Purcell*

By Robert Rowat
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"Music is music is music," says tenor Michael Slattery. "Great music is timeless."

Following up on the success of 2012's [Dowland in Dublin](#), Slattery has reunited with the musicians of La Nef for *The People's Purcell*, a collection of airs and suites by Purcell, reimagined in a traditional folksong idiom. The album is streaming until its Jan. 19 release on ATMA Classique.

Included are some of Purcell's best-known airs — "Fairest Isle," "She Loves and she Confesses, Too," and "Ah, how Pleasant 'tis to Love" — and instrumental selections from *The Fairy Queen* and *King Arthur*.

"I have very strong instincts about what songs to choose," says Slattery. "As I begin to narrow the repertoire (reading songs over and over again) ideas for arrangements come to me. Sitting at my piano, I listen and transcribe what I hear in my mind."



Michael Slattery has recorded oratorios by Handel with René Jacobs and Nicholas McGegan.

'It's magic'

"It's joy. And love. And different every time," Slattery reflects, describing his experience working with La Nef. "We're all in it: listening, reacting, and we feel it. It's magic."

La Nef's Sean Dagher played an important role in conceiving the project. "As my background is more folk than baroque, many of these pieces were new to me," he tells us via email. "So, as with the *Dowland in Dublin* project, I was simultaneously learning new tunes and coming up with new ways to accompany them. We also increased the forces on this project so we were conscious of having a bigger band and we explored different ways to best exploit it."

Actually, Dagher's collaboration with Slattery dates back to 2004's *The Irish Heart*, a collection of 12 traditional Irish tunes, including one of the best versions of "Danny Boy" you'll ever hear.

'Oddball projects'

"There's lots to like about working with Michael," reflects Dagher. "First of all, his amazing voice. When I'm playing a song with him, I really feel privileged to have the best seat in the house to hear an awe-inspiring vocal performance."

"Secondly, he's a great arranger and has strong and concrete ideas about the accompaniments we play," Dagher continues. "It's always a real collaboration, not just the singer singing the tune on top of my arrangements. That guarantees that there is something new for me, and something new from me, as well."

"Thirdly, he has shown himself to be adaptable and willing to take on these oddball projects. Just wait until you hear the next thing we're going to do with him at La Nef in 2019 (can't talk about it yet)."

For now, we'll occupy ourselves with *The People's Purcell*, a project Dagher says was driven by the strong melodic content. "Purcell's melodies have been adapted and re-arranged for centuries, in collections like [Playford's *Dancing Master*](#). Obviously Purcell's settings of his own melodies are sublime, but the melodies stand on their own and are thus ripe for alternate accompaniments." These include a surprising arrangement of Purcell's familiar *Dido's Lament* that morphs into a major key.

"[Baroque cellist] Amanda Keesmaat did some of the instrumental arrangements," explains Dagher. "She brings a new and surprising twist to all of it, inspired by her experience in contemporary music (before her baroque days). Also, her familiarity with the music in more traditional baroque environments lets her play with it in new ways."

Shruti box

In addition to singing and arranging some of the airs, Slattery plays the shruti box, a drone instrument from 19th-century Indian classical music. "It is a free-reed instrument (like an accordion)," explains Dagher. "The player pumps the bellows activating the reeds, which play the same notes for the whole piece. There is a selection of notes from which to choose, depending on the key of the music. It works in this context because drones can be very useful for many kinds of folk music."

"Another advantage is that the singer can play the shruti box while singing so it doesn't require an extra musician," Dagher adds. "Michael jokes that he got his masters from Juilliard in shruti box, but I should say that he does play it with extra musicality, adding and removing notes during songs and adjusting the relative volumes of the notes for maximum effect."

The People's Purcell will be released on Jan. 19.