



## From Alehouse to Playhouse

**Bjarte Eike and his barnstorming Barokksolistene capture the vital spark of Restoration London's entertainment scene with a captivating new recording for Rubicon Classics**

***The Playhouse Sessions* will be released on 23 September 2022 to coincide with Barokksolistene's concert double-bill at London's Southbank Centre**

'A smattering of Purcell, dances from Playford's *Dancing Master*, shanties, reels and ballads succumb to a nine-piece ensemble drawing on Baroque, jazz and folk styles for a no holds barred hooley of riotous improvisatory give and take,' *BBC Music Magazine* review of *The Alehouse Sessions*, August 2019



London's musicians, pushed in the 1650s, to the margins of society by order of Oliver Cromwell found room for new forms of entertainment in city-centre taverns and alehouses. They remained there long after the restoration of the monarchy, performing sets of dances, theatre songs and bawdy ballads to audiences glad to be free from Puritan constraints on pleasure. Norwegian violinist Bjarte Eike and his Barokksolistene have restored the spirit and substance of those long-forgotten performances with their *Alehouse Sessions*, hailed by *The Times* as 'irresistible' and 'fabulously unrestrained' by *The Guardian*. Five years ago the Norwegian violinist and his band scored a best-selling album with *The Alehouse Sessions* on Rubicon Classics. They return to the label with another compelling collection of music and words of the kind on offer more than three centuries ago at Henry Purcell's favourite Westminster watering holes.

*The Playhouse Sessions*, set for release on Rubicon Classics on 23 September 2022, reflects the uplifting energy and engaging emotional contrasts of Barokksolistene's Alehouse performances. "The album contains a sort of inner narrative that runs through the recording," says Bjarte Eike. "It has become like a play in its own right, with each track being a small tale within a larger story." The recording's tracklist includes Eike's beguiling arrangements of music from Purcell's semi-opera *The Fairy Queen* and his own original compositions on words from the play on which it is based, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; popular songs and ballads such as 'The Irish Washerwoman', 'I often for my Jenny strove' and 'The Three Ravens'; tunes from Purcell's welcome odes and stage shows, *Come ye sons of art* and *Dido and Aeneas* among them; the 'Willow Song' from Shakespeare's *Othello*; Eike's own voice in Puck's monologue from Act 5 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and John Dowland's sublime air 'Can she excuse my wrongs'.

London's theatres were closed at the start of the English Civil War in 1642 and remained shut until the Restoration. Alehouses offered redundant musicians, actors and dancers a place to scrape a precarious living and soon became their creative refuge. "Although a few surviving theatres reopened in 1660 with the return of Charles II, there was little money around to rebuild those that had been demolished," observes Bjarte Eike. "And a generation of musicians had already found an audience in places like the Black Horse in Aldersgate Street. So popular were their alehouse sessions that Cromwell tried to abolish them! But they outlived him and became part of Restoration musical life."

The form of a Barokksolistene Alehouse, he adds, is like a creative room. "Within its framework I can frequently refurbish the show with new contents. The Playhouse project is likewise an extension of the ever-evolving Alehouse Sessions. Together they tell the story of music and theatre in London during Cromwell's time and after the Restoration. Of course there's an historical context to what we do. But there's also the practical context – which is even more important to me – of connecting with a contemporary twenty-first century audience. An Alehouse / Playhouse performance is not something for the museum; it's about music made in the present moment, just as it was in the London alehouses of Purcell's day -- with their playhouses annexed to the rear of the beer-drinking saloons. The encounter of musicians onstage and the audience in the hall is the real magic of it. We have to fuse the audience into the action of our performance!"

*The Playhouse Sessions* will be launched on Friday 23 September with a late-night concert at the Purcell Room and a post-concert Alehouse Session in the foyer of the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Soprano Mary Bevan is set to join Eike and his Alehouse Boys for the first half of their Southbank Centre double-bill, offering unique interpretations of songs from Purcell shows and other hits from the late seventeenth-century London stage. "The Southbank Centre is a direct descendant of concerts given in the 1650s in the alehouses of London," notes Eike. "These alehouses after all staged some of the world's first public concerts. Later, after the Restoration, it became common for promoters to advertise alehouse concerts in the press and offer subscription tickets. Purcell and his fellow musicians were thus just as at home performing there as they were in the chambers of the royal court or in London's new theatres."

Bjarte Eike launched his Alehouse Sessions in company with like-minded musicians 15 years ago. The ensemble comprises a core of regular performers, all of whom have committed to memory a huge setlist of up to four hours of music. Typically they meet a day or so before a concert tour to share a meal and make music together; then next day, re-grouping thirty minutes before the show, they discover Eike's select-menu for the evening. "That ensures that every show is fresh," he notes. "I make sure we never repeat the same programme twice. It's therefore essential to work with people who share my outlook and dare to adventure. We're into a high-risk sport, with lots of traps and places where the unexpected appears - for good or for ill. And so the audience knows we're vulnerable. But our skill is seen in how we re-act on the hoof to the unpredictable. That's authenticity and honesty - and above all it's a performance that's genuine."

Armed with a classical training and a background in folk music and improvisation, Bjarte Eike was drawn naturally to Early Music in all its stylistic variety. "I never really felt at home with only one genre," he recalls. "Early Music allowed me to study profound, complicated compositions, but performing it has also opened up the chance of rebellion and uproar! Early music offers wide, multi-faceted areas of musical exploration for me. You find, for instance, links to different types of music wherever you look in seventeenth-century English repertoire. And I am fascinated by all these connections. They offer a foundation for the Alehouse Sessions and for all Barokksolistene performance more generally. Every member of the group plays, sings, dances and improvises without limitation. We're all interested in the many different fields of being a stage performer and pushing hard at the 'normal' boundaries of what it means to be a classical musician."

[www.barokksolistene.com](http://www.barokksolistene.com)

[Facebook](#) – [Instagram](#) – [Twitter](#)

**For press enquiries, please contact:**

Jacqueline Whitbread at Valerie Barber PR  
[jacqueline@vbpr.co.uk](mailto:jacqueline@vbpr.co.uk) / +44 (0) 20 7586 8560  
[www.vbpr.co.uk](http://www.vbpr.co.uk)

*We at Valerie Barber PR are committed to protecting your personal information and so we are letting you know that we are storing your email address, work telephone numbers and work postal address on our database so that we can keep you up to date with news on our clients. You can ask us to stop using your information at any time by emailing us at [info@vbpr.co.uk](mailto:info@vbpr.co.uk). You may also request access to the personal data we have about you, request that any incorrect personal data we have about you be rectified, or request that we erase your personal data. If you have any questions about how we care for and use your personal information please let us know us at [info@vbpr.co.uk](mailto:info@vbpr.co.uk).*

**The Playhouse Sessions, Rubicon Classics (release date 23 September 2022)**

**Bjarte Eike** director / violin | **Barokksolistene**

Jenny Loves, and She Confesses Too  
The Washer Woman Set  
Oft She Visits This Lone Mountain  
Over Hill, Over Dale  
Adagio and Glittering Queen  
The Three Ravens  
The Fairy Shuffle  
You Spotted Snakes; Hush no More  
Music For A While  
The Newcastle Set  
The Jolly Pilgrim  
Niel Gow's Lament for the Red, Red Rose

The Willow Song  
Now The Night Is Chased Away  
Can She Excuse Puck's Wrongs

**Friday 23 September 2022, 9pm**

**The Purcell Room, London**

[Event page](#)

**Bjarte Eike** director / violin | **Mary Bevan** soprano | **Barokksolistene**

Part 1: *Purcell's Playhouse*

Part 2: *The Alehouse Sessions*