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Title: George Frideric Handel

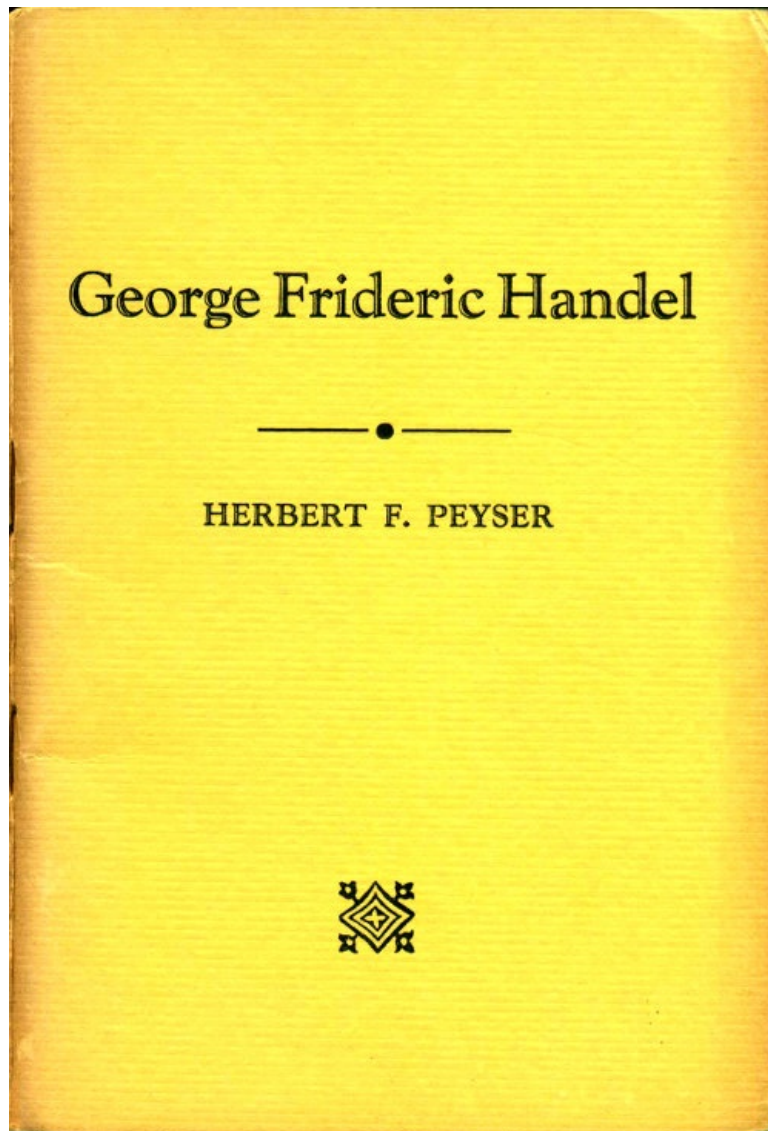
Author: Herbert F. Peyser

Release date: June 17, 2015 [EBook #49226]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Stephen Hutcheson, Dave Morgan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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**George Frideric
Handel**

HERBERT F. PEYSER



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the
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New York 19, N. Y.

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HANDEL IN MIDDLE AGE.
From the Portrait by Kneller.

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FOREWORD

Handel's long career resembles a gigantic tapestry, so bewilderingly crowded with detail, so filled with turmoil and vicissitude, with vast achievements, extremes of good and ill fortune, and unending comings and goings that any attempt to force even a small part of it into the frame of a tiny, unpretentious booklet of the present sort is as hopeless as it is presumptuous. Handel is far more difficult to reduce to such minuscule dimensions than his greatest contemporary, Bach, whose worldly experiences were infinitely less diverse and colorful, for all the sublimity, mystical quality and epochal influence of his myriad creations. The supreme master of florid pomp, Handel bulked much larger in the perspective of his own day than did, in his, the composer of the "Passion According to St. Matthew." In spite of an everlasting monument like "Messiah," the most popular choral masterpiece ever written, we may, however, ask ourselves if the body of Handel's music is as widely known and as intimately studied as it deserves to be. How many today can boast of a real acquaintance with Handel's operas (there are more than forty of them alone) apart from a few airs sung in concert; how many can truly claim to know by experience any of the great oratorios apart from "Messiah" and, possibly, "Judas Maccabaeus" and "Israel in Egypt?" Yet outside of such monumental works, Handel was time and again a composer of exquisitely delicate colorations, and sensuous style, not to say a largely unsuspected master of many subtle intricacies of rhythm. The present pamphlet, wholly without originality or novelty of approach, may, perchance, induce the casual reader to renew his interest in Handel's prodigious treasury, so much of it neglected, not to say actually undiscovered by multitudes of music lovers.

H. F. P.

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George Frideric Handel

By
HERBERT F. PEYSER

Some wit, comparing Bach and Handel, remarked that both masters were "born in the same year and killed by the same doctor." Born in the same year they unquestionably were, Handel almost an exact month before his great contemporary. Halle, where Handel first saw the light, is a comparatively short distance from Eisenach, where Bach was cradled. It lies not far from the eastern boundary of that Saxon-Thuringian country which harbored some of the imposing musical figures of Germany during the 17th Century. Such names as those of the famous "three S's"—Schein, Scheidt and Schütz—of Kuhnau, Krieger, Melchior Franck, Ahle, Rosenmüller, echo powerfully through the history of that period.

George Frideric Handel was born on Monday, February 23, 1685. That the name has been variously spelled need not trouble us; strict consistency in such matters lay as lightly on folks of this epoch as it did in the age of Mozart. However, it may be pointed out that in this booklet "Frideric" is retained in place of "Frederick" because Handel himself repeatedly used this form and because the British authorities thus inscribed him when he became a British citizen.

The Handel family came from Silesia, where Valentine Handel, the composer's grandfather, had been a coppersmith in Breslau. George Handel, the father, had been "barber-surgeon," attached to the service of Saxon and Swedish armies, then to that of Duke Augustus of Saxony. For a time he prospered and in 1665 he bought himself "Am Schlamm," at Halle-an-der-Saale, a palatial house, which in the course of years barely escaped total destruction by fire. In any case, Father Handel was to know the ups and downs of fortune; and the vicissitudes he endured did not sweeten an always morose and surly character. He has been described as "a strong man, a man of vast principles, bigoted, intensely disagreeable, a man with a rather withered heart." A portrait of him gave Romain Rolland "the impression of one who has never smiled." He was twice married, the first time to the widow of a barber, a woman ten years his senior, the second to Dorothea Taust, a pastor's daughter, thirty years his junior. By the first he had six children, by the second four, of whom George Frideric was the second.

Father Handel was 63 when his great son came into the world. The future composer of "Messiah" was born, not in the elaborate edifice which carries his bust and is inscribed with the titles of his oratorios, but in the house adjoining it which stands on a street corner and whose official address is Nicolai Strasse 5. Yet even this statement must be qualified. For this presumable "birthplace" was not built till 1800 and, according to the researches of Newman Flower, stands on the *site* of the house in which Handel was born. As for the town of Halle, it had definitely passed after the death of the Duke Augustus of Saxony, to Brandenburg; so that, strictly speaking, Handel was born a Prussian. But, as Rolland has noted, "the childhood of Handel was influenced by two intellectual forces: the Saxon and the Prussian. Of the two the more aristocratic, and also most powerful was the Saxon." At all events, after the Thirty Years' War the city of Halle, during the Middle Ages a center of culture and gaiety, had fallen into a drab provincialism.

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The house at Halle where Handel was supposed to have been born, decorated with laurels and the names of his oratorios. And—



—The house next door in which he was born.

Apparently the child's musical susceptibilities developed early and rather like Mozart's, even if unlike the latter, he had not the benefit of a friendly and understanding father. Who has not seen at some time or other the picture immortalizing the precocity of "the Infant Handel?" The story goes that the indulgent mother had smuggled a clavichord into the garret. In the dead of night the child crept to the attic till the father, aroused by faint tinklings, came with a lantern to investigate. Whether or not the clavichord was confiscated the result of the parental raid was a stern prohibition of all sorts of music-making. Some of us may be reminded by this apparent heartlessness of a rather similar punishment visited on the youthful Bach, when his elder brother deprived him of music he had painfully copied out by moonlight for his own use. 7

The elder Handel's motive was, according to his own lights, perhaps quite as defensible. He had no wish to see a son of his degraded to the rank of a lackey or some form of vagabond, than which a musician at that time hardly seemed any better. The barber-surgeon fully shared the prejudice of the average "strong man" against the artist. Rolland describes the bourgeois middle class German attitude of the 17th Century on the subject of music: "It was for them a mere art of amusement, and not a serious profession. Many of the masters of that time, Schütz, Kuhnau, Rosenmüller, were lawyers or theologians, before they devoted themselves to music." And old George Handel is supposed to have threatened: "If that boy ever shows any further inclination towards music or noises disguised as such, I will kill it!" There was, indeed, one way in which the boy could with a certain impunity satisfy his craving for music—in church, by listening to the organ and the singing of the choir. Such enjoyment 8

supplanted to some extent the games and childish pleasures of ordinary boys. He was, it appears, a somewhat lonely child, who made few friends and whose "playground" was a dismal courtyard opposite his home. 9

The father settled on the law as a fine, honest and lucrative profession for his son. Jurisprudence was to rescue Handel from the snares of music, just as in time it was to be the "salvation" of Schumann, as school mastering was by paternal decree to be the destiny of Schubert, and medicine that of Berlioz. Here, too, it was quite as ineffectual! All the same, the youth was not to escape his share of legal study; and by the time he reached 16 he entered the University of Halle as "studiosus juris."

About eight years earlier, however, fate in the paradoxical shape of Father Handel himself took a hand in George Frideric's future. He had his son accompany him on a journey to nearby Weissenfels, the residence of the Duke of Saxony. That personage asked the lad to play something on the chapel organ and was so stirred by what he heard that he counselled the obdurate father not to thwart the child's ambition. From an ordinary person the hard-boiled parent would have taken such advice in very bad part; coming from the mouth of a prince it acquired the force of a command. So he decided to allow his son to study music with the unspoken reservation, however, that he must belong first and foremost to the law. Actually, these musical studies might be said to have begun in Weissenfels, for here young Handel had a chance to hear some of the works of the Nürnberg master, Johann Krieger; and in this same town, a mere stone's throw from Halle, he had his first taste of opera, which was to thrust deep roots in his soul.

The boy was now entrusted to the care of Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, from Leipzig, who at an early age had become organist of the Halle Liebfrauenkirche. Zachow appears to have been an uncommonly gifted teacher and Handel's devotion to him never wavered. As we read Romain Rolland's words we are strangely reminded of 10 the ideals and methods of Theodor Weinlig, Wagner's unique master of composition: "Zachow's first efforts were devoted to giving the pupil a strong foundation in harmony. Then he turned his thoughts towards the inventive side of the art; he showed him how to give his musical ideas the most perfect form, and he refined his taste. He possessed a remarkable library of Italian and German music, and he explained to Handel the various methods of writing and composing adopted by different nationalities, whilst pointing out the good qualities and the faults of each composer and in order that his education might be at the same time theoretical and practical, he frequently gave him exercises to work in such and such a style.... Thus the little Handel had, thanks to his master, a living summary of the musical resources of Germany, old and new; and under his direction he absorbed all the secrets of the great contrapuntal architects of the past, together with the clear expressive and melodic beauty of the Italian-German schools of Hanover and Hamburg."

Around 1696 George Frideric is supposed to have gone to Berlin, though about this and possibly a subsequent trip a short time afterwards the chronicles give no clear account. Father Handel was seriously ill and, as it is unlikely that the 11-year-old student went to the Court of the Elector of Brandenburg alone, the assumption is that he made the journey in Zachow's company. Be this as it may, the artistic enthusiasm of the Electress, Sophia Charlotte, stimulated musical activities at the electoral court and attracted thither outstanding Italian composers, instrumentalists and singers. And it may well have been here that the youth was first brought into contact with the music of the South. He played on the clavecin before a princely audience and stirred it to such enthusiasm that the Elector wished to take him into service or at least finance a trip to Italy, to complete his studies. But 11 if we are to believe Mainwaring, Father Handel did not wish his son "tied too soon to a prince." Furthermore, the old man's health failed so alarmingly that he knew his days were numbered and wished to see the boy once more before he died.

Hardly was George Frideric back in Halle when the barber-surgeon went to his account. The youth wrote a memorial poem which was published in a pamphlet and proved to be the first time his name ever appeared in print. After settling her husband's affairs Dorothea Handel went about carrying out his wishes regarding her son's legal studies. In a spirit of duty he continued them a while; but soon after his completion of his college classes and his entrance for the Faculty of Law at the Halle University music gained the upper hand completely. He was religious without sentimentality but as little as the youthful Bach did he have any sympathy with Pietism (of which the Faculty of Theology was a hot-bed at the time) and was violently opposed to the Pietist antagonism to music. And when the post of organist at the Cathedral "by the Moritzburg" fell vacant by reason of the dissolute habits of a roystering individual named Leporin, Handel was made his successor, though the church was Calvinist and the young newcomer a staunch Lutheran.

There was now an end to all thoughts of jurisprudence. Music claimed him solely. Handel was only 17 but seems already to have exercised a strong musical authority in Halle. He assembled a capital choir and orchestra from among his most gifted pupils and let them be heard on Sundays in various churches of the town. Like Bach and other masters of that astonishing period, he composed an incredible number of cantatas, motets, psalms, chorales and devotional miscellany, which had to be new every week. It must not be imagined that he allowed them to wilt or evaporate. Handel's mind was a storehouse, whence nothing ever escaped and in which was always 12 stocked away and held in reserve for future use.

In the summer of 1703 he left his native city; not, indeed, forever, but only for occasional visits to relatives and friends, when professional business allowed him time. From Halle he turned his steps toward Hamburg, which had suffered little from the wars of the 17th Century, and grown rich, gay and artistic in consequence of enviable business prosperity. Commercial benefits were, of course, reflected in a musical expansion which raised the Hanseatic port above the level even of Berlin and made it the operatic city of the North. In Hamburg, notes Rolland, "they spoke all languages and especially the French tongue; it was in continual relationship with both England and Italy, and particularly with Venice, which constituted for it a model for emulation. It was by way of Hamburg that the English ideas were circulated in Germany.... In the time of Handel, Hamburg shared with Leipzig the intellectual prestige of Germany. There was no other place in Germany where music was held in such high esteem. The artists there hobnobbed with the rich merchants."

The Hamburg opera catered to various factions which did not invariably see eye to eye. One of these factions consisted of persons who sought in operatic entertainment out and out amusement; the other, of individuals with a religious bent, who regarded the average fantastic and extravagant opera as an invention of hell—*opera diabolica*. When Handel arrived the lyric theatre was making history guided by the composer, Reinhard Keiser. Under Keiser's management Hamburg became a home of opera in the German tradition. Some of these "German" operas were coarse and in atrocious taste. Hugo Leichtentritt tells, for instance, of a work called "Störtebeker und Godge Michaelis" (music by Keiser), a story about piracy on the high seas, with executions and massacres, in which bladders filled with sow blood and concealed beneath the costumes of the actors would be perforated in such a manner that the appalled spectators were spattered with a gory shower, often resulting in a stampede. 13

Keiser, though a person of unstable character and extreme presumptuousness, had indisputable genius. He was not yet 30 when Handel came to Hamburg and under him that city experienced its golden age of opera. To be sure, the weakest feature of the Hamburg Opera was the singing. For a long time the institution had no *professional* singers. The roles were taken by students, shoemakers, tailors, fruiterers "and girls of little talent and less virtue," while ordinarily artisans "found it more convenient to take female parts." A gifted Kapellmeister named Cousser, who had been a pupil of Lully in Paris, introduced important reforms and when Handel in 1703 arrived the moment was, in truth, a psychological one. "He was rich in power and strong in will," wrote the 22-year-old Johann Mattheson, the first acquaintance he was to make in Hamburg. Rolland pictures Handel as having "an ample forehead, a vigorous mouth, a full chin and a head covered with a biretta" (rather after the manner of Wagner, of whom throughout his life Handel reminds one in some amazing traits of character and genius).

Under Keiser the adventurous newcomer soon found employment as a second violin in the opera orchestra. His particular intimate was Mattheson, a musician of many gifts and uncommon versatility, who united in himself literary talents, a critical flair and a highly volatile temperament. It was he who helped Handel find pupils and who guided him into the town's important musical circles. So that before long Handel had access to the organ lofts of Hamburg's churches and opportunities to compose works for ecclesiastical purposes. Mattheson, incidentally, was a linguist and spoke perfect English; and it was through him that Handel was to enter for the first time into negotiations with what was to become his second country. 14

It was not very long, however, before the temperaments and idiosyncrasies of the two brought them into collision. Mattheson criticised the music of his friend, perhaps not entirely without reason, complained that Handel was not the most perfect of melodists and that he often wrote at too great length. If these opinions may have nettled the younger man they were not wholly lost on him, as time was to show. In the early months of their friendship Handel and Mattheson went to Lübeck to listen to the playing of the renowned Danish organist, Dietrich Buxtehude, whose celebrated *Abendmusiken* at the Marienkirche were likewise a magnet which drew Bach away from his duties in Arnstadt. The young men were deeply stirred by the music of the venerable master and Handel stored away in his incredibly retentive memory ideas which were to fertilize his imagination in later years. The two youths actually competed for the post of organist and might, like Bach, have won it but for the provision that whoever succeeded a retiring organist in Lübeck had to marry the daughter—or widow—of his predecessor. In this case the daughter seems to have been more than usually undesirable and, like their famous contemporary, the excursionists from Hamburg turned their backs on Lübeck.

Presently the friendship was imperiled once more, this time with what might have been disastrous results. In October, 1704, an opera, "Cleopatra" which Mattheson had composed to a text by a certain Friederick Feustking, was produced with the composer in the part of Mark Antony and Handel at the harpsichord. The piece won a success, but on a later occasion Mattheson (Antony being "dead") hastened into the orchestra and tried to push Handel from the instrument. A quarrel flared up immediately, which seems to have broken up the performance and have lasted half an hour. In the end the throng repaired to the Gänsemarkt, outside the theatre, the pair drew swords and set upon one another. Almost at once the combat came to an end, Mattheson's blade splintering against a metal button on Handel's coat. "The duel might have ended very badly for us both, if by God's mercy my sword had not broken," the young firebrand was to write later. The reconciliation was not immediate but when it did come about the two dined together, then betook themselves to the theatre to a rehearsal of Handel's first opera, "Almira." The representation, on January 8, 1705, was an instant triumph for its composer. The Hamburgers were completely captivated by the freshness and manifest genius which the score exhibited. Mattheson had sung the tenor part but does not seem to have been overjoyed by his friend's spectacular success. 15

Handel was spurred by his fortunate operatic debut to embark on a second work. The fact that "Almira" had been sung partly in Italian, partly in German, did not keep it from obtaining twenty performances at the outset. Handel made the mistake of interrupting its run because he believed that in his next opera, "Nero, or Love Obtained Through Blood and Murder," he had written something better. Mattheson sang the part of Nero; but the opera died after only three hearings. To aggravate matters the Keiser regime, now largely discredited, gave promise of putting an end to the Hamburg Opera; and Handel began to see himself enmeshed in the catastrophe of the wreck, a victim of elaborate jealousies and intrigues.

* * *

In 1704 he had made the acquaintance of an Italian prince, Giovanni Gaston del Medici, an adventurer and a notorious profligate, whose father was Grand Duke of Tuscany. He was astonished that Handel seemed so little interested in Italian music, including some specimens he set before him. Handel insisted that "angels would be necessary to sing them if such stuff were to sound even agreeable." At this time his ambition was to create a German style, independent of foreign influences. And for Keiser's successor, Saurbrey, Handel turned out a new opera, "Florindo und Daphne", which, like Wagner's "Rienzi", proved to be so long that the composer caused it to be given in two parts, "for fear", he admitted, "that the music might tire the hearers." Then, without taking leave of Mattheson or any of his friends, he accepted the prince's invitation and went to Italy. 16

More or less mystery surrounds Handel's arrival in Italy, though the time was not exactly propitious, what with the War of the Spanish Succession in full blast and funds in the wanderer's pocket fairly low. But the composer did not tarry in Florence, his first stop, for long and early in 1707 went to Rome. From the operatic standpoint the Eternal City had nothing to interest him. Pope Innocent III ten years previously deciding that the opera house was immoral, had closed it; then when things promised to improve a bit for musicians a devastating earthquake renewed the religious qualms of the people, so that during the whole of Handel's Italian sojourn, Rome had not a single performance of opera. However, there was abundant church and chamber music, which spurred him to emulation. To the Easter festivities of April, 1707, he contributed a "Dixit Dominus" and a few months later he wrote a "Laudate Pueri" and other Latin Psalms. But more important for his future were the excellent connections he made. Letters of recommendation from the Medici prince opened the Roman salons to him; and in such aristocratic circles his virtuosity on the keyboard seems to have gained him more fame than even his compositions. "The famous Saxon" ("Il Sassone famoso"), as Handel was called among the Romans even as early as the summer of 1707, was the wonder of musical soirees. And he was making inestimable artistic friendships. When we note that among those with whom he was brought into contact at one time or another in Rome included the Scarlattis, father and son; Arcangelo Corelli, Bernardo Pasquini, Benedetto Marcello—to mention only a few—we can judge to what grandly fertilizing inspirations Handel was exposed. We must mention in passing Cardinals Panfilii and Ottoboni, as well as the Marquis Ruspoli, who yielded to nobody in his enthusiasm for Handel's gifts. All these men belonged to a coterie called the "Arcadians", which united "the nobility and the artists in a spiritual fraternity not only the most illustrious artists and aristocrats of Italy, but further included four Popes and members of foreign royalty."



HANDEL AT THE TIME OF HIS FIRST VISIT TO ITALY.

The "Arcadians" held weekly meetings at the palace of Cardinal Ottoboni, where poetic and musical improvisations were given. It was for the concerts in the Ottoboni home that Handel composed his two Roman oratorios, "The Resurrection" and "The Triumph of Time and Truth", which approximate operas and the second of which was to undergo several transformations during his career. In the Ottoboni palace later took place that celebrated contest between Handel and the incomparable Domenico Scarlatti, which was adjudged a draw. The heart-warming friendship between the two masters was to endure for years. It is by no means out of the question that in the un-operatic atmosphere of Rome Handel, nevertheless, began to compose the first of his Italian operas, "Roderigo", which was heard for the first time only when he returned to Florence in the autumn of 1707.

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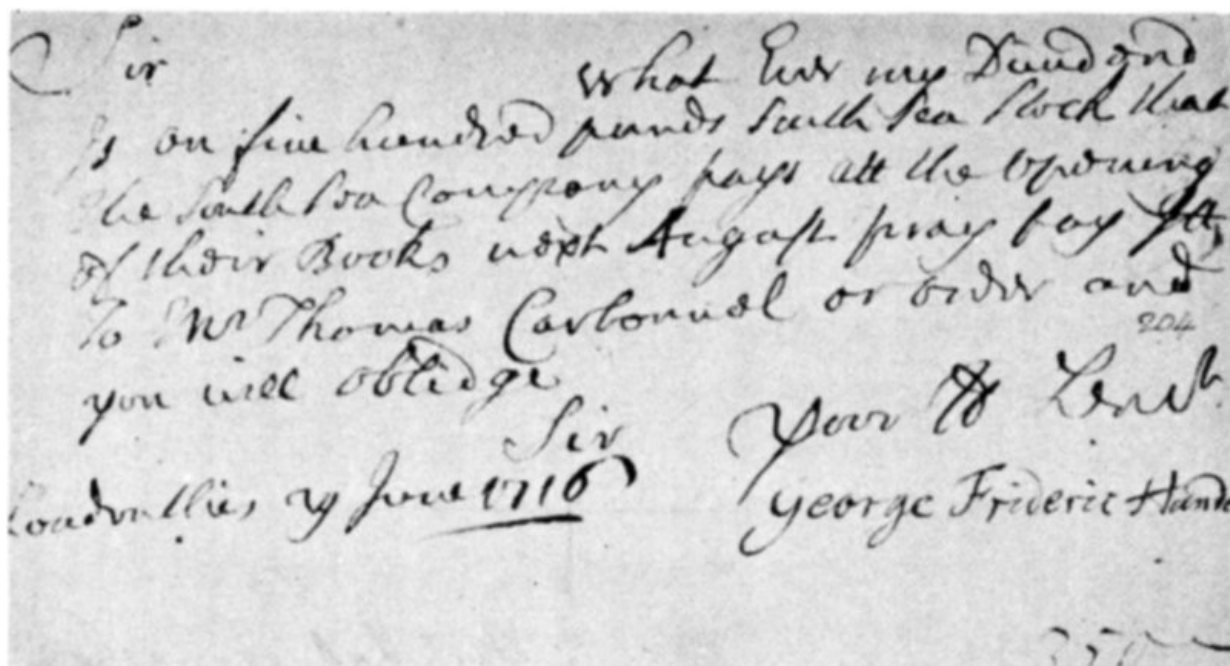
Handel was not to leave Italy till some time during the late spring of 1710, yet there are not a few blanks in his Italian travels, which it is impossible to fill out. He worked as industriously as ever—composed, played, absorbed myriad impressions. In Florence "Roderigo" had a success which it was claimed by some had been achieved partly through the favor of the Grand Duke and the love of a prima donna, Vittoria Tarquini. Possibly it was furthered by the latter but certainly not caused by it. Handel's life is conspicuously free from conventional

“love interest”; and perhaps the most celebrated story of his dealings with women is the one which tells of his raging threat to throw the soprano, Francesca Cuzzoni, out of a window if she did not sing exactly as he wanted what he had written for her. Certainly the middle-aged Tarquini never attracted him physically.

Encouraged by his Florentine luck Handel was moved to try his fortunes in Venice, where opera houses had sprung up everywhere and at one time numbered fifteen. Seven were playing on one and the same evening during Carnival time and there were musical diversions or solemnities of one sort or another in churches and in those women’s conservatories called “hospitals”. Venice was then the musical capital of Italy, somewhat as Milan was to become at a later date. Handel does not appear to have contributed to the operatic life of the city at this time but his chance was to come before long. Yet he did make one encounter in Venice which was to have consequences—he met Ernest Augustus, Prince of Hanover, and the Duke of Manchester, English Ambassador Extraordinary. He went back to Rome (where an unsuccessful attempt was made to convert him to Catholicism); yet he loved the city and regretfully tore himself away from it to make a jaunt to Naples, which contributed importantly to his artistic sensibilities. As he had done elsewhere in Italy he haunted the picture galleries and nourished his enthusiasm for paintings. He assimilated the Spanish and French musical styles which “fought for honors in this city”; saw much of Alessandro Scarlatti, interested himself in the folk music of the place, noted down the melodies of the Calabrian Pifferari, met the Venetian Cardinal Grimani, composed for the Neapolitan “Arcadians” the *serenata* “Acis and Galatea”. Grimani, whose family owned the theatre of San Giovanni Crisostomo in Venice, supplied him with the libretto of an opera, “Agrippina”, which Handel probably began to compose on the spot. Its performance in Venice was as good as assured and from Naples he returned to Rome, making another useful friend in the Bishop Agostino Steffani, who was charged with secret missions by different German princes and held at the same time the post of Kapellmeister at the Court of Hanover. 20

“Agrippina” was produced in Venice, 1709-10. Its reception exceeded anything the composer had known till then. The chronicles tell of cries of “Viva il caro Sassone”, also of “extravagances impossible to record.” Obviously his travels in the peninsula had superbly enriched his creative powers and the Venetians found the new work “the most melodious of Handel’s Italian operas.” Nor was its popularity confined to Venice. He seems to have had some idea of going to Paris, became familiar with the French language, used it in his correspondence and Romain Rolland describes his style as “always very correct and having the fine courtesy of the Court of Louis XIV.”

But Handel did not go to France. Instead, he returned to Germany and went to Hanover. Prince Ernest had, in Venice, been completely captivated by “Agrippina” and repeated an invitation he had made once before. The worthy Steffani invited the “dear Saxon” to succeed him as Kapellmeister at the Hanoverian Court. Wisely, “the dear Saxon” accepted. How differently things might have turned had he not been in Venice at just that providential moment! So Handel, as Chrysander said, “walked in the steps of Steffani; but his feet were larger.” 21



Showing Handel’s handwriting and signature when he first came to London.

His stay in Hanover in 1710 was brief. Hardly had he prepared to take up his duties than proposals were made to him from England. He asked leave of absence and received it; accepted an invitation from the Elector Johann Wilhelm to visit his court at Düsseldorf; and then, by way of Holland, traveled to London, which he reached late in 1710, unable to speak a word of English. Before he had gone back to the Hanoverian Court he had written an opera, produced it amid prodigious enthusiasm and taken the first steps toward becoming a sovereign British institution. 22

* * *

He could not have timed his coming better. Purcell’s death sixteen years earlier had given what was something like a death blow to English music; and what now passed for native compositions amounted to pitiable odds and ends. Rolland ridicules the claim of some unthinking people that Handel “killed English music since there was

nothing left to kill." A renewal of the Puritanical opposition which poisoned the English stage contributed to the confusion and discouragement of British artists, and the worst of such attacks as the notorious Jeremy Collier had made on the "profaneness and immorality" of the theatre lay in the fact that, as such things often do, they expressed the deep feelings of the nation. In consequence of a universal hypocrisy foreign elements came to fill the vacuum created. Some bad Italian librettos were set to wretched music and served up with momentary success. Other "entertainments" of the sort mingled Italian and English words and were duly satirized by the jealous and priggish Joseph Addison, nettled by the failure of his own piece, "Rosamund", to which one Thomas Clayton had composed atrocious music.

Handel came into contact with one Aaron Hill, who managed the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, and received from him an opera text, "Rinaldo", which an Italian, Giacomo Rossi, had adapted from Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered." The new arrival rose magnificently to his opportunity. The music was completed in just two weeks and performed on February 24, 1711. And luck aided Handel by supplying him with some extraordinary singers, all of them new to England—Giuseppe Boschi, a young and astounding bass, and the sensational castrato, Nicolini, who took London by storm. The tale of "Rinaldo" was that of the Venetian "Agrippina" all over again! In one evening the British capital was subjugated, for all the bile and venom Addison and Steele could discharge into the columns of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. The melodies of the opera spread like wildfire and seem to have appealed to the lower classes as well as to the aristocracy. To this day some of them have preserved their vitality. The noble air, "Lascia ch'io pianga", in sarabande rhythm, is a fairly familiar item on recital programs; and the Crusaders' March, a fine, swinging tune, was adapted to the words "Let us take the road" by Dr. Pepusch when he assembled out of countless folksongs and dances John Gay's deathless "Beggar's Opera"—in 1728 a thorn in Handel's side but still, after more than two centuries, a classic with an iron constitution. 23

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Roughly speaking, Handel composed forty-four operas from "Almira", in 1705, at Hamburg to "Deidamia", 1741, in London. It is obviously impossible to consider even a small fraction of them here and we shall have to content ourselves with little more than the names and dates of only a few. All the same, it may be well to pause here momentarily to ask ourselves what, in the first place, a Handel opera really is like. For unless we are specialists, not to say antiquarians, we have little means of definitely knowing. The lyric drama of that period cannot be judged by the works of the 19th and 20th Centuries or even by more than a scant handful of masterpieces of Gluck and Mozart. Its problems, its musical and dramatic aspects are basically different. A movement, which had its rise in Germany after the First World War and which continued on and off for several years (even spreading intermittently to other countries, including the United States) demonstrated that these baroque entertainments are essentially museum pieces, prizable as certain of their elements may be. To us, who have been nurtured on the theatre works of Mozart, of the composers of the school of dramatic and pictorial "grand opera", of the opera buffa and the opéra comique, the *drame lyrique* of Gounod and Bizet, the works of Verdi, the music dramas of Wagner and his assorted successors of various nationalities—to us the operatic specimens of Handel seem infinitely alien and remote in their premises and calculated stylizations. The nearest we can approach them today is through such surviving examples of the old *opera seria* as Mozart's "Idomeneo" or Gluck's "Alceste". And even those do not supply genuine parallels. 24

To the average person reared on the lyric drama as known to two or three generations preceding ours the long-established description of a Handelian opera as a "concert in costume" may suffice at a pinch. But in a larger sense it begs the question, for Handel's forty odd operas are both more than this and less. We should find their librettos so cut to a pattern that the most old-fashioned "books" of the 19th Century would possibly strike us, by comparison, dramatically bold, even involved. Handelian operas have no trace of psychological subtlety or elementary "conflict". What theatrical "action" there is passes before us with something like lightning speed. Incidents which need to be communicated to the spectator are, in the main, recounted in recitative. What we understand as "incident" is subordinate to phases of emotional expression; and in ensemble pieces. Joy, rage, sadness, a broad scale of elemental feelings, are recognizably embodied in musical moods and tempos unmistakable in their lyrical or dramatic communications of "affetti" ("emotions"). There is little, if indeed any, of what a later esthetic was to call "the art of transition" and it was nothing in any manner unusual for a fiery or combative *presto* to precede (or follow) a tender *largo* or *andante*, and other formalistic clichés. The accompaniment, the orchestra, indeed the "action" and the stage picture is not much more than incidental background and frame. 25

The true center of gravity of a Handel opera lies in the performance of the singers and their command of declamation, florid utterance, sustained song and artifices at that epoch accepted as supremely expressive. Only in grasping these facts can we put ourselves in the frame of mind needed to understand the essential principles of these baroque masterpieces and to appreciate what—apart from their sheer melodic beauties—lifts them to a higher level than curios lacking any further validity, difficult as it may be for many of us to force our imagination and our feelings into such a mold.

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Having conquered England at a blow and become the idol not only of high society but of the common people as well, Handel recalled in the spring of 1711 that he was still Kapellmeister of Hanover. In London he had made enemies as well as friends and one of the most implacable of his foes was the great but churlish Addison. His admirers, on the other hand, included a child named Mary Granville, later Mrs. Delany, one of his staunchest friends; the Duke of Burlington, through whom he had entrée to Burlington House; and the famous eccentric, Thomas Britton, a coal dealer by day but who, on certain evenings, sponsored memorable concerts in a specially outfitted loft above his coal shop, which drew prominent London musicians and cultured aristocrats to the Clerkenwell "garret", where Handel frequently appeared as harpsichord and even organ virtuoso. 26

Back in Hanover June, 1711, he renewed his contacts with Bishop Steffani, composed organ concertos and other chamber music, as well as a quantity of songs to German texts by the Hamburg Senator, Brockes. He would have liked to produce "Rinaldo" but the Hanover Opera was closed. Yet London had entered his blood and nothing would content him but his speedy return, the more so because his English admirers demanded him. He obtained leave "on condition that he return to Hanover after a reasonable time"; and by November, 1712, he arrived in England to supervise preparations for a pastoral, "Il Pastor Fido", a work hastily thrown together and variously improved more than twenty years later. This time Handel did not repeat his "Rinaldo" sensation and the piece had only half a dozen hearings. To make matters worse, a certain MacSwiney, who succeeded Aaron Hill at the Queen's Theatre, absconded, leaving nothing but unpaid bills and enraged singers. At this stage there enters the picture a Swiss adventurer, by name Heidegger, a man of unbelievable conceit and homeliness, who was, however, to play an important role in Handel's future. To recoup the failure of "Il Pastor Fido" the composer turned out in less than three weeks a "tragic opera" in five acts, "Teseo", with a libretto by Nicolo Francesco Haym, and dedicated tactfully to the Earl of Burlington. "Teseo" came near duplicating the fortunes of "Rinaldo"; and if, as Rolland says, it was "full of haste", it was also "full of genius." If anything could have entrenched the composer still more firmly in London it was this opera. He went for a while to live at Burlington House at the Duke's invitation; met Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, struck up friendships with this and that musician at the Queen's Arms Tavern in St. Paul's Churchyard and was never so happy as when he sat with some musical crony, a mug of beer at hand and a harpsichord nearby. The first work he composed in the ideal peace of Burlington House was a Birthday Ode for Queen Anne, whom he had met on his first London visit. The Ode was produced at St. James's on February 6, 1713, and was the first English he had set to music. All his life Handel's English remained bad, sometimes even grotesque, and the incorrect accenting in his compositions repeatedly betray his deficiencies in our tongue. Of such faults the Birthday Ode has its full share, in spite of which the Queen was so delighted with the work that she settled on the composer an annual pension of 200 Pounds. He found it politic to write music for patriotic purposes, and instantly complied with the sovereign's command to supply a "Te Deum" and a "Jubilate" to celebrate the Peace of Utrecht, both compositions given at a solemn service at St. Paul's before the assembled Members of Parliament. 27

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Queen Anne died on August 1, 1714, and for a time the skies over Handel threatened to cloud; for on the very day of her passing the Elector of Hanover was proclaimed by the Secret Council King of England. He arrived in London on September 20 and was crowned George I at Westminster a month later. Here was a pretty kettle of fish! His former master to whose service he had most certainly not returned "in a reasonable time" suddenly seated on the English throne—and not even a new "Te Deum" prepared against his coming to the land which Handel now regarded as home!

Handelian luck got him out of what might have been a serious predicament. He must have trusted to his destiny in the first place to help him out of an obviously awkward situation and, being tactful, he made no open move to aggravate it. George I was and remained intensely German, brought to England with him "a compact body of Germans"—chamberlains, secretaries, even his pair of elderly mistresses, the Baroness Kielmansegge and Madame Schulenburg; and all manner of comforts and consolations he could not find in his new island kingdom. He made no effort to shed his German love of music, wherefore as Rolland points out, "he could not punish Handel without punishing himself." And after he heard Handel's fascinating new opera, "Amadigi", in May, 1715, he lost all idea (if, indeed, he ever harbored any) of disciplining his former servant. He appointed Handel music master to the little princesses and when, in 1716, the monarch had to go to Hanover the composer accompanied him on the trip, took occasion to study musical developments in Germany and even wrote a Passion on a text by Heinrich Brockes. 28

Here is the point to consider for a moment the tale of the "Water Music", one of the most venerable Handelian anecdotes. The story runs somewhat as follows: Lord Burlington and Baron Kielmansegge, the Master of the King's Horse, in order to reconcile sovereign and musician, in 1715 persuaded the latter to write a set of light pieces to be played on a boat close to the royal barge at a water party on the Thames. The King liked the music sufficiently to inquire who composed it and, being told, summoned Handel, promised to let bygones be bygones and received him back into favor. Unfortunately for romance, later documents have shown that the "Water Music" was not played till 1717 and then under wholly different conditions. But the legend has become so ingrained in British musical tradition that, as Newman Flower wrote, "it is precisely what ought to have happened." At all events, the "Water Music" is an adorable suite, definitely English in character—like much else in Handel's music—and to this day an ornament of concert programs in one or another arrangement. 29

King George, far from remembering past annoyances, saw to it that Handel's yearly pension from Queen Anne should be increased to 600 Pounds, so that even without further earnings his financial state was tolerably secure. His good fortunes were enhanced by the musical enthusiasms of the King, who could not hear enough of "Rinaldo" and "Amadigi" (to the spectacular features of which live birds, which sometimes misbehaved, and a fountain of real water, heightened the attractions of sumptuous settings). He went to them, often incognito, several times a week sharing his private box with his bevy of lady friends, new and old; or he would vary his visits to the opera with attendance at plays or concerts, so that his chances to admire the works of Handel, in one form or another, were rarely lacking. Many found that the monarch's habit of parading his amours before London audiences added to the piquancy of a Handelian score!

By the side of the famed artificial soprano, Nicolini, sang the brilliant Anastasia Robinson, who had been a soprano but whose voice, after a siege of illness, suddenly dropped to contralto. Mrs. Robinson was particularly noted for the fact that her morals were at all times spotless. Mrs. Delany was to describe her as "of middling stature, not handsome but of a pleasing modest countenance, with large blue eyes.... Her manner and address were very engaging, and her behavior on all occasions that of a gentlewoman." When her husband, Lord Peterborough, died she burned the diaries he had kept, wherein he had noted his various infidelities and other secrets not meant for the scrutiny of his wife.

Handel's star was steadily rising and his fame was not to be transcended till a number of years later and then only by virtue of his own genius and after many fluctuations of fortune. But when the King returned to London from his trip to Germany opera fell upon bad days. Musical and theatrical life flourished, indeed, yet suddenly farces and other diversions, imported from France, captured the mood of the town and delighted the monarch and his ladies. Now nobody felt like putting up money on opera, since inexpensive vulgarity was a safer bet. At just about this period Handel and James Brydges, Duke of Chandos, former Paymaster-General of the Army during the Marlborough wars, were brought into contact. The erstwhile Earl of Carnarvon had accumulated his wealth by heaven knows what sharp practices, and inherited an estate at Cannons, near Edgware, where he had erected a luxurious palace, including a chapel, a theatre, and other musical appurtenances inseparable from such an establishment. The Prince of Wales was a frequent visitor at Cannons, braving even the swarming footpads of Edgware Road. The Duke of Chandos seems to have been in a position to buy anything which struck his fancy and there is a story that on one occasion, he or his son (the accounts differ) coming across a man unmercifully thrashing his well-favored wife, rescued the lady by buying her on the spot. He, therefore, had no particular trouble securing Handel as master of his music in place of his former employee, the German Dr. Pepusch. Some ten years later Dr. Pepusch had his revenge by compiling the score of the "Beggar's Opera" which was to become such a grievous obstacle in Handel's path. 30

But until 1720 Handel was in the service of the Duke of Chandos, even if he spent much of his time in London, busily attending to the musical instruction of the daughters of Caroline, Princess of Wales, and writing numerous "Lessons" and clavier suites for his royal pupils. Which brings us to another celebrated Handelian fiction, "The Harmonious Blacksmith." The legend is quite as diversified and even more far-fetched than the one about the "Water Music." For well over a century the world has been fed the story of the blacksmith and his forge near Whitechurch, close to Edgware. In the house of this blacksmith Handel is supposed to have taken refuge from a thunderstorm, the blacksmith meantime continuing his hammering. When the storm was over the composer went forth and, still haunted by the rhythm of the pounding, set down the melody and then proceeded to write variations on it. This "Air and Variations" form part of Handel's Fifth Suite of clavecin pieces, but it was not till 1820 that some imaginative publisher, taking his cue from an apprentice who continually whistled Handel's tune, invented the fanciful title; and not till 1835 that the London *Times* published an anonymous letter retailing the legend of the blacksmith and his forge. We have no place here to recount the complex ramifications of the amiable myth which culminated in the auctioning off of an old anvil—supposedly the very one which the composer heard struck! But the publisher had the last word and to the end of time the Fifth Suite will assuredly remain "The Harmonious Blacksmith." 31

Far more important in the development of Handel's style are the "Chandos Anthems" (or Psalms), composed during the years from 1717 to 1720 while the master, at Cannons, was steadily evolving. They fill three volumes of the Complete Handel edition and "stand in relationship to Handel's oratorios in the same position as his Italian cantatas stand to his operas. In these religious cantatas, written for the Duke's chapel, Handel gives the first place to the chorus.... There is already in them the spirit and the style of 'Israel in Egypt', the great monumental lines, the popular feeling. It was only a step from this to the colossal Biblical dramas." (Rolland) And Handel took this first step with "Esther", called in its first form "Haman and Mordecai, a masque." It was staged on August 29, 1720. Almost simultaneously he wrote the exquisite pastoral tragedy, "Acis and Galatea", a Sicilian legend he had already treated during his Neapolitan days but which, in its later shape took on an unsurpassable element of classical finish. 32

* * *

Yet there were breakers ahead! Whether or not he could discern them from afar it is probably unlikely that the prospect of conflict would have troubled over much a nature as powerful and combative as Handel's. Indeed, difficulties were what this prodigious vitality and ever renewing creative inspiration best thrived upon. As so often happens in lands where opera is fundamentally an exotic people again wanted opera. It was a logical time to end the Cannons interlude. The psychology of the moment, to which Handel was sensitive, came just when company-promoting took on almost the aspect of a hobby. There was money aplenty and the South Sea Bubble, which was indeed swelling, had not yet burst. So Lord Burlington and other peers raised capital for a new season of Italian opera, appointed Handel director-in-chief, made the ugly but efficient Heidegger stage manager, rounded up librettists and sent Handel to the Continent to engage singers for what was to be known as "The Royal Academy of Music"—an English duplication of the official name of the Paris Opéra. And the *Weekly Journal* soon announced that "Mr. Handel, a famous Master of Musick, is gone beyond the sea, by order of His Majesty, to collect a company of the choicest singers for the Opera in the Haymarket."

"Mr. Handel" visited Hanover, Düsseldorf, Dresden and Halle, where he went to his birthplace "Am Schlamm", saw his old mother, who was going blind, and her aging spinster sister. And at this point occurred one of the most poignant incidents of musical history—that meeting of Handel and Bach, thwarted by an inscrutable destiny. Bach learned that his contemporary was in Halle, went there on foot from Coethen to seek him out and—missed him by a day! Even Bach's subsequent dispatch of his son, Wilhelm Friedemann, to invite Handel to visit him misfired and the two were destined forever to remain personal strangers. 33

Handel secured some extraordinary singers in Dresden, where the Italian opera was blooming. In addition to Boschi, the bass, who had sung in "Rinaldo", he bagged the great Signora Durastanti and the castrato Senesino, who until the subsequent coming of the mighty Farinelli, was perhaps the artificial soprano whom London most worshipped at a time when castrati were completely the rage. Senesino played incredible havoc with the hearts of deluded women. Handel, in addition to the countless duties of a music-director had also operas to compose, and in due season he was somehow turning out three a year. Nicola Francesco Haym supplied him with a libretto adapted from Tacitus, "Radamisto", and this work, produced on April 27, 1720, was a triumph such as even Handel had never experienced. It ran till the season ended late in June; "crowds flocked to 'Radamisto' like a modern mob to a notorious prize-fight." (Newman Flower)

The first season of the Royal Academy finished in a flourish, aided by the circumstance that the metropolis was in the throes of an orgy of financial speculation. We can read of incredible schemes and “bubbles” with the help of which money was to be lured from private pocket-books. Newman Flower tells of “one for trading in hair, another for the universal supply of funerals in Great Britain, one for a wheel of perpetual motion, one ‘for carrying on an undertaking of great advantage, but nobody to know what it is’.” Still another project contemplated “breeding silkworms in Chelsea Park.” By the time things were ready for the opening of the Academy’s second season Lord Burlington imported from Rome the composer Giovanni Battista Bononcini, possibly not dreaming that he was introducing a dangerous rival to Handel. In his little way Bononcini had talent and charm, as well as a conceit out of all proportion to his pleasant gifts. An opera of his was produced at the Academy with Senesino in the cast and enjoyed a good run, while a composite work, called “Muzio Scevola”, with one act by Handel, another by Bononcini and a third by a mediocrity, Filippo Mattei, followed. The results of the increasingly complicated situation were to precipitate a contest that split London’s high society into factions. The cynical John Byrom compressed it into an epigram, part of which has entered the English language:

*“Some say, compared to Bononcini,
That Mynherr Handel’s but a ninny;
Others aver that he to Handel
Is scarcely fit to hold a candle.
Strange, all this difference should be
‘Twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”*

Be all of which as it may, Handel presently had the mortification of seeing his own new “Floridante” fail while Bononcini’s pretty “Griselda” packed the theatre like nothing since “Radamisto!”

But Handel resembled the mythical Antaeus, who whenever he fell renewed his own powers by contact with Mother Earth. Before long he was turning out masterpieces in bewildering continuity. In 1723 he composed the superb “Ottone”, in 1724 “Tamerlano” and “Giulio Cesare” and the following season the sumptuous “Rodelinda”; in 1726 “Scipione”, and “Alessandro”, in 1727 “Admeto” and “Riccardo I”, in 1728 “Siroe” and “Tolomeo.” This period, incidentally, brings us to those excesses of singer worship and rivalry which stirred the public to white heat and turned the opera house into something between a wild prize fight and a three ring circus. Then, in 1722-23, the species *prima donna* suddenly invaded the scene, in the person of Francesca Cuzzoni, who was squat and ungainly, but had an astounding voice and an art of song that made high society overlook her bad temper and her worse style in dress. Handel had occasion to experience her tantrums at the rehearsals of “Ottone”, when she refused to sing an aria as the composer wanted it; whereupon he had recourse to real “Taming of the Shrew” tactics, seized her bodily and threatened to throw her out of the window, at the same time shouting to her in French: “Oh, Madame, I know full well that you are a real she-devil; but I intend to teach you that I am Beelzebub, the Chief of Devils!” Whereupon the humbled Cuzzoni sang her “Falsa imagine” exactly as Handel wanted. Possibly the incident did not end Handel’s difficulties with her but in her relations with him she became more tractable and if she could not subdue the insensitive master she did subdue her audiences. “Damme, she has a nest of nightingales in her belly!”, yelled one of the gallery gods on a certain occasion and the plebeian indelicacy seems to have won the approval of the boxes. Soon Anastasia Robinson, revolted by the turmoil over Cuzzoni, retired from stage life and married the Earl of Peterborough.

Cuzzoni, however, was only one obstacle of her kind. Soon afterwards the management, on the lookout for another sensation, secured the soprano’s most hated Continental rival, Faustina Bordoni, who was to become the wife of the composer Hasse. Handel brought the pair on the stage together in his opera “Alessandro”. Lady Pembroke was “protectress” of Cuzzoni, Lady Burlington of Faustina. Finally, in May, 1727, things culminated when the two jealous creatures came to blows during a performance of Bononcini’s “Astyanax”, tore each others hair and pummeled one another in full view of the spectators, who took sides and shrieked with delight as the coiffures of the combatants were ruined and faces scratched. The “fighting cats”, as the pair were called, later were made the subject of Colley Cibber’s farce, “The Rival Queens”.

In time Cuzzoni despite her lack of taste in dressing was to set fashions; and a brown and silver attire in which she appeared in “Rodelinda” so captivated the ladies that, with modish variations, it was to be the rage for years. The various castrati (notably the great Senesino) were in many ways as capricious and difficult to manage as the *prima donnas*. Senesino, having irritated the Earl of Peterborough by reason of some reflection on Anastasia Robinson was flogged by her husband. The scandal enchanted the drawing rooms and Society was even more delighted when the singer, appearing in “Giulio Cesare” was frightened out of his wits and burst into tears because a piece of scenery fell at his feet at the very moment when, as Julius Caesar, he had to sing words to the effect that “Caesar knows no fear!”

In time came the greatest castrato of them all, the incredible Farinelli, who earned so much in London that when he retired to Italy he built himself a palace there which he sarcastically named “English Folly”. People used to shout at the Opera that there was only “One God and one Farinelli!” And describing a London birthday party where this divinity was among the guests the Duchess of Portland wrote: “There were about forty gentlemen that had an entertainment, and Farinelli wore a magnificent suit of clothes, and charmed the company with his voice as Orpheus did (and so kept them from drinking).” On the other hand when this god was once so imprudent as to walk uninvited into a party at the Duke of Modena’s in St. James’s Street the infuriated host showed him the door with the words: “Get out, fellow! None but gentlemen come here!”

All these scandals, spectacular squabbles and silly exhibitions did not, in the long run, enhance the credit of the Academy. Handel, who had been naturalized on February 13, 1726 and at the same time been appointed Composer to the Court and to the Chapel Royal, was together with the rest of London, shocked in the early summer of 1727, to learn of the death of George I on a trip to Germany. On October 11 of the same year George II was crowned and, though less favorably disposed to the composer than his father, continued the pensions Handel held from the late sovereign and from Queen Anne and contributed to them another large sum for music lessons

to the young princesses. Handel, for his part, wrote for the new King four Coronation Anthems which added to his glory. The Academy, after losing an appalling amount of money presently received its death blow, the production at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields of "The Beggar's Opera", by the clever satirist, John Gay, with music compiled by Dr. Pepusch, Handel's predecessor in the employ of the Duke of Chandos. This "ballad opera", that "made Gay rich and Rich, the manager, gay", which still leads a lusty existence, and has been at various times a landmark in English and American theatrical history, proved an earthy and bawdy entertainment, against the barbed shafts of whose ridicule the artifices of Italian opera could not prevail for long.

Yet Handel remained incorrigible. Once again he entered into partnership with Heidegger, planned another opera season, secured Senesino again and went abroad to engage other singers. On that occasion he traveled again to Italy, went to Hamburg and made a last visit to his aged mother in Halle. She was now paralyzed, and shortly afterwards she died. The new London opera season got off to a bad start, one failure succeeding another. 38 Politics aggravated the situation, the more so as George II and the Prince of Wales were at odds and the supporters of the latter, determined to set up a rival opera company to ruin Handel.

But the story of Handel's pertinacious efforts to float new operatic enterprises for almost another ten years is too long, involved and too honeycombed with intrigue, contending influences and low tactics of one sort or another to be examined here. The composer's Hanoverian origin stirred many parties against him. Moreover, he was a self-willed, imperious person, who, like Richard Wagner more than a century later, had the gift of stimulating antagonism. He was, wrote W. McNaught, "a pervading presence, a busybody forever intruding upon public affairs. He had taken to ordering the amusements of the town in his own interests; and he belonged to the wrong party." One almost fancies oneself confronted with a chapter from the life of the creator of "Die Meistersinger!"

Yet what a treasury of glorious music Handel was pouring out with incalculable lavishness during these agitated years! Let us mention in passing a few of the new operas as they came and went: "Ezio", "Orlando", "Il Pastor Fido", "Ariodante", "Alcina", "Arminio", "Berenice", "Faramondo", "Serse". The last-named calls for a word by itself. "Xerxes" has nothing to do with the Persian ruler of antiquity. It is a comic opera, Handel's first and only one, which stands up extraordinarily well under modern stylized conditions of revival, apart from which it contains possibly one of the most universally beloved melodies that Handel ever wrote. This melody, heard at the very opening of the piece, appears in the score as a *largo* to the words "Ombra mai fu", a song of gratitude to a plane tree for its beneficent shade. But for generations it has been slowed from the pace originally prescribed to a solemn, swelling hymn known to uncounted millions as "Handel's Largo." And far more know it as a 39 churchly canticle than its lightly moving operatic context. Almost every one of this mass of operas, furthermore, is charged with grand arias of all the emotional varieties common to its epoch—gems enshrined in practically every one of the great anthologies of the 18th Century song.

It was not till 1741 that Handel concluded his period of operatic creativity with "Deidamia", written to a libretto by Paolo Rolli. London's taste for opera had, during more than a decade shown continued fluctuation. But in 1731 a new situation brought about an event that was to provoke a development of capital importance for Handel's future. The children of the Chapel Royal presented in a private performance his masque, "Esther", on the composer's birthday. The success of the performance was such that it resulted in others, one of which was given without Handel's consent by one of his rivals. The master was equal to the occasion. He added some numbers to the score and gave half a dozen representations at the King's Theatre; but as a Biblical subject could not be acted on the stage the masque was given in concert form, in the presence of the royal family and of High Society. The Handelian oratorio had more or less come into being!

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In the summer of 1733 Handel went to Oxford. The University authorities had offered him a degree of Doctor of Music. Oxford is said to have known little of his music at that time. Yet his arrival there might, according to Newman Flower, "have been the triumphant entry of a king. The town was overcrowded; even accommodations at the hostels ran out and people slept in the streets." The composer brought with him a new oratorio, "Athalia", composed to a text which Samuel Humphreys had adapted from Racine. Hugo Leichtentritt claims that the 40 Rector, Dr. Holmes, aimed to bring about a rapprochement between the Hanoverians and the Jacobites. A whole week of Handelian works was offered, with hearings of "Esther", "Deborah", "Athalia", the Utrecht Te Deum, "Acis and Galatea" and other creations. In the end the master did *not* receive the honorary degree. Some have believed that he turned it down when he was told it would cost 100 Pounds. Like Haydn half a century after, he found the academic honors of Oxford expensive; and later a story gained currency that Handel had shouted in his particular brand of English: "Vat de dyfil I trow away my money for what de Blockhead wish; I no vant!"

Had it been practical he might have brought a whole opera production to Oxford. In place of such a luxury he compromised on oratorios, the more so because the dividing line between such entertainment and the opera of the period was not so sharply drawn as it was eventually to become. The chief differences between the two forms lay in the preponderance of choruses, such as, in opera, were regarded as hardly more than side issues.

Meanwhile, he seemed unable to resist the lure of the theatre. Again and again he returned to Italian opera. He continued his earlier partnership with Heidegger; he made trips to Italy and elsewhere and secured new singers (the castrato, Carestini, the prima donna, Strada). His enemies increased in number and power and resorted to the basest tactics imaginable to discredit and injure him. The so-called Opera of the Nobility opened at a playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields, lured his singers away from him by fair means or foul, and by securing the great Farinelli obtained a trump card. Handel (who in time parted company with Heidegger) would burn his fingers the moment his fortunes seemed on the upgrade. Even the weather was against him, what with the Thames freezing over in one of the years that he obstinately returned to opera and cutting down his audiences. He lost money 41 ruinously, he went into bankruptcy, he wore himself out to such a degree that he had a mental and physical breakdown and had to go to the Continent, to Aix-la-Chapelle, for a cure. His amazing resilience of spirit and body

helped him back to health and actually encouraged him to make another attempt at an operatic season with his egregious associate, Heidegger, at the King's Theatre early in 1738, for which he composed his comedy, "Serse."

A few months earlier his royal friend, Queen Caroline, had died and Handel gave voice to his genuine grief in the great Funeral Anthem, "The Ways of Zion do Mourn." And despite his misfortunes he busied himself with a charitable enterprise, the promotion of a Society for the Support of Decayed Musicians, which enlisted his active sympathies for the rest of his life. Not even benefactions of the sort could mollify the legions of his implacable enemies. His aristocratic foes, to hasten his complete downfall, actually hired hoodlums to tear down his posters and precipitate noisy disturbances whenever they thought trouble-making could in some way or other harm him. Yet a few friends stood unshakably by his side, none more faithfully than the loyal Mrs. Delany.

Just when his creditors had seized him and threatened him with imprisonment the news of his tribulations gave rise to a popular movement of sympathy. In 1735 he had delighted the English public by his "Alexander's Feast", composed on Dryden's "Ode to St. Cecilia", produced triumphantly at the Covent Garden Theatre. It had been written in twenty days. As the years passed, Handel's composing activity seemed incredibly accelerated. In the freezing winter of 1739 he wrote, "to keep himself warm" (as Rolland says) the "little" Cecilia cantata in a week, the version of Milton's poem (under the title "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato") in just under a fortnight, and the glorious Concerti Grossi, Opus 6, in a month distracted by his last operatic cares! Incidentally, Handel had received about this time a testimonial of public admiration in the form of a marble statue by the sculptor, Roubiliac, which a manager of musical entertainments named Tyers had caused to be erected in Vauxhall Gardens, a meeting place of London Society, where Handel's works made up the best liked musical features.

"THUS SAITH THE LORD," FROM THE "MESSIAH."



As Handel wrote it, and—



As Christopher Smith transcribed it.

Still, by the spring of 1741, Handel in a moment of profoundest disheartenment prepared to throw up the sponge and leave for good and all his home for the past thirty years. At long last he was fed up on the struggle and announced one last concert for April 8, 1741. And then, when the darkness before dawn seemed blackest, he sat down to create his masterpiece, the most universally beloved choral work ever composed! 43

That summer Charles Jennens gave Handel a compilation of Scriptural texts which he called "Messiah." Jennens was a literary amateur, born at Gopsall Hall, Leicestershire and educated at Balliol College, Oxford. Rich and bizarre, he was vastly conceited and especially proud of the manner in which he had assembled the various Biblical texts used in this case. Handel had been associated with him before—in the oratorio, "Saul" (1739), and in "L'Allegro ed Il Penseroso" a year later, as a supplement to which he had added some poor verses of his own to the lines of Milton and called the product "Il Moderato." Robert Manson Myers thinks it "extraordinary that Handel turned to this eccentric millionaire for his libretto of 'Messiah'." Jennens was of another mind and even later wrote to an acquaintance: "I shall show you a collection I gave Handel, called 'Messiah' which I value highly; he has made a fine entertainment of it, though not near so good as he might and ought to have done.... 44 There are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but even more unworthy of 'Messiah'"; and deploring Handel's "maggots" he added that he had "with greatest difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition." Doubtless Handel, had he so chosen, could have picked his texts himself; he compiled the book of "Israel in Egypt" unaided in 1738 and when, a good deal earlier, the Bishop of London wanted to help him with the words for the "Coronation Anthems" he retorted: "I have read my Bible very well, and I shall choose for myself!" Mr. Myers, in his encyclopedic study of "Messiah" feels certain that Handel must have controlled the choice of passages selected.

Like Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and other supreme musicians Handel could create with a rapidity which ignominiously shames composers of our supposedly "speedy" age. Even bearing that fact in mind, the composition of "Messiah" between Saturday, August 22, 1741, and Monday, September 14, following remains one of the miracles of music. Shut up in a little room on the first floor of his home on Lower Brook Street, Hanover Square, none can say exactly what went on. Handel is supposed to have uttered afterwards the words of St. Paul: "Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote it I know not." Nobody seems to have dared intrude upon this mystic concentration. Food was left near him but usually found untouched when the servant came to remove it. He sat at his desk like a stone figure and stared into space. Sometimes his man stood in awe to see his master's tears drop on the music paper and mingle with the ink. "When he was composing 'He was despised' a visitor is reported to have found the trembling composer sobbing with intense emotion." And after the "Hallelujah Chorus" he uttered those historic words: "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!" The 45 autograph score, with its blots, its angry erasures and general untidiness, offers fierce evidence of his tumultuous feelings and flaming ecstasies. Possibly between April and late August of 1741 he was shut up in his four walls planning the work, for we have no clear idea just what he did during this period. Sketches and fragments do not clear up what mystery there may be, for the composer destroyed all but some fugitive scraps.

Handel appears to have "been reluctant to submit such music to the capricious taste of aristocratic London." So when William Cavendish, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, invited him to visit Dublin and permit the public of "that generous and polite Nation" hear his oratorios Handel assented at once, the more so because it was a question of assisting three benevolent institutions of Ireland (one of them the Charitable Musical Society for the Relief of Imprisoned Debtors). With his usual impulsiveness he even agreed to present "some special oratorio" solely for the benefit of the unfortunates jailed for debt. And he was happy to shake the dust of London from his feet for a while. Before starting on his Irish journey, incidentally, he composed in a fortnight part of another oratorio, "Samson", based on Milton's "Samson Agonistes" and containing that noble air of lament, "Total Eclipse", which was to affect him so poignantly some years later. For his Dublin productions he had two exceptional woman singers—Susannah Maria Cibber (also an illustrious tragic actress) and Signora Avolio, a highly trained Italian.

The chorus was recruited from Dublin's St. Patrick's Cathedral and Christchurch.

"Messiah" did not receive its first hearing till April 13, 1742. Reports emanating from the last rehearsals greatly whetted public appetite and on the morning of April 13 *Faulkner's Journal* ran the following: "This day will be performed Mr. Handell's new Grand Sacred Oratorio, called the Messiah. The doors will be opened at Eleven, and the performance begin at Twelve. The Stewards of the Charitable Musical Society request the favor of the ladies not to come with hoops this day to the Musick Hall in Fishamble Street. The Gentlemen are desired to come without their swords." Mr. Myers relates that "Handel's 'polite' audience comprised 'Bishops, Deans, Heads of the Colledge, the most eminent People in the Law, as well as the Flower of Ladyes of Distinction and other People of the greatest quality.'" The audience was transported. In some ways the heroine of the occasion was Mrs. Cibber, who sang the air "He was despised" with such tenderness and pathos that the Reverend Patrick Delany, who had harbored a bitter prejudice against actresses and singers so far forgot himself that he rose and solemnly exclaimed: "Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven thee!" 46

It was late in August, 1742, before Handel returned to London. The hostility of the English aristocracy was still strong and continued for some years, although the forceful voice of Alexander Pope had been raised in his favor, little as that poet is said to have known about music. But Pope's acknowledged belief in Handel's "talent" did something toward disarming the composer's enemies. However, he was in no hurry to let London hear "Messiah" in spite of all the great things spoken and written about it. Not till February, 1743, did Handel plunge once more into the eddies of music-making in the metropolis—not, indeed, with operatic schemes as of old but with a plan for a series of subscription concerts at Covent Garden, offering "Samson" as the first attraction.

He took his time before bringing forward "Messiah". Even before he could advertise it his hypocritical foes in fashionable circles began a campaign against the "profanation" and the "pious" raised loud cries; clergymen in particular were scandalized "at the sacrilege of converting the Life and Passion of Christ into a theatrical entertainment." Even the idea of printing the word *Messiah* on a program led Handel to the expedient of announcing his great work simply as "A Sacred Oratorio." At that, the embattled clerics tried to enjoin the performance "on the ground that Covent Garden Theatre was a place of worldly amusement and that in any case public entertainments during Lent were sacrilegious." However, the "Sacred Oratorio" was at last given its first London hearing on March 23, 1743. The composer conducted, Signora Avolio, Mrs. Cibber, John Beard and Thomas Lowe were the chief soloists. And here let us cite once more Robert Manson Myers' superb study of the masterpiece: 47

"As the glorious strains of the 'Hallelujah Chorus' burst upon the awed assemblage, thick-witted George II found himself so deeply affected by Handel's music (or so eager to shift his position) that he started to his feet with all the spontaneous verve a sixty-year-old gout-ridden monarch could muster. Instantly his phlegmatic courtiers also rose, and since no Englishman may remain seated while his King is standing, the audience at once followed suit, thus inaugurating a custom which persists to the present day. Actually the King's gesture was more a tribute to Handel's impressive music than an instance of exceptional religious devotion...."

"It is a curious indication of public taste that this casual Eighteenth Century 'fashion' has remained for two centuries an inviolable tradition both in England and in America. Even today thousands who can scarcely distinguish F sharp from middle C punctiliously observe a custom established by a stupid Hanoverian king and his worldly court two hundred years ago."

Thanks to bigotry and organized religiosity, however, "Messiah" had only three performances in 1743, none in 1744, two in 1745 and none whatever till four years later. Newman Flower recounts that the master, being complimented on the work by a titled hearer, replied: "My lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained people; I wished to make them better." Yet as late as 1756 a Miss Catherine Talbot, one of Handel's most devoted admirers, could say that "the playhouse is an unfit place for such a solemn performance." However, in the words of Robert Manson Myers, "England's early rejection of 'Messiah' may be ascribed as much to personal resentment as to shallow musical taste.... Handel flaunted his independence and moved with resolute determination, snapping his fingers in the face of princely patrons and daring to defy the bluest blood in England. What was to be done with this insufferable German upstart, this mere musician, who despite persistent opposition succeeded in discharging his debts to the uttermost farthing? Chosen leaders of British 'quality' resolved to crush Handel at once. They devised a systematic campaign to boycott his oratorios, and no scheme proved too petty for the gratification of their spite." 48

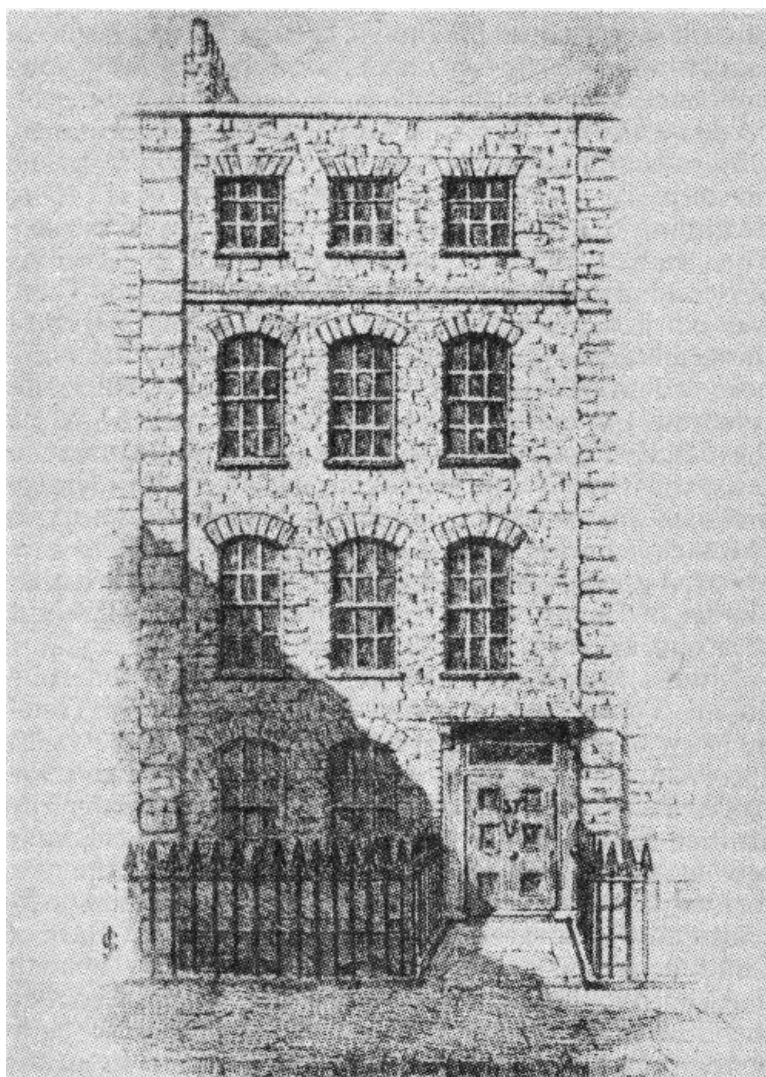
* * *

Vain resolve! For Handel, crushed, had a most persistent habit of rising again. If political cabals brought him low, the tides of national politics brought him to the top once more. "Messiah", to be sure, was not to become an unshakable British (shall we not rather say Anglo-Saxon) monument till after the composer's death; yet Handel was able to make the most, creatively, of the great national emergencies of his last decade. In 1743, as Composer of Music to the Chapel Royal, he wrote a "Te Deum" and an anthem to celebrate the victory of Dettingen, music that conquered the popular heart. To this period belongs the charming secular oratorio, "Semele", (source of the beloved airs "Where'er you walk" and "O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?") at the first production of which Mrs. Delany found it significant that "there was no disturbance in the playhouse." But the old habit of launching operatic or concert enterprises was upon him once more and again threatened to consume his credit and his substance. Bankruptcy threatened. Other oratorios, "Hercules", "Belshazzar", grand masterpieces both of them, were given in 1745 to dwindling audiences. Handel's health was imperiled. Then came 1745, the Jacobite rising and the landing in Scotland of the Pretender, Charles Edward. There was consternation which culminated in the march of the Highlander army on London. Loyally, the composer identified himself with the national cause; to celebrate the early defeats of the Jacobites he wrote the "Occasional Oratorio", a call to Englishmen to resist the invader. But this occupies a less considerable niche in history than "Judas Maccabaeus", next to "Messiah" perhaps the most popular of Handel's oratorios, unless we choose to set above it the earlier "Israel in Egypt"—to 49

Robert Schumann “the model of a choral work.”

“Judas Maccabaeus”, the text of which a certain divine, Thomas Morell, had based on the Old Testament, was set by Handel between July 9 and August 11, 1746, was produced by Handel at Covent Garden, April 1, 1747. The composer was extraordinarily attuned to the emotional mood of the moment. People saw in the heroic Judas an embodiment of the victorious Duke of Cumberland, who had ferociously scattered the hosts of the Pretender. And the Jews of London, proud of the glorification of their warrior hero of old, rallied to Handel’s support and packed the theatre in such numbers that the composer suddenly found himself with a wholly new public at his feet, which to some degree replaced for a time to come the aristocratic patrons he had lost.

50



HANDEL'S HOUSE, 1875.

Handel lived here—then 57 Lower Brook Street, Hanover Square—for 34 years, 1725 till his death in 1759; “Messiah” was composed within its walls.

In the martial, heroic score of “Judas Maccabaeus” Handel had incorporated some music he had originally designed for other works. “See the conquering hero comes”, probably the best known chorus in the oratorio, had originally been a part of “Joshua”, and was not heard in “Judas Maccabaeus” till a year after its first production. Even the chorus “Zion now her head shall raise”, was a later addition and had not been composed till after Handel had lost his sight. 51

This is the place to comment briefly on Handel’s “borrowings” about which so much ado has been made that one writer went so far as to allude to him as “the grand old thief.” It is altogether too easy to lay a disproportionate stress on the practice involved, the more so as it was a fairly legitimate custom in the Eighteenth Century. Besides Handel, masters like Bach, Haydn, Gluck, Mozart and even Beethoven, had a way, more or less frequently, of taking their own where they found it. Often, indeed, they found it in their own earlier creations. In any case no moral or ethical question was involved, for the good reason that the *treatment* of a theme or a melody according to the esthetic of that period, mattered far more than the phrase in question. Handel, when told of some passage from another composer found in his music had a way of retorting: “The pig did not know what to do with such a theme.” Then, too, he adapted to broader purposes music he had conceived earlier in other connections. “Messiah”, for instance, offers many cases in point. The chorus “His yoke is easy, His burthen is light” was adapted for better or worse from an Italian duet composed originally to the words “Quel fior che all’ alba ride”; the great “For unto us a Child is born”, was a madrigal denouncing “Blind Love and Cruel Beauty” thus: “No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi”, while “All we like sheep have gone astray” was at first the Italian duet “So per prova i vostri inganni.” The great ensemble, “And with His Stripes”, employs the same fugal subject which Bach put to use in the A minor fugue of the “Well Tempered Clavier” and is also found in the Kyrie of Mozart’s “Requiem.” But themes of this type were “in the air” in that period and fairly recognized as general 52

property. It would be preposterous to labor too much the points involved—the more so as every now and then the practice is “avenged” (if we like!) by some awkwardness of accent or clumsiness of declamation which results by forcing the older phrase into a newer textual association. Such things are very different from the barefaced claim Bononcini once made to having composed a certain work which, as it transpired, had been written by a minor musician living in Vienna. Then too, in the phrase of W. McNaught, “Handel did not borrow the thoughts of others; he rescued them.” And it must never be forgotten that men like Bach and Handel faced deadlines unthinkable to any musician of today!

Following “Judas Maccabaeus” Handel’s fortunes rose once more and after his conflicts with ill-will and intrigue he was the incontestable victor. The consequence, far from rest and relaxation, was another stream of great works not all of them, unfortunately, having become as familiar to posterity as they undoubtedly deserve to be. Oratorios like “Alexander Balus”, “Susanna”, “Joshua”, “Solomon” and “Jephtha”, treasurable as they are, are known to few, probably because they are eclipsed by the gigantic shadows cast by “Messiah”, “Judas Maccabaeus” or “Israel in Egypt.” In 1749 he had written “Theodora”, which failed. Its ill luck does not seem to have moved him to more than a kind of “wise-crack” to the effect that “the Jews would not come to it because the story was Christian and the ladies because it was virtuous.” In the same year he composed a scene from Tobias Smollet’s “Alceste”, parts of which he later used in his “Choice of Hercules”.

For the signing of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, the King demanded a showy festival, little as there was to celebrate in the termination of a war both unpopular and remote. Handel was commissioned to compose 53 music for an ostentatious show to culminate in a grand display of fireworks in Green Park, where a vast and grotesque wooden building, surmounted by unsightly allegorical figures, had been set up. Twelve thousand people foregathered for a rehearsal of Handel’s music, in Vauxhall Gardens, and traffic as a result, was desperately tangled. At the actual celebration everything went awry, the fireworks fizzled and to provide a humiliating climax the edifice in Green Park caught fire. Newman Flower tells in a colorful account of the event that Handel had “a magnificent band worthy of the occasion ... forty trumpets, twenty horns, sixteen hautboys, sixteen bassoons, eight pair of kettledrums; for the first time he introduced that forgotten instrument, the serpent into his score, but took it out again.... He had for that night as fine a band as he ever conducted.”

Handel’s contribution, indeed, was the one indisputable success of the occasion. He gave the bright and sonorous “Fireworks Music” (a kind of companion piece to the “Water Music”) the month after the Green Park fiasco for the Foundling Hospital, or “The Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children.” The concert brought Handel the Governorship of the institution.

The Foundling Asylum was a pride and pleasure to Handel in his declining years. He presented it with a new organ, opened it himself with a performance of “Messiah” on May 1, 1750, when countless persons of distinction had to be turned away since the Asylum chapel accommodated only 1,000. From that time on the master saw to it that the oratorio was sung there every year and that the proceeds, always considerable, were donated to the Hospital. Not to be behind his great associate, the artist, Hogarth, who subsequently shared with Handel the governorship, donated a portrait he had painted to the Hospital, raffled it off and gave the proceeds to the 54 Asylum.

The composer went one last time to Halle and arrived in Germany, Rolland points out, just at the time his greatest contemporary, Bach, died in Leipzig. His own health was deteriorating, though his mind remained clear and his brain active. To be sure his sight had begun to trouble him. Yet when Thomas Morell, in January, 1751, gave him a libretto, “Jephtha”, he set to work composing it at once. He who had turned out the sublimities of “Messiah” in four weeks and the martial grandeurs of “Judas Maccabaeus” in even less had, however, to break off for ten days after the opening *Largo* of the chorus “How dark, O Lord, are Thy ways.” And he painfully set down on the manuscript: “I reached here on Wednesday, February 13, had to discontinue on account of the sight of my left eye.” On his 66th birthday (February 23) he wrote “Feel a little better. Resumed work” and set the words “Grief follows joy as night the day.” Then he stopped for four months and did not complete the whole score till the end of August, 1751. The last four numbers had taken him more time than he usually spent on an entire oratorio. By that time he had gone completely blind.

Two years later he regained control of himself, played the organ at twelve oratorio productions he gave annually in Lent. He was, even, with the assistance of his pupil and secretary, John Christopher Smith, son of an old Halle school friend, to compose some more music and to remodel his old Italian oratorio, “The Triumph of Time and Truth.” He had submitted to the care of a notorious quack, the “ophthalmiater” Chevalier John Taylor, who then enjoyed an extensive vogue among distinguished patients and who boasted that he had seen, on his travels, “a vast variety of singular animals, such as dromedaries, camels, etc., and particularly at Leipsick, where a celebrated master of musick (Bach) already arrived to his 88th year (sic!) received his sight by my hands.” 55 In any case, the different physicians hid nothing from their patient. His case was hopeless, he was afflicted with “gutta serena”. With his sight his best source of inspiration was gone.

“This man”, said Romain Rolland, “who was neither an intellectual nor a mystic, one who loved above all things light and nature, beautiful pictures and the spectacular view of things, who lived more through his eyes than most of the German musicians, was engulfed in deepest night. From 1752 to 1759, he was overtaken by the semi-consciousness which precedes death.” He had made his will in 1750 and at different times in the next nine years he added codicils to it. On April 6, 1759, he played the organ a last time at a “Messiah” performance, broke down in the middle of a number, recovered and improvised, it was said, with his old-time magnificence. Then he was brought home and they put him to bed.

Handel expressed a desire to be buried in Westminster Abbey; and he said: “I want to die on Good Friday in the hope of rejoining the good God, my sweet Lord and Saviour, on the day of His Resurrection.” On Saturday, April 14, 1759, the *Whitehall Evening Post*, announced: “This morning, a little before eight o’clock, died the deservedly celebrated George Frederick Handell Esq.” And a week later: “Last night about eight o’clock, the remains of the

late great Mr. Handel were deposited at the foot of the Duke of Argyll's Monument in Westminster Abbey; and though he had mentioned being privately interr'd, yet from the Respect due to so celebrated a Man, the Bishop, Prebends, and the whole Choir attended to pay the last Honours due to his Memory; the Bishop himself performed the Service. A Monument is also to be erected for him, which there is no doubt but his Works will even outlive. There was almost the greatest Concourse of People of all Ranks ever seen upon such, or indeed upon any other occasion." Nevertheless, others have testified that Handel was not "buried midst a great concourse of people." Ironically enough, the music performed at his obsequies was "Dr. Croft's Funeral Anthem." 56

In the Poets' Corner a rather mediocre monument, by L. F. Roubiliac, was later unveiled to his memory "under the patronage and in the presence of His Most Gracious Majesty, George III." But the lordly George Frideric Handel might have been prouder of the monument the dying Beethoven reared to his greatness when, pointing to Arnold's Handelian edition by his bed, he exclaimed: "There lies the Truth!" 57

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