

Programme of Music, P.U.S. Summer Term, 1924.  
GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL (1685–1759).  
BY CEDRIC H. GLOVER.

(1) "*The Harmonious Blacksmith*": Those who possess gramophones should study this work with the aid of Mrs. Gordon Woodhouse's harpsichord record (H.M.V.D. 645): for others an adaptation for pianoforte is provided. The origin of the air and its mysterious title are fully discussed in the standard authorities and need not be recapitulated here. Suffice it to say that the popular story of the blacksmith of Edgware was invented long after the composer's death and is now held to be as apocryphal as that connected with the C sharp minor sonata of Beethoven. These variations form the last movement of the Fifth suite of a collection styled "*Suites de Pièces pour le Clavecin*," published in 1720 and composed by Handel for the daughters of the Prince of Wales, to whom at the time he was giving instruction.

The tune is a very beautiful one; its grave dignity and austere charm are typical of the composer at his best. The variations, originally called by the old English term "Doubles," are of the decorative variety, and the main theme is never far distant. It is difficult to believe that they were written in the same century as Bach's great "Goldberg" variations, which are just as modern in feeling as Handel's are archaic. Note that the first four variations go in pairs, the characteristic semiquaver and triplet figures appearing first in the treble and then in the bass; both

[p 344]

rhythmic devices find a place in this order in most sets of variations written about this time (cf. Corelli's "*La Folia*"), it being so arranged that each variation should surpass its predecessor in rhythmic speed.

(2) *Prelude, Air and Variations*: This is the first of three "Lessons" for harpsichord. The term "Lesson" had by Handel's day lost any educational significance, and was used loosely for the separate movements, which together formed a "Suite" (cf. the modern use of "Etude"). In this case Handel has deviated from the customary chain of dance movements, which comprised the suite of his day. The prelude is typical harpsichord music, the arpeggios being written for an instrument, which was not capable of sustained tone; such repetitions as occur in bars 9-10, 15-18 lose their effect if played on an instrument without a double manual or stops to vary the tone. The first four bars of the succeeding Allegro furnish a further instance (cf. Bach's "*Italian Concerto*"); the first two bars should be played *forte* and the following two *piano* to obtain the effect intended; note further instances in bars 5-8, 9-12, 13-14 and 15-16. Bars 5-7 are a good example of one of Handel's commonest mannerisms—the repetition in sequence of the same figure up or down the scale. The structure of the movement is very simple and held together by the little semiquaver figure, which is bandied about from treble to bass and vice versa; emotional content there is none, the music is purely decorative, like a pretty wallpaper.

The Air and Variations follow closely on the lines of "*The Harmonious Blacksmith*" variations, with which they should be compared. The air is a very beautiful tune, rhythmically interesting and with a fine climax in the penultimate bar. It won the admiration of Brahms to such an extent that he wrote a fine set of variations himself on this theme (op. 24) and a comparison between the two sets affords an instructive example of the difference between the old and the new method of writing variations. Brahms' set represent a number of moods

suggested by the theme, and are therefore purely subjective and not necessarily variants of the actual theme at all, though harmonically based upon it; they belong to the same class as the variations which Beethoven wrote at the end of his life or the Bach "Goldberg" variations.

Handel's variations on the other hand

[p 345]

are just pretty decorative patterns weaved about the theme.

(3) *Violin Sonata in F*: Handel was one of the most proficient harpsichord players of the age; he was also a violinist of some ability and wrote a number of sonatas for the instrument with figured bass, which were published as opus 1 in 1732. In the Handel sonatas the harpsichord part is merely an accompaniment, constructed at will by the player from the figuring supplied by the composer. The Bach violin sonatas on the other hand contain an independent part for the keyed instrument, equal in importance to that written for its companion. Bach's sonatas therefore anticipate the duet sonatas of Mozart and Beethoven, whereas those of Handel derive directly from the old Italian sonatas of the Corelli school. Though Handel conformed to the stereotyped conventions of his model with respect to the character of each movement and its position in the sonata, he naturally achieved a far greater fluency of expression.

The first movement of the sonata under discussion is suave and mellifluous; there are none of those peculiarities of construction associated with the sonata of Haydn's day and subsequently incorporated in the connotation of the word itself. There are therefore no formal subjects, and the movement is held together by the first phrase of four bars, which recurs, slightly elaborated in bar 18 and again at bar 47. The second movement is usually in contrapuntal style, dignified and austere; in this case, Handel has given us a light-hearted opening, following by a more serious middle section (e.g. bars 18-21), which later passes back into the first mood with just a hint of solemnity in bars 36-70. There is a trace of conventionality about the violin figure in bar 9 seq. and elsewhere with its upward sequence, but this movement shows more attempt at thematic development than the first, and great play is made with the interval of the diminished seventh in bars 16 and elsewhere (cf. also bar 6). The third movement is in true Italian style in the manner of Corelli; it is a beautiful piece of workmanship, but too polished and calculated to be deeply emotional in spite of a finely developed climax in the final bars; it is so constructed as to exhibit to the full the singing qualities of the solo instrument. The final

[p 346]

Giga is delightfully frivolous and reminiscent of those with which Corelli was wont to terminate his sonatas. The Giga is a dance of Italian origin, and probably owes its name to an old word for the violin (cf. German "Geige"); it is almost always in compound time and concluded the series of dance tunes which comprised a Suite. Note the ascending sequence in bars 1-3, and the descending one in bars 9-11, the effective break into simple time in bars 23 and 25 and the climax in bar 37.

(4) (a) "*He shall feed his flock*": this is one of the most famous arias in "The Messiah"; it is a beautiful and noble conception in spite of the clumsy arrangement of the words to the music, which is pastoral in character (cf. the Pastoral symphony in the same oratorio) and obviously suggested by and more suitable to the words of the first verse than of the second.

(b) "*Ombra ma fui*": this is a good example of Handel's secular arias; for some unexplained reason this song is popularly known as the "Largo" and as such has been subjected to frequent maltreatment at the hands of the adaptor. It is a good instance of the uniformity of Handel's style; whether the subject be secular or religious, Handel wrote the same kind of tunes and there is none of that distinction which we find so marked in Bach's sacred and secular cantatas. So detached has the tune of this aria become from its setting that it is a favourite piece with church organists, who are not normally prone to look to the opera house for their voluntaries. "Serse" (Xerxes), the otherwise forgotten opera in which this aria occurs, was one of the 39 Italian operas and was composed in the year 1738. The grace and dignity of the classical Italian style are nowhere better exemplified. Note the diatonic simplicity of the orchestral introduction, outlining the beautiful binary tune, which is to come, and the great expansion, which the first half of the tune (bars 1-9) undergoes in the aria proper (bars 15-38), whereas the second half (bars 10-14) is repeated intact with only slight modifications (bars 39-43) apart from a three bar coda to round it off.

(5) *Concerto grosso in D minor*: Handel composed twelve concertos for strings and the collection was published in 1739. His concertos belong to the same category as

[p 347]

those of the old Italian masters, Corelli and Vivaldi, and have close affinity with the Brandenburg concertos of Bach. These concertos were not intended as a vehicle for the display of virtuosity, as were the concertos of the later composers. Orchestration was in its infancy in the days of Handel, and the concerto grosso was the first attempt at purely orchestral music. In a concerto of this type a small group of efficient soloists ("concertanti"), string or wind players, was contrasted with the main body ("ripieni") of more or less inefficient string players, who were often brought up from menial tasks in the buttery or kitchen for the purpose. The "ripieni" were further supplemented by a harpsichord player, working from the figured bass, who replaced the modern conductor by keeping the orchestra together in addition to his proper function of filling in the harmony.

The "Overture" in this work is a broad, solid piece of music, dignified and serious in the Italian manner. Note the imitation between first and second violins in bars 1-4, first at the interval of a bar, subsequently of half a bar. The three soloists, in this case two violinists and a violoncellist, play with the orchestra throughout. The second movement, as usual, is fugal in character; the answer in bar seven is played by second violins and violas in unison, but the latter drop out in bar eight, presumably owing to the fact that they could not be trusted to play in the higher positions and the weakness of tone of the XVIIIth century second violin was probably less noticeable in fast passages than in slow. The violas are similarly strengthened by the violoncellos in bars 23-24. The whole movement bustles along in a perfect welter of counterpoint, and again there are no special passages for the soloists. The little epilogue in common time, with which this movement ends, in direct contrast with the mood of the remainder of the movement, is a common device of the composer and of the age. The slow movement is also true to type; the solo instruments hold the field in bars 10-13 and elsewhere. The cold formality of this movement and a lack of independence in the part writing make it perhaps less successful than the others; the ear too is beginning to long for the relief of a change of key, but the principle of key contrast between movements was

[p 348]

not yet systematically practised. The third movement affords very little respite from the solemnity of the rest; it is full of interesting contrapuntal devices, imitation and the like, but the mood is unchanged. The last movement is opened by the solo violins, the second imitating the first; both joining the main orchestra again when it enters in bar 5, but start off independently again (bar 16), only to resume with the orchestra in the next bar. There are constant alternations of this kind throughout the movement, sometimes the soloists play by themselves or together, sometimes with the orchestra. The parts allotted to the soloists differ in no essential from the rest of the movement, and no opportunities for technical display are offered them, the sole intention being to secure a variety in the balance of tone. This movement is eminently typical of the methods of the composer; it is moreover skilfully worked out and very effective in performance.

### **SYLLABUS.**

#### SET BOOKS:

- (1) Studies of the Great Composers, pp. 22-59, by Sir Hubert Parry (Routledge).
- (2) Musical Groundwork, pp. 31-38, by F. H. Shera (Milford, 3/6).
- (3) "The Master of the Musicians" (A story of Handel's day), by Mrs. Emma Marshall

(Seeley) is also recommended.

#### MUSIC:

- (1) "The Harmonious Blacksmith." Augener's Edition. 6d.
- (2) Prelude, Air and Variations: from "Three Lessons," Augener's Edition, No. 5095. 2/6.
- (3) Violin sonata in F: Augener's Edition, No. 7502. 3/-.
- (4) (a) "He shall feed his flock" (Messiah). 1/-.
- (b) "Ombra ma fui" (Serse). 1/6.

Both in Augener's Edition.

(5) Concerto Grosso in D minor: miniature score, Payne's 273, 1/6, or, arranged for pianoforte duet, Peters Edition, No. 2695A, 2/6.

All the above can be obtained from or through Messrs. Augener Ltd., 63 Conduit Street, London, W.

Children studying the pianoforte can learn either (1) or (2). Violinists of quite moderate ability can attempt (3). The Aria in (4) b is possibly suitable for class or solo singing.

### **GRAMOPHONE RECORDS.**

"The Harmonious Blacksmith" (harpsichord) H.M.V.D. 645. 6/6

"He shall feed his flock."} H.M.V. D.B. 506. 8/6.

"Ombra ma fui."}

Water Music: Columbia L.1437 and L.1438. Each 7/6.