

*George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)*

BY MARGARET RUSSELL

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries music was largely promoted by the churches, the nobility and the opera houses. The performance of music was in a way utilitarian. For the church, composers wrote music for different services as well as cantatas ('pieces to be sung', usually for mixed voices) and anthems for Feast Days and special occasions. With the aristocracy music was for genuine enjoyment at home, or a status symbol which fitted in with the fashionable importance of luxury and 'culture'. At any rate they could afford to keep a resident band of musicians with a *Kapellmeister*, who might often compose the music as well, to direct them. There were, inevitably, patrons and patrons; some treated their employees with dignity and respect but many tended to use them as serfs. Mozart, for instance, in one of his *Kapellmeister* jobs was given his meals below-stairs with the domestic staff.

Handel's father, having broken with the long-standing family tradition of being coppersmiths to become a court physician, knew all about the dangers of this servility.

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Perhaps for this reason he was absolutely against music as a career for his only son. In his early childhood little George's musical talent was so strong that opposition had to be brooked by stealth. He found, in the attic, an old harpsichord or spinet (both forerunners of the piano, which had not yet been invented) and used to creep up and play it at dead of night when he hoped the family were all asleep. However, in fairness it must be said that, from the age of eight, for four years, Handel was allowed to have lessons from Zachau, organist of the Liebfrauen Church in Halle. He took organ, harpsichord, violin, oboe (his favourite instrument) and composition in his stride, at the same time doing well at the local grammar school. This prodigious talent qualified him to go and continue his studies in Berlin when he was twelve years old and already known as an organist and composer. But he did not stay long. The Elector, vastly impressed by the lad's playing, offered to pay for further musical studies in Italy, but father Handel would not hear of it and when he died the following year, George returned to school in Halle. He went on composing and playing, got a job as organist at the Reformed Church and actually tried for a year to study Law at the University. But he knew that music must be his profession and, at eighteen, left his family and all his commitments in Halle and set out to acquire the necessary skills.

During the next four years, as a violinist in the opera orchestra in Hamburg Handel learnt a great deal about the techniques of composing, performing and producing opera. He composed several himself and one was publicly performed. Three years in Italy, the home of opera, completed his apprenticeship and in 1710 he returned to Germany to become *Kapellmeister* to the Elector of Hanover. After only six months he was given a year's leave of absence and came to London for the first time. He liked it so much that next time he was granted leave of absence he came again, overstayed his leave and was dismissed from Hanover. He settled down happily in London for good but a tricky situation arose when the Elector, whose disfavour he had incurred, eventually became King George the First of England. The story goes that the King was so enchanted with the 'Water Music', which Handel wrote for a royal trip on the Thames, that he forgave all. At any rate Handel was accepted at Court, as he was with affection and enthusiasm in many houses of the aristocracy of lesser mortals.

Musical taste in England at this time had sunk to a low ebb. Italian opera was all the rage and itself had somehow gone wrong. It had begun with the simple dramatisation of stories, moods and situations by actors who sang and were accompanied by at first just a few instruments and eventually a whole orchestra. Oratorios had the same origins, but with scriptural themes, and performed as part of a service in the chapel, or 'Oratorio'. As time went on opera developed more and more action and movement, while there was less and less in oratorio, until the latter became virtually a concert piece with no costume or staging, and all the drama was contained in the words and music. By the eighteenth century the people responsible for all the action and movement in opera, namely the singers, had become so important that they were the most popular part of the entertainment. Rather like the 'pop' groups of our own day, they caused swooning and hysteria, and they were so much in demand that part of Handel's job in directing an opera

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house was to go and import the most famous ones direct from Italy. Operas came to be written for them to make a special display of their voices with the 'licence' to make any song into an orgy of scales, runs and trills. They engaged in fiendish professional jealousy, exercised tyranny over the conductor (Handel once brought a famous soprano to heel by holding her out of an upper-floor window and threatening to let go if she didn't behave herself) and provoked such intrigue and scandal in the industry that Handel was bankrupt several times. Nevertheless he continued for thirty years to give the London public what they wanted, composing over forty operas and being involved variously in management, production and direction. Meanwhile he composed orchestral works such as 'The Water Music' and the 'Firework Music' (to celebrate the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle), anthems for royal weddings, coronations, birthdays and funerals, some of the *Concerti Grossi*, one organ concerto and several oratorios (*Saul and Israel in Egypt*).

When the opera fad had more or less spent itself Handel was bankrupt for the third and last time. He realised he must alter his sights, and, to our lasting enrichment, turned wholeheartedly towards oratorio. In a short twenty-three days during this period of adversity he wrote 'Messiah', our most beloved oratorio, and nowadays in this country performed more often than any other work in the world. When it was finished Handel himself said, 'I think I did see all Heaven before me, even the great God himself'.

With the coming of autumn professional singers can be heard saying to each other, 'How many Messiahs have *you* got this season?', and the answer may be, 'thirty-six'. Isobel Baillie could be found singing thirty performances in as many days. It is a work which people love to sing, from famous soloists with professional choirs or up-and-coming soloists whose fees may be within the scope of provincial choral societies who engage them, to 'excerpts' given by the local soprano or tenor or bass, accompanied on the local church organ or the dreadful village hall piano. It is a perennial *event*, all over the country. Dublin was the first city to hear it publicly performed and hailed it with enthusiastic demands for a repeat. The first performance in London was a flop but the English very soon took it to their hearts and the 'Hallelujah Chorus' has become almost part of our religion. When George the Second first heard it (at Covent Garden in 1743) he rose to his feet and all the audience with him; and ever since then it has been the tradition for the audience to stand when it comes to the 'Hallelujah'.

I think a vocal score is a 'must' for any household where music is important. It will have life-long use. It is published in a fine edition by Watkins Shaw, with Bible references for the text of each section (publishers: Messrs. Novello and Sons, Soho Square, London, W.1, price 17/6).

There was a personal dignity and nobility in Handel which is evident in a great deal of his music. He was also a master of melody and he did enrich the music of Italian opera. The German composer Gluck (1740–1787) once told him, 'You have taken too much trouble over your opera. Here in England that is a waste of time. What the English want is something they can beat time to'. Although most of the operas were soon forgotten some of the melodies from them are imperishable, e.g. 'Art thou troubled?' from *Rodelinda*, 'Come to me, soothing Sleep', from *Ottone*. Many children will have sung

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'Where'er you walk', sometime at school, probably without knowing that it came from *Semele*. 'Ombra mai fu', still sung in the original Italian (in the opera *Xerxes* it was homage of the Prince of Persia to a plane tree under whose shade he was sleeping off a carousal), has become even better known as 'Handel's Largo' when it is arranged for piano or organ or a combination of various other instruments.

Writing anthems was a continual part of Handel's life. For the accession of George II to the throne he wrote no less than four, including *Zadok the Priest* which is now performed frequently as a concert piece. The 'Chandos Anthems' were written to celebrate his patron, the immensely rich Duke of Chandos who had built himself a palace, 'Canons', near Edgware, complete with private chapel. For three years from 1716 Handel was director of the Duke's music—while still remaining music teacher to the King's grandchildren.

Some of the *Concerti Grossi*, op. 3 (for flutes, oboes, bassoons and strings) were written at 'Canons'; others at Hanover and one for the marriage of the Princess Royal in 1733. The *Concerto Grosso* was simply a series of 'movements' with one group of instruments given special prominence, over the 'Tutti' or whole orchestra. In Handel's Organ Concertos, and the viola and the oboe concerto, as with modern concertos generally, prominence is given to just one instrument. Various sonatas for flute, violin or oboe with keyboard instrument and the Harpsichord Suites complete Handel's instrumental music. I have suggested the recording with No. 5 because this one includes the Air and Variations so well known as 'The Harmonious Blacksmith'. Incidentally, although the harpsichord was the forerunner of the piano in that it was a stringed instrument with a keyboard for operating the sound, the limits of this mechanism required a special kind of music to be written for it. Whereas with the piano, when you press a key down it causes a little hammer to hit the strings (and fall away immediately) so that the harder you hit, the louder the note, with the harpsichord the strings are plucked by a little quill or spike of leather; this means that it doesn't make much difference to the tone whether you press the key hard or lightly. There are two (or more) strings for each note on the harpsichord and variation in tone was achieved mainly by adding a device which caused the quill to pluck only one of the strings when less sound was required—the same mechanism as the 'soft pedal' on the piano. The 'loud pedal' on the piano operates a row of felt 'dampers' which lie along the strings and stop the vibration once they have been hit. When the pedal is pressed down it raises the dampers so that vibration can continue. This would have been useless on a harpsichord so that, to get emphasis and prolong notes, various trills and twiddles were written into the music.

Handel's oratorio period restored dignity to English music and brought capitulation from his old opera antagonists. Wherever he played it was to packed houses. He lived simply and, while he consorted much with the nobility, he also gave many benefit concerts for deserving charities. Even when he was totally blind at 68, he continued to play his organ concertos in public and 'conduct' his oratorios from the organ. Unlike his great contemporary, J. S. Bach, who was born in the same year, in the same part of North Germany (they never met) and who died relatively unsung. [sic] Handel was buried with all  
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due honours in Westminster Abbey.

As nearly every publisher in the world publishes Handel's music, it is convenient—and advisable—to deal with a comprehensive firm of collectors. Recommended is J. B. Cramer and Co. Ltd., 99 St. Martin's Lane, London, W.C.2, telegraphic address: 'Fortissimo', London. There one can obtain, for instance, some very good arrangements of Handel's music for piano, graded roughly according to Associated Board standards, e.g. 'The First Book of Handel', 'The Second Book . . .', etc., and in fact any vocal or instrumental music required.

Portraits and busts of Handel exist all over the country, many in private collections, but others may be seen in the Bodleian Library and the Music School collection in Oxford, the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, the National Portrait Gallery in London and presumably when they are open to the public, the State Apartments at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle.

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Programme Notes

*Composers*

September 1969: Handel

January 1970: Tchaikovsky

April 1970; [sic] Purcell

*Artists*

September 1969: Pieter de Hooch

January 1970: Fra Angelico

April 1970: Constable

*Shakespeare Plays*

Forms II and III: 'Merchant of Venice', 'King John', 'Midsummer Night's Dream'.

Form IV: 'Merchant of Venice', 'King John', 'Coriolanus'.

Form V: 'Antony and Cleopatra', 'King John', 'Coriolanus'.