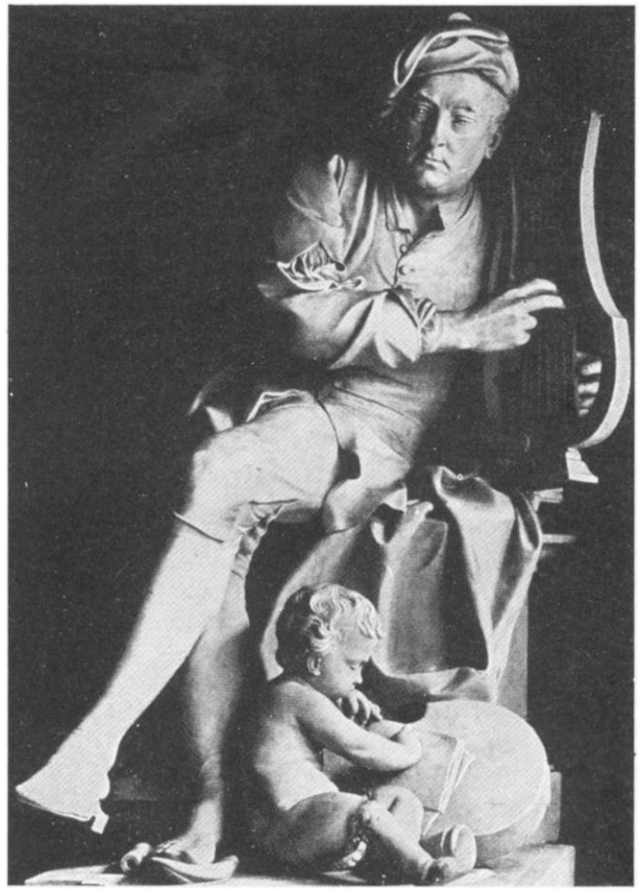
George Frideric Handel

born 23 February 1685

★ 300th anniversary issue ★



Handel: 300 years on

Paul Henry Lang

1985 marks the tercentenary of the birth of three great composers, a stellar event, rarer than the reappearances of Halley's comet. It is proper that we should honour the memory of great men, especially when their art is living and continually enriches us, but such occasions are valuable for other reasons too. We can review the life and works of our artistic benefactors, see how their pictures gradually emerge as we place the new films in the developing tray, note the changed views and appreciations, and eliminate misconceptions and spurious legends. Thus we may arrive at a better understanding of Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel and Domenico Scarlatti.

It is a facile habit of popular (and not so popular) musicography to bracket certain musicians in pairs: Palestrina – Lassus, Bach – Handel, Haydn – Mozart, Bruckner – Mahler, and so forth, a habit that plays havoc with historical and stylistic understanding and leads to mistaken comparisons. The Bach – Handel hyphenation, which we owe to the Germans' claim to Handel as their very own national composer, is one of the most ill-founded. Handel lived for almost half a century, that is, all his mature life, in England, became a naturalized British subject by Act of Parliament, composed all his important works in and for England, acknowledged his allegiance to his chosen homeland *expressis verbis*, and is buried among England's great in Westminster Abbey. Bach was a devoted Lutheran church composer, while Handel never composed a single piece for the Lutheran service. Yet as recently as a couple of decades ago a prominent German biographer called the two musicians 'Bach und Händel, unsere Grossmeister, die Sänger Christi'. Yes, Bach 'sang' of Christ, all his life, but where did Handel? In his mature works only twice, in *Messiah* and *Theodora*; all his other large-scale vocal works are strictly limited to the Old Testament or to the legends of antiquity. There is little sense in linking Bach with Handel and then declaring one superior to the other, which is usually the fate of one of the bracketed composers – no-one expects an apple tree to bear cherries. To belittle Handel's stature in Bach's company is to mislead the readers, as did many of the historians and critics after Albert Schweitzer. Handel was seen as 'the other' – though lesser – giant of the Baroque. Surely our appreciation of each of these coryphaei will increase if we see them not as rivals but as two branches of a mighty oak; they complement each other and illuminate the entire Baroque.

We find Handel at 18 as cathedral organist in his native Halle, having received a thorough training in the Protestant church musician's métier from Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, one of the ablest German musicians at the turn of the century. But the young man chafed within the restrictive boundaries of his profession; he wanted something else, the theatre, for which he felt he was born. Suddenly he decided on a risk unheard of in those days: he resigned from the coveted position of cathedral organist in order to move to Hamburg, the site of the most important opera house in Germany. As was always the pattern in his life, in no time he reached the top. First an anonymous fiddler in the orchestra, he soon moved to the conductor's harpsichord, and then produced his first opera, *Almira*.

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The Hamburg days were full of opportunities. There was Johann Mattheson, though only a few years older than the newcomer, an experienced opera hand and a highly cultivated man of the world, from whom Handel learnt a great deal. Even more influential was the acquaintance with Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739), the leading German opera composer of the age.

Still, Handel once more abandoned a promising future. Realizing that a sojourn in Italy was essential to an opera composer, one day he gathered his belongings, his scores – and some of Keiser's – and set out for Italy where he stayed for almost four years. He was a total stranger when he arrived there, but within a year he was again at the top, hobnobbing with princes and cardinals, and after the great success of his opera *Agrippina* in Venice (1709) a career was open to him that would have put the leading composers of Italy in the shade. But no: once more he decided to jettison everything and press on.

Why Handel left Italy when the doors of all its opera houses were open to him is not clear, but (at least in my opinion) two factors seem to account for it. Despite the genuine welcome by the Italians, he may have realized, as later did Johann Christian Bach, the great cantor's youngest son, who became a Catholic and cathedral organist in Milan, that eventually such a conversion, for which he was temperamentally unsuited, would become almost inevitable. On the other hand, he was not willing to accept the lowly social and artistic estate of a German artisan, and England must have appeared to him, from reports he heard from Mattheson and others, as a country where he could achieve his ambitions.

Mattheson, among his other occupations – singer, composer, writer on music – was counsellor at the British diplomatic mission in Hamburg, thoroughly familiar with English history, letters and socio-cultural conditions. Independence, social, economic and artistic, was always of prime importance to Handel, who undoubtedly formed an idea of the kind of life possible in England, then the most advanced nation in Europe. So, after a brief stint at the court in Hanover he went on an extended leave of absence to verify the facts *in situ*. After his return to Hanover his mind was made up, and wangling another leave in 1712 he went to London with the intention of settling down there. He obviously did not envisage a return to Germany; whether he foresaw that George, Elector of Hanover, would become King of England, or whether (as the traditional view has it) the confrontation in London was unfortunate as he had ignored the terms of the leave he had been granted, is uncertain; but the King and his perhaps truant musician were quickly on good terms.

Now we again witness Handel's uncanny ability to make his way up. Even on his first visit, and before he mastered the English language, he found an entry to the best literary and social circles and to Queen Anne's court – never again would he accept a subordinate position. Now he was welcomed by the aristocracy, notably in the circle around Lord Burlington, and he became the music master of the daughters of George II. They were the only pupils he ever accepted, but he had genuine admiration for Princess Anne's considerable musical talents, working out with the utmost care a course of instruction in composition for her; they became warm friends.

This was the time of the first great expansion of the British Empire, and Britons could scarcely fail to see themselves as divinely favoured. At the festive gatherings in St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey for important celebrations of political and dynastic events, Nonconformists and Jews joined the Established Church in honouring King and country. All were delighted with Handel's robust ceremonial music, royal and popular at the same time, exuding pomp, power, dynastic loyalty, and an unshakable trust and pride in English institutions. This spirit suited Handel, himself a conqueror, and his music expressed it faithfully, notably in the *Te Deum* settings, the coronation anthems, and the anthem-like choruses in his oratorios. The coronation anthems, composed for George II, themselves became an institution; every British monarch since that time has been crowned to their strains. When, from Chrysander onwards, German Handelians have made the mistake of bracketing Handel with Bach as 'our great German Lutheran master', they have failed to realize that this is no longer German music, that it announces a new profession of faith and a different national allegiance.

Handel immediately entered the free enterprise system, well developed in England but as yet little known in the arts on the Continent; Mozart still paid a high price for attempting freelance independence. He became his own impresario, renting theatres, engaging opera troupes, advertising in the newspapers, composing operas and grand ceremonial music, and conducting the performances himself. We can count on our fingers the works of Bach published in his lifetime, while Handel's works, at least in the form of 'favourite airs' from the operas and oratorios, were not only printed but pirated and counterfeited. But the perpetrator could not always get away with his booty. Handel would not suffer competition, and when he got wind of an unauthorized edition he simply sat down and in a few days there appeared in the newspapers an advertisement such as 'Mr Handel announces a completely revised edition, corrected and augmented with a number of new pieces', and the pirate was left high and dry. At times he was short of working capital (though never 'bankrupt' as romantic biographers would have it), but he usually managed to extricate himself and come back triumphantly with new operas that annihilated the competition. His will to conquer and succeed was so strong that, even after he suffered a severe stroke, he only needed a few months' rest and, like Antaeus, he was back to dominate London's musical life as before.

Handel remained a bachelor all his life. It may well be that the composer–impresario–businessman, always engaged and domineering, simply did not have time for courting or domesticity. In contrast to Bach's modest circumstances, Handel lived like an upper-middle-class

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gentleman. He had a good eye for art, and loved to purchase paintings. He also had a good business sense: he had an account with the Bank of England and played the stock market with success. No wonder that, unlike his great contemporary, he died a relatively wealthy man. Both Bach and Handel were tight-lipped about their private lives, and neither cared to communicate his inner thoughts in letters (which are usually among the best biographical sources), nor did either have a confidant to whom he could open his heart; so it is difficult to shed light on their character and personality from such first-hand sources. It is also curious thet neither expressed his views on composition or music in general.

Before proceeding to a brief discussion of Handel's works, we must first deal with a dilemma that still causes misgivings and even censure: Handel's 'borrowings'. Throughout musical history composers have often fallen back on materials either from their own earlier works or those of other composers. This proclivity reached its height in the Renaissance; most of the many great masses of Palestrina and Lassus, to quote a significant example, are built on chansons and motets, not only on excerpts but entire compositions, which were then elaborated with the highest artistry and subtle, complicated technique. Replenishing new works with previously composed music continued in the Baroque, and the incipits of sonata-form works in the Classic era still came mostly from the public domain. At first sight nothing seems more absurd, and less in keeping with any notion of creativity; but what mattered to these musicians was not 'originality' of invention, the supreme creed of the Romantics, but what happens to the borrowed material. All the originality and invention went into the elaboration. Indeed, today we enjoy the palingenesis as if it were a totally new composition. When listening to the 'Crucifixus' of Bach's B minor Mass, which comes directly from one of his cantatas, or 'For unto us a child is born' in *Messiah*, a reworking of one of Handel's Italian love duets, our enjoyment is in no way disturbed by our knowledge that these magnificent pieces saw service in earlier and quite different compositions. Modern German musicology, our main source of terminology before we got our own musicological sea legs, used the terms 'parody' and *contrafactum* for what in English we simply dub 'borrowings'. All these terms are unfortunate because of the perjorative flavour (*contrafactum* literally means something counterfeited), but since they are acclimatized ('Palestrina's parody masses') in the musicological vocabulary, it is convenient to accept them. When in the 19th century the extent of Handel's borrowings from other composers began to become known, there was great indignation, and he was denounced, even called a plagiarist. His critics were unaware that such borrowings were standard practice in pre-Romantic times; nor did they know of Bach's numerous borrowings.

Obviously, Bach or Handel could compose a new aria almost as fast as it takes to copy an old one. But if a suitable piece was readily available they might not bother. It is important for us to realize that borrowing does not signal lack of invention, fatigue or laziness, and certainly not lack of moral integrity, but rather a concept no longer congenial to us, namely that a musical composition is not enshrined forever but can be the starting-point – or filler – for another one.

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When Handel arrived in England, though young, he was already a master of the operatic métier. The aristocracy, knowledgeable in the ways and customs of other cultures because of their customary grand tours of Europe, wanted to import opera for their entertainment, and indeed the Royal Academy of Music, which they founded as a stock company, was the property of the ruling class. But the wider English public looked upon opera with misgivings, seeing in it a creation of those idolatrous and irresponsible Italians and possibly tainted with popery. The literary world, whose members came from the middle class, was unsympathetic towards the genre that dominated all Europe; the English literary dictator, Dr Johnson, flatly declared the Italian opera in London 'an exotic and irrational entertainment'. This opposition to opera by the general public was not merely a xenophobic quirk in the English character; no culture possessing a well-developed and highly popular theatre takes kindly to opera. The English liked songs and dances as incidental elements in their plays, but when it came to what was called 'all-sung' theatre, they balked. It was the same in Spain with its fantastic production of plays, and originally in France too where Boileau demurred, declaring music 'incapable of narration'; it was an Italian, Lully, who single-handedly established opera in France and ran it with dictatorial powers until it took hold.

Baroque opera was until recently held in disdain, and ignorance of the works was the rule everywhere. But to dismiss *opera seria* as dead and buried is patently a sign of inability or unwillingness to see beyond the antiquated clichés and conventions. Accustomed as we are to the more or less through-composed opera, the Baroque aria opera does seem alien. There were many arias, often rather isolated, and the opera could degenerate into a vocal concert in costume. When the librettist could not extricate himself from the often impossible imbroglios, he turned to the greatly admired theatre machines which lowered to the stage a chariot from which dismounted a god to take over from fate the disposition of the dénouement (hence *deus ex machina*). This, the *lieto fine* or happy ending, may destroy the true drama for the modern listener, to whom a logical ending is an immanent necessity for the drama, and tragedy is negated if robbed of its inevitability. The public in the Baroque era demanded not true aesthetic satisfaction in that sense, but entertainment, and it wanted its moral sense gratified; good must conquer evil, the sympathetic hero must triumph, the lovers must unite, the conspirators must be punished.

The *lieto fine* became almost mandatory both in opera and in oratorio. We see this even in the excellent libretto of Handel's *Semele*. As the work draws towards the inevitable catastrophe, Semele is consumed by the fire of Jove's

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radiance; but a sort of coda was tacked on, a jubilant celebration of Bacchus, the fruit of Semele's dalliance with Jove (though Bacchus is nowhere hinted at in the drama itself). Though this operatic dramaturgy was ridiculed by some of its contemporaries (Marcello's satire, *Il teatro alla moda*, comes to mind), on the whole the Italians did not mind such short-comings and even gloried in the castrato's unnatural art, so long as the singing was good. Handel was basically a conservative, an 'organization man', who did not question traditions and established customs. His librettos are often trying, thrice belaboured versions of old Venetian or Neapolitan opera texts arranged by the house librettists of the Royal Academy (or later other would-be dramatists), with the recitative shortened to avoid boring the English-speaking audiences, becoming more and more jumbled in the process. Yet within this framework he surpassed all others and brought Baroque opera to its zenith.

It surprises us to read that during Handel's stay in Hamburg Mattheson found him 'strong' in counterpoint but 'weak' in melody, although this is understandable given his training in the German cantor's art. The Italian experience released latent gifts and in *Agrippina* he already matched the best the Italians could offer. The first London opera, *Rinaldo*, though a quickly assembled pasticcio, has melodies among his greatest. From here onwards all he needed to learn was to endow his *dramatis personae* with growing intensity and to hone his skill in the use of tonal concordances for architectural organization. Handel was inexhaustible in the art of varying the return of the first section in the da capo arias, *bêtes noires* to Gluck and Wagner. Particularly attractive and expressive are the interruptions and substitutions; he will break into the aria with recitatives or ariosos, or even replace the da capo section with something entirely different, or suspend it and immediately enter the next number. In a word, we cannot speak of an invariable pattern, though the plain da capo form was by far the most frequent. There are very few ensembles (other than duets) in the operas, virtually all of them of extraordinary quality (more elaborate ones in the oratorios). They are not yet action pieces in the late 18th-century sense; but from here there is only a step leading to the concerted finale, one of the glories of the Classical opera and something that Gluck did not envisage in his reform. At that, in *Ariodante, Sosarme, Orlando* and *Imeneo* Handel is close to the later finale, though the brilliance of some of the closing sections is marred by the inappropriate happy ending.

Handel's highly developed dramatic instinct enabled him to take a worn, much used libretto which Rolli or some other hack patched up for him, and with his music give it the appearance of eternal, preordained necessity. His dramatic figures come to life through the intensity and psychological insight of the music, which goes far beyond what is written in the text. The variety of his operatic characters is great, ranging from the cruelty and egotism of Tamburlaine to the noble generosity of Julius Caesar. He depicts few ingênues; his women, like Racine's, are strong and most

G.F. Handel
The Roman Vespers
University College Cardiff Press

University College Cardiff Press is pleased to announce that their edition of Handel's *The Roman Vespers* (1707) is in a forward state of completion and will be ready for rental performance at the beginning of the forthcoming Handel Tercentenary 1985.

The Roman Vespers is without question the great musical discovery of our age. Previously, its existence had been only a matter of speculation, first proposed in 1959 by the late Dr James Hall. Since then, new sources have been discovered that show that Handel did indeed compose, for his Roman patron, Cardinal Colonna, two large Vespereal cycles for the Church of Santa Maria di Monte Santo in July 1707. Some of the individual sections of this great Vespers are still unpublished, and will first be issued in this new scholarly edition, while others, such as the well-known 'Nisi Dominus' and 'Laudate pueri' were always well known, though not in their proper context. Prepared under the supervision of H.C. Robbins Landon, *The Roman Vespers* has been edited by a team of Baroque specialists, all members of University College, Cardiff: Ian Cheverton, Robert Court (principal editor) and Robin Stowell.

First Performance: The world première in modern times is to take place with the Springfield Symphony in March 1985.

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of them know the secrets of life; even Dorinda, the simple shepherdess in *Orlando*, can become ardent. Alcina is a much more complicated character: a sorceress and a passionately sensuous woman, deadly to the men she captures, but also wildly in love with Ruggiero and crushed when her lover escapes and spurns her. This so-called magic or dance opera is really one of the truly tragic works; with incomparable artistic skill, Alcina's changing moods are etched with constantly rising dramatic power. Handel knew well the sorceresses and seductresses and always found the right music for them. *Orlando*, also a fairy opera, is one of Handel's most remarkable creations; it is often deliberately disjointed, even confused in style and texture as Orlando falls prey to his deranged fury.

But Handel was also master in creating the conscious and happy femininity that is released in love. There are eternal subjects, still alive without losing their attractiveness though changes in styles and mores leave permanent traces on their character and meaning. Such a one was Cleopatra. She never failed to inspire the bachelor Handel who lavished warm, erotic music on her. She is not profound, nor even very clever, yet she is a fascinating figure by virtue of her conviction that no man can withstand the attraction of her beauty. In the dullest of Handel's oratorios, *Alexander Balus*, it is interesting that when Cleopatra appears everything in this lacklustre work instantly changes; Handel's imagination catches fire, and from that point onwards she dominates the oratorio, though this time as a tragic and suffering woman. Another type, also from an oratorio, is Solomon's young and amorous queen whom Handel rewarded with the 'Nightingale Chorus', the apotheosis of making love *al fresco*, a ravishing, delicately erotic scene unparalleled in the annals of music.

The orchestral colours in these scenes are of the most exquisite nature, shimmering, insinuating and altogether new and individual for the age. Caesar himself, like Xerxes, is shrewdly characterized. Handel did not want to deface two monuments, so they remain great warriors, but by the subtle echoing and blending of line and colour the heroes are lovers touched by the light frost of autumn. Both these works are so delicately sophisticated that it takes a long time – as it did with *Così fan tutte* – before listeners come to understand and love them. For a full appreciation of Handel's genius it is absolutely necessary to know his operas, because he was essentially a man of the theatre. Furthermore, though this is seldom acknowledged, Handel, with some 40 operas to his credit, devoted twice as many years to this genre as he did to the oratorios.

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After composing his 40 Italian operas, Handel – for a variety of reasons – decided to try something else without abandoning dramatic composition. He noticed that the few works he had composed to English librettos had been successful; he also knew that the heroes and stories of the Old Testament were familiar to every Briton. The Bible played a paramount role in English life and in Handel's art, but it was a role quite different from the one it played in Bach's. The English, especially the middle classes under Puritan influence, were, ever since Cromwell, particularly attached to the Old Testament; in no other Christian country was the Old Testament so thoroughly domesticated as in England. What attracted Handel and his librettists to it was mainly the abundance of colourful heroes and vivid stories.

But there was another reason for this preference. The English people of all walks of life saw themselves as the new chosen people – Milton and others declared this to be so – and felt a kinship with the biblical heroes, seeing in their deeds and laws a reflection of their own institutions. (It is interesting to note that Handel's dramatic oratorios based on legends from classical antiquity were failures.) So when, after *Deidamia*, he closed the book on opera and devoted his undimmed energies to English oratorio, he must shrewdly have guessed that here was a solution: a way to seize the favour of the English public while using to the full his own gifts for musical drama. Since most of the oratorios were on biblical stories, this change of attitude has been regarded almost as a religious conversion from the 'frivolous' opera to the service of God. But Handel was not a composer of religious music; as we shall see, even the anthems and *Te Deum* settings are dynastic and ceremonial music. Indeed, whenever in the oratorios the heathen sing, there is a jolly, popular hue to the music; one almost feels that he mourned the victory of Christian asceticism over pagan *joie de vivre*. It was *Messiah* which for centuries influenced the general but mistaken view that Handel was quintessentially a Christian, religious composer, 'the composer in ordinary to the Protestant religion'. *Messiah* is not characteristic. It was the only oratorio composed on commission, for the Dublin association of charities, which specified a Christian religious work. It was composed with genuine devotion and dedication, and contains some of the most heartfelt expressions of faith. Yet it is untypical in that it has no *dramatis personae*, no narrative action, and with a few exceptions it is meditative or declarative. Even here, though, there are moments of grand ceremonial music like the Hallelujah Chorus, which resembles a coronation anthem.

As a composer of Italian opera, Handel was a master of the genre when he settled in England; but he had to re-learn everything when setting English texts because here was an entirely new spirit and atmosphere. He was now addressing the large middle classes instead of the sophisticated aristocrats of the Royal Academy. Little in his German heritage could have prepared him for the English oratorio, but there was a great deal in Blow's and Purcell's anthems, the many welcome songs, birthday odes and so forth – that is, English ceremonial music – all of which entered his bloodstream. It is remarkable with what ease Handel approached and absorbed cultural and stylistic elements. When in Italy he could match the Italians not only in opera but even in Catholic devotional music. In England he espied the English spirit as faithfully as those who were born on the island. He spoke with a German accent, but developed

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an affinity with English word and verse; numerous anecdotes about his lack of ability in the use of the English language have been used by German authors and patriots to prove that the Saxon never became an Anglo-Saxon. Interestingly, he used German sparingly; his correspondence with mainland colleagues was mostly in French. His development was rapid and he melded all impressions gained into a highly personal tone and style.

The English oratorio was Handel's own creation, and he achieved it single-handed. The Italian oratorio, often cited as direct ancestor of the English form, was really a substitute opera to be presented during Lent when theatres were closed. It was plainly a solo opera, albeit on a religious libretto taken from hagiography and the Bible. The chorus, the glory of the English oratorio, played a minor role; there were few of them, and they were brief. The arias were smallish and accompanied recitatives few, whereas in the English oratorio they frequently carried the most dramatic parts of the action. The orchestra, which Handel made an active participant in the drama, was simple and non-committal. There were many fine works among them; Handel knew them at first hand and profited by them, but the impressions gained were within the total Italian exposure and (with the possible exception of the works of Carissimi) not specifically connected with the concept of the English oratorio.

The apparatus used by Handel in the oratorios was the same as in his operas, but the proportions were larger and he composed some remarkable ensembles – up to quartets and even a quintet – of a kind that few if any Italians essayed in his time. The most important departure from the Italian oratorio was in the role of the chorus, of which Handel became the supreme master in post-Palestrina times to this very day. Actually, he revived the *choros* of the ancient Attic drama with all its categories: the dithyramb, the victory paean, the mourning- and wedding-songs, but he also created the action chorus, where the chorus itself becomes the protagonist. Such choruses appear quite naturally in the classical dramas (*Hercules* or *Semele*), but transferred to the biblical oratorios they introduced an entirely new dramatic element. Whenever the chorus 'acts', taking over from the solo voices, the aural proportions widen and emotions rise, at times to an almost violent pitch. These dramatic oratorios are theatre works without any religious significance despite the frequent, and at times illogical, splicing in of the praises of Jehovah; the public loved the ample, trumpeting Hallelujahs and other rousing choruses and Handel did not fail to respond.

In the oratorios Handel enjoyed much less constraint than in the rather rigidly organized *opera seria*. The castrato was the *primo uomo* in the Italian opera, but he naturally used English singers in the oratorios, and now turned his attention to the tenor voice – rare though not unknown in a heroic role in the operas – becoming responsible for its rise to the stature of *primo uomo*. The new freedom Handel found in the oratorios also enhanced his audacity of musical diction, his exuberance of fancy, and sharpened his powers of characterization in music. Notably his female characters emerge with great dignity and force. Nitocris, a woman of iron, sees that Belshazzar is ruining the realm, but although he is her son she unflinchingly takes the fateful decision to save the country from destruction at the cost of Belshazzar's life. Then there is the implacable Dejanira, Hercules's wife, both tragic and demented with jealousy. But Handel also knew how to characterize all shades of young women, the chaste and charming virgins like Iole in *Hercules* or Michal in *Saul*; all of them delightful and radiant but also strong in adversity, like Jephtha's daughter Iphis, and Theodora, deeply moving in the glory of martyrdom. It is extraordinary that despite the pedestrian texts Handel could make them convincing.

Among the male figures Saul is an almost Shakespearian character: violent, jealous, intractable and death-dealing. He is a mixture in greatness and sin, indecision and remorse, yet even in his fall he has heroic stature. Among the unsullied heroes are Samson, a simple giant; Joshua, who grows into a hero; and particularly Jephtha, the last a very complicated but resolute man whom Handel presents with such sympathetic warmth that he becomes deeply etched into our soul. His meeting with Iphis after his pledge of sacrifice is one of the great moments of humanity in crisis.

Solomon, perhaps the richest of the oratorios, a pageant oratorio, is essentially a eulogy of King and country, bold in harmony, exquisite in counterpoint and melody. It is miraculously both massive and pastoral. There is little drama in it except for the celebrated judgment of Solomon, which makes the true mother unforgettable, but wonderful music pours out from every page. *Susanna* might be called an intimate comic opera, a unique case among the oratorios. The characterizations are superb and witty, but the work is regrettably flawed by the tremendous choruses which have little relevance to the essentially serio-comic plot and atmosphere, and which makes the 'oratorio' very long. The only remedy is to cut several of them even though they are among the greatest examples of Handel's choral art. In its abbreviated – but rounded! – form *Susanna* would be delectable comic opera. In both *Theodora* and *Jephtha* Handel seems to have opened a new and final chapter in his creative life. He appears to contemplate the meaning of life and the hereafter, and there are some profound spiritual problems surrounding these works. These problems are hidden, difficult to explain, and we only feel them. Perhaps they are philosophical and religious, perhaps autobiographical. Local colour, even the action, and all details seem superfluous, only the soul speaks. We recall Cicero's beautiful words about the wisdom of old age, when the soul had fulfilled its service to passions and has become its own master. It was while working on *Jephtha* that blindness struck the composer and he had to lay down his pen.

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'When he chooses he can strike like a thunderbolt', said Mozart of Handel, and that is the Handel we know best. But there was another Handel, the composer of pastorals and serenatas in which he quietly surrenders to the con-

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A page from the autograph of 'Jephtha', showing part of the chorus 'How dark, O Lord, are thy decrees, all hid from human sight', during the composition of which (on 13 Feb 1751) Handel's sight weakened to the extent that he had to break off work

templation of nature and is wholly free of anything theological, theoretical, or conventional artistic restrictions. Handel seldom indulged in literal imitation of external phenomena, but in the evoking of nature he had no superior. His genre pictures are altogether free of pathos; they are delectable, almost tactile, and irresistible. And here Handel is often a pure lyricist, like Shakespeare in his sonnets. Although *Acis and Galatea* is really an idealized tragedy, its fresh fairy-tale charm is everlasting and indelible. The two Cecilian odes, but especially Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*, are equally felicitous in tone and sound.

But let us single out for a moment a neglected piece that this writer considers particularly attractive and English to the core: *L'Allegro ed il Penseroso*. It is not a popular work, even confirmed Handelians do not quite know what to make of it, and it certainly is no oratorio, sacred or secular, though so classified. The Miltonian poem shows man in his gay and optimistic moods, in his enjoyment of life and his surroundings as they are now. Opposed to him is the pessimist who recalls the glories of the past and does not trust the present and the future. The work is constructed of individual but connected vignettes, and Handel's music follows the contrasting moods with admirable suppleness. Milton's many pregnant words and similes delighted him and fired his imagination. This is a great masterpiece of the 'other' Handel, the whimsical, meditative and intimate Handel, but it is precisely for these qualities that the work has been neglected. It does not regale us with the feats of Anglo-Israelite arms and the rousing praises of the commander-in-chief, Jehovah.

★

Handel's output in instrumental music is more extensive than one would think, ranging from solo and trio sonatas to large-scale concertos and suites. Curiously, this acclaimed virtuoso on the organ wrote no solo music for that instrument. English organs rarely had a pedal board before the 19th century; the organ concertos were written, all but one of them, for a small one-manual instrument and sound just as well when played on the harpsichord. His harpsichord suites and a volume of keyboard fugues, which became popular all over Europe, include some facile entertainment music. They were intended for the rapidly increasing number of amateurs eager for a literature within their capabilities, but most of the suites are from the top drawer. The keyboard fugues (many of which saw service later in the oratorios) used to be criticized and cited by the Bach cultists as proof of Handel's inferiority in counterpoint when compared to Bach's partitas and the English and French suites but, as Coleridge said, 'no comparison moves on all fours', and in this case it is particularly lame.

The volume of keyboard fugues is specially interesting because it clarifies the controversy about Handel's concept of polyphony. Though his contrapuntal skill was formidable, he seldom used it consistently throughout a composition, not even in the fugues, for the simple reason that a dramatic composer cannot think in strict counterpoint; he needs flexibility which can cope with ever-changing situations and conflicts. In the operas and particularly in the oratorios Handel's overwhelming effects are usually homophonic, the great blocks of sound magnificently built in tiers in his breathtaking choruses. When he sensed that to observe linear logic would carry him into areas and situations unfavourable for playing or singing he immediately, and with immense skill, swerved from the contrapuntally logical progression, for to him warm and rich sound and uncontested primacy of the expressive melody were the principal requirements. Despite his early training, Handel's polyphony is closer to the Italian kind than to the North German variety – he learnt much from Corelli and Albinoni. All this is reflected in the keyboard fugues; they are great fun to play because they

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are idiomatic, not very difficult, and full of wit and surprises.

Among the great Baroque masters Handel and Rameau had the most highly developed sense of the orchestra, particularly for the accompanying dramatic orchestra. Handel liked the large orchestra and used it with gusto whenever it was available, but he could work miracles with simple four-part strings. As a melodist no-one surpassed him, and he had a particularly acute ear for colour, balance and euphony. The French dances fascinated every composer, and penetrated into all forms, especially into the suites. Handel, in his orchestral music, concertos and overtures (i.e. suites) used them inventively and with colours that far surpassed the French models. The first collection of orchestral concertos, op.3, are mostly attractive but not great Handel, but the op.6 set of Twelve Grand Concertos (note the English plural in the original title), together with Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, constitute the peak of the Baroque concerto as well as Baroque instrumental ensemble music in general. These concertos are pronouncedly orchestral, while Bach's are like enlarged chamber music. Burney already called op.6 'grand' not only because they are larger and meatier than the Italian concertos but because of their emotional grandeur and expressive depth. They are remarkably modern, some of the movements approaching sonata form, and the orchestra is often of symphonic intensity. The fugues are splendidly unconventional, the slow movements majestic and heroic, the finales capricious and full of verve. The *Water Music* and the *Music for the Royal Fireworks* require no praise; they are well known and bursting with vigour.

★

Handel absorbed everything and delighted in everything; one could say that he was the ultimate amateur in the primary sense of the word. But this amateur owned all the riches of the world. He was not interested in metaphysics nor in the old German Christian mysticism, with its frequent reflection on death as the prelude to salvation. On the contrary, he revelled in life and beauty, particularly as manifested by men and women who love or hate, scheme or sacrifice. Next to his great themes are the slighter ones, but he deals with both with equal care and enjoyment, and often the selected theme is only a pretext to conjure up and celebrate something else. This is what vexed such vain librettists as Jennens, and puzzled his critics. But the beauties he saw and created are not the beauties of mere eloquence; they have body, flesh, blood, aroma and flavour, for they too are eternally alive.

This is, then, the picture of Handel as seen from our vantage point centuries after his death. Modern research, notably the admirable writings of Winton Dean, has clarified this picture, but there are still some cobwebs at the corners that will have to be removed. Still, we see a man radiantly alive with undimmed power, and it will remain so long after the critics' family trees have been extended by a hundred begats.

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