



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

## Handel: Interactions and Influences

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The 2021 Handel Institute Conference went ahead as an in-person event despite continuing difficulties for international travel. Some speakers had to withdraw very late in the day, to be replaced by members of the Institute's council, who gave papers that either had been presented at other recent events or had had to be withdrawn. A small conference in plenary sessions grouping papers into pairs in generous slots of forty minutes each – making for a very welcome convivial atmosphere – it was a triumph in the circumstances. This year's theme, Interactions and Influences, was prompted by the anniversary of Royal Academy opera *Muzio Scevola* (1721), composed jointly by Amadei, Bononcini and Handel. In the end, only five of the sixteen papers addressed it directly. Nevertheless, many of them, presented by emerging and established scholars based in the UK, Europe and the US, were of extremely high quality.

The stimulating tone was set from the beginning by a refreshing and imaginative harpsichord recital by Bridget Cunningham after an evening reception at the Foundling Museum. It interspersed selected movements from Handel's ground-breaking 1720 *Suites de Pieces* with little-performed contemporary arrangements of arias from *Muzio Scevola* and *Floridante*. Fittingly enough, the first paper the following morning, my own (Andrew Woolley, Universidade Nova de Lisboa), was concerned with the keyboard music Handel composed before his Italian period. I proposed on the basis of the ritornello-like structures in some of these pieces that Handel was perhaps the first German composer to explore the Italian instrumental-concerto style and that through it he developed skills as a virtuoso keyboard player. This presentation was paired with a wide-ranging paper by Peter Kohanski (University of North Texas) on the eighteenth-century reception of Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. He considered the role of these suites in framing the monarchy's public image and highlighted their historical significance, since they were heard in concert-like settings that, unusually for the time, lacked vocal music.

The first full day continued with the first of two sessions concerned with various aspects of *Messiah*. Donald Burrows (The Open University), who is currently preparing a new edition for the Halle Handel Edition, discussed an important manuscript in the Gerald Coke Handel Collection at the Foundling Museum. Through a careful assessment of its codicology he demonstrated that it was begun while Handel was in Dublin and copied in several stages from both the composing score (autograph) and the performing score of the work. It was used as an exemplar for other early manuscripts and has helped clarify the chronology of some of the early performing copies. Despite a significant technical glitch that hampered the paper that followed, Fred Fehleisen (Juilliard School) convincingly illustrated thematic relationships between a passage in 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people' and another in 'He was despised' and what they could mean for interpretation of the work. It elicited a brief but interesting discussion about Handel's intentions and listener perceptions.

The next session contained the first of several papers dealing with literary texts and text-setting. Appropriately enough, following on from the previous paper, Cathal Twomey (Maynooth University and Dublin City University) used 'Comfort ye' as a point of departure to illustrate what he calls a 'principle of rhetorical parallelism' guiding Handel's use of word repetition. He proposed that word repetition was an important part of the armoury used by both composers and poets to create formal rhetorical effects, contrary to the common view of it as a mere prop for the spinning-out of musical ideas. The critical literature on Handel's text-setting was also the starting-point for the paper by Colin Tilney (University of Birmingham), which defended some of Handel's choices of idiom that have perplexed previous commentators. Citing examples from across Handel's career, he suggested that instances of 'mismatch' between words and music – including borrowings where the text's meaning changes radically – can in some cases be understood as Handel's ironic commentaries on underlying meanings and dramatic situations.

The final session of the day was more directly related to the conference theme. Federico Lanzellotti (Università di Bologna) gave an overview of Bononcini's three settings of *Muzio Scevola*, including his contribution to the 1721 collaboration. On each occasion Bononcini worked with different librettists and singers, leading to significant changes, though Lanzellotti showed that the 1721 setting draws upon themes and metaphors emphasized in the librettos for Bononcini's Rome (1695) and Vienna (1710) versions. Stephen Roe (London) then gave a detailed paper aiming to explain the widespread perception in late eighteenth-century Britain that Johann Christian Bach was a natural successor to Handel. He showed that Bach encountered Handel's music, which he clearly respected, at various stages of his life, and that throughout his London career he took opportunities that came his way to cater to British taste by associating himself with Handel's music and practices – even if Bach's music itself reveals only superficial influences from the older German composer.

The papers the following day were no less varied, though in a sense Yseult Martinez (Université de Lille) began where Lanzellotti had left off by examining the libretto for *Alcina* (1735) and its literary precedents. She argued convincingly for the quality of the anonymous adaptor's work, showing that it appealed to the moral sensibilities of the day by making Alcina a courtesan-like figure who suffers a series of catastrophes before emerging reformed or edified at the end. Also concerned with the period of Handel's later career, Carole Taylor (independent scholar, London) followed with a paper reporting on research into the financing of opera as revealed by bank archives. There is much data to be sifted through and not all of it can be made sense of, though transaction records show that business dealings were undertaken by individual aristocratic subscribers as much as by theatre managers.

The session that followed returned to the topic of the reception of Handel's music, in two papers concerned with *Messiah*. Luke Howard (Brigham Young University) argued that the 'scratch' *Messiah* performances that emerged in the 1960s have a history going back to massed festival performances with minimal rehearsal in the nineteenth century. He suggested that modern 'scratch' equivalents arose in popular reaction to the distaste of historically informed groups for massed renditions (they had started to perform pared-down versions of large-scale choral works around this time). The first recording on period instruments, that of Christopher Hogwood with the Academy of Ancient Music (Decca L'Oiseau-Lyre DSLO594, 1980), was one of fifty-eight commercially available historically informed recordings of the work discussed by David Vickers (Royal Northern College of Music). Vickers pointed out that some historical evidence is yet to be put into practice, including evidence for orchestral doubling of the vocal lines and the size and composition of orchestras, and that there has been inconsistent attention to the integrity of variant versions.

The next session brought together two contrasting papers concerned with concert life. Lizzie Buckle (Royal Holloway, University of London and the Foundling Museum) illustrated the use of network diagrams to organize information drawn from concert notices in London newspapers. The diagrams visualize degrees of connection between performers and venues and provide insights

into overall trends, such as the number of concerts taking place between one decade and the next. Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson (independent scholars, Brentwood) then turned to the micro level to examine an apparently one-off large-scale performance of *Messiah* at Hornchurch, Essex, in 1788. The concert followed precedents for oratorio performances at London theatres during Lent, and its impetus seems to have come from local enthusiasts, who engaged the well-connected violinist John Hindmarsh as musical director and to recruit the principal performers from London.

The final session returned once more to Handel's posthumous reputation. Joe Lockwood (University of Oxford) offered several correctives to previous commentary on Mozart's knowledge of and engagement with Handel's music. Pointing to a reluctance of scholars to find the direct models that Mozart might have used, he suggested that the aria 'Ah, fuggi il traditor' from *Don Giovanni* (1787) drew upon oratorio arias by Handel that Mozart knew from the library of Baron van Swieten as well as his experience of orchestrating them for the baron. In what was perhaps the finest paper of all, David Wyn Jones (Cardiff University) rounded off the conference by considering Handel's music in Beethoven's Vienna. Claiming that 'the history of Handel reception in Vienna is yet to be written', the paper went far in that direction. Jones explained how, through the efforts of the court official Ignaz von Mosel, Handel's music became an integral part of an idealist vision for cultural policy in the years after 1815, and that Beethoven admired it partly because of what he knew of its public role in late Georgian Britain. He suggested that Beethoven's Choral Symphony was a type of public music inspired by the model of Handel oratorios, some of which had achieved canonic status.

Before making some concluding remarks, Donald Burrows presented a lifetime achievement award to Hans Dieter Clausen, who was roundly applauded. It was a fitting conclusion to an event that demonstrated the variety and vitality of Handel and Handel-related scholarship today.

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