

Introduction

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Handel is at the same time one of the most accessible and one of the most elusive of the major creative figures in Western music. The 'Hallelujah Chorus', 'Handel's Largo', the Hornpipe from the *Water Music* and the opening of 'Zadok the Priest' are examples of pieces of his music that have had sufficient appeal to find their way into 'popular' consciousness at various times during the twentieth century. Moreover, Handel's broad, attractive musical style seems to present few problems for the listener: it is to be heard in the background in restaurants and aircraft cabins, the choice of company managements that wish at the same time to find a pleasingly neutral aural background and to flatter their clientele with allusions to 'high' culture. No one would begrudge Handel this place in the sun: indeed, most of us would prefer that, if the aural wallpaper is to be inevitable, it should be worth listening to. But of course there is a danger that the music will be taken for granted: it is heard so often that everyone 'knows' it: it is assumed that there is no more to be said, and even repeat performance borders on the superfluous for real musicians. Mozart's 40th symphony and Beethoven's Fifth suffer this same hazard, but perhaps the danger to Handel is more subtle: his style is in itself sometimes apparently so effortless as to discourage further investigation. Yet there is indeed more to be said, and more questions to be asked, about the context in which Handel's style developed, about the novelty of his own mature style, about the compositional skill that lies behind the apparently effortless fluency, and behind his knack of setting up a mood or an emotional intensity with the simplest musical means.

His biography presents a similar challenge, not only in the ever-contentious area of the relationship between a creative artist's 'life' and 'works', but also in the relationship between the man and his environment. We can locate Handel as to time and place in various successive environments; thus we can see ways in which he was affected by current circumstances, and ways in which he seems to have moulded the lives of those around (and after) him. But in many areas the relationship is not clear: so unclear, in fact, that it seems probable that Handel, if not actually rejecting some features of his surroundings, at least opted out of involvement. How we relate Handel to (for example) contemporary London

depends on our image of what London was like. A sentimental view might have Handel taking lunch with Pope and dinner with Hogarth. Not only is there no biographical justification for this, but the association is misleading, for these personalities interpreted the London around them in terms of their own individual perceptions. The images that make up *The Rake's Progress* form a cleverly constructed narrative, and it would be naive to accept them as realistic everyday scenes from contemporary London life. More significantly, Handel did not seem to share the rather puritan and pessimistic view of humanity that gives such force to Hogarth's pictures. Handel, with his Lutheran upbringing, might well have been shocked to know that a century after his death Edward Fitzgerald would describe him as 'a good old Pagan at heart', but there is certainly something positive and life-affirming about his music. This is not to say that Handel shirks or down-plays serious situations in his music: if anything, the endings to *Tamerlano* and *Theodora* received more severe musical settings than the words absolutely required. But overall, tragedy is matched by comedy: sometimes things turn out well, sometimes badly; and sometimes humans act from generous rather than mean motives. Such, as far as we can gather anything at all on the matter from his music, seems to have been Handel's world-view, and the sheer exuberance of his melodies and harmonies suggests that he found life a positive experience. Working in the theatre might have involved arguments with leading singers as an occupational hazard, but these paled into insignificance on a night when an opera or oratorio went well in performance.

Part I of the *Companion* deals with the background to Handel's career, and the relevant topics alter as we move through his life. In his early years, interest centres on the composer's early experiences, on his upbringing in Halle and the type of education (general and specifically musical) that he received (Chapter 1). The political background to his early years is also important: we need to remember that neither 'Germany' nor 'Italy' were single unitary states. Handel seems to have identified himself as a 'Saxon', but he was born a Prussian citizen: seventeenth-century Halle had been a victim of occupation in the Thirty Years War. While war had been a recent memory in the city of Handel's childhood, it was also a current fact of life in Italy, whose states were at the centre of the conflict between Habsburg and Bourbon interests in the first decade of the eighteenth century (Chapter 2). Handel's travels to Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice in the early years of the eighteenth century involved finding a way through the current political turmoil and making the best of the various musical opportunities that each place had to offer. By the time Handel came to London in 1710 a European peace was in prospect, though Britain's part

in it was controversial, and was especially viewed as such in Hanover, whose princely house was anticipating its succession to the British throne (recently secured as an entity by the Act of Union) on the death of the ailing Queen Anne. The political, social and religious context that Handel found in London was very different from those of Germany and Italy, but it provided a setting in which he could develop his mature career (Chapter 3). Nevertheless, the most directly influential circumstances in London were the places in which Handel worked and the people who were his professional colleagues. His career developed primarily in the London theatres: we need to know not only about the buildings themselves, but also about the institutional arrangements for the management of the theatre companies, and about London's professional theatrical ambience into which Italian opera, and eventually Handel's oratorio-type works, were gradually absorbed (Chapter 4). Eighteenth-century London had its own flourishing concert scene, and indeed its own tradition of English dramas-with-music: Handel's professional activities can, in one aspect, be seen as just one element in the entertainments available to Londoners (Chapter 5). But London was also a cosmopolitan place: Handel was, especially in his first years in London, identifiable as yet another immigrant, working in the foreign medium of Italian opera. Handel's professional colleagues (and sometimes rivals) included a surprisingly large number of Italians who had ended up in London: some of them stayed for only a short time, while others were active for several seasons or even became permanent residents (Chapter 6). His day-to-day associates, whether musicians or those working in necessary ancillary activities such as libretto-writing or set-designing, were indeed a cosmopolitan social group within London society. Not so the librettists for Handel's oratorio-style works, who came from the ranks of cultured English gentlemen: these were not necessarily professional theatre-folk but they had an interest in English literature and, often, in theology and biblical scholarship (Chapter 7). Their importance to Handel's later career as providers of texts for musical setting is obvious, but they form the 'background' in a subtler way as well.

Recent experience in preparing a biography of Handel,¹ in which I have to some extent re-lived the events of his life, has persuaded me that Handel probably showed a strong interest in current developments in English literary culture only during his first decade in London. The primary evidence for his association with Hughes and Arbuthnot comes from his first years in London: his closest contact with 'literary' circles (including perhaps Pope and Gay) came at Burlington House and Cannons, all before 1720. In the 1720s the literary focus of his life was, if anything, Italian. In the 1730s, when he introduced English-language

works into his theatre programmes, he was apparently entirely unresponsive to Aaron Hill's plea that he should take a lead in the development of a new school of English musical drama: my strong impression is that, although he no doubt took an intelligent interest in what was going on around him – in the ideas of *literati*, theologians, philosophers or painters – these were not central passions, nor did they exercise a direct influence on his creative activities. Handel was probably rather conservative in outlook, preferring stability to the injection of revolutionary new ideas: it is arguable, therefore, that the ferment of literary, critical and theological activity which had a stronger effect on some of his London contemporaries was mediated to Handel principally through the attitudes implicit in the texts that he set to music. Only very rarely does it seem that Handel objected strongly to what his librettists served up for him, and then his objections were as likely to be on practical, dramatic or musical grounds. Admittedly we do not know much about the librettos that Handel was offered but never set, or his reasons for such rejections. But we can pay attention to the content of the texts that he did set, which he must have found at least acceptable, and to the characters of the people who created them.

Part II of the *Companion* deals with Handel's music itself. The musical form in which Handel composed most is the aria for solo voice, variously accompanied by orchestra, instrumental ensemble or basso continuo alone: in all he composed more than 2,000 arias in his operas, oratorios and cantatas. Handel's approach to the aria therefore makes a natural starting-point (Chapter 8). It seems very likely that the two things which Handel found most stimulating, apart from the practical excitement of bringing works to performance, were a good libretto (which need only be 'good' in that it fired his imagination with dramatic situations and literary images that could be conveyed effectively through musical setting) and the craft of composition itself. The latter had two major aspects: what we may call the short-term effect of setting up a particular mood or a particular level of emotional intensity, and the more long-term constructional skill of keeping a movement alive once it was under way. In both of these (which one may, by analogy, think of as 'rhetorical' skills, as means of keeping the musical argument alive) Handel was a master. His mastery was so highly developed technically that it must have become largely instinctive – hence the speed with which, in bursts of intense creative effort, he could complete a major score. But the musical thinking that went into his compositional processes is to some extent accessible. One very valuable source of evidence is the large quantity of Handel's autograph music that survives. It gives almost complete coverage of Handel's mature compositions, though it consists mainly of final composition

drafts rather than sketches from the earlier stages of creative evolution. Nevertheless, Handel's autographs reveal how he went about the business of composition, both in matters of detail and in larger issues of formal construction (Chapter 9). His working methods included the 'borrowing' of musical material, from himself and from other composers. This practice has been a source of controversy since the composer's own lifetime, and has tended to divert attention away from the creative skills that constituted 'composition' for Handel: but, properly regarded, the use that he made of pre-existing music gives us one way of approaching his particular genius.

If we take a broad view of Handel's works, he can be credited with two innovations: the invention of large-scale English theatre oratorio and of its accidental adjunct, the organ concerto. In his London theatre oratorio-type works Handel to some extent brought together Italian and English musical traditions. The result is a genre which is undeniably effective in performance but which defies simple comprehensive description: this is partly because of the richness and diversity of the contributing elements and partly because the genre continued to develop with each new work (Chapter 10). In his preface to *Samson*, Handel's librettist Newburgh Hamilton described Handel's oratorios as a 'musical Drama . . . in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage'. Hamilton's perception of 'the Solemnity of Church-Musick' was the result of another of Handel's creative innovations, though this time in terms of style rather than genre: his 'Utrecht' *Te Deum* and *Jubilate*, and *Coronation Anthems*, set new standards of solidity and scale for English church music, as his *Dixit Dominus* may have done earlier for Latin settings in Rome. But there is more to Handel's church music than these grand-scale works: the repertory, although not as extensive as that for the operas and oratorios, covers pieces written for differing circumstances, liturgical contexts and performing conditions (Chapter 11). Related performing conditions link together Handel's 'solo' sonatas, trio sonatas and cantatas which, although usually regarded separately through a rather artificial division between vocal and instrumental genres, are treated here in terms of the 'chamber music' context for which they were mainly conceived (Chapter 12). By contrast, although parallels may be drawn between the solo aria and a movement from a concerto featuring a solo instrument, Handel's orchestral music really forms a separate entity, related to the development of orchestral music in France and Italy in the period of Handel's youth (Chapter 13). Consideration of Handel's keyboard music brings us back full circle to the earliest period of his biography and his musical career, for many of his formative musical influences are attributable to the keyboard training he

received under Zachow in Halle, and his initial reputation was made as a keyboard virtuoso, a role that combined composition, improvisation and performance (Chapter 14).

Since music is ultimately a performing art, our stimulus to the study of Handel's music, as for that of any other significant composer, is that his pieces 'work' – that is, that they affect the listener (and performer) – in practice. Part III therefore deals with some issues that arise when the music, as received in Handel's score, is converted into the musical experience. For Handel's Italian contemporaries, opera was a literary as much as a musical medium: Metastasio was highly regarded for his poetic diction as well as for his ingenuity in plot-construction, and it is arguable that, for Italians, drama remained effectively synonymous with opera until well into the twentieth century. Handel seems to have become fully at home in, and fully committed to, contemporary Italian culture during his years in Italy, which were what we might describe as the 'probationary' period of his career, following his apprenticeship in Germany. A good colloquial command of foreign languages seems to have been among the skills that came to Handel fairly easily: Charles Burney never forgot the impression made on him by his youthful contact with the composer 'swearing in four or five languages'.² But patience with the niceties and refinements of languages was probably not one of the features of Handel's personality: of the Italian librettists with whom he worked in London, it seems likely that he formed a much closer relationship with the practical, musicianly, Nicola Haym than with the more 'literary' Paolo Rolli who, for his part, probably resented the fact that a German composer was beating Italians at their own game. The extent of Handel's practical competence in Italian, as well as being an interesting topic in itself, has practical consequences. Under what circumstances should we correct Handel's linguistic 'mistakes' when it comes to performance, and where (as with some parallel examples of Handel's individual treatment of the English language) should we preserve the character of the sounds he intended (Chapter 15)?

Perhaps no area of Handel performance has been more affected in the years between 1900 and 2000 than the sound of the orchestra. The 'early music' revival of the twentieth century is a complex subject, but the movement's origin was stimulated partly by simple musical curiosity – a curiosity that challenged the proposition that old instruments and techniques had become obsolete because they 'didn't work', and that was disturbed by the mis-match between an imaginative aural reading of the score and the timbres that were available in current conditions. Complete 'authenticity' may be a chimera, but that does not diminish the value, indeed the necessity, of pursuing the appropriate sounds and styles for Handel's music. Such a pursuit must take as its starting-point what is

known about Handel's use of the orchestra, including those features in his scores which were not fully notated in the form expected by modern conventions (Chapter 16).

Finally, we take a last look at the major genres of opera and oratorio. *Opera seria* as a genre did not enjoy a good press for a couple of centuries after Handel's death. The criticisms of the genre, as embodied in the 'classic' statement contained in the dedication to the printed score of the Calzabigi/Gluck *Alceste* (1769), concerning its reliance on vocal ornamentation and the drama-impeding form of the *da capo* aria, have remained influential, and indeed relevant in terms of the very different operatic genres that have developed in succession since 1750. It is perhaps less fruitful to expend the energy on vigorous denials that *opera seria* is a 'concert in costume' than to record that, on some nights at least, the genre has provided powerful theatrical experiences, in which conflicts and interactions of characters, and those wider resonances about the human condition that arise from the audience's emotional participation with events on stage, have been stirred rather than hindered by a medium that allows the time-stopping quality of powerful emotion sufficient room for its musical expression, and in which ornamentation becomes a natural means of emotional discharge. But even Handel's music cannot guarantee this experience every night, and authenticity has been slower to reach the stage – in styles of movement, costume and stage design – than the orchestra pit. A good preparation for attendance at a performance of one of Handel's operas written for London is to read through the dual-language libretto that was printed for the work's first performance:³ this, combined with a knowledge of what, in general terms, Handel could do with the operatic aria, is usually sufficient to set aside any lingering doubts about the effectiveness of the medium. It is sadly a matter of record that what is seen in the theatre has often fallen short of the imaginary – and to a large extent realisable – ideal: when gesture and the stage picture are at odds with the style of the music, Handel would usually have been better served with a concert performance. Nevertheless, the gradual re-establishment of Handel's operas on the stage has been an important development of modern times, and there is a growing realisation that the operas are practical musical-dramatic entities: furthermore, recordings of complete (or near-complete) opera scores have brought the music into public access in a way that would have been unimaginable even in 1950. But it still remains true that the public with experience of Handel's operas in performance, whether in the theatre or on record, remains substantially smaller than that for his oratorios, so there is accordingly more explaining to do (Chapter 17).

If the revival of *opera seria* involves the re-creation of circumstances in

which the genre makes dramatic and musical sense, it might be argued that such efforts are not necessary for oratorio, which has enjoyed something of a continuous performance tradition since Handel's lifetime and, as a 'concert' genre, has fewer complications for modern performance. Furthermore, we have a century's experience of attempts at 'authentic' performance of the oratorios behind us, since A. H. Mann's pioneering performances of *Messiah* in the 1890s. Nevertheless, while certain aspects of modern oratorio performances have undoubtedly returned to the spirit of the originals and, as with the operas, the lesser-known works are now becoming well represented in recording catalogues, it is still difficult to recover the ambience for which they were created. Perhaps it is too much to expect that we shall ever experience Lenten theatre seasons in which some Handel oratorios are appreciated as 'new' works, in which the performers are working in a musical style which commands their undivided attention for a few weeks, and in which no one expects to be out of the doors within three hours of the start of the performance. But that is no reason for ignoring what can be known of the musical arrangements of Handel's own performances, even though the evidence does not give us complete information on a few fundamental matters, such as the way that Handel arranged his performers in the theatre (Chapter 18). However imperfect the execution, oratorios (or any other works of Handel's) make most sense when performers and audiences share some understanding of the work itself, as conceived by the composer and (where relevant) the librettist. It is for this reason that matters of performance practice are not the exclusive prerogative of performers, but are part of the legitimate interest of the listener as well. It will be interesting to see how Handel's works fare as the three-hundredth anniversaries of their first performances come round.