

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685, the same year as Bach. Handel's reputation rests on his many instrumental works, operas and cantatas, but chiefly on his oratorio, *Messiah*, whose "Hallelujah" chorus is sung at Christmas and Easter all over the world. When he lived, however, he was most famous for his forty-two operas.

Handel's father was sixty-two years old when his son was born. A wealthy surgeon-barber who shunned concerts and paid street musicians to keep away from his house, he would not allow Handel to take music lessons. Luckily, Handel's Aunt Anna, who lived with the family, smuggled a clavichord into the attic. The seven-year-old George practiced there in secret, playing tunes he had heard in church, as well as his own melodies.

Handel's luck changed when his father was asked to pay a visit to Duke Johann Adolph of Weissenfels. The Duke overheard the young Handel brilliantly improvising on an organ at the castle and urged Handel's father to consider a career in music for his son.

Handel's father relented. Handel began studying with Zachau, the local church organist and composer. Zachau taught his young pupil with about Italian and German composers, and Handel began to compose church music and concertos for the oboe, one of his favorite instruments.

Handel entered the University of Halle to study law in 1702, but his heart was in music. Shortly after he matriculated, he took the position of organist at Halle Cathedral for one year, but left for Hamburg in 1703. Hamburg had a public opera house—the only one in Germany outside of the courts, and Handel's first love was opera.

Handel began working for Reinhard Keiser, the opera house director, and played second violin in the orchestra. He was befriended by the composer and theorist Johann Mattheson, who later claimed that he helped Handel to develop a more melodic style of composition. The two young men were quite competitive with each other, once even fighting a duel over who should play the continuo part in one of Mattheson's operas.

Almira, Handel's first opera, was performed in Hamburg in 1705 and was warmly received. After writing a few more operas, which have not survived, Handel decided to visit Italy where skilled opera composers like Alessandro Scarlatti were working.

The three years Handel spent in Italy were the turning point of his career. Employed by various noblemen, he got a chance to write two operas, including *Roderigo*, which was performed in Florence in 1707 and *Agrippina*, performed in Venice in 1709. He also wrote his first oratorio and numerous cantatas. The Italian style of composition was the most musically advanced in Europe, and Handel completely absorbed the idiom.

Handel was recognized for both his compositions and his playing. At Cardinal Ottoboni's palace in Rome he competed with Domenico Scarlatti on the keyboard, where



George Frideric Handel (Cont.)

It was decided that Handel was the superior organist. Thanks to the acclaim he won in Italy, Handel got his first full-time job as kapellmeister to the Elector of Hanover. But almost immediately he took a year-long leave of absence to explore London, England.

Handel was eager to visit London. The city was home to a vibrant opera scene, as well as democratic musical societies where rich and poor could mingle freely, such as the famous concerts organized by coal-merchant Thomas Britten. Handel made his debut by presenting the opera *Rinaldo* in 1711 at the Queen's Theatre. Handel wrote the score in a fortnight, "borrowing" much of the music from his earlier operas. Stage effects included live sparrows and recorders that imitated birdsongs. It was a sensation.

After returning to his job in June, Handel began studying English. Yet again, he got permission from the Elector to visit London. He was supposed to return "within a reasonable time," but actually stayed for almost fifty years!

On his return in 1712, Handel stayed at Burlington House in Piccadilly as a guest of the Earl of Burlington. He wrote a number of operas for the Queen's Theatre as well as a Birthday Ode for the reigning monarch, Queen Anne, who gave him an annual pension of 200 pounds.

When Queen Anne died in 1714, Handel's former employer, the Elector of Hanover, became George I of England. It used to be thought that he was angry at Handel for leaving his service without permission, but more likely, the new monarch was happy to see his former employee. Handel wrote his famous "Water Music" for a party the King gave on the River Thames. Musicians floated on barges near the King's boat and played so sweetly that the King commanded the performance to be repeated.

In 1717, Handel lived as the guest of the Duke of Chandos, where he composed eleven religious works known as the Chandos Anthems. Also written at this time was a dramatic setting of a Bible story in English, which was later to be known as "Esther."

By this time, Handel was well-known by the musical elite of London. In 1720, in an effort to promote Italian opera in London, a group of noblemen sponsored a venture at the King's Theatre known as the Royal Academy of Music. Handel was made leader of the orchestra and the famous male singer, Senesino, was brought from Italy. From 1720 to 1728, Handel wrote thirteen operas for the Royal Academy, including *Julius Caesar*. In 1727, his former pupil, the Prince of Wales, became George II.

Handel was in his element, juggling many balls, acting as composer, conductor, stage manager and producer. He often came into conflict with the singers imported from Italy who were treated like rock stars, and had salaries and egos to match. One soprano, Francesca Cuzzoni, was so stubborn that Handel once threatened to throw her out of a window. In 1726, another soprano, Faustina Bordoni, arrived from Italy and from then on, Handel had to write operas in which both women were given an equal number of arias. In 1727, tempers flared and the two jealous singers came to blows on stage in front of an audience that included the Princess of Wales.

By 1728, Londoners were becoming tired of Italian opera, and the impecunious Royal Academy was dissolved. Unfazed, Handel and his old friend J.J. Heidegger decided to

take over the business themselves. Handel made a trip in 1729 to Europe to hire some new singers. J.S. Bach made an attempt to meet the great composer when he was in Halle visiting his mother, but Handel did not have time to visit.

Handel continued producing an opera season that was mildly successful. Then, in 1732, two groups, one amateur and one professional, gave the first staged performances of Handel's *Esther* in London. In those days, copyright laws were not strict, and anyone could perform anyone else's music without permission. Not to be outdone, Handel put on his own performance of *Esther* at the King's Theatre, but without staging it, because the Bishop of London banned the staging of a religious work in an opera house. Thus the idea of oratorio—a sung, but unstaged performance of a sacred text—was born.

Handel wrote two more oratorios in 1733, *Deborah* and *Athalia*, after the production of one of his greatest operas *Orlando*. An unpleasant surprise awaited him when he returned from Oxford. Because he had raised ticket prices for the performances of *Deborah*, he had made a few enemies, and the Prince of Wales, always eager to oppose his father, a Handel supporter, founded another opera company known as "The Nobility Opera." Thus began a costly rivalry between two opera houses in a city that was barely interested in supporting one.

The Nobility Opera immediately hired all the singers that Handel usually used. In 1733, both opera houses opened to scanty audiences; often the king sat in an almost empty theatre at the Haymarket while his son patronized the other empty theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Handel began playing organ concertos to liven up the intermissions. But both ventures suffered financial losses, and the strain of competition was probably the cause of a stroke Handel suffered in 1737.

After a visit to a health spa at Aix-la-Chappelle, Handel recovered. Over the next few years, he gradually moved away from opera, reluctantly realizing that its popularity with the English people was waning. His next oratorio, *Saul*, was performed in 1739, followed by *Israel in Egypt*. He wrote the beautiful "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" in ten days as well as a number of concertos for strings and optional oboes, which he published by subscription. A statue of Handel was erected in the Vauxhall Gardens, and he enjoyed national acclaim.

In 1741, Handel received an invitation from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland inviting him to Dublin to give some charity concerts. Handel prepared to take several of his popular works with him, but he also wrote a new oratorio called *Messiah*. Handel said when composing the "Hallelujah" chorus, that it was "as if I saw the great God on his throne, and all his angels around him." A review of the first performance said, "Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crouded Audience."

Handel returned to London and presented, by subscription, a new oratorio, *Samson*, at Covent Garden, which was well received by Londoners. People were still somewhat reluctant to hear religious works in a theatre, which may have been why *Messiah* was not popular initially. Handel also wrote *Semele*, which is really an opera, but was

George Frideric Handel (Cont.)

presented as an oratorio.

In the last years of his life, Handel continued to write superb music, including his "Music for the Royal Fireworks," written in honor of the ending of a war in Europe. Twelve thousand people attended the celebration and caused a traffic jam on London Bridge. Handel began a series of annual charity performances of *Messiah* at the Foundling Hospital, which still owns a copy of the *Messiah* manuscript.

Sadly, Handel began to lose his eyesight. The Countess of Shaftesbury records her sadness "to see the great though unhappy Handel, dejected, wan, and dark, sitting by, not playing on, the harpsichord..." Many audiences were moved to tears when they saw him being led to the organ to play his concertos and to make his bow to the audience. In 1758, Handel had an operation by the same man who had unsuccessfully operated on Bach's eyes. He was to live one more year, dying in 1759.

Questions for Study and Discussion:

1. Was Handel's father supportive of Handel's love of music? _____

2. What happened to cause Handel's father to change his mind about his son's career? _____

3. What musical form did Handel like most? _____

4. Why did Handel go to Italy? _____

5. Name four of Handel's operas. _____

6. What is an oratorio? _____

7. Why did Handel switch from writing operas to writing oratorios? _____

More on Handel's Music

The Nature of Opera

In Handel's time, the stars of opera were the singers who were paid very high salaries because of their spectacular ranges. We tend to think of the atmosphere of an opera as solemn with a quiet and attentive audience. But during the 1700s, opera goers listened only when their favorite star was singing, and played cards and chatted the rest of the time. There were numerous conventions that composers had to follow just to make the singers look good. They had to write at least thirty arias per opera, which broke up the story line. The singer always repeats the first half of the aria with trills and embellishments to show off her voice. Sometimes, the singer added his own dialogue or even an aria that had nothing to do with the story but flattered his voice. No wonder Handel got angry at singers at the Royal Academy!

Handel's Borrowings

Handel frequently "borrowed" material from his earlier works to create new ones, and, what is even more disturbing to the modern observer, from other composers. Much of "Israel in Egypt" is taken from the work of the Italian composer, Erba, and other works use material from Telemann and Muffat.

Handel's borrowings increased dramatically after his breakdown in 1737, when he may have been short on inspiration. But one should not judge him too harshly. Using other composer's materials didn't have the same stigma that it does today because copyright laws were virtually non-existent. Also Handel usually improved upon what he borrowed. As William Boyce, an English composer, noted "He takes pebbles and converts them into diamonds."

How Handel's Operas Are Performed Today

Handel wrote most of his leading roles for altos and sopranos, a few basses and hardly any tenors. Some men singers for Italian opera were known as castratos (they had an operation that prevented their voice from breaking), and they sang in an alto or soprano range. Nowadays, men do not sing high parts, so casting one of Handel's male roles presents unique problems. Sometimes the part is taken down an octave so that tenors or basses can sing it, but more often a woman plays the part that a male castrato would have played in Handel's time.

DATES TO REMEMBER

After each date, describe what event occurred in Handel's life:

1. 1685 _____
2. 1703 _____

George Frideric Handel (Cont.)

3. 1705

4. 1711

5. 1712

6. 1717

7. 1720

8. 1728

9. 1732

10. 1741
