

[1] **George Frideric Handel
in Words and Music**
Written by Davinia Caddy
Read by Nicholas Boulton

[2] **Music for the Royal Fireworks, HWV 351 – Overture**
from Naxos 8.557764 Track 18

[3] *Tho' no man ever introduced such a number of instruments, yet in his Orchestra not one is found idle or insignificant.*

So said the English theologian John Mainwaring in his 1760 biography of the German-born performer-composer George Frideric Handel, a recently deceased icon of the English musical establishment. The subject of Mainwaring's words is of course the music we heard a moment ago: Handel's contribution to the Royal Fireworks display that was scheduled to take place in London's Green Park on 27th April 1749. The event itself was intended to celebrate the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle that had ended the eight-year War of the Austrian Succession and guaranteed Maria Theresa of Habsburg the right to inherit the Austrian lands from her father, Charles VI. Incidentally, the Treaty also confirmed the right of succession of the house of Hanover, in England as well as Hanover. Indeed, it was George II, the second Hanoverian King of England and the Prince-electoral of Hanover, who came up with the idea of a lavish pyrotechnic celebration – ostensibly a celebration of hard-won European peace and good will, but most probably intended to promote his personal glory and ambition.

Over-the-top it certainly was. An Italian pyrotechnist called Gaetano Ruggieri was hired to design and assemble the fireworks, and to coordinate their display. A Franco-Italian architect and stage designer Giovanni Niccolo Servandoni was charged with the installation of the theatrical 'machine', as it was called, overseeing the work of multiple stage decorators and craftsmen. And Handel, at the time the most renowned composer in the country, was commissioned to write the music – a French-style orchestral suite with an overture and four dance movements, all to be performed, outdoors of course, prior to the pyrotechnic display.

As Mainwaring intimated, Handel, too, had grand designs on the evening's entertainment: specifically, on the size and make-up of the instrumental ensemble at his disposal. The King, it seems, had a distaste for strings, especially 'fiddles': he wanted Handel's music to consist of only 'martial' instruments: namely, winds and percussion. Handel, for his part, wanted an enormous ensemble, including a brass section comprising 12 trumpets and 12 French horns, as well as strings. Some negotiating and convincing must have ensued, for the finished score called for 24 oboes, 12 bassoons, a contrabassoon, 9 trumpets, 9 horns and 3 sets of timpani. Handel seems to have had his own way in keeping hold of the strings, which, according to the score, simply double the oboe and bassoon parts. But the arguments did not end there. When the King demanded a grand public rehearsal in London's Vauxhall Gardens, Handel initially objected. On this occasion, though, the composer had to back down: at 11am on 21st April 1749, Handel's musicians played to an enormous audience of more than 12,000. Indeed, the event caused a commotion on surrounding thoroughfares and even a stoppage on London Bridge: it was reported that 'no carriage could pass for three hours'.

While the evening's entertainment was something of a flop – the fireworks display was a disaster and one of the pavilions burnt down in the middle of the show – Handel's music remains one of the composer's greatest and most popular works. Indeed, his *Fireworks Music*, arranged for more conventional orchestral forces, was repeated only a month after its premiere at a charity concert at the Foundling Hospital, an institution – founded 'for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children' – of which Handel was a benefactor and, later, a governor. Since then – that was, 27th May 1749 – we can only imagine how many times Handel's score has been performed, in how many different arrangements and transcriptions, in- and out-doors, with or without rockets, firecrackers and Catherine wheels. The music, in itself, has become synonymous with mid-eighteenth-century England and with royalty, its pomp, ceremony, grandeur and tradition.

But is this music necessarily synonymous with Handel? Conductor and early music expert Christopher Hogwood has described Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, as well as his earlier royal commission *Water Music* (dating from 1717, more on this later), as 'freakish': that is, odd, outlandish and even incongruous when considered in the context of Handel's musical *oeuvre*. Indeed, Hogwood, on the face of it, seems to be right: even a cursory glance at Handel's musical output reveals the widest possible range of genres – vocal and instrumental, music for the home, the concert stage, outdoors (as we have just heard), as well as for the church and the theatre. It seems that no genre of the era was left untouched. Moreover, as Hogwood is keen to remind us, Handel's greatest musical love was not these twice-in-a-lifetime royal-inspired audio-visual spectacles. His real passion was for large-scale vocal-dramatic works: his early career was marked by the composition of opera, mainly on Italian librettos; and his later career concentrated on the new and emerging genre of the English oratorio. It was the latter, especially, for which the composer would probably have wanted to be remembered: not one-off puff-pieces of purely instrumental music. In fact, historians have revealed that Handel's orchestral music was nearly always practically motivated: by the demands of publication (and the money that would be generated); by the need for musical interludes and virtuosic additional movements to his large-scale vocal works; and, as a result, by the need to attract a large and ever-expanding audience, one that was perennially impressed – particularly by the composer improvising at the keyboard. Hogwood goes as far as to doubt whether Handel ever attended, let alone conducted, a concert of purely instrumental music. He writes: 'Handel did not "do" instrumental concerts: all his orchestral music, organ concertos and concerti grossi were planned as additions to his vocal entertainments.'

Handel the vocal-orchestral specialist: this dramatic aspect of the composer's creative personality will emerge clearly from the short life-history that follows. And so, too, will the composer's qualities of eclecticism, experimentalism, and political and commercial astuteness: qualities that hint at an independence of mind and self-determination that is often buried within the mountainous literature on the composer's gloriously grand English reception. Indeed, there is an undercurrent, within some books, articles and CD booklets, of conservatism: Handel tends to be portrayed not only as a conventional musical figure, but an old-fashioned and unadventurous one – earnest, staid, even sombre. But how else could the composer be described, then and now, and how did his music help generate these long-standing and sometimes conflicting impressions?

[4] **Organ Concerto in G minor, Op. 4, No. 1, HWV 289 – IV. Andante**
from 8. 553835 Track 4

[5] George Frideric Handel was born on 23rd February 1685 in the central German town of Halle, on the river Saale, roughly 100 miles southwest of Berlin. His father, aged 63 on his birth, was an esteemed barber-surgeon who served at the court of Saxe-Weissenfels, presided over by Duke Johann Adolf. Handel's mother was his father's second wife, and the daughter of a pastor. Little is known about Handel's early education, though stories have been relayed (and, no doubt, revised) about his initial musical exploits. As legend has it, Handel's father discouraged his son's musical interests, preferring that he focus his attention on more serious academic subjects – and eventually pursue a career in law. But Handel rebelled, going against his father's wishes by playing the clavichord in secret in the attic of the family home – a very early sign, some historians-cum-psychologists have argued, of the self-reliance, industry and independence that would come to define the composer's character. As the legend continues, when the Duke overheard the young boy play the organ in the court chapel at Weissenfels, he advised Handel senior to invest in his son's talents and seek musical tutelage under Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, organist at the Marienkirche in Halle – the marketplace church where Handel had been baptized. Zachow offered tuition in musical performance (organ, harpsichord and violin) and composition (a firm grounding in musical keys and chords, as well as imitative part-work). This comprehensive music education – Handel became acquainted with music by Domenico Alberti, Johann Jakob Froberger and Johann Pachelbel, among others – was no doubt influential: the beginning, perhaps, of what would be Handel's lifelong interest in the absorption and assimilation of a range of different musical styles.

Some years after the death of his father on 14th February 1697 (when Handel was not quite 12), the budding musician kept open the possibility of a career in law by enrolling at the University of Halle. There, beginning on 10th February 1702, the composer learned many of the skills necessary to achieve success as an independent musician in later life: an ability to organize, calculate and capitalize on finances; proficiency in different European languages; social etiquette and a capacity to engage with a cross-section of classes and cultures; and a knowledge and understanding of various literary idioms. But music still figured heavily in the young Handel's imagination: merely one month after his University matriculation, the composer was appointed as organist of the Calvinist Domkirche (the Cathedral) in Halle. Contracted for a single year, he would combine his University studies with looking after the Cathedral organ, performing regularly at services and teaching pupils at the attached school.

During the year of 1702, it is likely that Handel spent a short period of time away from his hometown of Halle and visited Berlin, where he met the Italian opera composers Giovanni Bononcini and Attilio Ariosti. The excursion seems to have been an important stimulus to Handel's musical imagination, for one of his first works, published in the early 1730s as the Trio Sonata Op. 2 no. 2 in G Minor, includes passages of music borrowed from two Bononcini operas of the period, *Cefalo* and *Polifemo* – both of which Handel is thought to have heard during his stay in the German city. The Trio Sonata – a genre typically comprising two melody instruments and so-called 'continuo' (an accompanimental pairing of harpsichord and cello) – is thought to be the earliest surviving music by Handel, dating from a time when the composer, in his first year at University, was still based in Halle.

[6] **Trio Sonata in G minor, Op. 2, No. 2, HWV 387 – I. Andante**
from Avie Records AV2282 Track 5

[7] Handel's University education came to an abrupt end when, in July 1703, he moved from Halle to Hamburg – a 'free city', without court, that would be his home for the next three years. A powerful cultural, diplomatic and trading centre, Hamburg lay claim to a successful opera company founded in 1678: the Oper am Gänsemarkt (literally, Geese Market), a public theatre situated in the Gänsemarkt square and directed, at the time, by Reinhard Keiser, a prolific German opera composer. Handel's first position at the theatre was as a rank-and-file second violinist, but, having impressed his employer with his virtuosic keyboard skills, he soon became the continuo harpsichordist – a position of considerable importance within the opera orchestra. Handel, it seems, was particularly attached to the role: at least, this is the impression conveyed by a well-known anecdote from the period concerning Handel's professional relationship with fellow musician Johann Mattheson. Initially, that relationship was friendly, warm and convivial: the two shared a carriage to Lübeck to meet the renowned but ageing composer and organist Dieterich Buxtehude; they are thought to have found enjoyment in musical games en route, competing with one another in crafting music of increased complexity. But that professional rivalry soon turned sour, particularly in relation to a power struggle between the two over who would play the continuo role in a production of Mattheson's third opera *Cleopatra*. Mattheson, perhaps unsurprisingly, wanted to direct the final part of the opera, *his* opera, from the keyboard: an exceptional tenor singer, he had been on stage, playing the role of Antonius, until this point. But Handel, who had overseen the orchestra from the keyboard for the majority of the opera, would not cede territory. As Mattheson recounts, their dispute soon turned physical, and almost lethal:

'Incited by several people who were present, we fought a duel by the doors of the Opera House, in the open market place, and with a crowd of onlookers. Things might have passed off very unfortunately for both of us, had God's guidance not graciously ordained that my blade, thrusting against the broad, metal coat-button of my opponent, should be shattered. No harm came of the affair, and through the intervention of one of the most eminent counsellors in Hamburg, as well as of the manager of the opera house, we were soon reconciled again.'

While the Hamburg Opera was dedicated principally to Keiser's compositions, the director's absence in 1704 led Handel to attempt an opera of his own, premiered on 8th January 1705 and titled *Almira*. Broadly based on goings-on at the court of the fictional Spanish

monarch Almira, Queen of Castille, and set to a libretto by the German theologian and poet Friedrich Christian Feustking, the opera comprised 42 German and 15 Italian airs: the presence of both languages, even within the one work, was customary practice in the Hamburg theatre. The production, which was very successful and gave rise to 19 further performances, betrayed the influence of the absent Keiser on the then-19-year-old Handel: in particular, Keiser's manner of amalgamating an eclectic and cosmopolitan mix of national styles. *Almira's* scenes of spectacle, ceremony and danced divertissements were typically French; its recitatives (movements of sung speech used throughout to advance the plot) featured rhyming German verse; and the lyrical, virtuosic and at times sensual melodies were hallmarks of the Italian style. The aria 'Geloso tormento' furnishes a good example. During a court entertainment, Queen Almira becomes consumed by jealousy, believing that her beloved Fernando is flirting with another woman, Princess Edilia. With typical operatic hyperbole, Almira sings:

'Jealous torment, gnaws at my heart, Do not say that mine is a contemptible soul, For to die of jealousy, is the worst death of all.'

Listen to how Handel represents Almira's distress and impassioned sorrow: a solo oboe lament, complete with virtuosic flourishes and an expressively discordant, almost pained melodic line, contrasts with pulsating unison strings – a pounding dramatic motif marked 'forte' (loud) on each occurrence.

[8] **Almira, HWV 1 – Act I: Aria: Geloso tormento ('Jealous torment')**
from Avie Records AV2350 Track 2

[9] As well as *Almira*, Handel composed three additional operas while resident in Hamburg: the unsuccessful *Nero*, also based on a Feustking libretto, its music now lost; *Florindo* and *Daphne*, for which only short orchestral excerpts remain – the two were apparently conceived as one mammoth whole, to be performed on successive evenings. Interestingly, by the time the pair reached the stage (January 1708), Handel had left Hamburg for Italy, keen to pursue his interest in Italian opera in the country of its birth. According to the historical record, the composer received an invitation to travel in the company of 'a Prince of Tuscany', though whether this was Prince Ferdinando de Medici (a well-known musical patron), or his brother Prince Gian Gastone de Medici, is unsure. Whatever the case, Handel declined the invitation to join the Prince's entourage: he preferred to travel independently – again showing that spirit of self-determination and entrepreneurship that would come to characterize his mature years.

Indeed, Handel could well be described as a freelance musician: as Hogwood reminds us, 'Handel never in his life took a "tenured" position of the sort that Bach, Mozart or Haydn accepted.' Though he may have lacked the security and permanence of other professional occupations, Handel gained plentiful opportunity to experience first-hand the different musical cultures he sought to emulate – primarily, at this stage of his career, opera. Italy, it seems, provided fertile terrain on which Handel could establish and develop his compositional craft and his dramatic imagination. And the country brought Handel into contact with a range of important musical figures. In Rome, where a papal ban forbade public operatic performances, Handel was known first and foremost as 'Il Sassone' (a Saxon), a virtuoso keyboardist. He met composers Arcangelo Corelli, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti (challenging the latter to a harpsichord contest), as well as the celebrated soprano Margherita Durastanti (for whom Handel would later write cantatas and prima donna roles). Some of his first patrons were leading churchmen of the time – Cardinals Colonna, Ottoboni, and Pamphili – for whom he composed Latin church music, as well as his first oratorio, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (The Triumph of Time and Truth). Also in Rome he took up residence in the palace of the Marchese Francesco Maria Ruspoli, travelling to Ruspoli's country estate at Vignanello. Within the Ruspoli households, Handel was productive, composing motets, French songs, chamber music, a second Italian oratorio, and even a Spanish cantata with an obligato part for solo guitar. According to Handel expert Donald Burrows, this Iberian-themed work was 'probably composed for Sunday afternoon "conversazioni" in the summer of 1707, attended by principal representatives in Rome of Spanish Sicily, reflecting Ruspoli's social status in Rome and his political alignment in the War of the Spanish Succession.'

[10] **Cantata spagnuola, HWV 140 ('Spanish Cantata') – Aria: No se emendara jamas ('My heart will never stop loving you')**
from Sono Luminus DSL-92131 Track 3

[11] While in Rome Handel had produced music for the highest-ranking nobility, cultivated international visitors and the most important churchmen, in Florence and Venice the composer would pursue the production of his first all-Italian operas *Rodrigo* and *Agrippina*. The former premiered at Florence's Teatro di via del Cocomero in October 1707 to a favourable reception; the latter, a satirical comedy, opened the carnival season at the Teatro Grimani di San Giovanni Chrysostomo, Venice, on 26th December 1709. With a libretto by Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani, about an ambitious Julia Agrippina (the fourth wife of the Emperor Claudius) who schemes to put her son Nero (from a previous marriage) on the throne, the opera was considered Handel's first musical masterpiece and quickly established his international reputation – at the age of 24. Running for 27 performances (an extraordinary achievement for the time), *Agrippina* impressed for the intensity of its musical dramaticism. Biographer Mainwaring wrote of the first performance:

'The theatre at almost every pause resounded with shouts of Viva il caro Sassone! ("Long live the beloved Saxon!") They were thunderstruck with the grandeur and sublimity of his style, for they had never known till then all the powers of harmony and modulation so closely arranged and so forcibly combined.'

Even the following recitative, sung by the character Otho (the commander of Emperor Claudius's army who saved his master from death) is far from inexpressive. As Otho questions his role in the drama around him, lamenting the injustice of the heavens, of his Emperor, his friends and his beloved Poppaea, Handel's music expertly communicates Otho's volatile emotional states. Listen for the striking musical dissonances, the disjointed phrases, uneven contours, and sudden harmonic shifts. And listen, also, to the sounds of the orchestra. Importantly, this movement represents the sole occasion, within the opera, when Handel accompanies musical recitative with orchestra, rather than the usual and much plainer sounds of the continuo.

- [12] **Agrippina, HWV 6 – Act II, Scene 5: Otton, quai portentoso ('Otho, what prodigious ...')**
from Dynamic CDS431 Disc 2 Track 25

- [13] Renowned Handel expert Winton Dean has suggested that *Agrippina* represents an early pinnacle in the composer's operatic career: according to Dean, 'once he achieved maturity in *Agrippina*, Handel's operatic style changed little in 30 years'. Nonetheless, if this was indeed the case, Handel's life changed significantly. For a start, the success of *Agrippina* gave the composer a foot in the door with audiences, patrons and fellow musicians in England – the country in which he was shortly to settle for the rest of his life. On 11th February 1710, the London newspaper *The Post-Boy* reported from Venice:

'Mr Handel's Opera, which is now performed at San Giovanni Chrysostomo, is the best that ever was heard for the Musick; but the Words are but indifferent. Albinoni's Opera at San Cassan is also very well lik'd, both for the Words and Musick.'

Despite criticism of its libretto, Handel's opera also impressed high-ranking Germans in the audience at Venice, including the Hanoverian nobles Baron Johann Adolf Kielmansegg and Prince Ernst, the Elector's younger brother.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that a few months later, Handel left Italy for Hanover to take up the position of Kapellmeister (director of music in court) to the Elector himself (the future George I of England), an appointment that came with a generous salary and an immediate leave of absence for 12 months. Seduced by the new craze for Italian opera in London, it was to England that Handel decided to travel, via Düsseldorf. Handel's mission was clear. While attempts by other composers and theatre directors to establish a repertoire of all-sung opera in English had failed, there was scope to capitalize on public demand for what one commentator called 'real Italian music sung by Italian singers'. Hence *Rinaldo*, Handel's first opera for London, which premiered at the Queen's Theatre in Haymarket on 24th February 1711. A story of romance, redemption and conflict at the time of the First Crusade, the opera stunned audiences with its impressive scenic effects and splendid décor; this is not to forget the elaborate harpsichord improvisation, performed by Handel himself, that featured within the work. The opera was a great success, securing 14 subsequent performances – again, quite exceptional for the period. Criticism, though, did emerge from one specific outlet: the *Spectator*, a new journal founded by writers Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Addison, who had previously tried (and failed) to establish a repertoire of English opera, thought it ridiculous for English audiences to have to sit through entire evenings of musical entertainment in a foreign tongue. But critic George Hogarth acknowledged that such an attack had not dampened the English audience's enthusiasm for the opera. Hogarth wrote:

'Notwithstanding the influence which the Spectator influenced over the taste and manners of the age, its attacks ... seem to have had little effect in turning people from the entertainment.'

The following aria, sung by the knight Rinaldo's beloved Almirena, taken hostage by Rinaldo's pagan enemies, is titled 'Lascia ch'io pianga' (Let me weep). An earnest and heart-felt plea for her release, the aria is now one of the most famous of all of Handel's Italian operas.

- [14] **Rinaldo, HWV 7 – Act II, Scene 4: Lascia ch'io pianga ('Let me weep')**
from Naxos 8.553735 Track 3

- [15] At this point in his career, it is likely that Handel was aware of the real guarantors of his fame and fortune: his London audience. Indeed, the public have been described as Handel's 'power base', of signal importance to his musical priorities, his stylistic choices and instrumental combinations, as well as the dramatic stories, and librettos, he would choose to set. It is perhaps for this reason that, no sooner had Handel returned to Hanover, in order to recommence his role of Kapellmeister to the Elector, than he decided to travel once again to the English capital. In September 1712 the Elector granted Handel a second leave of absence, on the condition that the composer return 'within a reasonable time'. Before the year was out, Handel had re-settled in London – supposedly for a period of months, but actually for the rest of his life.

Attracting the patronage of aristocracy, nobility and, as we will learn, royalty, Handel was attracted by the prospect of setting himself up relatively independently as a leading composer of a genre that had already achieved considerable success overseas. As a result, Italian opera would be the composer's main concern for the forthcoming 20-or-so years, with varying financial success as well as several fallings-out between opera singers, directors and companies. Between 1713 and 1716, the composer was based at the luxurious Burlington House, home of the artistic patron Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington. Here Handel composed the Italian operas *Il pastor fido* (premiered in November 1712), *Teseo* (January 1713), *Silla* (June 1713) and *Amadigi* (May 1715). But he was also eager to promote himself as a composer of choral music, church music and court music – mainly the remit of the musicians of the Chapel Royal. But Handel still managed to obtain commissions, for ceremonial occasions, directly from the monarchy. Indeed, having being dismissed in June 1713 from his Hanover post (surely inevitable, given that the composer had not returned to Germany in that 'reasonable time' he had agreed to), Handel entered the service of Queen Anne, who granted him an annual salary and a 'retaining pension'.

- [16] **Water Music: Suite No. 2 in D major, HWV 349 – IV. Lento**
from Naxos 8.550109 Track 20

- [17] One of the most beloved pieces that Handel composed during these relatively early years in London was his *Water Music*. First performed on 17th July 1717 to accompany a trip on the River Thames, from Whitehall to Chelsea, made by King George I (who acceded to the throne in 1714, following the death of Queen Anne) and his entourage, Handel's music was designed to be ceremonial, stately and dignified, but also pure entertainment – a pleasurable diversion that the King enjoyed so much he insisted it be repeated on the return journey. Played by some 50 musicians on a second barge, most standing and crammed together, the music may also have acted as a peace offering to the King, Handel's former employer in Hanover; it may also have been construed as a publicity-boosting spectacle for

the King himself – a German-speaking figure fairly unpopular with his English subjects and generally thought rather bland and uncharismatic.

The 22 movements of Handel's work, perhaps unexpectedly, offer an eclectic stylistic melange, combining French dance music, Italian airs, English country dances and military tunes for trumpets and hornpipes. 'Alla Hornpipe', arguably the most memorable movement of Handel's *Water Music*, showcases piercing trumpet fanfares, catchy themes, lively rhythms, persistent syncopations (which have the effect of driving the movement forward) and a generally celebratory musical atmosphere.

[18] **Water Music: Suite No. 2 in D major, HWV 349 – II. Alla Hornpipe**
from Naxos 8.550109 Track 17

[19] One month after the now-infamous barge excursion, Handel became composer-in-residence to James Brydes, Earl of Carnarvon. This was a period of service that Handel would enjoy from August 1717 to February 1719. At Cannons, the Earl's magnificent mansion near Edgware in outer London, Handel was prolific, writing church music (including anthems and a *Te Deum*), dramatic music (his first English oratorio, *Esther*) and instrumental music (parts of his Eight Keyboard Suites). *Esther*, thought to have been performed by the Earl's private orchestra and choir sometime during 1718, and possibly in a semi-staged version, was Handel's initial attempt at a genre with which his name would later be considered synonymous. Based on a three-act Old Testament drama by Jean Racine, the 'oratorium' as it was called, features the Jewish orphan Esther, who, becoming Queen of Persia, saves her people from massacre by the villain, prime minister Haman. Handel's score is certainly dramatically motivated, especially his portrayal of the King's expression of love ('Oh beautiful Queen') and of Esther's plea to God for mercy ('Tears assist me'). Yet it also includes a prominent role for the chorus, as the Jews rejoice in anticipation of God's intervention to end the tyranny of Haman:

[20] **Esther, HWV 50 – Act III, Scene 1: He comes, he comes to end our woes**
from Linn Records CKD397 Disc 2 Track 2

[21] Handel's Eight Keyboard Suites, bits and pieces of which are also thought to date from Cannons (as the composer temporarily turned his attention away from opera), betray what we can now recognize as his characteristically mixed musical style, comprising (in the words of one commentator) 'French courtly dances, Italian lyricism, Teutonic counterpoint and robust English tunefulness, mixing the learned and calculated with the spontaneous and improvisatory'. Virtuosity and experimentation should also be added to the list of features: the keyboard pieces are not only technically challenging (testifying to Handel's own skills) but structurally abnormal. Suite No. 1 in A Major, for example, includes some typical movements: the Allemande, Courante and Gigue. But in place of the conventional Sarabande, Handel includes an introductory, fantasia-like Prelude – grand, impressive and virtuosic, as well as unstructured and improvisatory. The following is a modern-day performance of the movement for piano, here replacing Handel's original keyboard.

[22] **Keyboard Suite No. 1 in A major, HWV 426 – I. Prelude**
from Naxos 8.572197 Track 1

[23] It has been said that Handel's mixture of styles within the Eight Keyboard Suites – also known as the *Suites de pièce* – was likely commercially motivated, the composer keen that the compilation exude a universal appeal and thus attract the widest possible audience. Indeed, the keyboard was an increasingly popular instrument in the 1700s, not only amongst the aristocracy but the burgeoning middle classes; as a result, the instrument found a place within the theatre, the concert hall, the church and the home. (The clavichord was particularly suited to the domestic environment, with its more intimate sound and cheaper design.) In London and other major cities, there was also a substantial market for keyboard music, keyboard lessons, instruction books and of course instruments themselves. With this in mind, historians have argued that the compilation and publication of the Eight Suites in 1720 bolstered Handel's finances: an astute businessman, the composer was keen to protect his interests following the recent economic crisis caused by the South Sea Bubble, a crisis that had negatively impacted a number of Handel's English benefactors. But there was another rationale behind the 1720 publication. For in Amsterdam, an unauthorized publication of some of Handel's early keyboard music had come into circulation – an historical example, we might say, of the illegal publication of pirated copies of music, released without the composer's knowledge and consent. Keen to protect his reputation and any loss of earnings, Handel sought to safeguard his music from any future unauthorized editions. Thus in June 1720, the composer obtained a Royal Privilege for the publication of his latest keyboard pieces, the Eight Suites. On 14th November, the set was issued by the English publisher Christopher Smith (who became Handel's chief copyist and business manager) and featured a preface from the composer himself:

'I have been advised to publish some of the following Lessons, because Surreptitious and incorrect copies of them had got abroad. I have added several new ones to make the Work more useful, which if it meets with a favourable reception, I will Still proceed to publish more reckoning it my duty, with my Small talent, to serve a Nation from which I have received so Generous a Protection.'

[24] **Keyboard Suite No. 2 in F major, HWV 427 – III. Adagio**
from Naxos 8.572197 Track 7

[25] Despite the popular reception of the Eight Suites, which were reprinted on several occasions during Handel's lifetime not only in England but across northern Europe, keyboard music was soon relegated to the bottom of the composer's musical priorities. Opera, once again, was now to become his primary occupation. In fact, in 1719, Handel became the musical director of the Royal Academy of Music, an

organization (unrelated to the present-day Conservatoire) under royal charter to produce Italian operas in London. Handel's roles included 'Master of the Orchestra' and house composer; in addition, he was charged with scouting for star singers, and spent time travelling abroad to do so. The Royal Academy opened at the King's Theatre, London, on 2nd April 1720 with *Numitore*, by the Italian opera composer Giovanni Porta. Then, on 27th April, came Handel's own *Radamisto*, followed by an arrangement of Scarlatti's *Narciso*.

For the rest of the decade, Handel's professional life revolved around the Academy, as the composer produced a list of Italian operas, including *Ottone* (1723, with star soprano Francesca Cuzzoni) and *Alessandro* (1726, also featuring a new prima donna Faustina Bordoni). *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, premiered on 20th February 1724, represented 'the artistic peak of the Royal Academy's operations', an 'opera seria' (literally, serious opera) that passed as historical fiction – and that, as was customary for the genre, focused on the behaviour of the great and the powerful. Set around 47 BC, during Caesar's visit to Egypt, the opera recounts relations between Caesar, Cleopatra and her brother Tolomeo, who jointly rule over the nation. With a libretto by Nicola Francesco Haym, also a composer and a performer, the opera featured Cuzzoni as Cleopatra, as well as the star contralto castrato of the period, Francesco Bernardi, also known as Senesino, in the role of Caesar. In the Act One scene 9 aria 'Va tacito e nascoto' (Silently and slyly), to an accompaniment of strings and solo horn, Caesar contemplates his standing in Egypt. At Tolomeo's palace in Alexandria, the hero compares himself to a stealthy hunter carefully observing his prey – the prey, of course, is a metaphor for Tolomeo, King of Egypt, who Caesar views suspiciously. Handel showcases the horn for its association with hunting, the nobility, wealth and privilege; the instrument, here in such a prominent solo role, would be entirely unexpected by the London audience. (Indeed, the opera as a whole calls for four.)

[26] **Giulio Cesare in Egitto, HWV 17 – Act I: Aria: Va tacito e nascoto ('Silently and slyly')**
from Capriccio C10547 Track 11

[27] The late 1720s witnessed the dissolution of the Royal Academy of Music, largely owing to disputes between directors and subscribers, and to the financial demands of the singers, not to mention the increasing rivalry between them. At a meeting of 18th January 1729, the directors made the decision to wind-up the operation, but they allowed Handel and John James Heidegger, the Swiss count-cum-house manager, to continue producing operas 'without disturbance for five years' – that is, until 1734. Handel himself remained committed to the genre and undertook another European tour in search of new singers, taking in Venice, Bologna, Rome and Hamburg. His new company produced a mixed bag of works, including the heroic *Lotario*, a revival of *Giulio Cesare*, the satirical *Partenope*, and the pasticcio (pastiche) operas *Ormisda*, *Porro* and *Sosarme*.

Of special importance to Handel's career during this second opera-dominated period was a series of performances of *Esther*, the English oratorio dating from 1718 and his stay at Cannons. On 23rd February 1732, at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand, the music director of the Chapel Royal, Bernard Gates, staged Handel's work, supposedly with the composer's blessing. (Incidentally, this is thought to have been the only staged performance of any Handel oratorio prior to the twentieth century.) Having heard about an anonymously promoted second performance of the oratorio, on 20th April the same year in the Great Room of the York Buildings, on Villiers Street, Handel determined to oversee his own version at the King's Theatre, performed on 2nd May. With singers from the King's Theatre company (including Senesino, Francesca Bertolli and Handel's latest soprano Anna Maria Strada), as well as a choir from the Chapel Royal, *Esther* encapsulated and epitomized a new genre of music for the eager London public: religious, yes; dramatic, yes; but staged, no: *Esther* featured no acting, no scenery and no costumes. As an anonymous pamphlet reported, the lack of staging created some confusion for those in the audience:

'This being a new thing set the world a-madding. Hadn't you been at the oratorio? says one. Oh! If you don't see the oratorio you see nothing, says t'other, so away I go to the oratorio, where indeed I saw the finest assembly of people I ever beheld in my life; but to my great surprise found this sacred drama a mere concert, no scenery, dress or action, so necessary to a drama. But Handel was placed in a pulpit ... by him sat Senesino, Strada and Bertolli in their own habits. Strada gave us a 'hallelujah' of an half hour long; Senesino and Bertolli made rare work of the English tongue, you would sworn it had been Welsh. I would have wished it had been Italian, that they might have sang with more ease to themselves, since ... it might as well have been Hebrew.'

Adding to the confusion, historians have acknowledged that this 1732 version of *Esther* likely bore little relation to the 1718 original. The later version had been significantly revised and expanded, with new music and borrowings from earlier works by Handel, including the anthems *My Heart is Inditing* and the popular favourite *Zadok the Priest*, first performed at the coronation of King George II in 1727. Handel, we can presume, wanted to boost the role of the chorus in his new version of *Esther*, an approach he would soon adopt and emphasize in his later oratorios.

[28] **Zadok the Priest, HWV 258**
from Naxos 8.557003 Tracks 1–3

[29] At this point in his career, oratorio was still secondary to opera in Handel's musical ambition. But all was not plain sailing on that front. For the 1730s witnessed the establishment in London of a rival opera company, the so-called 'Opera of the Nobility', headed by Frederick, Prince of Wales. Designed to challenge Handel's operatic supremacy, the 'Opera of the Nobility' poached a number of Handel's star singers, including the London favourite Senesino. After four years of what one recent commentator has called 'operatic warfare', when Handel and Heidegger's five-year contract at the King's Theatre ended in 1734, the rival company took over. But, for Handel, all was not lost. On 7th December 1732 John Rich had opened a new theatre at Covent Garden – nowadays known as the Royal Opera House – and he offered Handel two nights a week for the performance of Italian opera. Covent Garden also held a particular attraction: namely, French dancer Marie Sallé and her ballet company, for which Handel provided newly written music in all his operas of the 1734–35 season.

Among these are some of his finest works, including *Ariodante* (premiered on 8th January 1735) and *Alcina* (on 16th April 1735): the latter, which ran for a remarkable 18 performances, is often regarded as the composer's last great operatic success. After a period of rapprochement between the two rival companies, when Frederick and his wife made a point of visiting Handel's Covent Garden for the

first production of the 1736–37 season (a revival of the popular *Alcina*), Handel seems to have lost focus. Moreover, his health had started to deteriorate. According to his friend the Earl of Shaftesbury:

'Great fatigue and disappointment, affected him so much, that he was this Spring struck with the Palsy, which took entirely away, the use of 4 fingers of his right hand; and totally disabled him from Playing: And when the heats of the Summer 1737 came on, the Disorder seemed at times to affect his Understanding.'

Fortunately, Handel's right-hand paralysis proved temporary: a trip to the vapour baths at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in September seems to have brought about a complete cure.

Opera was not entirely forgotten by the composer: new works included the legendary *Faramondo* produced in January 1738 and the curiously comic *Serse* dating from April of the same year. But, beginning with *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*, English oratorio most decisively captured Handel's musical imagination. Not all audience members, though, were convinced by this un-staged musical drama, not to mention the prominent role of the chorus – no longer a mere commentator on the action, but an active participant. For example, following the premiere of *Israel in Egypt* on 4th April 1739, Handel was obliged to make cuts to the chorus-heavy work while adding Italian-style arias to placate his audience. It is perhaps ironic, then, that it was with English choral music that Handel achieved such international success during a subsequent excursion to Dublin. Between December 1741 and June 1742, the composer – now a naturalized British citizen – offered a series of 'Musical Entertainments' in the Irish capital. On the concert programme was English choral music and recently composed oratorios culminating with his latest – and arguably his greatest – work, *Messiah*.

[30] Messiah, HWV 56 – Part II: Hallelujah
from Naxos 8.550667–68 Disc 2 Track 17

[31] With *Messiah*, and, shortly after, with *Samson*, Handel seems to have realized that the genre of English oratorio was key to his continued success as England's leading composer. Indeed, oratorio combined all the musical components in which he excelled: the smaller forms of recitative and aria (which he had perfected in his Italian operas), and the larger structures characteristic of the choral music tradition that had such deep tap-roots in English musical culture. Then there were the practical advantages of oratorio: without staging, décor and costumes, costs could be kept to a minimum. Moreover, Handel had relatively free reign over the performances: there were no theatre directors, set designers or ballet masters to collaborate – and compete – with. There was even an additional benefit, one for Handel himself and also for his concert audience. For the composer utilized the intervals of his choral concerts as occasions to perform his latest organ concertos, impressing audiences with his nimble-fingered keyboard technique.

[32] Organ Concerto No. 9 in B flat major, Op. 7, No. 3, HWV 308 – III. Spiritoso
from Naxos 9.70148 Track 11

[33] Despite these benefits, the composer nonetheless seems to have liked making things difficult for himself: after recovering from another short period of illness (in the words of his friend Charles Jennens, 'the return of his Paralytic Disorder which affects his head and speech'), Handel turned his attention to *Semele*, a mixed-genre dramatic work. Essentially an English opera arranged for concert performance (during the Lenten season of 1744), *Semele* might well have looked like an oratorio. But then there was its plot, based not on biblical or even vaguely sacred subject matter, but rather on a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about an adulterous affair between Jupiter, King of the Gods, and the mortal Princess Semele. What were the concert audience to make of it? Mary Delany, a longstanding friend of Handel, called the work 'a delightful piece of music'; but she added, '*Semele* has a strong party against it, the fine ladies, petit maitres, and *ignoramuses*. All the opera people are enraged at Handel.' Music historian Donald Burrows explains:

'The "opera party" felt that Handel was encroaching on their territory, while others who (on the strength of Samson and Messiah) were now looking to oratorio to offer spiritual uplift were not prepared for the unabashed sensuousness of a score depicting both wittily and tragically the fate of one of Jupiter's paramours.'

Handel was to run into similar troubles with one of his next works, the classical drama *Hercules*. Again, there were complaints from the 'opera party' about the concert performance. One Lady Brown, the wife of a British resident in Venice, advised audiences to boycott the performance. Handel published a newspaper announcement offering subscribers their money back, but the saga ended up working in the composer's favour and boosting his support base.

After this relatively problematic season, it is thought that Handel enjoyed an excursion first to the countryside home of the Earl of Gainsborough, then on to Scarborough, where he could benefit from the spa waters. Yet, on return to London, the composer complained once again about his health, as well as his not having composed a new work. A different kind of turmoil soon followed, as England witnessed the Second Jacobite rebellion – an attempt to overthrow the Hanoverian Succession. Handel contributed music in support of the Hanoverian cause, including a song and oratorios: one of the latter, titled *Judas Maccabaeus*, became a particular favourite among audiences, the early performances incorporating a concerto for orchestra with two wind sections – arranged from earlier music by the composer.

[34] Judas Maccabaeus, HWV 63 – Part III: See, the conqu'ring hero comes!
from Naxos 8.550102 Track 1

[35] Now a composer of considerable status and national pride, Handel continued his regular composition and performance of oratorios, creating works such as *Joshua*, *Solomon*, *Susanna* and *Theodora*; during this period, *Samson* and *Messiah* remained his most prized

oratorios and combined to form the basis of his concert repertoire for many years. But his musical output was soon to diminish in quantity, as Handel's health deteriorated further. A newspaper announcement stated that the composer had been 'seized with a paralytick disorder in the Head, which has deprived him of his sight'. The Royal surgeon William Blomfield attempted to operate in November 1752, but no lasting cure was effected. As a result, Handel came to rely on the assistance of one John Christopher Smith (the son of Handel's business manager and copyist) in preparing his scores, including that of his final oratorio *The Triumph of Time and Truth*; this, though, was nothing more than an English version of one of Handel's earlier Italian works, *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità*. In the end, it was his blindness and ill health that led to Handel's death on 14th April 1759. His request for burial 'in a private manner' in Westminster Abbey was honoured and occurred during the evening of 20th April. According to sources, some 3,000 mourners attended the service.

On his death, Handel was a much-beloved national icon, a figurehead of the English musical establishment whose works had crossed boundaries between genres and styles, not to mention national musical cultures. Certainly, he was no musical conservative: his music tended to consolidate the defining characteristics of the major European idioms of the day, and in such a way as to conceal any ungainly contrasts. As a result, Handel was known for his eclectic tastes, his alertness to changing trends at home and abroad, and his stylistic versatility. He was a self-critical composer whose scores reveal considerable revision and rewriting before performances. He was self-sufficient, independent and, also, ambitious. As this short biography has revealed, he left the security of a position as a church musician in his hometown of Halle; he travelled independently to Italy, turning down the opportunity of a position within a Prince's entourage; he settled in London, a city lacking the established musical institutions and ready-made publics that could be found on the continent; he remained a guest, not a salaried employee, in the noble households of Ruspoli in Rome and Brydges at Cannons; and he was never the servant of an individual patron. In sum, he was a quite exceptional figure, a bastion of musical distinction, resourcefulness and eclecticism.

[36] Recorder Sonata in F major, HWV 369 – III. Siciliana
from Naxos 8.550700 Track 16