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# George Frederic Handel

## His Life, His Times and His Music



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## Handel's Life

Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685. He showed interest in music, but was not encouraged to develop it. His father hated music, considering it a pastime that showed weakness of character. He wanted his son to have the financially secure career of a lawyer and therefore wouldn't allow young Handel to play an instrument.

Nevertheless, Handel managed to learn to play the organ and clavichord – a small instrument that resembles a piano. One story suggests that Handel's sympathetic mother smuggled the clavichord to him in the attic. By covering the strings with cloth, Handel was able to practice every night without being heard by his father.

Handel might never have been allowed to practice music openly if it hadn't been for a duke who heard him play the organ. The duke persuaded Handel's father to allow him to take music lessons.

The young boy's first music teacher was F.W. Zachau, the organist of the Lutheran Church in Halle. Handel, who was about eight years old, made quick progress under Zachau's direction, learning the organ, harpsichord and violin, as well as composition, harmony and counterpoint. By the time Handel was 11, Zachau admitted that there was nothing more he could teach his bright pupil.

Handel's father wanted to stop Handel's musical training at this point. He ordered his son to return immediately from a visit to Berlin. Handel reached his father's house just in time to be with his 74-year-old-father when he died.

For a long time, Handel continued to feel a duty to his father and kept up with studies leading to a law career. At the same time, however, he sharpened his musical skills by writing cantatas for church services and working as a church organist.

At 18, he finally decided his destiny was in music. He left his birthplace for Hamburg, Germany, determined to improve his musical knowledge and ability. It was the start of numerous travels that greatly influenced the composer's work.

## **Hungry Handel heads for Hamburg**

Hamburg was the centre of German opera when Handel arrived there in 1703. Handel got a job at the city's famous opera house as second violinist, but soon took advantage of a musician's absence to show his tremendous talent at the harpsichord.

At the opera house, Handel became friends with Johann Mattheson who, at 22, was four years older than Handel and a composer, singer and music theorist. In December, 1704, their friendship was interrupted by a quarrel that led to a duel over how one of Mattheson's operas should be performed. Mattheson's sword split when it struck one of the buttons on Handel's coat. Handel's career came close to being over before it really began!

## **Prince invites Handel to Italy**

From Hamburg, Handel travelled to Italy at the invitation of a prince who had heard Handel's music and was impressed by it; Handel's primary motivation was to gain experience, especially from the composers of Italy's famous operas.

Italy proved to be a turning point in Handel's musical development. He heard and met the composers and performers of some of the world's greatest operas, oratorios and chamber cantatas, as well as the principal instrumental forms of the concerto and sonata. The experience refined Handel's talents.

Later, in England, he was called the "great bear" because of his huge size, awkward walk and gruff manner.

## **Handel sets his sights on London opera house**

As in Germany and Italy, Handel absorbed England's best music and integrated it into his own works.

On his first visit to England, a 26-year-old Handel set his sights on London's new opera house, the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, where he produced the first Italian opera composed specifically for London. *Rinaldo* was produced in February 1711. Its 15 performances

were a tremendous success and a decisive influence on Handel's later career.

Handel made several trips to Germany where his family and employers were, but he kept returning to England at every opportunity. In 1713, a commission from Queen Anne helped Handel to sever his ties with Germany and make England his permanent home.

Handel was named music director of the Royal Academy of Music when it opened in April 1720. For eight years the Academy was considered Europe's operatic capital, with the best performers and composers. Several of Handel's works, and his ability to convince star singers to perform in London, contributed to the Academy's success.

The Academy's eventual decline is attributed to the high salaries demanded by performers, as well as to conflicts among the Academy's rival composers, singers and patrons. Handel's quick temper and dictatorial manner did not help. He had several spats with other composers. His hot temper, however, was balanced by a cool sense of wit. Many of his friends and acquaintances praised the humorous way Handel would retell a story, often using a mix of four languages – English, French, Italian and German – to get his point across.

Handel was well known for his temper and the way he would yell at a performer who did not follow his orders. When one singer refused to sing a piece as Handel ordered, he actually held her out a window.

After the Academy closed, Handel joined another opera house and continued to produce operas and rework his existing material with varying degrees of success. Handel regained his success by establishing the English oratorio as a popular form of music.

### **Stroke, blindness fail to stop Handel**

In April 1737, Handel suffered a stroke, which temporarily paralyzed his right arm and prevented him from performing. The stroke also affected the composer's mind. While he remained active, his efforts were scattered over the next four years. He continued to produce Italian operas, even though the public no longer favoured them.

By the time he was 65, Handel also suffered from blindness in one eye. The loss of sight affected the quality of Handel's later compositions. Soon after, he went completely blind.

The disability was a serious blow to Handel, who with age had withdrawn from most friends, social functions and politics in order to concentrate on his work. Nevertheless, he continued to play organ and concertos from memory, and later improvised musical scores. Despite his tough exterior, Handel possessed a kind spirit. He regularly gave concerts for the benefit of needy performers and charities.

Handel never married or had children. He left the bulk of his sizable estate to a niece in Germany. There were gifts to his other relations, servants and friends, as well as his favourite charities.

## Handel's Times

### **Outlandish fashions marked Handel's time**

Handel was born into a period of history that emphasized proper behaviour. People began to pay more attention to practicing correct manners and improving their appearance.

### **Clothes make the man in Handel's day**

Wealthy men made a great effort to show their financial and social status through their clothing. The heavy and usually dark cloth of their jackets and coats was brightened with gold and silver buttons. Waistcoats were delicately embroidered and worn slightly open to show a fine linen shirt trimmed with fancy ruffles.

Wigs covered the heads of most fashionable men. These hairpieces were made in dozens of styles and carefully looked after by wig specialists called perruquiers. They used a special hair and scalp ointment called pomatum to help keep the wig's curls in place, before covering it in fashionable powder.

Wigs were very expensive and men risked having them stolen right off their heads when they walked in a busy street. It was also common for thieves to cut holes in the back of carriages so they could steal the valuable hairpieces from unsuspecting passengers.

### **Women taller than men by a hair (piece)**

Women's fashions were even more outlandish. Their hair was piled as high as possible on their heads, making them appear much taller than men.

A head cushion was worn on the head as the base of the hairstyle and a few huge curls were pinned on each side of it. Then the decorations were added. These included ribbons, long ostrich feathers, flowers and even fruit. The higher and more decorated the hair, the more fashionable it was considered.

The hoops that women wore under their petticoats were just as impractical. They caused a woman's skirt to take up the entire width

of a sidewalk. The long train that usually formed part of a woman's skirts made walking in these hooped skirts even more difficult. If a woman did not have a footman to help her carry this train, it was very easy for the train to be stepped on by other people.

### **Women go to great lengths to save face**

Pale skin was considered beautiful and women covered their faces in a foundation of unhealthy white lead. Lips were rouged with red leather or colored plaster, while eyebrows were darkened with black lead or covered with false eyebrows.

Many fashionable sometimes women wore patches on their face to indicate the politicians they supported. These circular or crescent-shaped patches also covered smallpox scars.

It was common for women to wear false teeth and to place small cork balls into their mouths to make their cheeks look rounder. These cork balls, called plumpers, caused women to speak with a stylish lisp.

### **Infrequent bathing creates flourishing fragrance industry**

Wealthy ladies had a footman who carried a small case packed with bottles of scents and aromatic vinegar for them. Some women carried their own purses filled with their favourite scents.

These perfumes, along with a hand-held fan, helped women to deal with the foul odor that most people had. Europeans were not very clean during Handel's time. They rarely took baths, and often wore the same clothes for days.

The trouble it took to warm up sufficient amounts of water helps to explain why baths were infrequent. Soaking in a tub was usually done as a cure for an illness.

Washing clothes, especially the heavy fabrics that were commonly worn, was equally difficult. Only when cheap cotton became widely available later in the 18th century was laundry done more often. Cotton also led to better table manners. Cloth napkins were more commonly used because they were easier to wash.

Of course, not everyone could afford to dress in these eccentric fashions. Most people did not have the money to run out and buy the latest clothes, wigs, makeup and scents. They nonetheless paid great attention to these trends and tried to imitate them as best they could.

### **Handel's feelings expressed openly**

People were encouraged to be quiet, work hard and follow the rules of their religion. Doing things because they were enjoyable wasn't approved.

This may help to explain why Handel's father regarded music as a frivolous activity and wanted his son to have the honourable and financially secure career of a lawyer. As Handel grew older and gained success as a composer, he was able to use his music to change this restrictive way of thinking.

Not everyone approved of Handel's music. A large segment of society believed that God would disapprove of people who enjoyed music and other leisure activities.

Handel's strongest opposition came from religious leaders. There is little doubt that Handel's long stays in Rome influenced the fact that he wrote only two operas in Italy. Opera was forbidden in Rome by orders of the Pope.

Nevertheless, Handel and other composers were able to get around this restriction by writing music in operatic style, but calling these compositions either oratorios or cantatas.

### **Religious themes selected for many compositions**

Handel chose religious themes for many of his compositions, and people started to approve of using this beautiful music to worship God. As they grew accustomed to enjoying religious music, they began to appreciate other types of music and artistic expression.

*Messiah* is Handel's best-known example of creative worship. This world-famous English oratorio is divided in three segments. The first deals with the coming of the Messiah. The second concerns the



suffering and death of Christ. The last part celebrates the Resurrection.

Handel expressed a wide range of emotions through his music. Whether it was joy, sadness, or the fear and excitement that come from being in a dramatic situation, he was able to compose music to interpret those feelings.

## Handel's Music

### **A master composer at work**

George Frederic Handel is recognized as a great composer of the Baroque age (1600-1750), a period that featured long, elaborate pieces of music that often required many singers.

Handel is best known for his English oratorios. An oratorio is basically an opera without the costumes and scenery. He introduced this format to England, where it quickly became popular. Several of Handel's oratorios continue to be performed as church music in English-speaking countries around the world.

The composer's tremendous success with oratorios tends to overshadow his ability in other kinds of music. He was a master of Italian-style operas. He also wrote beautiful scores for instruments only. The common thread throughout Handel's music is his ability to blend a rich variety of sounds that are still enjoyed today.

Handel was an eclectic artist. He combined German, Italian, French and English musical traditions to compose his own works. His first music teacher, F.W. Zachau, may have played a significant role in Handel's lifelong tendency to borrow and rework existing music. Zachau, who had a large collection of German and Italian music in manuscript form, encouraged the young Handel to copy and imitate different styles.

### **Handel's musicianship enriched by travel**

Handel's extensive travels enriched his skills as a composer and musician. The years he spent in Italy (1706-1710) were the most significant. Italy exposed Handel to the best of opera, oratorio and chamber cantata, as well as the instrumental forms of the concerto and sonata. By playing and studying with Italy's leading composers and musicians, Handel turned his raw talent as a composer into a polished style.

A large part of Handel's genius involves the way he often broke or stretched the traditional rules of music to make a dramatic impact.

He concentrated on writing music that would entertain the public, rather than being concerned with what other composers would think of his work.

England's royalty recognized Handel's talent and often hired him to write music for special occasions. He composed solemn pieces for state funerals, as well as joyous music to celebrate royal weddings, coronations, the end of a war and other historic events.

Handel had the habit of working extremely hard for short, intense periods of time so that his compositions were completed quickly. He wrote *Messiah*, his most famous oratorio, in just over three weeks. Handel also tended to return to his earlier compositions to work at improving them, although sometimes his revisions lessened the quality of his original music.

The composer's inspiration often came from the sounds he could produce at the organ keyboard. He was also motivated by the words that were written to tell a story in an opera or oratorio. He wrote music to fit the images that those words produced in his mind.

### **Handel follows common practice of borrowing music for his own compositions**

Handel often stirred controversy by borrowing from the works of other composers. This was something he did not hesitate to do if it seemed the most convenient way to finish his own project.

The practice was common among composers, and there were usually no hard feelings as long as the borrower developed the material in his own style. By the 1730s, however, Handel began to incorporate entire movements by other composers into his own works. Some historians suggest Handel borrowed extensively during this period because physical and mental problems interfered with his own creativity.

Borrowing didn't bother Handel's conscience, except when he was accused of depending on the talent of another composer. This was rarely the case, because Handel usually took the core of another composer's idea and developed it in a superior way.

Unfortunately, some of Handel's music is unavailable today. His first opera, *Almira*, is the only existing work that can positively be identified with Handel's Hamburg period (1703-1706). The opera, performed in January 1705, was fairly successful. *Nero*, a second opera performed a month later, was a failure and the music from it is lost. Only parts of two other early operas, *Florindo* and *Daphne*, survive. Other works are missing, although Handel probably revised and included them in later compositions.

### **Composers' works often backed by patrons**

Composers needed patrons to pay for their work. These patrons often influenced what composers wrote. Marquis Francesco Ruspoli, a rich and ambitious man, was a great supporter of Handel in Rome. He employed Handel as a household musician during at least three different periods. The terms of Handel's employment were flexible, but he was expected to produce cantatas for performance on Sundays.

Handel worked under similar conditions while he lived at the residence of Lord Burlington in Surrey, England, for three years. He composed during the day and performed for company in the evenings.

A few years after he settled in England, Handel received a raise from Queen Caroline for teaching her two daughters, in addition to being employed by the royal court. He continued to receive an annual pension from England's royalty throughout his life.

### **The English oratorio contributes to Handel's fame**

The work that contributed most to Handel's fame was the English oratorio, in which a chorus of singers would tell a story by singing it to the audience. Handel introduced this type of music after the Bishop of London objected to operas.

Handel liked the oratorio format. He enjoyed making greater use of the chorus for dramatic effect, and he appreciated not having to arrange for the financing of expensive costumes and theatre props.

The composer took advantage of middle-class interest in classical Bible stories as the base for his oratorios. However, the composer soon learned that the middle-class support had its drawbacks. This element

of society was very religious and viewed many forms of art as evil influences. Handel advertised the initial London performance of *Messiah* as a New Sacred Oratorio to avoid offending anyone. The plan quickly backfired when the press announced that an oratorio, considered an Act of Religion, should not be played in a theatre.

He regularly surprised and delighted his audiences by allowing certain notes to last longer than anyone would ever expect.

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## What to Listen for in Handel's Music

### **Concerto Grosso in B flat major, Op.3, No.2**

A concerto grosso is a musical composition written for a group of soloists (concertino) and orchestra (ripieno). The concertino and the ripieno sometimes play in unison, but more often they play in contrast with each other.

In or about 1720, Handel produced a series of six concertos for string instruments. One of them was the *Concerto Grosso in B flat major, Op.3, No.2*. In this piece, the concertino is made up of two oboes and one bassoon, which introduce the melody or theme. Throughout the piece, this melody is passed on to other instruments and transformed into different variations.

While Handel did not invent this style of music, he developed it to a new level of sophistication.

### **Organ Concerto in F major, "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale"**

A concerto is different from a concerto grosso in that it is written for one soloist, rather than a group of soloists, and orchestra.

One of Handel's most popular concertos for organ and orchestra is known as "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale", because the second movement imitates the sounds of these birds.

This work provides a good example of how Handel used previously composed music in his compositions. It contains material from his *Concerto Grosso Op. 6, No.9*, and from his *Trio Sonatas N<sup>os</sup>. 5 and 6*.

### **Water Music Suite**

Handel composed his *Water Music Suite* (1717) for a water pageant that King George I planned to enjoy on the Thames River. This is how the event was described in the July 19, 1717, edition of the London's *Daily Courant* newspaper.

On Wednesday evening about 8, the King (George I) took water at Whitehall in an open barge... and went up the river toward

Chelsea. Many other barges with persons of quality attended, and so great was the number of boats, that the whole river in manner was covered.

A city company's barge was employed for the music, and there were fifty instruments of all sorts, playing all the way from Lambeth... the finest symphonies, composed expressly for this occasion by Mr. Handel, which His Majesty liked so well that he caused it to be played over three times in going and returning.

### **Music for the Royal Fireworks**

*Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749), one of Handel's finest accomplishments, was composed to celebrate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which officially established peace between France and England, as well as other European countries. The composition was played by a larger-than-customary orchestra: 24 oboes, 12 bassoons, nine trumpets, one contrabassoon, three pairs of timpani and a 'serpent' (a type of horn that is no longer used).

King George II asked Handel to write music for as many military instruments (horns) as possible and hoped 'fiddles' (strings) would be excluded. Handel initially objected to these constraints, as well as the planned public rehearsal, but he finally agreed. When the outdoor rehearsal took place (without fireworks), a crowd of 12,000 created a major traffic jam.

The actual performance on April 27 went splendidly, too, but the subsequent fireworks did not work as well. They started a fire, which caused the main building at Green Park in London to burn down and the crowd to disperse in close to a panic.

### **"Arrival of the Queen of Sheba"**

This oratorio is one of Handel's best-known baroque compositions. "Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" is actually part of Handel's oratorio *Solomon*, which was composed in 1748 and performed the following year. Again, it is an example of Handel's ability to borrow ideas, but the final version of this music certainly is.

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## ***Messiah***

*Messiah* (1742) is considered by many to be the greatest oratorio ever written. The complete work contains 50 sections and requires two-and-one-half hours to perform.

Handel composed it in 25 days of almost constant work. During this time, he refused to be interrupted by friends, hardly ate and rarely slept.

This composer was not a particularly religious man until the later years in his life, but he acknowledged a divine source as the motivational force for *Messiah*. When he finished the famous "Hallelujah Chorus", which praises God as the King of Kings, he told a servant, 'I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God himself.'

At the first London performance of *Messiah*, King George II stood up when the chorus sang the "Hallelujah Chorus". It is not clear why the King stood, whether in tribute to Handel or because he needed a stretch. Whatever the reason, everyone else stood out of respect to both the King and the composer. This tradition continues today.