

Georg Friederich Händel* was born in 1685, a vintage year indeed for Baroque composers, in Halle on the Saale river in Thuringia, Germany on February 23rd. At the age of 18, in 1703, he traveled to Hamburg, where he made the acquaintance of Prince Ferdinando dei Medici, son and heir of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, who invited Handel to visit Italy where he spent more than three years, mainly in Rome, but also taking the opportunity to visit Florence, Naples and Venice. * On taking British nationality Handel adopted the forenames George Frideric.

Italy was a great center of musical activity, particularly during the first 20 years of the 1700s, and Handel was to meet and exchange ideas with many of the leading composers, musicians and nobility of the time, including Prince Ernst August of Hanover, brother of the Elector, George Louis, who was destined in 1714 to become King George I of England. Handel went with him to England, the country which, with royal patronage, was to become his home for the rest of his life.

In the summer of 1717 the King requested a concert on the River Thames and thus Handel was commissioned to write a "Water Music", for Wind and Strings. On the 17th of July an evening of entertainment was therefore given on the Thames before the King and members of the Court along with musicians accommodated in the Royal barges, a concert that went on until the early hours of the morning after repeated requests from the King for "encores".

In a report dated July 19th, 1717, Frederic Bonnet, the Brandenburg envoy to the English Court wrote:

"Some weeks ago the King expressed a wish to Baron von Kilmanseck to have a concert on the river, by subscription, like the masquerades this winter which the King has attended assiduously on each occasion. The Baron addressed himself therefore to Heidegger, a Suisse by nationality, being the most intelligent agent the nobility could have for their pleasures. Heidegger answered that as much as he was eager to oblige his Majesty, he must reserve his subscription for the big enterprises; to wit, the Masquerades, each of which was worth from 300 to 400 guineas to him. Baron Kilmanseck, seeing that H.M. was vexed about these difficulties, resolved to give the concert on the river at his own expense, and so the concert took place the day before yesterday..."

"By the side of the Royal barge was that of the musicians to the number of 50 who played all kinds of instruments, viz., trumpets, violins and basses, but without voices. This concert was composed expressly for the occasion by the famous Handel, native of Halle, and First Composer of the King's music. It was so strongly approved that H.M. commanded it to be repeated, once before and once after supper, although it took an hour for each performance. . . The Concert has cost Baron Kilmanseck £150 for the musicians alone..."

The **Music for the Royal Fireworks** was composed some 30 years later, in 1749, to accompany the festivities at Green Park in celebration of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. The public rehearsal in Vauxhall Gardens drew an audience of some 12,000 people and created a 3-hour traffic jam on London Bridge! The actual performance was unfortunately less spectacular as some of the fireworks were affected by rain, and one of the set pieces caught fire. It is possible that the last five movements, including and following the Bourrée, were used to accompany the appearance of allegorical figures in the course of the display.

Shortly after his death ten years later, on April 14th, 1759, Handel started to become a legend. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, his burial site marked by a monument, again by Roubiliac. Documents on his life began to flow, and on the 25th anniversary of his death in 1784 an unprecedented series of three Commemoration Concerts was organized at Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon.

Despite his German origin, Handel epitomizes more than any other composer the spirit of England, and these two works, spanning as they do thirty years in Handel's musical life, epitomize his music as much as any.

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Front Cover: The Sharp family making music on the Thames, 1781, by the painter Johann Zoffany (1734/5 - 1810). Born in Frankfurt, Zoffany spent most of his working life in England. His decisive breakthrough came with a commission from Garrick to portray a group of actors at work. The Sharp family is here portrayed in theatrical style during one of their musical excursions on the Thames near Fulham. Each family member is clearly identifiable, including the family dog.