

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, in Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice.

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.

Though the Court gave him a useful foothold in England, Handel's great love of opera, its flamboyant singers and the challenge of inciting and maintaining the interest of a fickle public audience began to draw him away from the fairly constricted circle of the Court and its music. In the winter of 1718-19 members of the nobility created an Italian opera company in London, initially funded by an eight-year subscription, calling it, with the King's permission, 'The Royal Academy of Music' with Handel as its Music Director. During the next eight years, almost half the performances were given over to Handel operas.

In January 1728, however, Gay's *Beggar's Opera* opened at the Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It was not a true opera but a play with songs made up from popular tunes (including some by Handel), and treated London's low life in a way that parodied current political and cultural events - not excluding Italian opera.

Over 60 performances were given that year, eclipsing the final season of the Royal Academy. This was significant in that it marked the beginning of a change in London musical taste and fashion, away from Italian opera in favor of something less highbrow, more home-grown, and more easily intelligible. At first, Handel refused to forsake Italian operas, and managed despite several dramatic failures, to continue writing and producing them for a few years longer.

Finally however, while he was still determined to write for the stage, Handel recognized at last the realities of changing public tastes - and the economics of ignoring them, and turned to a form which he had gradually been developing over ten years: *English Oratorios*, in many ways musically operatic, though far more reliant upon the chorus.

"*Alexander's Feast*" was followed by "*Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verita*", then "*Saul*", and the Biblical epic "*Israel in Egypt*" (1739). Handel's printer-publisher John Walsh took the unprecedented step of bringing out a full score of "*Alexander's Feast*", thus confirming the popularity not only of the work but of the genre. At last Handel had recognized the public's preference for, and taste in English choral works, thus giving himself a new creative lease of life.

Handel's Organ Concertos were written primarily as *interludes* within his Oratorios, the first two, according to Dr. Charles Burney, appearing with "*Deborah*" on March 17th and *Esther* on April 14th, 1733, both at the King's Theatre, Haymarket. "*Two new Organ Concertos*" were advertised for the Covent Garden performance of "*Esther*" on March 5th, 1735, of which socialite Mrs. Pendarves wrote to her mother ten days later, describing them as "*the finest things I ever heard in my life*". Thereafter it became commonplace to include Organ Concertos and, indeed, concertos for other instruments too. Madame Fiquet du Bocage relates in a letter dated April 15th, 1750, that the Organ Concertos were played '*either alone or accompanied by the orchestra*'.

Sir John Hawkins ('*A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*' 1776) wrote of Handel:
"*When he gave a Concerto, his method in general was to introduce it with a voluntary movement on the diapasons, which stole on the ear in a slow and solemn progression; the harmony close wrought, and as full as could possibly*

be expressed; the passages concatenated with stupendous art, the whole at the same time being perfectly intelligible, and carrying the appearance of great simplicity. This kind of prelude was succeeded by the Concerto itself which he executed with a degree of spirit and firmness that no one has ever pretended to equal."

Almost without exception every one of Handel's Sacred and Secular Oratorios included at least one Organ Concerto – “*The Messiah*” had them for performances in Dublin and London.

In his ‘Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression’ (1753) William Hayes wrote that Handel “*at the Age of Seventy to the Astonishment of all Mankind performed Wonders on the Organ, both set Pieces and extempore*”. William Mason (“Essays on English Church Music” 1795) regretted that nothing could “*compensate for the want of that Solo, now alas! to be heard no more*”.

Two sets of Organ Concertos were printed during Handel's lifetime; two others posthumously. The first, entitled ‘*Six Concertos For the Harpsichord or Organ*’ was announced in the *London Daily Post* dated 4 October 1738. The title page included the statement: “*These Six Concertos were Published by Mr. Walsh from my own Copy Corrected by my Self, and to Him only I have given my Right therein. George Frederick Handel.*”

The second collection entitled ‘*A Second Set*’ was announced in the *London Daily Post* for November 8th, 1740.

The third collection imaginatively entitled ‘*A Third Set*’ was announced in the *Public Advertiser* for February 23rd, 1761, (Opus 7); though published two years after his death, it seems likely that Handel supervised the preparation of this edition.

On this CD we offer the complete Third Set, consisting of Six Concertos. That these Concertos, as formally published, would not have been anywhere near as impressive as Handel’s actual and personal renditions is quite clear from contemporary reports. Handel was a great improviser, and indeed these Concertos were built around Handel’s own improvisations, which would of course have differed with each performance. The Concertos themselves, in their published form, leave ample scope for improvisation, which is actually called for in several instances.

Though few performers today would dare to claim parity with Handel in their improvisatory capabilities, we believe that the well-known organist, Karl Richter, comes very close to Handel in this ability. The recording itself was made at Karl Richter’s home base of St. Marks Church, Munich, Bavaria, where over the years he gave many of his Organ recitals.

There is often confusion over Handel's correct forenames. Born **Georg Friedrich Händel** in Halle on the Saale River in Thuringia, and after a sojourn in Italy Handel went to Hanover in 1710, where he was appointed Capellmeister to the Elector, George Louis. As a result of the British Act of Settlement of 1701 which secured the Protestant succession to the Crown, George Louis was to become King George I of England in 1714. By 1705 George had already been naturalized by an Act of Parliament, and Handel was to follow the Elector in adopting English nationality, along with his “new” names of **George Frideric**.

More HANDEL ORGAN CONCERTOS, The “**First Set**”, 1738 - **Op. 4** - Nos. 1, 4, 5, 6 & 13 are available on *Baroque Music Collection BMC 5*