

## BMC 23 - HANDEL HARPSICHORD SUITES - *Christopher Wood*

**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.

Handel's father was Surgeon to the Court at Weissenfels; the story is told that on a visit to the Court, Handel's father took with him his young son who promptly wandered into the chapel and began to play the organ. The Duke overheard him playing and encouraged his father to provide further musical tuition. Though this did not happen to quite the extent the Duke might have had in mind, Handel's father intending his son for law rather than music, it set the young lad on his future course. The elder Handel grudgingly permitted his son to study with Zachau, Organist of the Liebfrauenkirche Halle, where he was taught harmony and counterpoint, the organ, harpsichord, violin and oboe.

Handel visited Berlin in 1696 and heard some Italian music at the Court of the Electress Sophia Charlotte, but when the Princess suggested that he should be sent to study music in Italy his father again refused.

He was only twelve when he was appointed Assistant Organist at Halle Cathedral. Five years later he entered the University to complete law studies, it being still his father's wish that he should enter the legal profession. On March 13th 1702 he succeeded Leporin as Cathedral Organist at the annual salary of 50 thalers and lodging. He continued his studies at the University but left in 1703, having succeeded in persuading his mother that the law was not for him.

He resigned from his Organist's post and made his way to Hamburg, securing a post at the Opera House as 'Violino di ripieno' and later as Harpsichordist. Handel's first Opera, *Almira*, was produced at Hamburg in January 1705.

Whilst in Hamburg, Handel made the acquaintance of Prince Ferdinando de' 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. By 1706 he had reached Rome, where Marquis (later Prince) Francesco Ruspoli employed him as a household musician and where most of Handel's major Italian works were composed. This visit was significant; Baroque music, like that of any period, has its musical clichés, and much that is typical of Baroque music can be traced back to Italy and particularly to Corelli, with whom Handel had studied. The influence of Italy was to show itself in Handel's lifetime preoccupation with opera – as well as Italian operatic "stars". His Concerti Grossi too, bear witness to the influence of Italy and Corelli.

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 – and not only Italians, for it was obligatory for every cultural and music-loving person of any rank or nobility to do the "Grand European Tour" which naturally included the main Italian cultural centers. Thus on his travels around Italy Handel also made a number of useful contacts including the Duke of Manchester, the English Ambassador, and most significantly Prince Ernst August of Hanover, brother of the Elector (later King George I of England) who pressed him to visit Hanover.

The Prince may also have intimated the possibility of a post at the Hanoverian Court, for when Handel left Italy early in 1710 it was for Hanover, where he was in fact appointed Capellmeister to the Elector, George Louis, who immediately packed him off on a twelve months' leave of absence to visit England.

The Royal Houses of Britain and Germany had always been closely inter-related, and the Act of Settlement of 1701 which secured the Protestant succession to the Crown of England, had made Handel's Hanoverian employer George Louis' Mother Heiress-presumptive to the Throne of Great Britain. Thus the Elector George Louis would have been anxious to have Handel spy out the land and report back to him on the London musical, social and political scene.

By prior arrangement he obtained leave of absence to visit England, where he produced *Rinaldo*. After a stay of

six months Handel returned to Hanover, remaining there until the spring of 1712, when he again left for London. Handel overstayed his leave and was still in London in September 1714 when Britain had a new monarch. Thus it was that George Louis, Elector of Hanover and already naturalized by Act of Parliament in 1705, became King George I of England, initiating the Royal House of Hanover.

One of the first engagements for the new George I was to attend Morning Service at the Chapel Royal where "A *Te Deum* was sung, composed by Mr Handel" - and Handel's position with the new Ruler appears to have then been secured. In addition to his royal duties for King and Court - his 'Caroline' *Te Deum* was performed by the Chapel Royal musicians at the King's first Royal Engagement.

Among Handel's Keyboard Works are two sets of Eight Harpsichord Suites. The composer was acting as music-master to the King's daughters when he published his first set of Suites "*pour le clavecin*". Though the publication date was 1720, sketches for some of the movements were made as far back as 1705. In a preface Handel stated that he had published them "*because Surreptitious and incorrect copies of them had got abroad.*" The seven Suites recorded here are all from the First Book. The Second Book was published without the composer's permission by John Walsh in 1733. These two sets contain the cream of Handel's essays for this medium. In the virtuoso class as a performer on the harpsichord and organ, Handel improvised to a great extent, and he no doubt embellished his own performances with all sorts of ornamentation, which would have filled out the harmonies.

Although Handel employs dance forms throughout these Suites, they are by no means mere collections of dance movements, being planned with greater freedom. One or two conform to the four-movement succession of *Allemande, Courante, Sarabande* and *Gigue*, while others open with a *Prelude*, a *Fugue*, or a *French Overture* and conclude with a *Passacaglia* or *Minuet*.

Some of the movements of these Suites were transcribed by the composer and appear in other works: the Fugue from Suite No. 6 appears, in a slightly modified form, in the Concerto Grosso, Op. 3/5, while the Overture of Suite No. 7 also serves as the Overture to the Opera *Orestes*. The movement marked 'Presto' in the d-minor Suite came from a Lesson in D minor. Handel also used it as part of the Overture to the Opera "*Il pastor fido*" and as the finales of the Concerto Grosso, Op. 3/6 and the Organ Concerto in d-minor, Op. 7/4.