

BMC 41 - HANDEL: The Six Concerti Grossi Op. 3. & Oboe Concertos 2 & 3

Unlike the twelve Concertos of Handel's Opus 6, which are basically String Concertos, the Six Concertos of Opus 3 here recorded might almost be considered Handel's answer to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites, at least in terms of the variety of instrumentation, and style of the various movements.

In addition to the usual Allegros and Andantes, we find Minuets, Gavottes and grand French style Overtures. Instrumentation includes oboes and violins, supplemented by flutes and bassoons, and in the last Concerto, a concertante keyboard (harpsichord or organ).

We owe this splendid set of Concertos to the enterprise of one John Walsh, an English publisher who saw himself as a strong competitor to Roger of Amsterdam who not only published the great names of continental composers but also had a significant distributor network.

Walsh clearly saw Handel as a prime source of material, and it was he who published Handel's Organ Concertos. Walsh appears to have persuaded Handel to supply compositions for publication on a regular basis, and in 1734, Handel quickly assembled a collection of Six Concerti Grossi, incorporating favorite music from his previous operas, anthems and sacred works along with new material. The set of six was issued as Opus 3.

For the origins of these works however, we must go back in time almost twenty years to Handel's period of service to James Brydges, the Duke of Chandos. Brydges rose by force of personality, administrative ability and the favour of the Duke of Marlborough to become Paymaster of the Forces Abroad during the War of the Spanish Succession. The Paymaster was able to speculate with the monies he received, and by the time he left the post in 1713 Brydges had accumulated a fortune estimated at £600,000, a sum having in the year 1713 the same purchasing power as £58 million, or \$95 million today. The Duke then set about the enlargement of Cannons, his family home near London, remodeling the Jacobean mansion in the Georgian Baroque style.

In 1717 Brydges was created first Duke of Chandos 'for no apparent reason', and in the same year on August 4th, he secured the services of Handel who joined the Chapelmaster Dr. Pepusch as composer-in-residence. The Duke maintained an excellent musical establishment of up to thirty first-class players among whom were named Francesco Scarlatti, brother of Alessandro, and Johann Christoph Bach, cousin of J.S. Here Handel produced his magnificent Chandos Anthems (BMC 37 & 38) and much keyboard and instrumental music.

However, the Duke's prosperity and Handel's employment by him would be short lived. In July 1720 the Duke, along with much of Britain's gentry, was caught holding inflated, and now collapsed shares in the infamous South Sea Bubble. Chandos himself suffered major losses, signaling the end of his princely lifestyle. Needless to say, Handel left to seek his fortune elsewhere. Nonetheless, as can be seen from the detail below, the "Chandos Years" proved a highly creative period for Handel.

The first movement of the Concerto No. 2 is drawn from the Brockes Passion. The vigorous third-movement fugue, one of Handel's finest, exists in two earlier versions: one for orchestra, one for keyboard.

In the Concerto No. 3 Handel drew on three 1717-1718 works: the seventh of his anthems for the Duke of Chandos (first movement), his Chandos Te Deum (second movement) and a keyboard fugue (final *Allegro*).

The first movement of Concerto No. 4 goes back to the Overture of the Opera *Amadigi* at its revival on June 20, 1716; in some manuscripts it features as the Overture to the Ode written for the Birthday of Queen Anne (1713-14); in a publication of 1728 it appeared in a harpsichord transcription. The second movement appeared among the "Aylesford" harpsichord pieces, No. 34. The fourth movement goes back to the closing movement of Sonata Op. 1, No.5, for transverse flute; one of the *minuets* of the "Aylesford" pieces (No.9, "Courante with two *menuets*").

In its original published version, Concerto No. 5 consisted of only two movements, the first an arrangement of the instrumental Overture to the Chandos Anthem "In the Lord Put I My Trust" (1717-18); the second movement (considerably rearranged) appears as the third movement of the Harpsichord Suite in F-sharp minor. In a later printing the composer added the present movements 3-5: a meditative *Adagio*, an energetic fugue from another Chandos Anthem, and a sprightly gavotte.

The first of the two-movements of Concerto No. 6 was delivered at the premiere of the Opera "Ottone" (1723). The second movement formed of the Overture to the Opera *Il pastor fido* (1712), while the closing movement originated as the Harpsichord Suite in D minor later becoming the closing movement of Organ Concerto Op.7, No.4.

Only Concerto No. 1 seems to be a completely independent, new composition, presumed to have been first performed in March 1734 at the wedding of Princess Anne to William of Orange; research has placed the composition of the work to 1730-34.

The Opus 3 Concertos became known for a time as Handel's "*Concertos for Oboes and Violins*", presumably to differentiate them from his Twelve Concertos Op. 6, which are scored only for strings and harpsichord. Handel did however produce three "bona fide" Oboe Concertos. Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 were published by Walsh at the end of 1740. Here again we are looking at re-arrangements of earlier compositions: Concerto No.2 in B-flat Major was assembled by reworking two two-movement Overtures from the Chandos Anthems.

Oboe Concerto No.3 is actually the earliest of the three: composed by an eighteen-year-old Handel in Hamburg in 1703, it soon fell into oblivion, not reaching print until 1863 in Leipzig.

Of the Three Oboe Concertos we offer numbers Two and Three on this disc. The First can be heard on **BMC 14: Baroque Oboe Concertos**.

Cover print: *The Thames and the City of London from Richmond House by Canaletto, 1747*