

BMC 49 - G.F. Handel: Sonatas, Concerto for Harp & Lute

Georg Friederich Händel was born in Halle on the Saale River in Thuringia, Eastern Germany on February 23rd 1685, a vintage year indeed for Baroque composers which Handel shared with Bach and Alessandro Scarlatti.

Though his father had intended him for the law, Handel's own musical inclinations seem always to have been clear to him. At the age of 18, in 1703, he traveled to Hamburg, where he took a job as a violinist at the Hamburg Opera and gave private lessons to support himself. He became acquainted with Johann Mattheson (who later chronicled the known events of Handel's life during his stay there) and together they visited Buxtehude in Lübeck in that first year. In the new year Handel's first two operas were produced, *Almira* and *Nero*.

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. In 1706 he arrived in 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 bear witness to the influence of Italy and Corelli. And Corelli established the Trio Sonata form, with his four sets of 12 published between 1683 and 1694.

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 appointed Capellmeister to the Elector, George Louis.

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. With her death in September 1714 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*"; Handel's position with the new ruler appears to have been secured.

Apart from his Royal connections, which he retained throughout his life, two major influences were at work in Handel's career: opera, and publishing. Newly invented during Handel's time was the process of engraving music onto copper plates, developed in London by John Walsh and in Amsterdam by Estienne Roger.

Not only did these firms provide a printing service; they also acted as publishers and distributors. Composers no longer needed to find wealthy patrons to finance the printing of their scores then attend to their own distribution; it now became possible for composers to have their scores printed and published at little or no cost to themselves, with the promise of royalties to follow.

Walsh began as an instrument maker, turning to publishing in 1695. At his premises in Catherine Street, The Strand, London, Walsh began printing on a scale hitherto unknown. A shrewd businessman, he published popular music and cheap music tutors, advertised, and offered subscription issues – even free copies – and serialized music collections. To reduce costs Walsh used pewter plates instead of copper, and to speed up the printing process he used punches instead of engraving. His editions opened with standard stock title pages.

Newly arrived in London, Handel entrusted Walsh with the publication of the Opera *Rinaldo* in 1711, establishing a connection which would survive until Handel's death. Walsh was succeeded in the business by his son, John jr. (1709-1766), who published all of Handel's later works, having astutely secured the exclusive rights for a period of 14 years beginning in 1739. Handel's Opus 5 Trio Sonatas were published by Walsh in that year. These are largely re-workings of earlier compositions, and several themes will no doubt sound familiar. The last Trio Sonata on our disc has two splendid fugues which go back to organ and harpsichord compositions.

Though operatic works dominated Handel's career, an important by-product was his Organ Concertos. Beginning life as interludes between operatic acts, performed flamboyantly by Mr Handel himself on the organ at the back of the stage, the Organ Concertos became popular in their own right – an opportunity of which Mr Walsh took full advantage.

Of the set of six Organ Concertos published by Walsh in 1738 as Handel's Opus 4, at least two – Nos. 5 and 6 – were not originally composed for Organ. While the 5th was originally scored for Harp and Orchestra, No.6 was composed as a '*Concerto per il Liuto e l'Arpa*', to be played during the first act of Alexander's Feast (first performed on 19th February, 1736). In all the printed editions of this work from Handel's time down to our own, the music has appeared in a mutilated form, lacking the whole of the Lute part, as well as the written-out Organ continuo part to be found in British Museum MS R.M. 19.a.1 (c. 1740). The missing Lute part has not yet come to light, but the existing text of the Concerto enabled Thurston Dart to reconstruct it with some confidence. His notes on the reconstruction are quoted as follows.

“The harp part works in canon (or quasi-canon) with itself remarkably often – too often, in fact, for this to be mere coincidence. It is a safe assumption that the lutenist must have conversed for much of the time in close-knit dialogue with the harpist, just as do the two soloists in Bach's Concertos for Two Harpsichords or Two Violins, or in Handel's own incomplete Concerto for Two Organs and Double Orchestra.

“The exquisite scoring of the accompaniment, for muted and pizzicato strings with treble recorders and organ continuo adding additional touches of colour, is the perfect foil to the delicacy of the two solo instruments. Once again Handel's consummate skill as an orchestrator is confirmed. By analogy, the woodwind parts in the second Concerto for Harp alone have been transferred from oboes (well-suited to the timbre of an organ, but out of keeping with Handel's other uses of the harp) to treble recorders.”

In this recording Thurston Dart plays the continuo part on an Eighteenth-century Chamber Organ.