

George Frideric Handel

(Born; Halle, 23 Feb 1685; Died; London, 14 April 1759). English composer of German birth. He was born Georg Friederich Händel, son of a barber-surgeon who intended him for the law. At first he practised music clandestinely, but his father was encouraged to allow him to study and he became a pupil of Zachow, the principal organist in Halle. When he was 17 he was appointed organist of the Calvinist Cathedral, but a year later he left for Hamburg. There he played the violin and harpsichord in the opera house, where his *Almira* was given at the beginning of 1705, soon followed by his *Nero*. The next year he accepted an invitation to Italy, where he spent more than three years, in Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice. He had operas or other dramatic works given in all these cities (oratorios in Rome, including *La resurrezione*) and, writing many Italian cantatas, perfected his technique in setting Italian words for the human voice. In Rome he also composed some Latin church music.

He left Italy early in 1710 and went to Hanover, where he was appointed Kapellmeister to the elector. But he at once took leave to take up an invitation to London, where his opera *Rinaldo* was produced early in 1711. Back in Hanover, he applied for a second leave and returned to London in autumn 1712. Four more operas followed in 1712-15, with mixed success; he also wrote music for the church and for court and was awarded a royal pension. In 1716 he may have visited Germany (where possibly he set Brockes's Passion text); it was probably the next year that he wrote the *Water Music* to serenade George I at a river-party on the Thames. In 1717 he entered the service of the Earl of Carnarvon (soon to be Duke of Chandos) at Edgware, near London, where he wrote 11 anthems and two dramatic works, the evergreen *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther*, for the modest band of singers and players retained there.

In 1718-19 a group of noblemen tried to put Italian opera in London on a firmer footing, and launched a company with royal patronage, the Royal Academy of Music; Handel, appointed musical director, went to Germany, visiting Dresden and poaching several singers for the Academy, which opened in April 1720. Handel's *Radamisto* was the second opera and it inaugurated a noble series over the ensuing years including *Ottone*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Rodelinda*, *Tamerlano* and *Admeto*. Works by Bononcini (seen by some as a rival to Handel) and others were given too, with success at least equal to Handel's, by a company with some of the finest singers in Europe, notably the castrato Senesino and the soprano Cuzzoni. But public support was variable and the financial basis insecure, and in 1728 the venture collapsed. The previous year Handel, who had been appointed a composer to the Chapel Royal in 1723, had composed four anthems for the coronation of George II and had taken British naturalization.

Opera remained his central interest, and with the Academy impresario, Heidegger, he hired the King's Theatre and (after a journey to Italy and Germany to engage fresh singers) embarked on a five-year series of seasons starting in late 1729. Success was mixed. In 1732 *Esther* was given at a London musical society by friends of Handel's, then by a rival group in public; Handel prepared to put it on at the King's Theatre, but the Bishop of London banned a stage version of a biblical work. He then put on *Acis*, also in response to a rival venture. The next summer he was invited to Oxford and wrote an oratorio, *Athalia*, for performance at the Sheldonian Theatre. Meanwhile, a

second opera company ('Opera of the Nobility', including Senesino) had been set up in competition with Handel's and the two competed for audiences over the next four seasons before both failed. This period drew from Handel, however, such operas as *Orlando* and two with ballet, *Ariodante* and *Alcina*, among his finest scores.

During the rest of the 1730s Handel moved between Italian opera and the English forms, oratorio, ode and the like, unsure of his future commercially and artistically. After a journey to Dublin in 1741-2, where *Messiah* had its première (in aid of charities), he put opera behind him and for most of the remainder of his life gave oratorio performances, mostly at the new Covent Garden theatre, usually at or close to the Lent season. The Old Testament provided the basis for most of them (*Samson*, *Belshazzar*, *Joseph*, *Joshua*, *Solomon*, for example), but he sometimes experimented, turning to classical mythology (*Semele*, *Hercules*) or Christian history (*Theodora*), with little public success. All these works, along with such earlier ones as *Acis* and his two Cecilian odes (to Dryden words), were performed in concert form in English. At these performances he usually played in the interval a concerto on the organ (a newly invented musical genre) or directed a concerto grosso (his op.6, a set of 12, published in 1740, represents his finest achievement in the form).

During his last decade he gave regular performances of *Messiah*, usually with about 16 singers and an orchestra of about 40, in aid of the Foundling Hospital. In 1749 he wrote a suite for wind instruments (with optional strings) for performance in Green Park to accompany the Royal Fireworks celebrating the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. His last oratorio, composed as he grew blind, was *Jephtha* (1752); *The Triumph of Time and Truth* (1757) is largely composed of earlier material. Handel was very economical in the re-use of his ideas; at many times in his life he also drew heavily on the music of others (though generally avoiding detection) - such 'borrowings' may be of anything from a brief motif to entire movements, sometimes as they stood but more often accommodated to his own style.

Handel died in 1759 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, recognized in England and by many in Germany as the greatest composer of his day. The wide range of expression at his command is shown not only in the operas, with their rich and varied arias, but also in the form he created, the English oratorio, where it is applied to the fates of nations as well as individuals. He had a vivid sense of drama. But above all he had a resource and originality of invention, to be seen in the extraordinary variety of music in the op.6 concertos, for example, in which melodic beauty, boldness and humour all play a part, that place him and J. S. Bach as the supreme masters of the Baroque era in music.

Dramatic music operas - *Almira* (1705); *Rodrigo* (1707); *Agrippina*; (1710); *Rinaldo* (1711. rev. 1731); *Il pastor fido* (1712); *Teseo* (1713); *Silla* (1713); *Amadigi di Gaula* (1715); *Radamisto* (1720); Act 3 of *Muzio Scevola* (1721); *Floridante* (1721); *Ottone* (1723); *Flavio* (1723); *Giulio Cesare* (1724); *Tamerlano* (1724); *Rodelinda* (1725); *Scipione* (1726); *Alessandro* (1726); *Admeto* (1727); *Riccardo Primo* (1727); *Siroe* (1728); *Tolomeo* (1728); *Lotario* (1729); *Partenope* (1730); *Poro* (1731); *Ezio* (1732); *Sosarme* (1732); *Orlando* (1733); *Arianna* (1734); *Ariodante* (1735); *Alcina* (1735); *Atalanta* (1736); *Arminio* (1737); *Giustino* (1737); *Berenice* (1737); *Faramondo* (1738); *Serse* (1738); *Imeneo* (1740); *Deidamia* (1741); 3 pasticcios; arrs. music for *The Alchemist* (1710), *Comus* (1745), *Alceste* (comp. 1750)

Oratorios, odes etc *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707); *La resurrezione* (1708); *Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne* (Quest;1713); *Brockes Passion* (Quest;1716); *Acis and Galatea, masque* (1718); *Esther* (1718, rev. 1732); *Deborah* (1733); *Athalia* (1733); *Parnasso in festa* (1734); *Alexander's Feast* (1736); *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità* (1737); *Saul* (1739); *Israel in Egypt* (1739); *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* (1739); *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1740); *Messiah* (1742); *Samson* (1743); *Semele* (1744); *Joseph and his Brethren* (1744); *Hercules* (1745); *Belshazzar* (1745); *Occasional Oratorio* (1746); *Judas Maccabaeus* (1747); *Joshua* (1748); *Alexander Balus* (1748); *Susanna* (1749); *Solomon* (1749); *Theodora* (1750); *The Choice of Hercules* (1751); *Jephtha* (1752); *The Triumph of Time and Truth* (1757)

Sacred music Latin works incl. *Dixit Dominus* (1707), *Laudate pueri Dominum* (1707), *Nisi Dominus* (1707); English works-11 'Chandos' anthems; 4 Coronation anthems, incl. *Zadok the Priest* (1727); Chapel Royal anthems; 'Foundling Hospital Anthem' (1749); 'Anthem on the Peace' (1749); 'Funeral Anthem' (1737); 'Utrecht' *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* (1713); 'Dettingen' *Te Deum* (1743); other pieces; hymns

Secular vocal music 7 dramatic cantatas; Circa;25 solo and duo cantatas with inst(s) Circa;70 solo cantatas with bc; Circa;20 duets and trios with bc songs (most to English texts)

Orchestral music 6 concerti grossi op.3, BFlat;, BFlat;, G, F, d, D/d; 12 Grand Concertos, op.6, G, F, e, a, D, g, BFlat;, c, F, d, A, b (1739); 3 concerti a due cori, BFlat;, F, F (Circa;1747); conc. for *Alexander's Feast*, C (1736); 3 ob concs.; 6 concs. op.4, nos.1-5, g/G, BFlat;, g, F, F, org, no.6, BFlat;, for harp (1738); 2 org concs., F, A, in 'A Second Set' (1740); 6 org concs. op.7, BFlat;, A, BFlat;, d, g, BFlat;; other org concs. *Water Music* (1717); *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749); other pieces; dances

Chamber music 6 trio sonatas op.2; 7 trio sonatas op.5; solo sonatas with bc (12 publ as op.1) - 6 for rec, 5 for fl, 3 for ob, 5 for vn, 1 for va da gamba

Keyboard music 2 bks suites (1720, 1733); 6 fugues (1735); preludes, sonatinas, airs