

## PRAIRIE HANDEL PROGRAM, March 22, 1987

Imagine yourself in London 250 years ago. We have the pleasure to hear George Frideric Handel, an already famous composer who was also a very popular organist, one of those who could improvise entire concerts at the organ. . .

### 1. Michael Briggs

(or Johann Schmidt)

A. We light the candle this morning in honor of John Christopher Smith and his son of the same name. Smith was Handel's copyist from about 1714 to the 1740's. He was probably Handel's closest friend for most of his career. Although they had a falling out in the late 1740's Handel left him a sizable bequest in his will and all of his musical writings. Little of Handel's music was published in his lifetime, so it is largely thanks to the Smiths, father and son, that we have so much of his music.

B. George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685 --- the same year as the birth of Johann Sebastian Bach. Handel and Bach never met, although they sometimes lived close to one another and admired one another's music. Except for their common devotion to music, they lived markedly different lives. Bach was very much a family man; Handel never married. Bach spent ~~xxxxxx~~ all of his career in the provinces of Germany, most of it as Cantor in Leipsig. Handel was very cosmopolitan, travelling to Italy, France, throughout Germany, and settling in England. He could curse in four languages, and did when his singers annoyed him. Bach wasn't famous in his lifetime; even in the half century after his death, some of his sons were more well known. Only in the later 18th and 19th centuries did Bach's greatness become known. Handel was very famous in his lifetime. He was a friend of kings and queens and moved in aristocratic circles. He ~~was~~ well off, you might say wealthy, and he speculated in the financial markets in London as well as acting as a producer of expensive musical productions.

Handel's father wanted him to become a lawyer and tried to deny him access to musical instruments. He learned how to play anyway, and when an official at the court in Halle heard him play the organ, he persuaded his father to let him be instructed in music. In 1702, while probably a law student at the University of Halle, he became organist at the Calvinist cathedral in the city. In 1703 he picked up and moved to Hamburg. Handel was always self-confident and would move to new places without much assurance of a job. In Hamburg he met and became friends with the composer Telemann. The two of them visited the aging composer Buxtehude, who wanted to have one of them succeed him as organist at Lubeck --- the hitch being that the candidate should marry Buxtehude's daughter, and the two declined the invitation.

In 1706 Handel moved to Italy, ~~where he certainly~~ certainly the capital of the musical world in the period, where he learned from composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti and composed some well received operas (except in Rome). He was always composing instrumental music as well, for example music for strings. . . . & woodwinds.

### 2. Anna Nettleton

### 3. Jori Vetzner

\* Smart career planning: to move from the center of the musical world to the center of the capitalist world, the center of wealth

2

C. Handel was in Italy from 1706 to 1710, when he returned to Germany to become Kapellmeister to the Elector of Hanover, the future George I of England. But as soon as he got the job he picked up and moved to London.\* In London he was well received by the aristocrats, and lived with Lord Burlington in Burlington House. There he met Such English poets as John Gay. . .

#### GAY QUOTATION

In 1711 his Rinaldo, the first Italian opera to be produced in London, was a sensational success. He was also composing for the court of Queen Anne. Queen Anne died in 1714 and was succeeded by the Elector of Hanover as George I. There is a story that George was angry at Handel for ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ spending all that time in London when he should have been Kapellmeister in Hanover. To get into the King's graces, Handel composed his water music, hired a barge and an orchestra, and accompanied the king's barge on a trip up the Thames. Maybe it's an apocryphal story, but it is likely that the king was angry with Handel and that Handel's music was enough to get him back in the king's graces.

He was close to the royal court for the rest of his life, composing music for coronations and funerals, teaching the royal children music, and was given a healthy stipend from the court for the rest of his life.

In 1718 he helped found the first opera company in London, and from then until 1737, almost 20 years, he was active in the business of producing operas. This meant trips to the continent to track down Italian opera singers --- in particular the famous castratos and sopranos. (He only stopped composing for castratos in the 1740's...) The most famous singers in that period were in as much demand as they are today, and their behavior as rivals was as intense as today, probably more so. They weren't very easy to work with. They commanded very high fees. . . This was remarked on by William Hogarth in THE RAKE'S PROGRESS. ✕

#### QUOTE FROM RAKE'S PROGRESS

(By the way, Handel certainly knew Hogarth. They were both governors of the London Foundling Hospital\*) Even when singers were difficult, Handel, like the other great composers for voice, loved them. We don't know much about Handel's sex life, but there is a remark allegedly written by George III that Handel "scorned the advice of any but the Woman he loved, but his Amours were rather of short duration, always within the pale of his own profession."

Handel didn't write only for castratos and sopranos, of course, and has much beautiful music for tenors and for baritones, for example the following.

#### 4. Mike Sheehy

\* Later on he gave the royalties from the Messiah to the Foundling Hospital.

I hope it was a good cause. We know ~~from other sources~~ that mortality rates in foundling hospitals in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century were generally very high, so that sending a child to a foundling hospital was in effect infanticide

Handel's first opera company went out of business in 1728 after 10 years of struggle. In 1729 he started another opera company, which soon had competition from a company started by some of the nobility. The rivalry was intense between the companies, the composers, and the singers. While there was a craze for opera in London for a while, many of the English didn't like the lavish spectacles and the idea of singing in a foreign language. There were satires and lampoons of Italian opera. One of the things that helped seal the doom of Italian opera in England was the publication of John Gay's 'Beggar's Opera' in 1728. This was in part a ~~xxx~~ comic satire of Italian opera, sung in English with spoken dialogue rather than recitative. Instead of being based on Italian music, Gay and his arranger put the words to the music of a variety of English popular songs of the day, folk songs, and some songs from other operas, including one of Handel's Italian operas. The Beggar's opera was a big success.

Handel's second opera company, together with its rival, went broke in 1737, and that largely meant the decline of Italian opera in England for a long period. 1737 was a bad year for Handel; he became ill and couldn't compose for a while. It might have been a minor stroke, or perhaps some kind of rheumatism. This didn't keep him from producing music; in the period he put out some music by Italian composers under his own name. It was common in the period for composers to borrow the music of others, but usually they acknowledged the source and improved on it, returning the debt with interest, as it were. But in 1737 Handel was in a bad way.

I had wanted to find something from Handel's own choral music for the congregation to sing, but I couldn't find anything easy enough. Some of the pieces in the Beggar's opera are easier.

→ DODIE CHAPRA ←  
5. Beggar's Opera

I couldn't resist including this song about lawyers on the program, since we have so many of them with us.

After all of that, let us return to some more serious music.

6. George and Ruth Calden

Handel's first oratorio in English was Esther, produced to great success in 1732. The oratorios were more to the taste of the English. They involved more choral music than the operas, they were in English, and they didn't involve the lavish spectacle and huge costs of the operas. Despite the success of Esther, Handel didn't really emphasize the oratorio form until his efforts to produce Italian operas had more or less clearly failed. Only then did he turn more to the form, of which he is the major founder.

Handel spoke English with a German accent, but he clearly learned to love the language. His operas and oratorios were in many cases based on librettos by major English poets of his day and the 17th century. He also set other poems to music, such as Milton's L'Allegro. The last lines of that poem must have been congenial to him.

quote MILTON, L'ALLEGRO

in 1741, the same year in which he wrote The Messiah, he also wrote another oratorio based on Milton's poem about Samson. In 1744 he wrote the oratorio Semele. The libretto was by Wm. Congreve, with a little addition by Alexander Pope. It's based on a story from Ovid; it's a story that Prairie people might appreciate. Semele is beloved by Jupiter in

The oratorios are a kind of people's music in Britain, maybe almost everywhere. This is a nice story. The man who would have produced lavish Italian operas mostly for the English upper classes ended up writing music appreciated by the masses of the population.

human form. She is provoked into insisting that he appear to her in his divine form; he does so, and she's zapped. The moral might be to have as little to do as possible with the gods.

#### 7. Barb Park and Dodie Chapru

Handel continued always to write orchestral music. Some of it was for the royal court. An idea of his fame comes from reports about the first performance of his music for the royal fireworks.

##### QUOTE ABOUT THE FIREWORKS MUSIC

He was a superb orchestrator. While Prairie doesn't have a symphony orchestra to illustrate his skills in this vein, we do have our Prairie Winds. . . . who can introduce themselves by name.

#### 8. Recorder Group

In 1743 he had had another stroke. He developed cataracts and probably glaucoma and went blind in 1752. He didn't compose after that, but he continued to have his music performed, and he gave organ concerts. We have some reports from contemporaries about the concerts.

##### QUOTE ABOUT HIS BLINDNESS

He died in 1759, having made peace with John Christopher Smith on his deathbed. He was generous in his will to charities, his librettists, and his servants, including J. C. Smith --- £2,000 and all that music, which the younger Smith later gave in its entirety to the British Museum, where it is today.

#### 9. Joe Laurence

Postlude: 'Happy Nymphs and Happy Swains' from *Acis and Galatea*

## About Handel's Fireworks Music

FROM THE "GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE," APRIL 1749

Friday, April 21

Was performed, at Vauxhall Gardens the rehearsal of the music for the fireworks, by a band of 100 musicians, to an audience of above 12,000 persons (tickets 2s. 6d.). So great a resort occasioned such a stoppage on London Bridge, that no carriage could pass for 3 hours. ---The footmen were so numerous as to obstruct the passage, so that a scuffle happen'd, in which some gentlemen were wounded.

SOMEONE NAMED BYROM WRITING TO HIS WIFE ABOUT IT:

Walking about here to see sights I have retired to a stump of a tree to write a line to thee lest anything should happen to prevent me by and by . . . they are all mad with thanksgivings, Venetian Jubilees, Italian fireworks, and German pageantry. I have before my eyes such a concourse of people as to be sure I never have or shall see again. . . The building erected on this occasion is indeed extremely neat and pretty and grand to look at, and a world of fireworks placed in an order that promises a most amazing scene when it is to be in full display. His Majesty and other great folks have been walking to see the machinery before the Queen's Library. . . . My intension...is to gain a post under one of the trees in St. Jame's park, where the fireworks are in front, and where the tail of a rocket, if it should fall, cannot but be hindered by the tranches from doing any mischief to them who are sheltered under them. . .

(later:) all over, and somewhat in a hurry, by an accidental fire at one of the ends of the building, which, whether it be extinguished or not, I know not, for I left it. . .

THE "GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE" AGAIN:

While the pavilion was on fire, the Chevalier Servandoni, who designed the building, drawing his sword and affronting Charles Frederick, Comptrollor of the Ordnance and Fireworks, he was disarmed and taken into custody, but discharg'd the next day on asking pardon before the Duke of Cumberland.

## ON HANDEL'S BLINDNESS

An observer noted, "To see him. . . led to the organ. . . at upwards of seventy years of age, and then <sup>conducted</sup> towards the audience to make his accustomed obeisance, was a sight so truly afflicting and deplorable to persons of sensibility, as greatly diminished their pleasure in hearing him perform. . . . I was always much disturbed and agitated by Beard's singing of Samson's air 'Total eclipse,' which moved audiences to tears.

BENJAMIN MARTIN, "TO MR. HANDEL. ON THE LOSS OF SIGHT."

Homer and Milton might complain  
They roll'd their sightless orbs in vain;  
Yet both have wing'd a daring flight,  
Illumin'd by celestial light.  
Then let not old Timotheus yield,  
Or, drooping, quite th' advent'rous field;  
But let his art and vet'ran fire  
Call for th' the magic of his lyre;  
Or make the pealing organ speak  
In sounds that might the dead awake:  
Or gently touch the springs of woe,  
Teach sighs to heave, or tears to flow:  
Then with a more exalted rage  
Give raptures to the sacred page,  
Our glowing hearts to heaven raise  
In choral songs and hymns of praise.