

BMC 24 - SYLVIA MARLOWE - Harpsichord Music by J.S. Bach & Handel

There is a celebrated anecdote regarding a competition which was set up in Dresden in 1717 between J.S. Bach and the French composer, Louis Marchand. Apparently Marchand heard Bach playing, and deciding that he was no match for Bach, he left town in haste by special coach. Between Bach and Handel however there was no such competition, actual or avoided, for although they came close at one point in their careers, they just never happened to be in the same place at the same time. It does seem however that they were aware of one another's music, and held one another in mutual respect.

Born within fifty miles of one another and during the same year, 1685, Bach on March 25th, Handel on February 23rd, their musical careers unfolded in different geographical locations and circumstances. Yet both reached a peak in their respective fields, and in many ways there were similarities, more than is often claimed.

Both musicians began life in Royal or Ducal Courts. Handel's father was Surgeon to the Court at Weissenfels, to which Bach also later became associated. The story is told that on a visit to the Court, Handel's father took his young son who promptly wandered into the Palace 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. After a spell with the Hanover Court and a sponsored sojourn in Italy, Handel was to take up an appointment with the English Court after George Louis of Hanover became King George I of England. Similarly Bach was associated with two Princely Courts, in Weimar and Cöthen, until his move to Leipzig in 1723, and as a result of his musical and compositional services to the Duke of Weissenfels he received an honorary title in 1729.

Bach wrote to an old school friend that he had been very happy at the Court of Cöthen and would have liked to spend his life there, but for the Duke's new wife who did not care for music and discouraged the Duke's musical activities. Handel however reacted differently. His great love of opera, its flamboyant singers and the challenge of inciting and maintaining the interest of a fickle public audience began to draw him away from the fairly constricted circle of the Court and its music. During the winter of 1718-19 members of the nobility created an Italian opera company in London calling it, with the King's permission, 'The Royal Academy of Music' with Handel as its Music Director.

During the next eight years, almost half the performances were given over to Handel's Operas. Later, reluctantly accepting the English public's growing disaffection with Italian operas, and their desire for more home-grown entertainment, Handel developed the Oratorio form which proved very successful. Thus in a way he moved musically towards Bach, who from 1723 until his death was Capellmeister and Director of Music to the City and main churches of Leipzig.

It has sometimes been suggested that while Handel enjoyed the dazzling life of theatrical London, Bach was hidden away in some backwoods corner of obscure Germany. Nothing in fact could be farther from the truth. At the beginning of the 1700s Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial State, with Leipzig as its economic capital. Leipzig, with a population of 30,000, was the second city of Saxony, the center of the German printing and publishing industries, an important European trading center, and site of a progressive and famous university. It was also one of the foremost centers of German cultural life, with magnificent private dwellings, streets well paved and illuminated at night, a recently opened municipal library, a majestic town hall, and a vibrant social life. Outside its massive town walls were elegant tree-lined promenades and extensive formal gardens, enhanced by the Pleisse River. The old-established University drew scholars and men of distinction from far and wide, and the famous book trade contributed much to the cultural life of the city.

One of Leipzig's most important features was its international commerce. When the three-times-yearly Leipzig Trade Fairs were in progress, the town was transformed into a show-ground mixing business with pleasure, and was popular with members of the Royal Court of Dresden. Many connections were established between nations on these occasions, and this in turn had a beneficial effect on the civic economy and culture as well as the international variety of its music. Leipzig was the center of book publishing in Germany and Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, the setting-up of private libraries and rich art collections which they opened to the public evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life.

If Leipzig was a lively and cultured city, Dresden was even more so. It was the Residence of the Elector of Saxony, who was also since 1697 King of Poland. The Court was extremely well endowed with finance and thus everything that goes with it, richly decorated buildings, music, theater and opera. Indeed, while Handel was moving away from Italian opera, Bach was making frequent visits in his later Leipzig years to Dresden where his friend Hasse was Capellmeister.

Hasse had in fact been given the post of Capellmeister, much to the disappointment of next-in-line Jan Zelenka, because of his love of opera. His wife was the internationally celebrated singer Faustina. Both husband and

wife were great friends of Bach, and they visited one another often in their respective cities. With his honorary title of Court Composer to the Dresden Court Bach was always well received in that fair city.

Another similarity between these two great composers and musicians was their near unlimited capacity for improvisation. Bach was frequently called upon to test new organs both large and small, such was his reputation as an organist and expert in organ construction. Bach's opening recital on the new organ built by his close friend Gottfried Silbermann for the Frauenkirche in Dresden was reported in the *Dresdner Nachrichten*:

"On December 1st 1736, the famous Capellmeister to the Prince of Saxe-Weissenfels and Director Musices at Leipzig, Mr Johann Sebastian Bach, made himself heard from 2 to 4 o'clock on the new organ in the Church of Our Lady, in the presence of the Russian Ambassador Von Keyserlinck and many Persons of Rank, also a large attendance of other persons and artists, with particular admiration, where also His Royal Majesty most graciously granted the same, because of his great ability in composing, to be His Majesty's Composer".

Tradition has it that Bach's recitals consisted in very large part of improvisations, often upon a theme given at the time. Towards the end of his life, Bach was received at the Potsdam Court of Frederick the Great, on which occasion he improvised instantly and extensively upon the King's theme on the new Silbermann Fortepianos, later elaborating it to become the Musical Offering.

Handel too loved to improvise, especially during intervals in his Oratorios. These improvisations were to form the basis of his Organ Concertos, almost all of which were written as interludes in his Oratorios, the first two appearing with *Deborah* and *Esther* at the King's Theatre, Haymarket in 1733. "Two new Organ Concertos" were heard at the Covent Garden performance of *Esther* in 1735, of which London socialite Mrs. Pendarves wrote to her mother describing them as *'the finest things I ever heard in my life'*.

By 1750 Bach's health was failing, and he was losing his eyesight. In yet another connection between these two composers, Bach underwent surgery at the hands of Handel's English oculist, John Taylor, though without success. Bach died on July 28th, 1750; Handel nine years on April 14th, 1759. Handel was buried in state in Westminster Abbey with a monument sculpted by Roubillac; Bach was buried without any such splendor. While Handel's music was publicly celebrated and enjoyed, as well as posthumously published directly after his death, Bach's music was retained at first only in the minds and at the hands of composers such as Mendelssohn and many others, for whom Bach was "the foundation of all music".

Our program displays the talents of both composers in keyboard composition. Bach's Toccatas were early compositions, virtuosic pieces in which the performer was expected to add both a certain flair as well as personal touches of interpretation in tempi and phrasing. The Italian Concerto is a later work dating from 1735 when it was published in the Second Part of Bach's *Clavierübung* or "Keyboard Practice"; here the solo keyboard achieves the effect of a concerto through the alternation of structural density (loud passages with both manuals coupled, contrasting with recitative style passages with softer registration on the upper manual, for example). The Fantasy in c-minor is also a late composition.

Handel seems to have been very fond of writing sets of Variations on a given "Air" or melody, and included several in his Harpsichord Suites published in 1720. The "Harmonious Blacksmith" Variations (not recorded here, but hear them on BMC 21) provide a well-known example. The present Air with Variations in B-flat most probably belong to a lost Suite. In our g-minor Suite Handel includes a Passacaglia, which being a set of variations on a bass line, is very similar in concept to the Air-with-Variations.

The origins of Handel's Organ Concertos as entertainment during Oratorio intervals was mentioned earlier. These concertos, being marketed as published scores, were offered as Concertos for Harpsichord or Organ, no doubt to gain as wide a public as possible. The keyboard part is without pedal, though organists having pedalboards would normally add pedals, properly reflecting Handel's innate love of the Grand Sound. Here however, Ms Marlowe treats us to a performance on the harpsichord, proving that this instrument in the right hands can be every bit as impressive as the organ.

Two sets of Organ Concertos were printed during Handel's lifetime; two others posthumously. The first, entitled *'Six Concertos for the Harpsichord or Organ'* was announced in the *London Daily Post* dated 4 October 1738. The title page included the statement: *"These Six Concertos were Published by Mr. Walsh from my own Copy Corrected by my Self, and to Him only I have given my Right therein. George Frederick Handel."* The Concerto given here is No 1 in g-minor, from Opus 4 (the first set). An organ comparison can be heard on BMC 5.

*Sylvia Marlowe is a musical legend. She played an enormous role in the U.S.A. during the 1950-60's in widening popular interest in Baroque music, and Bach in particular. She was also one of the world's great harpsichordists. Her phrasing, articulation, precision of touch and brilliant dynamism have rarely been equaled. Also by Sylvia Marlowe and available on ORYX *Baroque Music Collection* BACH 715: Concertos by J.S. Bach for 1, 2, 3 & 4 Harpsichord(s) & Strings, BWV 1052, 10 61, 1064 & 1065.*