

BMC 46 - G.F. HANDEL: OVERTURES from his Operas

Born in Germany in 1685, Handel went to England with George I (when the English Crown fell by descent to the House of Hanover), and remained there for the rest of his life. Though he composed some harpsichord suites, orchestral works, and the very beautiful Chandos Anthems, his real love was Opera, not just the *genre*, but the whole world of audience reaction, star performers (he imported fashionable singers from Italy), the stage, the settings, the promotion, and the challenge of inciting and maintaining the interest of a fickle public audience.

During the winter of 1718-19 members of the nobility created an Italian Opera Company in London, initially funded by an eight-year subscription, calling it, with the King's permission, 'The Royal Academy of Music' with Handel as its music director. Having already composed and produced several individual operas in Venice and London, Handel recognized the vital importance of employing only the very best singers and instrumentalists, especially in the lead vocal parts dominated by a handful of international "stars". He therefore engaged the best English singers and instrumentalists, then went to Dresden in search of Italian stars of whom he always managed to claim a fair share. The Royal Academy's first season opened on 2 April 1720 with Giovanni Porta's *Numitore*, followed soon after by Handel's *Radamisto*. During the next eight years, almost half the performances were given over to Handel operas.

In January 1728, Gay's *Beggar's Opera* opened at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It was not a true opera but a play with songs made up from popular tunes (including some by Handel), and treated London's low life in a way that parodied current political and cultural events - not excluding Italian opera. Over 60 performances were given that year, eclipsing the final season of the Royal Academy.

This was significant in that it marked the beginning of a change in London musical taste and fashion, away from Italian Opera in favor of something less highbrow, more home-grown, and more easily intelligible. Handel refused to forsake Italian Operas however, and managed despite several dramatic failures, to continue writing and producing them.

Many of Handel's friends and supporters tried their best to convert him to English Opera, but to no avail. In 1733 some of his friends, colleagues, and former patrons decided to repay his arrogance by defecting from the Royal Academy to form what has come to be called the 'Opera of the Nobility', with the Prince of Wales at its head. At the end of the 1734 Opera Season, Handel suffered the indignity of having the King's Theatre let to the momentarily prosperous *Opera of the Nobility*. Nevertheless, as the dates given below clearly show, the 1730s proved a particularly fruitful decade in terms of Handel's opera output.

In April 1737 Handel suffered a stroke or an injury which seriously affected his right hand. He was still determined to write for the stage, but recognizing at last the realities of changing public tastes - and the economics of ignoring them - Handel turned to a form which he had gradually been developing over ten years: English Oratorios, in many ways musically operatic, though far more reliant upon the chorus. *Alexander's Feast* was followed by *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità*, then *Saul*, and the biblical epic *Israel in Egypt* (1739). Even when total blindness came in 1752 he continued to perform Organ Concertos and voluntaries between the parts of his Oratorios, so great were his memory and powers of improvisation. He remained involved in the arrangements for performances of his works up to his death on April 14th, 1759.

On this disc we have selected some of Handel's very best Opera Overtures. These were introductory pieces, designed both to settle the audiences and to set the mood of the stage work to follow; thus there is considerable musical variety, though most begin with a flamboyant 'French Style' Overture, often accompanied by a Fugue.

Teseo - HWV 9: - Completed score: 19 December 1712 - First performance: 10 January 1713: London, Queen's Theatre, Haymarket (10 performances to 17 February; also 17 March, 18 April, and 16 May). On the second performance night, the theater manager, Owen Swiney, fled to Italy with the box office receipts. "Mr Swiny Brakes & runs away, & leaves ye Singers unpaid ye Scenes & Habits also unpaid for. The Singers were in Some confusion but at last concluded to go on with ye operas on their own accounts, & divide ye Gain amongst them." Swiney was promptly replaced by the Swiss, John Jacob Heidegger.

Agrippina - HWV 6: Completed score: 1709. First performance: December 1709 or during Carnival 1710, Venice, Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo. (27 successive nights of performances). This Opera was written for Venice and his second on a Roman theme, the *Nero* of 1705 being lost. Both works were probably intended to challenge Keiser's *Octavia*, a score of which Handel had taken with him to Italy.

Esther - HWV 50b. Completed score: 1732. First performance: 2 May 1732: London, King's Theatre, Haymarket. (6 performances to 20 May).

Orlando - HWV 31. Completed score: 20 November 1732. First performance: 27 January 1733: London, King's Theatre,

Haymarket (6 performances to 20 February; resumed 21 April for 4 more performances to 5 May).

Arminio - HWV 36. *Composed:* 15 September - 14 October 1736. *First performance:* 12 January 1737: London, Covent Garden Theatre (5 performances to 26 January; also 12 February).

Xerxes (Serse)- HWV 40. *Composed:* 26 December 1737 - 14 February 1738. *First performance:* 15 April 1738: London, King's Theatre, Haymarket (5 performances to 2 May).

Faramondo - HWV 39. *Composed:* 15 November - 24 December 1737. *First performance:* 3 January 1738: London, King's Theatre, Haymarket (7 performances to 24 January; also 16 May).

Berenice, regina d'Egitto - HWV 38. *Composed:* 18 December 1736 - 27 January 1737. *First performance:* 18 May 1737: London, Covent Garden Theatre (3 performances to 25 May; also 15 June).

Alcina - HWV 34. *Completed score:* 8 April 1735. *First performance:* 16 April 1735: London, Covent Garden Theatre (18 performances to 2 July, end of the season). Handel wrote five operas on subjects involving magic or sorcery; two of them, *Alcina* and *Orlando*, both derived from incidents in Ariosto's "*Orlando Furioso*".

Ariodante - HWV 33. *Composed:* 12 August-24 October 1734. *First performance:* 8 January 1735: London, Covent Garden Theatre (11 performances to 3 March).

Judas Maccabaeus - HWV 63. *Composed:* Act I: 8/9 July - 22 July 1746. Remainder Completed 11 August 1746. *First performance:* 1 April 1747: London, Covent Garden Theatre. The first performance probably included the Concerto a Due Cori in F major, No. 3 (HWV 334). (6 performances to 15 April).

Libretto by the Reverend Thomas Morell, from the first book of "Maccabees" from the Apocrypha and a few details from Josephus' "Antiquitates Judaicae". This work represents Morell's first collaboration with Handel. The libretto was "*design'd as a compliment to the Duke of Cumberland upon his returning victorious from Scotland*" having defeated Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, at Culloden. (The Duke of Cumberland, Prince William, was the son of George II. Perhaps Handel was cementing his always profitable ties with the Monarchy!).

The political parallel lies between Judas' victory over the Syrians and that of the Duke of Cumberland's over the Jacobites: Judas unifies a nation disrupted from within by Hellenizers co-opting foreign Syrian forces. The Duke of Cumberland unifies a nation disrupted from within by Jacobites co-opting foreign French Catholic forces.

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