

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Concerto Grosso in G major, Op. 6, No. 1 (HWV 318)

Water Music, Suite No. 3 in G major (HWV 350)

Water Music, Suite No. 1 in F major (HWV 348)

George Frideric Handel

Growing up in the German province of Brandenburg-Prussia, George Frideric Handel became an accomplished keyboard player and acquired skill as a violinist and as a student of harmony, counterpoint, and composition. Nonetheless, when he entered Halle University in 1702, he did so as a law student, obeying his father's wishes. His heart was not in it. A year later, he left for the musical capital of Hamburg, where he befriended Georg Phillip Telemann (still a student) and gained a position in the municipal opera house, initially as a second violinist, later as a harpsichordist. He visited the aging Dieterich Buxtehude in nearby Lübeck but somehow managed never to meet Johann Sebastian Bach, his exact contemporary.

By 1706 he was off to Italy, a magnet for any composer at the turn of the 18th century. Rome was his base of operations for several years. He made his mark there with a number of oratorios, motets, and even operas, but he also was immersed in the instrumental music of such esteemed Italian masters as Arcangelo Corelli, a repertoire that was cultivated by Handel's patron, Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni.

Following his stint in Italy, Handel returned briefly to Germany, where he assumed the position of Kapellmeister to Prince Ernst August, Elector of Hanover, in 1710. But his time in Germany was reaching its end. He first visited Great Britain the following year, to oversee the production of his opera *Rinaldo* at the Queen's Theatre. His ensuing visits grew more frequent, and when

his patron the Elector ascended to the throne of England as George I in 1714, Handel established himself in London full-time. During

IN SHORT

Born: February 23, 1685, in Halle, Brandenburg-Prussia (Germany)

Died: April 14, 1759, in London, England

Works composed and premiered: Concerto Grosso, Op. 6, No. 1, completed September 29, 1739, in London; premiere unknown. *Water Music* composed in London, in the summer of 1717, possibly with some movements dating from a year or two earlier and others added as late as 1736; at least a good portion of *Water Music* was premiered on the night of July 17–18, 1717, aboard barges sailing on the Thames in the environs of London.

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: Concerto Grosso premiered and most recently performed May 10, 1979, Alexander Schneider, conductor. *Water Music*, Suite No. 3, premiered April 25, 1974, Pierre Boulez, conductor; most recently played December 23, 2006, Bernard Labadie, conductor. *Water Music*, Suite No. 1, premiered June 25, 1971, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor; most recently performed December 23, 2006, Bernard Labadie, conductor

Estimated durations: Concerto Grosso, ca. 13 minutes; *Water Music*, Suite No. 3, ca. 10 minutes; *Water Music*, Suite No. 1, ca. 24 minutes

the next 27 years Handel was enmeshed in the high-stakes vicissitudes of London's musical life, particularly in the worlds of opera and oratorio, while also producing important instrumental compositions.

The opus number 6 is a charmed numeral in the history of the concerto grosso, the pre-eminent orchestral genre of the late Baroque period. Corelli's Op. 6, a set of 12 concertos published in 1712 but composed between two and three decades earlier, stands as a yardstick against which all such works may be measured. Handel was certainly among its enthusiasts. In Corelli's concertos, a small group of solo instruments, called the *concertino*, trades off musical material with the larger orchestra, called the *ripieno* or *tutti*. The concertino may sometimes reinforce the tutti sections, or even provide an overlay to them, in addition to serving as a sub-ensemble on their own. As a mas-

ter assimilator, Handel absorbed the essence of Corelli's concertos and transformed it into something entirely his own, embodying a firm sense of drama in the instrumental texture while adhering to the tradition of the Italian concerto grosso.

He composed his entire **Concerto Grosso, Op. 6** in the space of a single month in the autumn of 1739: 12 concertos, each comprising from four to six movements, a total of 62 movements in the group. Amazing as that seems, it is a rate of productivity Handel duplicated elsewhere in his career. This set, moreover, consists almost entirely of newly composed material, with less self-borrowing than Handelians may expect of their composer (and the much-emended autograph reveals that the music did not flow in a stream of painless inspiration). The *London Daily-Post* carried publisher John

Views and Reviews

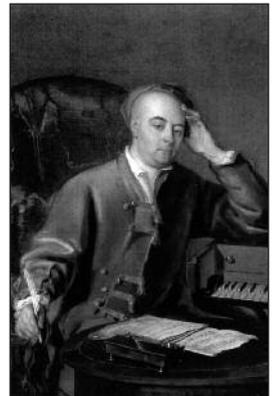
Charles Burney, who chronicled the musical life of the later 18th century, was enamored of Handel's G-major "Grand Concerto" (a.k.a. **Concerto Grosso**) when he heard it at a commemoration concert for the composer at Westminster Abbey in 1784:

If the epithet *grand*, instead of implying, as it usually does, many parts, or a Concerto requiring a great band or Orchestra, had been here intended to express sublimity and dignity, it might have been used with utmost propriety; for I can recollect no movement that is more lofty and noble than this; or in which the treble and base of the *tutti*, or full parts, are of two such distinct and marked characters; both bold, and contrasted, not only with each other, but with the solo parts, which are graceful and *chantant*.

Burney's astute and appreciative comments touch on technical details in all five movements. For example, of the fourth he writes:

The fugue upon an airy pleasing theme, is closely worked and carried on from the beginning to the end without episode, or division foreign to the subject, and in a modulation strictly confined to the key note and its fifth: those who know the merit and difficulty of this species of composition can alone be sensible of our author's resources and superiority, whenever fugue is in question.

Handel, in a 1730 portrait by Philippe Mercier



Walsh's advertisement for the new set of "Grand Concertos" on October 29, 1739, and a hundred subscriptions were received, enough to cover the cost of engraving the music "in a neat character," printing it on high-quality paper, and binding the sets for distribution the following April. Handel's Op. 6 proved popular, and by 1800 it was issued in no fewer than five English and two French editions.

Although they follow the general outlines of contemporaneous works, Handel's "grand concertos" (as they were titled when published) display a forceful, dramatic personality. One hears it everywhere in this piece — in the memorable contours of melodic phrases, the surprising twists of harmony and dynamics, and the well-calibrated interplay between the concertino group and the more powerful tutti.

Handel proved chameleonic in his ability to subsume the traits of various national styles popular in the music of his time. In his **Water Music** the composer seems ever so English, spinning out a Purcellian hornpipe as if he had absorbed the form in the cradle. Even his dances, with lineages that descend from the French courts, sometimes have a British ring, though in their exterior mien much of the music does adhere to French forms, a mark of impeccable pedigree in courtly circles of the early 18th century. Possibly this strikes contemporary audiences more forcefully than it did the listeners of Handel's time, thanks to the fact that certain details of the composer's style were so enthusiastically embraced in Great Britain that they continued to inform that nation's compositions for generations,

Report from the Royal Cruise

Two days after the royal cruise of June 17–18, 1717, at which Handel's **Water Music** was played, Friedrich Bonet, the Prussian Resident (i.e., consul) in London, penned a report:

About eight in the evening the King repaired to his barge, into which were admitted the Duchess of Bolton, Countess Godolphin, Mad. de Kilmanseck, Mrs. Were and the Earl of Orkney, the Gentleman of the Bedchamber in Waiting. Next to the King's barge was that of the musicians, about 50 in number, who played on all kinds of instruments, to wit trumpets, horns, hautboys [i.e., oboes], bassoons, German flutes [i.e., transverse flutes], French flutes [i.e., recorders], violins and basses; but there were no singers. The music had been composed specially by the famous Handel, a native of Halle and His Majesty's principal Court Composer. His Majesty approved of it so greatly that he caused it to be repeated three times in all, although each performance lasted an hour — namely twice before and once after supper. The evening was all that

could be desired for the festivity, the number of barges and above all of boats filled with people desirous of hearing was beyond counting. In order to make this entertainment the more exquisite, Mad. de Kilmanseck had arranged a choice supper in the late Lord Ranelagh's villa at Chelsea on the river, where the King went at one in the morning. He left at three o'clock and returned to St. James's about half past four.



King George I aboard the royal barge with Handel (gesturing to the orchestra on a second barge), in a painting by Edouard Jean Conrad Hamman from the mid-1800s

defining an “English sound” that was to no small degree, Handelian.

The *Water Music* is the most enduringly famous of Handel’s orchestral works, but the documentation of its origins leaves quite a few unanswered questions. At least a good deal of this music was first played to accompany King George I and his entourage during a royal cruise on the Thames, from Whitehall to Chelsea and back again, on the night of July 17–18, 1717. The invitation to provide music was fortuitous for Handel, since the opera company he had banked on working with had just closed down and its orchestra was at liberty. This was the most fully documented of King George’s aquatic excursions, but it was not the only one, nor even the first. Royal parties of that sort, if perhaps more modest, had taken place during the two preceding summers. It may be that some of the movements included in the *Water Music* had been written for those earlier festivities.

Handel’s original score does not survive apart from two movements that are clearly his later elaborations of original *Water Music* items. The source material goes back only to manuscripts (not in Handel’s hand) and printed editions that appeared from 1722 to 1743. These documents raise a number of questions. All of the pieces in the *Water Music* are in the keys of F major, D major or minor, and G major or minor. Evidence of the early materials suggests that at least the pieces in F were grouped together into a single suite — a common structural strategy for that era — but early sources present the movements of that suite in differing orders. Some early documents similarly create self-standing suites in D and in G, while others mix up the D- and G-based movements into a single suite, which makes perfectly good harmonic sense.

A transcription of the *Water Music* for solo harpsichord, written out in the 1720s, presents the music in three groups, gathering the

pieces in F, G, and D into separate suites. Because that manuscript happens to be in the hand of Handel’s amanuensis and copyist John Christopher Smith, Jr., this ordering commands considerable authority, and its sequence was therefore preserved when the *Water Music* was first published in full orchestral score, in 1788. In that arrangement, the three suites are further marked by distinct instrumentation: woodwinds, two horns, and strings in the first suite (in F); just woodwinds and strings in the second (in G), with a particularly prominent recorder part in Emmanuelle Haïm’s interpretation; and trumpets and horns, in addition to woodwinds and strings, in the third (in D). It is worth noting that no early sources suggest the inclusion of harpsichord or timpani, though the former might have seemed *de rigueur* as a part of the continuo and the latter would make a perfect partner to the brass, especially in the D-major movements. Harpsichord and timpani would probably have been too heavy and awkward to use in a floating performance, but at least some of this music was given at indoor concert performances in 1722, and it is possible that either or both instruments were employed on that occasion.

Instrumentation: Concerto Grosso, Op. 6, No. 1, calls for two oboes, a *concertino* (solo group) of two violins and cello, orchestral (*tutti*) sections of two violins, viola, and *bassi* (cello, bass, bassoon, and lute), and harpsichord. *Water Music* employs treble and soprano recorder, two oboes, bassoon, two horns, a *concertino* of two solo violins, string sections of two violins, viola, and *bassi* (with cello, bass, bassoon, and lute), and harpsichord.

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