

By PAUL JACOBS

THE STAYING INSIDE GUIDE—MUSIC

George Frideric Handel Pulls Out All the Stops

DURING THESE anxious times, the music of George Frideric Handel offers consolation and hope. While many of us are familiar with his oratorio “Messiah” and the “Water Music,” he was an astonishingly prolific composer, bequeathing to posterity some of the most moving music ever written. Here is a chance to experience—online—the full splendor of Handel’s genius.

Handel was born in 1685, the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach. Both were German and both became supreme organists. Bach wanted to meet Handel, whose music he highly esteemed, but a visit between these two titans of the Baroque never materialized. Handel’s impact on later composers cannot be overestimated, either. No less a figure than Beethoven declared, “Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived...I would uncover my head and kneel down on his tomb.”

A look at the composer’s genius as a creator of organ works

Bach gives us the most rigorous counterpoint and the densest fugues. But Handel seems more eager to let in the light, luring us with a sheen of elegant simplicity, almost concealing its exalted level of sophistication.

An ideal point of entry is to be found in Handel’s organ concertos, which were wildly popular during his lifetime. A beloved example is his Concerto in F, No. 13, known as “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale.” Cast in four contrasting movements (slow-fast-slow-fast), the work begins with Handel’s trademark melodiousness, presenting the organ and orchestra in seamless dialogue. The second movement is brilliantly virtuosic for the soloist, who also introduces recognizable bird-calls using high-pitched organ stops. In the third movement, the organ and orchestra echo pensively back and forth, until the radiant final movement disperses every gray cloud, requiring from the soloist the most fluid phrasing and nimble fingers. One of the most vivacious readings from the organist can be heard on YouTube, played by Johann Aratore.

In his early 20s, Handel traveled to Italy, spending several years absorbing its musical culture. This period in the sunny Mediterranean environment had an enduring influence on his style

of composition, infusing it with a degree of warm lyricism and dramatic power that few would equal. In 1712, at age 27, he headed for England, where he was to spend the rest of his life, becoming a British subject in 1727. An engaging overview of Handel’s life there can be found in “Handel, The Conquering Hero,” part of the BBC TV documentary series “The Birth of British Music,” uploaded to YouTube. The host, Charles Hazlewood, explores such central questions as “How did a foreign

composer become such a celebrity here? And what is it about his music that still captivates and fascinates us today?”

In England, his larger-than-life persona (and girth) attracted countless admirers, but also jealous adversaries. An intriguing depiction of the composer is given in the 1994 film “Farinelli” (available on Amazon Prime), which portrays contentious interactions between Farinelli, the flamboyant castrato singer, and Handel, the upholder of pure artistic ideals. A particularly

striking scene, shared on YouTube, is Farinelli’s eavesdropping on the great composer, who is practicing the organ late at night in the theater. Handel, an obsessive workaholic, was the true servant of music, not merely a sensational spectacle for the public like his rival Farinelli, who recognized Handel’s pre-eminence.

It was in London, in 1735, that Handel began composing organ concertos for the newly built Covent Garden Theatre (now the Royal Opera House), continuing to create

and perform them until blindness overtook him in 1751.

The organs of 18th-century England were considerably more modest than many of their counterparts in cities like Hamburg, where Handel had lived. These glorious instruments, which can still be experienced today on the website of Organ City Hamburg (a tourist site dedicated to the city’s musical history), included as many as four manuals (keyboards), a full pedalboard, and thousands of pipes. English organs, by contrast, had only one or two keyboards, no pedalboard, and far fewer pipes. In the Covent Garden Theatre, where Handel regularly performed his organ concertos, he fully exploited the limited resources of the compact chamber organ. Musicologist John Butt offers an insightful introduction to “Handel’s organ” on YouTube.

But these concertos, being the malleable masterpieces that they are, lend themselves to a wide array of interpretations. The German organist Karl Richter, utilizing a large, modern organ, recorded six of the concertos with the Munich Bach Orchestra in 1972, which can be heard on YouTube. Serving as soloist and conducting the ensemble from the organ bench, Richter was no purist. He was known for his intense, soul-searching interpretations, playing with palpable conviction.

These luminous concertos don’t necessarily need a symphony orchestra. Although already challenged by employing all four limbs in performance, a number of organists have decided to assume the dual role of both orchestra and soloist. Among the countless examples available on YouTube is the American virtuoso Carlo Curley performing the Allegro from Handel’s Fourth Concerto, Op. 4. He plays the pedals in his stocking feet after wittily advising that some of the action is so vigorous it will “void the warranty” on the organ.

Handel’s music continues to offer insight into a paucity of human emotions. And it does so with naturalness and ease. His work has a miraculous ability to soften our hearts and to transform our spirits. In the words of the composer, “I should be very sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better.”

Mr. Jacobs is a Grammy Award-winning organist who regularly performs with major symphony orchestras and is chairman of the organ department at the Juilliard School. In 2000, he performed an 18-hour concert of the complete organ works of J.S. Bach.



A 1727 portrait of German composer George Frideric Handel, attributed to Balthasar Denners

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