

### Symposium III: Georg Friedrich Händel

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#### GATTUNG UND KONTEXT

Donald Burrows:

#### HANDEL IN ENGLAND: SACRED MUSIC

Biographical studies of Handel's first years in London have, with good reason, mainly concentrated on his relationship with the successive opera companies at the Queen's Theatre Haymarket. Yet there would also have been much to interest Handel at this time in London's church music, and in particular in the activities of the three institutions with permanent professional choirs of boys and gentlemen: the Chapel Royal, Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral. These were at the centre of a national tradition of church music, represented in the provinces by parallel choral institutions in cathedrals and collegiate churches. We do not know what sort of interest, if any, Handel showed in this tradition during his first visit to London in 1710-11, but from 1712-14 we have compositions by Handel for the Chapel Royal singers, and performances of his music at St. Paul's Cathedral and the Chapel Royal. This music shows that Handel had by 1713 made creative contact with the practices of Anglican church music as he found them, and also that he had developed a considerable rapport with the musical talents and personalities of the leading soloists of the London choirs<sup>1</sup>. Handel's various connections with the court naturally drew him toward the Chapel Royal, but there is also evidence that he showed a particular interest in the music at St. Paul's Cathedral. This would not have been surprising: St. Paul's was the grandest of Christopher Wren's new buildings, and contained Bernard Smith's most recent large organ. If an anecdote of John Hawkins's is to be believed, Handel was by 1714 joining the choir of St. Paul's in a nearby tavern for convivial gatherings after the afternoon service<sup>2</sup>. It might be useful to mention in this connection that there was a large overlap between the memberships of the three major choirs, so Handel's contacts of this sort had a more general significance than might at first appear. In this paper I shall review briefly the developments that had affected the London choirs in the years before Handel's arrival, and then consider some of Handel's first contributions to English church music in the light of his contact with the traditions that were represented at the Chapel Royal and St. Paul's Cathedral.

The ecclesiastical and choral institutions in London, and particularly that of the Chapel Royal, were both repositories of accumulated tradition and centres for innovation. They had the resources to maintain and expand regular choral activity, and stood at the centre of liturgical experiment within the Church of England. Thus it was that, during the sixteenth century, liturgies in the English language were tried initially in the Chapel Royal, and in the seventeenth century the Chapel saw most of the significant new developments in the English 'verse' anthem with organ



accompaniment. The strength of habit attached to daily choral prayer book services is perhaps best exemplified by the speed with which they were re-established during the 1660s after a lapse of a decade during the Commonwealth period. The Restoration period also saw a new development at the Chapel Royal, described with disapproval by John Evelyn in his diary: "Instead of the ancient, solemn, grave wind music accompanying the organ was introduced a concert of twenty four violins ... after the French fantastical light way, better suiting a tavern or a playhouse than a church."<sup>3</sup>

The new 'Symphony Anthems' of the 1660s were apparently performed with the accompaniment of only one section of the 24 Royal Musicians - probably as few as half a dozen players - and only on Sunday afternoons when the King attended the Chapel. For the rest of the daily services verse anthems and full anthems were sung with organ accompaniment. The Caroline symphony anthem is mainly of interest to us today not for the specimens from the Restoration years but for Purcell's contributions from the 1680s. By then, the original French string style was being leavened by the new fashion for a more serious Italianate manner.

There was no break in the regular performance of organ-accompanied anthems at the Chapel Royal between the Restoration and Handel's arrival in London half a century later. The Symphony Anthem with orchestral accompaniment, however, suffered changing fortunes with the theological proclivities of successive monarchs. King James II set up a Roman Catholic Chapel for himself and his wife and, although symphony anthems continued to be performed before the protestant Princess Anne in the Chapel Royal, there was a general feeling that this activity did not attract the same status as formerly. King William III's Calvinism banished orchestral instruments from the Chapel almost completely: he only heard one orchestrally-accompanied work in the Chapel Royal during his reign. Queen Anne appears to have given positive support to the Chapel, restoring the choral part of the institution where numbers had become depleted during the previous reigns. At her accession symphony anthems were not re-introduced into the Chapel immediately, but instead orchestrally-accompanied settings of the Te Deum were performed at the Royal Thanksgiving Services at St. Paul's Cathedral for the various and frequent victories of the Duke of Marlborough's forces in the continental war. In practice, the opportunity for orchestrally-accompanied pieces at Thanksgiving Services presented itself about once a year. Here the symphony anthem principle seems to have taken on a more ambitious and a more modern form, and a more substantial body of choral and orchestral performers was involved. From a mixture of personal and diplomatic motives, Queen Anne ceased to attend St. Paul's for the Thanksgivings after 1708, but orchestrally-accompanied choral music continued to be performed before her at Thanksgiving Services in the Chapel Royal. At about the same time, this repertory of orchestrally-accompanied anthems and canticle settings found another outlet, at the annual service for the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy which was held at St. Paul's. It seems that the men of the three major choirs (and possibly some of the orchestral players as well) were behind the impetus to maintain the public performance of this orchestrally-accompanied repertory independently of the official Thanksgivings.

The habits of London's major choral institutions by 1710 therefore centred around two genres of church music: routine performances of verse anthems and full anthems accompanied by organ, and occasional performances of orchestrally-accompanied canticles and anthems. Handel contributed music to both areas of the repertory, and we should view his first essays in English church music in relation to the background that I have outlined. It is rather tempting, though ultimately insufficient, to demonstrate this background mainly through the music of Henry Purcell. Purcell was indeed recognised as



a great composer during Handel's time in London, but he had died 15 years before Handel arrived and tastes had changed somewhat during the intervening period. As a newspaper correspondent expressed it when defending Purcell's reputation in 1724, "The first and chief Reflection (i.e. criticism) they cast on his (Purcell's) music, (is) that 'this Old Stile'."<sup>4</sup> Between Purcell and Handel fall the careers of John Blow and William Croft as Organists and Composers for the Chapel Royal: Blow, who died in 1708, was roughly a contemporary of Purcell's, while Croft had been a Chapel Royal boy during Purcell's last years and was active as the leading Chapel Royal composer through Handel's first years in London. In the music that Blow and Croft composed after Purcell's death we can trace an expansion of the tendency towards a smoother, more Italianate style that can already be discerned in the music of Purcell's later years. Of Blow's last orchestrally-accompanied anthem "O sing unto the Lord", the English scholar Bruce Wood has remarked, "Its spacious phrases look, not back to that distinctively English mid-baroque language which Blow inherited from Humfrey, but rather forward, to the cosmopolitan high baroque style which in less than a decade was to be associated with the Hanoverian succession."<sup>5</sup> This description is even more appropriate to the work of William Croft, whose church music displays not only a move towards more lyrical phrases and a more solid harmonic style, but also a more suave approach to English word-setting and declamation.

Two brief examples from Croft's verse anthem "Blessed are all they that fear the Lord" will demonstrate Croft's ambiguous and transitional position between the old Purcellian style in which he was brought up and the newer Italianate style. The opening of a movement for alto solo "The Lord from out of Zion" (see Music Ex. 1) is constructed over a ground bass in the true Purcellian manner, and the theme itself is derived from Purcell's 1694 Ode for Queen Mary's birthday. (See Music Ex. 2)

That is surely as blatant a borrowing as any of Handel's, but the point for our present purpose is rather that as late as the 1720s Croft could occasionally revert naturally to the style of the 1690s. On the other hand, the first movement of the same anthem (see Music Ex. 3) gives an idea of the more modern harmonic and melodic style as it had developed in verse anthems during the first decade of the eighteenth century, and is but a short step from the opening of Handel's first English anthem, his first verse-anthem setting of "As Pants the Hart."<sup>6</sup>

If anything, Handel's opening is the more old-fashioned. It is very similar to the opening of an anthem that Blow had composed in 1697: but I have also found equally close comparisons with movements by Zachow, Kerll and Caldara<sup>7</sup>. The significance of this is probably that by 1710 the various national musical styles that had been so clearly distinguished to seventeenth-century consciousness were coming together into a cosmopolitan style. Thus, in spite of obvious differences in religious practice and ritual, Handel could accommodate his style without too much difficulty to the needs of church music in Germany, Italy and England. He had to adjust only to the demands of different languages and to the constraints and opportunities provided by local circumstances. Nevertheless, the second movement of Handel's "As Pants the Hart" may reflect a deliberate attempt on the composer's part to align himself with English expectations in the verse anthem: not only is it constructed over a ground bass, but it makes effective use of a male alto soloist - a voice particularly cultivated in the English cathedral tradition.

Turning now to the orchestrally-accompanied repertory, the work that we must obviously consider is the "Utrecht Te Deum and Jubilate," composed only about three months after Handel's return to London in 1712. Handel may possibly have heard a



Thanksgiving Service in the Chapel Royal in November 1710 at which an orchestrally-accompanied Te Deum was performed, but this is by no means certain. In any case, he almost certainly composed the "Utrecht" music in anticipation of a more large-scale occasion at St. Paul's Cathedral. No doubt some of the leading singers from the London choirs had already informed him of the general character of the Thanksgiving Services at St. Paul's from the earlier part of Anne's reign. Settings of the Te Deum with orchestra had been composed by Blow and Croft before 1712, but there is no certainty that Handel had had access to the music of them before he began his own Utrecht music. The case was different, however, with Purcell's orchestrally-accompanied D major Te Deum and Jubilate composed in 1694, for this work was still being re-issued in a printed edition in the eighteenth century and, indeed, was almost the only work of Purcell's still readily accessible and seeing further performances during Handel's lifetime. It may well have been the only work of Purcell's that Handel ever studied in detail, and it was certainly the model that Blow and Croft took as their own starting-points. Outwardly there are many similarities between Purcell's setting and Handel's. One can point, for example, to the sections with five-part choral writing, and to the disposition of solo and chorus voices, which alternate in the 'verse anthem' manner rather than dividing into discrete movements.

However, the differences in style between the two works are at least as significant as the similarities. Taking just the first two verses of the Te Deum as an example<sup>8</sup>. Purcell sets the text in three short cumulative sections (introduction - soloists - chorus) lasting about 1 1/2 minutes, while Handel's setting consists of two substantial movements for chorus and orchestra taking, in all, about 4 minutes. Quite apart from the matter of length, the larger scale of Handel's writing is emphasised by the extra solidity given by extended chorus writing. With this Te Deum, in fact, we see the beginnings of an interaction in the other direction between Handel and English church music. When William Croft revived his own orchestrally-accompanied Te Deum and Jubilate in 1715 he thickened the music up with more orchestral participation and with a new extended choral movement in the Jubilate. It was the beginning of a Handelian influence that was to dominate English choral music for nearly two centuries.

#### Notes

- 1) For a full treatment of this subject see Donald Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal during the Reigns of Queen Anne and King George I*, Phil. Diss. Open University, Milton Keynes 1981, chapters 3-5.
- 2) John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* London 1776, footnote to Book XIX, Chapter CLXXXII.
- 3) John Evelyn, *Diary*, entry for Sunday September 14, 1662.
- 4) *The Universal Journal*, 25 July 1724; see Burrows, op. cit., p. 107.
- 5) Bruce Wood, *The Restoration Anthem: An Introduction*, from the series programme: *Purcell and the English Tradition* (BBC London 1978)
- 6) Anthem 6C, HWV 251a.
- 7) See Burrows, op. cit., p. 77-80.



8) Purcell, and Handel, presumably worked from the Te Deum text as presented in the "Book of Common Prayer" (1662) in 29 verses.

The first two verses appear as follows:

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.

All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting.

Ex. 1 Croft: "Blessed are all they that fear the Lord", IV.

slow

Alto solo

Bc. (Vc, Organ)

The Lord from out of Si-on shall so bless thee, shall so bless thee

(Org<sup>n</sup>)

thee

\* Trumpet stop with ye right hand

Ex. 2 Purcell: "Come, ye Sons of Art", III.

[ ]

Alto I solo

Bc.

Sound the trumpet

Ex. 3 Croft: "Blessed are all they that fear the Lord".

[ ]

Organ

Bc. (Vc, Org.)

Solo A

Solo T

Solo B

(Org, Bc.)

Bles-sed are all they that fear the Lord, that fear the Lord.

Bles-sed are all they that fear the Lord, that fear the Lord.

Blessed are all they Bles-sed ...