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HARMONIC ORGANIZATION OF HANDEL'S OPERAS*

Handel was very conscious of harmonic relationships. Individual da capo arias follow regular harmonic patterns, and clear patterns govern the relationship of the previous recitative to the following aria. These patterns emphasize the chain-like character of opera seria, but they are not the only ones governing the structure of Handel's opera. Handel also thought in terms of large-scale dramatic and harmonic organization, carefully planning the relationships of the arias to one another.

Handel composed the arias first, leaving space for the recitative by writing out the text. Only when the arias were completed did he return to compose the recitatives and make the necessary harmonic links. This compositional practice underscores the importance of the aria keys to the structure of the operas. Indeed, past writers, especially Rudolf Steglich and Hugo Leichtentritt, have examined Handel's aria keys in order to uncover large-scale harmonic plans. However, they have been hindered by looking for patterns governed either by symmetrical structure or a single tonic, and their work has been largely discredited, for example, by Manfred Bukofzer and Winton Dean. Recently Eric Chafe has demonstrated the importance of tonal conflict in the harmonic organization of the passions of J.S. Bach, but he, too, argues against the existence of similar harmonic patterns in Handel's operas.

Handel's operas do not regularly exhibit stable harmonic patterns in a single key, or even in a group of related keys. Rather Handel's key relationships coincide with the dramatic tension and conflict in the libretto. Each set change determines a group of arias; at the end of a set all of the characters have exited and a new set begins. Sometimes these sets are harmonically closed; sometimes they are symmetrical; sometimes, in periods of the greatest tension, they group together to form larger structures. In almost all cases they are built around a strong tonal conflict representing the tension in the drama. Moments of greatest stress are indicated by placing consecutive arias in keys a half step or tritone apart.

In these sets, as on lower harmonic levels, Handel shows a predilection for certain patterns that recur with some frequency. And his borrowing practices often indicate his concern for such patterns, as, for example, where he transposes arias by half step when this does not in the context of the entire opera alter the range of the singer at all. The large-scale harmonic patterns of Handel's operas illustrate chronological changes in Handel's conception of musical-dramatic structure, with the most important break occurring with the opening of the Royal Academy in 1720. They also show Handel as a musical dramatist who is concerned with overall dramatic structure, and, finally, they indicate perhaps the most important difference between Handel and contemporary, and especially Italian, opera composers.

* The full-length version of this paper is still in preparation.