

Georg Friedrich Händel I

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AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS IN REGARD TO HANDEL'S BORROWINGS

Handel's borrowings allow us to look deeply into his process of composition, and to observe a first-rate musical mind at work. Although it cannot automatically be assumed that his subsequent changes represent improvements, whatever Handel entered into a score by way of revision needs to be carefully weighed. His second thoughts - what he kept, what he discarded - offer probably the most certain means we have of forming judgements concerning his music.

The abundance of Handel materials available for comparison, borrowings from others, borrowings from his own works, along with revisions or reworkings of previous drafts, make Handel's music a fertile field for evaluative studies, comparable only with Beethoven's in its potential for revealing the creative process. And yet Handel studies have scarcely begun to match those on Beethoven in regard to the aesthetic implications of successive changes.

Reports concerning Handel's borrowings make up a sizable part of the Handel literature, and aesthetic observations have often found a place in them, but usually as incidental to other considerations. Moreover, the basic criterion of musicological aesthetics, that impressions concerning a work be supported or reinforced by an analysis of the musical techniques involved, has rarely found application. The earlier studies leaned toward subjectivity, while the more recent ones have tended to omit aesthetic references. In either case, a correlation of the two sides - analytic and aesthetic - has been very little attempted. This applies both to detailed and to wide-ranging aspects of Handel's music.

In the present paper not only Handel's self-borrowings, but his borrowings from other composers will be considered in regard to certain aesthetic questions that arise in regard to each.

Handel's Self-Borrowings

In the self-borrowings - here taken to include not only the adoption of earlier individual ideas but the full-scale recomposing of earlier works - Handel's alterations tended to be more limited than in his borrowings from other composers. They could involve such things as a fresh realization of a thematic idea, giving prominence to some new feature, or simply adapting material to different voices or instruments. Concerning successive versions of Handel's own music two views have developed. According to the first (which has its origins in a 19th-century outlook) Handel the artist is given priority, the assumption being that his efforts were always consciously directed toward the goal of achieving the best possible work. The second view (of more recent origin) has qualified this idea, placing more emphasis on Handel as a practicing musician, as one who sought appropriate solutions to musical problems. According to this latter view, one cannot really speak of one version as being superior to another. J. Merrill

Knapp, for example has recently questioned the premise, once held by Chrysander and others, that Handel's sources can be seen as necessarily evolving toward a definitive final form. Rather, each version along the way (this is in reference to the operas) might reveal certain individual strengths and virtues all its own, making a multiple modern transcription of the works in question the ideal¹. As Gerald Abraham more succinctly expresses it: in Handel "the second thoughts are not always in every respect the better"².

Such a characterization of Handel as a man of expedience, concerned primarily with problems of the moment, gains credence in regard to two aspects of his composition in particular: (1) to the revisions that involve changes of texts, and (2) to the recasting of compositions for differing media.

Settings for Different Texts

Handel, in adapting his own earlier music to another text, usually inserted whatever changes were required to bring out the implications of the different words. He was unusually responsive to verbal images, and adjusted his music accordingly, so as to underscore whatever new text phrases were encountered. This means that a later version is to be regarded simply as an alternative, and should not necessarily take precedence in an aesthetic sense over an earlier one.

In example one we encounter a melodic pattern drawn upon by Handel in any number of works (only two are cited here). In "Apollo e Dafne" the pattern begins with a falling 7th, which effectively allows the initial word, "deh," to stand out. In "Alexander Balus", however, the opening interval is modified into a perfect 4th, which is less overtly expressive, but more in keeping with the text idea of "fair virtue"³.

Ex. 1

"Apollo e Dafne," 'Deh, lascia addolcire', HG 52B, p. 18.

"Alexander Balus," 'Fair virtue shall charm me', HG 33, p. 38.

Found also in "La Rissurrezione," 'D'amor fù consiglio', HG 39, p. 12.



Example two shows two other parallel passages, the first from "Il Trionfo del Tempo", the second from "Rinaldo". In the latter the new text words "martiri" (torments) and "pietà" (pity) are intensified with appoggiaturas.

Ex. 2

"Il Trionfo del Tempo," 'Lascia la spina cogli la rosa', m. 43, HG 24, p. 77.

"Rinaldo," 'Lascia ch'io pianga', m. 35, HG 58, p. 61.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is for "Il Trionfo del Tempo" and the second is for "Rinaldo". Both staves show a vocal line with lyrics and a basso continuo line with figured bass notation. The lyrics for the first staff are "giu-ge-rà quan-do nel cre-de il cor" and for the second staff are "de' miei mar-ti-ri sol per pie-tà".

And in example three the 32nd-note accompanimental patterns in "Imeneo", which suggestively depict the words "palpitar ... in seno" (to palpitate in my bosom), are softened to 16th notes in "Saul", along with a great enrichment of scoring and harmonic color, all of which better bring out the changed text, "In sweetest harmony".

Ex. 3

"Imeneo," 'Pieno il core', HG 93, p. 80.

"Saul," 'In sweetest harmony', HG 13, p. 223.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is for "Imeneo" and the second is for "Saul". Both staves show a vocal line with lyrics and a basso continuo line with figured bass notation. The lyrics for the first staff are "pal-pi-tar io sen-to in se-no, qual" and for the second staff are "pal-pi-tar io sen-to in se-no, qual".

In each of these examples, neither one nor another version can actually be adjudged aesthetically preferable, in that Handel sought in each a kind of music most suitable to the text being set.

David Kimbell (1977) comes to a similar conclusion in comparing the music and texts of "Il Trionfo del Tempo" and "The Triumph of Time" across a fifty-year time-span, 1707-1757⁴. He contends that in each of the versions Handel developed a unique and equally valid form of expression, and that the sensuousness and external virtuosity characteristic of "Il Trionfo del Tempo", performed in Italy in 1707, was no longer appropriate to "The Triumph of Time", presented in the more staid atmosphere of London in 1757. Thus one cannot justly claim that the later version should be regarded as taking aesthetic priority, only that it reflects a different time, place, and attitude.

Reworkings for Differing Media

When Handel recast his own works for a different medium, he showed considerable discernment in his handling of the voice parts or instruments newly called upon. As with new words, he also entered into the spirit of a new scoring and transformed his music accordingly. Here again, however, it would be quite unwarranted to regard the subsequent version as necessarily constituting an improvement, in that both the earlier and later tend to display qualities peculiar to the instruments in question. This point has been brought out in a number of recent writings.

Wilhelm Mohr (1967-68) describes Handel's borrowing of musical material from flute sonata movements in fashioning certain sections of his organ concertos. He demonstrates how Handel skillfully transformed a musical substance, whereby, for instance, the long-breathed lines idiomatic to the flute were turned into broken and more vigorous figures suitable to the strings in the concertos⁵. In other words, each version was constructed in such a way that the instruments called upon were heard to best advantage.

And William Gudger (1980) makes the point that Handel, when composing an aria for another voice type (e.g. a soprano aria recast for alto voice), was attentive to bringing out qualities that were propitious to whatever voice part was being utilized⁶.

In these and numerous other examples it can be established that the earlier as well as the later versions had their own legitimacy. Handel in such cases cannot be thought of as seeking an ideal final form for his material, but rather one suitable to the circumstances.

The Treatment of Musical Details

In one notable respect, however, successive versions in Handel's own music do appear to reflect a concern on his part to achieve an improved later realization. This is to be found in his alterations involving musical details, either in the harmony (apparently to achieve greater strength or clarity) or in the rhythm (often for the sake of greater cogency). In an aria from "Agrippina", for example, one that both musically and textually duplicates an earlier aria found in the cantata "Arresta il passo", Handel appears to have corrected a flawed cadence, one that is indeed difficult to harmonize convincingly. In "Agrippina" he not only mitigated the harsh dissonances, but made more regular the cadential succession of the original.

Ex. 4

"Arresta il passo," 'E un foco', m. 27, HG 52A, p. 42.

"Agrippina," 'E un foco', m. 24, HG 57, p. 41.



A more significant alteration appears in the two versions of "Laudate Pueri". Here an underlying three-measure ostinato pattern took on a more distinctive melodic profile through the addition of octave leaps, and a firmer cadence was achieved through a lengthening of the dominant from one to two beats.

Ex. 5

"Laudate pueri Dominum," c. 1706, 'Sit nomen', HG 38, p. 3.

"Laudate pueri Dominum," 1707, 'Sit nomen', HG 38, p. 28. Transposed up a minor 3rd.



In a reworking of an instrumental introduction in "Terpsicore" as part of "The Triumph of Time" the melodic line is invested with an exactly repeated pattern. Harmonic considerations seem to underlie the reworking. Observe how in m. 3-4 the theme proceeds firmly to the tonic c, and in m. 5-6 (the repetition) to the dominant g.

Ex. 6

"Terpsicore," 'Hai tanto', HG 84, p. 64.

"The Triumph of Time," 'Sharp thorns despising', HG 20, p. 138.

Transposed up a Perfect 5th.



These last examples bring to light a side of Handel's composition different from that shown in his word adjustments and new scorings. In the minutiae of his designs, in the details of harmony, melody, and rhythm he reveals himself as being keenly attentive to the amelioration of earlier works.

Handel's Borrowings from Other Composers

In the earlier writings on Handel's borrowings from others (mid-19th to early 20th century) general observations concerning Handel's superiority appear fairly frequently but they are lacking in technical, analytical support. Ebenezer Prout (1871), for instance, in ascertaining the differences between Urio's "Te Deum" and Handel's "Dettingen Te Deum" draws attention to Handel's addition of "a brilliant coda"⁷. Max Seiffert (1907), describing two of Handel's models for the Concerto Op. 6, No. 11, a Kuhnau sonata and a Kerll capriccio, ascribes to Handel "a more energetic rhythm" than had been present in the former and "a sharper melodic profile" than had existed in the latter⁸. And Sedley Taylor (1906), comparing (among other works) the "Hailstone chorus" from "Israel in Egypt" with the Stradella trio sonata from which it was derived, comments that Handel "works up Stradella's original into a colossal sound"⁹. These writers, however, do not explain the manner in which Handel accomplishes "brilliance", "energy", "a sharp melodic profile", or "a colossal sound".

More recent studies (from the mid 20th-century to the present) appear to represent a reaction. Judgmental remarks are made very sparingly, and the emphasis is placed almost entirely on the technical aspects of Handel's changes. Two examples are representative. Harold Powers (1962), explores the parallels between Handel's "Serse" and Giovanni Bononcini's setting of the same text. The closest he comes to aesthetic evaluation is in a pair of incidental allusions, first to Handel's "more integrated treatment of motives", secondly to his "wider range of harmonies"¹⁰. And Franklin Zimmerman (1978), comparing Handel's Overture to "Susanna" with its model, an overture by Blow, points out in passing that Handel creates more interest in his fugal section by varying the entries¹¹. Other writers as well since 1950 have seemed quite hesitant to enter into evaluations, preferring instead to concentrate on Handel's craftsmanship.

Deletions and Additions

A quite remarkable aspect of Handel's borrowing technique in respect to other composers was his elimination of certain segments of an original work and the adding of new ones. Why such deletions and additions in his estimation contributed to a more satisfactory work remains an intriguing question. To attempt an answer we need to compare each borrowing in some detail, and attempt to determine why each change was made.

An especially interesting case is Handel's reworking of a Courante (1735-39)¹² from the "Componimenti Musicali" by Gottlieb Muffat as part of his overture for the "Ode to St. Cecilia's Day" (1739)¹³. To be sure, the two examples are quite removed from one another in spirit and purpose, the first being a rather unpretentious dance for keyboard, the second a grand French overture for orchestra. Nonetheless, when examined from a purely musical standpoint, they bring to light some important differences in the compositional approaches of the two composers¹⁴.

Muffat's composition is replete with fascinating details, but these are treated rather as ends in themselves. Handel's opening can be reduced to a fairly simple scheme, in which an upward-moving, triadic (fanfare-like) outline reaches its apex on the higher octave, and is thereupon followed by figurations that emphasize one after another the descending notes of a D-major scale. This essential design was already present on Muffat's original, but is less decisively brought out. Muffat, after making an initial ascent, 1-3-5, fails to follow it immediately by the upper tonic (as does Handel), but lingers instead on the 4th and 3rd degrees for several measures, and only then abruptly ascends to the octave (see the markings in the example). Handel apparently recognized these essential melodic features, which lay (as it were) embedded in Muffat's original. He eliminated the discursive measures and proceeded directly, 1-3-5-8; and he lent further strength to this formula by preceding it with the 5th degree on the downbeat of the initial measure. Later, from the high point in the melodic line (m. 5), Handel further adopted the melodic contour already present in Muffat's piece by placing emphasis on the tonal degrees of 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, and then #4 (preparatory to the dominant key). This time, contrary to what he does in the beginning, Handel expanded in Muffat's basic scheme, adding elaborate decorative patterns to it. The reason seems to lie in Handel's ability thereby to sustain at greater length the effect of the climax that had been reached in m. 5 (whereas Muffat immediately dissipates his climax by quickly descending from it).

Ex. 7

Gottlieb Muffat. "Componimenti Musicali per il Cembalo," "Courante", HG Supplement V, p.8.
Handel. "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day," Overture, HG 23, p. 1.

Violin 1, ob. 1, 2
Violin 2
Viola
Bass

Larghetto e staccato

7



(4) 1 (4) 8 *

8

Vi

6 5

The Coordinating of Musical Elements

Handel's excerpt can be differentiated from Muffat's in yet another important respect: in his ability to coordinate the various musical elements into a single conception. Rhythm, texture, and harmony are each utilized so as to enhance the principal melodic and formal continuity.

Rhythmically, a significant change from Muffat's model may be seen in Handel's repositioning of the opening motivic pattern, making it conclude on the first rather than the second beat of the measure. This places an increased emphasis on the principal melodic notes (5, 1, 3, 5, etc.), and at the same time, by extending the upbeat from three to five notes Handel greatly increased the sense of anticipation prior to the beat.

Handel's texture is organized similarly, that is to give maximum weight to the initial part of each measure. The full orchestral entries on the first beat stand in striking contrast with the single-line upbeat patterns, played only by the violins and oboes in unison. In this way the tutti sound substantially contributes to the accentuating of the main notes in the melodic line (to 5 1 3 5 8).

Finally, in the harmonic design an especially effective touch is provided by the substitution of a submediant chord in place of the expected tonic in m. 5, a change that coincides effectively with the high point in the melodic line.

These aspects taken together reveal Handel's considerable powers of integration, whereby the several musical elements (rhythm, texture, scoring, harmony) are correlated with melody in order to form a convincing whole.

In music, as in the other arts, the superior work can be judged so primarily in terms of its internal relationships. As Stefan George wrote ("Über Dichtung"), "poetic excellence is not the result of a single, happy gesture; it is the interconnectedness, the relatedness of the individual parts, the inevitable succession of one event by another that characterizes the best poetry". These are indeed the very qualities that become apparent in Handel's music the more we examine it. If Muffat's opening motive may be said to represent a happy find (and was what attracted Handel perhaps to his work in the first place), Handel achieved from it a sense of inevitable flow, and of interrelatedness between the elements that ultimately elevated his work above Muffat's.

Where then do we stand in the study of Handel aesthetics? Especially needed is a comprehensive overview of the borrowings (an attempt has not been made since Sedley Taylor's pioneering effort of 1906). And we need to examine these borrowings, keeping in mind aspects such as I have mentioned: textual and scoring changes (where aesthetic improvements are perhaps not a question), the minute changes, along with large-scale deletions and insertions (where aesthetic considerations do come into play). This is no small undertaking, but it would contribute much to the clarification of Handel's creative process¹⁵. Large numbers of examples need to be interrelated and particular techniques established as typical through Handel's frequent or consistent use of them. In this way we will acquire a better awareness of Handel's intentions: whether a change was introduced out of mere expediency (for the requirements of a given performance) or whether it was introduced for artistic reasons. Only upon such a basis can we come closer to an understanding of Handel's music and of the nature of his genius¹⁶.

Footnotes

- 1) J. Merrill Knapp, Probleme bei der Edition von Händels Opern, in: Händel-Jb. (1967-68), p. 113.
- 2) Gerald Abraham, Handel: a Symposium, London 1954, p. 272.
- 3) HG = G.F. Händels Werke, ed. F.W. Chrysander (Leipzig and Bergedorf; 1858-94).

- 4) David Kimbell, Aspekte von Händels Umarbeitungen und Revisionen eigener Werke, in: Händel-Jb. (1977), p. 51.
- 5) Wilhelm Mohr, Händel als Bearbeiter eigener Werke, in: Händel-Jb. (1967-68), p. 83.
- 6) William D. Gudger, Skizzen und Entwürfe für den Amen-chor in Händels 'Messias', in: Händel-Jb. (1980), p. 84f.
- 7) Ebenezer Prout, Urio's 'Te Deum', and Handel's Use Thereof, in: The Monthly Musical Record (1871), p. 141.
- 8) Max Seiffert, Händels Verhältnis zu Tonwerken älterer deutscher Meister, in: JbP (1907), pp. 45 und 53.
- 9) Sedley Taylor, The Indebtedness of Handel to Works by Other Composers, Cambridge 1906, p. 71.
- 10) Harold S. Powers, Il Serse transformato - II, in: MQ 48 (1962), p. 88.
- 11) Franklin Zimmerman, Händels Parodie-Ouvertüre zu Susanna: eine neue Ansicht über die Entlehnungsfrage, in: Händel-Jb. (1978), p. 19.
- 12) Muffat's Courante appears in the HG supplements, V:8. The dating cited here is suggested by Bernd Baselt, Muffat and Handel: A Two-way Exchange, in: MT 120 (1979), p. 906.
- 13) Handel again drew upon the same material in the Overture to "Alexander's Feast" as well as in the Concerto, op. 6 no. 5.
- 14) Walther Siegmund-Schultze's suggestion (Zu Händels Schaffensmethode, in: Händel-Jb. 1961-62. p. 79) that Muffat's Courante must have remained latently in Handel's mind for some time before he called it up appears to be contradicted by Handel's incorporation of the most minute details of Muffat's work into his own.
- 15) A comprehensive study of this kind has also been proposed by Siegmund-Schultze, ibid., p. 92. It might best be achieved through scholarly cooperation and perhaps through the establishing of a central archive, in which examples of Handel's borrowings would be made available in an aligned format.
- 16) An abbreviated version of this study was presented at the Internationaler Musikwissenschaftlicher Kongreß Stuttgart, 19 September 1985.

Anke Bingmann:

ZUR GATTUNGSTYPOLOGIE VON OPER, ORATORIUM UND KANTATE,
DARGESTELLT AN HÄNDELS ITALIENISCHEN WERKEN

Als Georg Friedrich Händel im Herbst 1706 nach Italien aufbrach, hatte er in Hamburg u.a. mit seinen Opern "Almira", "Nero", "Florindo" und "Dafne" bereits erste Erfolge gefeiert.

"Italien: das hieß die Anwartschaft auf Weltruhm, wenn man sich unter den Franzosen, Spaniern, Portugiesen, Deutschen und Einheimischen durchsetzen konnte, die da unter den