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The character of the man

The Figure's odd; yet who wou'd think?
 (Within this Tunn of Meat & Drink)
 There dwells the Soul of soft Desires,
 And all that HARMONY inspires.

'I am myself alone' reads the Shakespearian inscription on a scroll decorating Goupy's caricature of Handel as a bewigged and well-dressed hog playing the organ, with the remnants of gluttony evident all around him (Plate 1). Joseph Goupy, painter and scene designer, was a close friend of Handel until (so Walpole tells us) this caricature and inscription created a rift – based on the 'evidence' that Goupy received no legacy in Handel's will; but many other close friends were not mentioned in that document. By the standards of eighteenth-century satire, the verses accompanying 'The Charming Brute' were both critical and complimentary; another, more exotic version reads:

Strange Monsters have Adorn'd the Stage,
 Not Afric's Coast produces more,
 And yet no Land nor Clime nor Age,
 Have equal'd this Harmonious Boar.¹

Maybe he was difficult, unusual, over-interested in food, independent, larger than life in all senses and short-tempered with it – but as a musician, the verses emphasise, he was unique and unrivalled. He was also private, and to many people, then as now, not easily explained; in spite of becoming a national monument, he was (and remains) an international enigma.

Handel's self-sufficiency had been noted for years. John Mainwaring in his *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*, a biography based on conversations with Handel's assistant, John Christopher Smith,

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Excerpt

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Plate 1 Engraving of a caricature by Joseph Goupy, 1754

describes the composer's unorthodox independence from his early days in the Hamburg opera, comparing him to Pascal and Tycho Brahe for his determination to follow his own choice of career. Setting out for Italy to seek his fortune 'on his own bottom' he showed an egalitarian attitude to patronage that meant he would never have to complain, as Bach did, that

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‘those in charge are odd and ambivalent towards music, which means I have to live with almost non-stop vexation, envy, and persecution’.² Handel was never liable to suffer at the death of a sole patron, nor be threatened with prison or an employer whose wife was ‘amusa’ or (like Haydn) with the dissolving of the cappella on the death of his princely patron. When Handel was offered a court position in Berlin, the argument went that ‘if he once engag’d in the King’s service, he must remain in it, whether he liked it, or not; that if he continued to please, it would be a reason for not parting with him; and that if he happened to displease, his ruin would be the certain consequence’. As a result, Handel never in his life took a ‘tenured’ position of the sort that Bach, Mozart or Haydn accepted; his was always a form of ‘regulated employment’ with a specific object and an end-plan in mind.

Handel was not the first German to decide that England offered the best prospects for a freelance musician at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Finger, Galliard, Keller, Greber and Pepusch had all preceded him, and the peripatetic Johann Sigismund Cousser (who had lived with Lully for six years and came to London in 1704) wrote out a series of rules for what a ‘German’ (in his case, Hungarian) might expect in coming to England, exchanging secure employment by a city or court for the more empirical world of public concerts and *ad hoc* patronage by the nobility.

Cousser offered a total of thirty-three rules for ‘What a virtuoso should observe upon arriving in London’, among them:

Find good lodging.

Retain your freedom and have it in the contract that you are permitted to perform outside the theatre whenever you wish.

Be proud but greet everyone politely, for the English like to be flattered.

Associate cordially with the musicians, but without great familiarity; seldom go drinking with them. If you wish to pay them special honour, do it in your own lodgings.

Prepare yourself with music to fit their taste – no pathos certainly, and short, short recitatives.

Praise the deceased Purcell to the skies and say there has never been the like of him.

Make yourself acquainted with the best masters, such as Lullie [Loeillet], Pepusch, etc.

Because of their great impertinence, don’t engage an English servant.³

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In letter or spirit, Handel followed the essence of these suggestions. He was proud and independent, secured lodgings on his own terms in such palaces as Cannons and Burlington House, struck up a close acquaintance with Pepusch, made due deference to elements of Purcell's style and the English taste, and employed a German manservant. In addition he was a great composer.

Handel fitted into the society and system that he had adopted with ease, although he remained a private enigma in many respects. He left no account of his political feelings, but his allegiances can be seen in the long list of compositions for royal celebrations and the speed with which he could rally to the support of the royal PR machine when asked. He was openly accounted a royalist by society; conversely it amounted to *lèse-majesté* not to love Handel, according to Lord Hervey: 'an anti-Handelist was looked upon as an anti-courtier, and voting against the Court in Parliament was hardly a less remissible or more venial sin than speaking against Handel'.⁴ He balanced his favours, courting the Prince of Wales as well as his father, and maintained connections with the opposite end of the political field. But in the end, as Donald Burrows points out, 'many of his strongest patrons and collaborators were, like Charles Jennens . . . supporters of the Old Succession (without necessarily being Jacobites)'.⁵

Several contemporary German commentators wrongly described Handel as the Capellmeister of the Court in London. Not only did Handel shrewdly avoid commitment,⁶ but in fact George I was in no position to make such appointments. It was no longer within his purview to allocate funds either for a royal Director of Music or for the maintenance of an opera, as he had in Hanover; such expenses were now dealt with by Parliamentary decree, the purse strings tightly controlled by the young Robert Walpole, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Added to which, Handel was 'other', i.e. not British. The most the King could offer was a continuation of the 'retaining' pension conferred by Queen Anne, and a position as Music Master to the Princesses.

Handel's independence was thus guaranteed both from within and without; nor was he in any doubt of his worth, as the satirical press was aware: in *Harmony in an Uproar*, an anonymous 1734 pamphlet, 'Handel' describes his progress in the first person:

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I was immediately admitted into the good Graces of the Court, and principal Grandees; who were all ravished with the Novelty and Exquisiteness of my Compositions: In consequence of which I was declar'd principal Composer to their O[per]as; and *should have enjoyed* the same Station in the Court Chapels and Publick Temples, only that Place could not be conferr'd upon a Foreigner: Yet upon all Solemn Occasions, they were obliged to have Recourse to me for their Religious Musick, tho' their ordinary Services were all compos'd and performed by Blockheads that were Natives; they claiming from several Laws a Right hereditary, to have their Places in their Temples supply'd with Fools of their own Country.

Handel's eventual naturalisation in 1727 made him eligible to write the anthems for the coronation of George II which set his style firmly in the public mind as 'sublime' and also 'voluminous' (there were said to be 160 instrumentalists employed in the coronation service). Dramatic musical creations with voices remained Handel's life-time obsession, and, like any man of the theatre, his work was for the most part driven by the demands of his audience; exceptions such as *Semele* or *Hercules* were risky gestures of independence. In this arena his life was determined by his public, not his patrons. Obstinacy *per se* is not an intrinsically admirable quality in an artist even when coupled with fine craftsmanship; it needs to be validated by association with a power base, community support, a feeling that here is a conviction that *should* be shared. Italian *opera seria* eventually failed for doctrinal as well as economic reasons: the power base of people who both believed and could afford the principles it exemplified became too rarefied and distracted by Enlightenment ideals. But out of this withdrawal of support there emerged a 'new' Handel, with music allied to the Bible and theories of a 'New Israel', speaking of patriotism, warfare and celebration (and also bourgeois entertainment), and a new success.

Almost as much can be said about Handel's ability to adapt as his inability to bend: independent fortitude was allied in his character with political and professional astuteness. In these terms, his career was not unique, but an early model for a new style of career as a freelance in a foreign country. Many of the questions that have been asked of Kurt Weill – another German expatriate transplanted to a different English-speaking country – could equally well be directed at Handel.⁷ To what extent was Handel also 'a composer in search of coordinates'? Were his 'projects

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variously defined by collaborators'? Certainly many librettists, impresarios and politicians would have said so. In their attitude to the public, both composers followed a path that made audiences central to their aesthetic calculations in a way which might equally be described as openly 'commercial' or 'responsive, flexible, and inventive'. Handel stood by his principles as long as he (and his backers) possibly could. In the opera wars 'Mr Handel's efforts to call back the public taste' were admired until finally declared ineffectual: 'the house is deserted, the undertakers are ruined'. But like Weill, Handel was also 'a composer of circumstance; it was his strength and the key to his survival and success'. A change of attitude to 'the people' is observable in both composers during the course of their lives, shrewdly absorbed by Handel from English democracy in action and politically promoted by Weill's principal collaborator Brecht in the USA; and both showed a 'genuine connection with the multitude' in writing music that spoke to and for a contemporary public.

With outside pressures so dominant, one might question whether such careers could be continuous and consistent (*'konsequent'*) and it is true that Handel's natural pattern of development is a balance of spurts followed by periods of consolidation and the repeating and refining of new discoveries; but he was far from being at the mercy of events. His constant awareness of his own past (his self-referential borrowings are only one signal) and his personal resilience make the positive and life-affirming music a direct portrayal of the man. He was, for this period, an example of the ideal modern composer – an 'articulate thinker, capable of seeing his art in the Enlightenment context', his work displaying 'a sense of self-awareness, responsibility and mature judgement of art conducted in the spirit of a scientific enquiry'.⁸

2

Politics and power

While blest with thy Celestial Airs,
 How vain we count the Views of life,
 The Miser's Hopes, the Lover's Cares,
 Domestic Feuds, and Public Strife!

(from *An Ode on Mr Handel, On his Playing on
 the Organ*, 1722, by Daniel Prat)

This feeble ode by the Revd Prat, 'formerly Chaplain to the King', was the first of several such eulogies wished on Handel in his lifetime. With equal incompetence, they all show that Handel was well on the way to becoming a national classic before he was even forty. His music and following had been noted in court circles as an ideal means to gratify the King and, when necessary, pacify the public – the well-known political technique of 'seduce and sedate'. 'Spin' had discovered its master of music, and the political manipulators, as well as the royal chaplain, had realised the emollient powers of such art against increasing 'Domestic Feuds' within the royal family, and 'Public Strife' in the wider political arena.

Handel was aloof: politically sensitive and at the same time capable of holding his own independent median position, whichever way the political wind was blowing. The biggest political jolt since his arrival in England had been the change of regime in August 1714, when the sudden death of Queen Anne put paid to the expectations of many Tory aristocrats. After confounding the 'knavish tricks' of the Jacobite rebellion of November 1715, George I looked for the security of a 'Whig supremacy' with no audible opposition. His succession had been carefully planned; representatives of the German court had been present in London for the last four years of the Queen's reign,¹ and Handel merely joined an existing colony, in theory working both in Hanover and London; he was described in the

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English press as ‘the famous Mr *Hendel*, a retainer to the Court of *Hanover*’. In fact, Handel had negotiated terms of engagement which left him free to travel and work outside the Hanoverian court (‘he had leave to be absent for a twelve-month or more, if he chose it and to go whithersoever he pleased’),² and he appears to have been curtly dismissed in 1713. The reasons may not have been totally musical; mild espionage was a popular second job for travelling musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Handel was certainly used as a source of information on Queen Anne’s state of health, and may have traded other items of inside knowledge as well. Was his spying perhaps not thorough enough? In any case the break was not as severe as legend suggests. From the Privy Papers we now know that Handel’s royal pension (£200) from Queen Anne was continued under George, and the arrears eventually made good. He had even privately been given early reassurance that his position in England would be ratified when the House of Hanover took over, so the need for a public reconciliation with the monarch (the traditional fable associated with *Water Music*) did not really exist.

What was more at risk was King George’s own popularity with his new people. The King found ‘pageantry and splendour, badges and trappings of royalty’ irksome and avoided public appearances whenever he could. There were also internal cracks; family disagreements between him and the Prince of Wales were becoming more open, so when the King left for Hanover in 1716, as he did each summer, he refused to leave his son with the full powers of regent, reducing him to ‘Guardian of the Realm and Lieutenant’. The Prince and Princess eventually relocated to Leicester House, after their children had been confiscated by the King, and began to cultivate an alternative town society, giving parties and balls for the disaffected nobility. Princely support for Walpole and Townshend (pushed into opposition by a split amongst the Whigs) threatened the King’s bold plan to make the Hanoverian succession the exclusive property of the Whig regime with only a nominal Tory opposition.

To counteract this division, ministers advised that the King needed to be seen by his people – at this period most people only knew the King’s features from coinage or engravings, and fewer than 1 per cent of them had ever heard his voice. A royal progress was the traditional ritual of reassurance, and the least tiresome version, the summer water party, had

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been used with some frequency since 1715 to promote the royal family's appeal.³

A water spectacle enhanced by the music of Handel was more than just politically expedient, since George himself was a genuine Handelian. In addition to renewing his pension and employing him as Royal Music Master to the Princesses, the King, as Privy Papers from the Hanover archives show, was personally active in supporting Handel's operas: 'A man who attended *Admeto* 19 times in just over six weeks would seem to have been a genuine lover of Handel's music.'⁴

Given these facts, Mainwaring's account seems less convincing, but he may simply have been recording, via his conversations with J. C. Smith, the embellished memories of the composer himself:

The King was persuaded to form a party on the water. HANDEL was apprised of the design, and advised to prepare some Music for that occasion. It was performed and conducted by himself, unknown to his Majesty, whose pleasure on hearing it was equal to his surprise. He was impatient to know whose it was, and how this entertainment came to be provided without his knowledge. The Baron then produced the delinquent ...

... HANDEL was restored to favour, and his Music honoured with the highest expressions of the royal approbation. As a token of it, the King was pleased to add a pension for life of 200 £ a year to that which Queen ANNE had before given him.⁵

Mainwaring appears to associate *Water Music* with the first year of the King's reign, without giving any further evidence; it is true that several such parties are documented, many instigated by the Prince and Princess of Wales, but none of the reports mentions Handel. The only such water event for which a connection with music by Handel is documented took place on 17 July 1717, and the descriptions in the press (and in more detail in diplomatic despatches) exactly match the scoring of what we now call *Water Music*. Parliament had just recessed, and a suitably lavish water progress was master-minded (and underwritten) by the King's brother-in-law, Baron Kielmansegge, after the leading impresario, John Heidegger (Swiss and never naturalised), had rather splendidly refused to be involved because it might prejudice his more commercial operations. Kielmansegge, Master of the Horse to George and a career diplomat, had married the King's illegitimate half-sister Sophie after

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previously being ambassador in Venice, where he had first ‘taken great notice’ of Handel in 1709. It was Kielmansegge who invited Handel to Hanover, where he was Capellmeister for more than two years, and Kielmansegge who was asked to break the news to Handel of his dismissal in 1713, so he clearly had a rapport with the young composer.

It was propitious timing for Handel. The fledgling opera company on which the composer had gambled had just closed its doors at the King’s Theatre on 29 June; the musicians were unemployed and opera was not to re-open for three years. Apart from the ‘reconstituted’ Caroline *Te Deum*, no music had been commissioned from Handel by the Court since the death of Queen Anne and he had written nothing at all for the new monarch, already three years on the throne. Now was the moment for self-advertisement, as the aptly named *Daily Courant* (the world’s first daily newspaper) reported (London, 19 July):

On Wednesday Evening [17 July 1717], at about 8, the King took Water at Whitehall in an open Barge, wherein were also the Duchess of Bolton, the Duchess of Newcastle, the Countess of Godolphin, Madam Kilmanseck, and the Earl of Orkney. And went up the River towards Chelsea. Many other Barges with Persons of Quality attended, and so great a Number of Boats, that the whole River in a manner was cover’d a City Company’s Barge was employ’d for the Musick, wherein were 50 Instruments of all sorts, who play’d all the Way from Lambeth (while the Barges drove with the Tide without Rowing, as far as Chelsea) the finest Symphonies, compos’d express for this Occasion, by Mr Hendel; which his Majesty liked so well, that he caus’d it to be plaid over three times in going and returning. At Eleven his Majesty went a-shoar at Chelsea, where a Supper was prepar’d, and then there was another very fine Consort of Music; which lasted till 2; after which, his Majesty came again into his Barge, and return’d the same Way, the Musick continuing to play till he landed.

The journey from what was sometimes called ‘Whitehall Bridge’ or ‘Stairs’ (see Plate 4, p. 75) (in fact a landing jetty) upriver to the rural hospitality of Chelsea would have been timed to coincide with the tidal flow. The Thames at this time was spanned by only one bridge (Westminster Bridge was not completed until 1746), and the narrow arches of the mediaeval London Bridge acted as sluice gates to hold the tidal pressures at bay. Precise timing by the watermen could ensure that both going and returning were with the tidal flow.⁶