

## 1 | Handel and opera: a biographical survey of the circumstances

Of all the great composers of the eighteenth century, Handel was the supreme cosmopolitan. Born in Halle,<sup>1</sup> he served his musical apprenticeship there and in Hamburg; during three years in Italy he became one of the most accomplished exponents of the internationally admired Italian style; he died an honoured and much loved British subject, and he lies now in Westminster Abbey among the greatest creative artists of his adopted home.

He was able to achieve these things because he was an early and extraordinarily successful example of a freelance composer; a man confident that his prodigious gifts would rise to any challenge, a man sufficiently urbane, cultivated and broadminded in his sympathies to feel at home in Lutheran Germany, in Catholic Italy and in Anglican England alike.

For thirty years, counting not quite continuously, the opera house was the principal focus of his creative work. He composed more than forty operas (considerably more than Mozart, more even than Verdi or Rossini), the first for Hamburg in 1704 when he was nineteen years old, the last (unless we count one or two of the oratorios as English operas) for the King's Theatre, London, in 1741 when he was fifty-six. And since this book concerns itself not with opera in any general or theoretical sense but quite specifically with Handel's operas, it will be worth starting with a biographical survey of those years he spent primarily in the theatre.

### The German apprenticeship

#### Halle

Handel's breadth of sympathy and the capaciousness of his cultural and intellectual appetite he owed, in no small part, to the happy fact that he was born and brought up in Halle. With the transfer of the city to Brandenburg-Prussia in 1680, Halle had lost its princely court to nearby

<sup>1</sup> Halle is usually glossed 'in Saxony', and Handel was frequently described as a Saxon. However, at the time of his birth the city had recently been transferred from Saxony to Brandenburg-Prussia – a belated consequence of the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

Weissenfels; nevertheless, at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century it remained culturally a remarkable place, exemplary in many aspects of its civic and social amenities, its educational institutions and its musical life. After the last great plague had devastated the city in 1681–83 and catastrophically reduced the population, civic life had been rebuilt by the encouragement of immigration: French Protestants; Protestants from south Germany; Jews. These influxes in turn transformed commercial and cultural life and Halle became one of the most cosmopolitan and tolerant cities of the age.

One striking manifestation of that tolerance was the founding of a new university in 1694, a university where the great jurist Christian Thomasius, recently dismissed from Leipzig University for his liberal views, found a new home. Law, as taught by Thomasius, was no mere theory and practice of jurisprudence: it entailed ethical, philosophical and cultural reflections on human affairs – and the fact is worth mentioning because it was law that Handel himself is presumed to have studied when, in accordance with the hopes of his father, he enrolled at the university for a year in 1702–03. Thomasius, lecturing in German rather than the Latin traditional for jurists, helped turn Halle into the leading academic centre for Enlightenment thought in the German-speaking world, and by Handel's time young men were coming from all over Germany to study there. Among his contemporaries in Halle were two who later became colleagues in Hamburg: Barthold Hinrich Brockes, poet of the *Deutsche Arien* and of the Passion oratorio *Der für die Sünden der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus*, who in his student years regularly arranged 'a little concert in my room';<sup>2</sup> and his cousin Barthold Feind, who is not known ever to have collaborated with Handel, but who will have known him well since he was a poet and librettist, and the leading polemicist of the Hamburg opera during the years Handel worked there.

Before enrolling at the university Handel must have studied at the Stadt-Gymnasium, where music played a central part in the curriculum. A principal duty of the school's choirs was to provide music for services in the city churches. And in being trained for his part in this role, Handel will have acquired not only a close practical experience of the obviously important items of the modern Lutheran repertory, but also a good working acquaintance with polyphonic masterpieces of the sixteenth-century

<sup>2</sup> Quoted, via the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hamburgische Geschichte* (1847), in B. Baselt, 'Handel and His Central German Background', in Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks (eds.), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Music Division, 1987), p. 50.

Catholic tradition from Josquin to Lassus. One would dearly like to know more of these school days: for instance, what dealings he might have had with the Con-Rector of the school, August Christian Rotth (by marriage one of Handel's great-uncles), and in particular whether at this impressionable age Handel had absorbed anything of Rotth's 'poetics'. For this schoolmaster, who died in 1701 while Handel was a pupil at the school, was the author of a *Vollständige Deutsche Poesie*, which in its copious pages includes what has been deemed 'probably the most comprehensive and profound study of German Baroque dramaturgy'.<sup>3</sup>

What is certain, if Mainwaring's account is to be trusted,<sup>4</sup> is that, well before entering the Gymnasium, Handel had found the perfect music teacher in Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow (1663–1712), organist at the Marktkirche, the memory of whom he evidently cherished for the rest of his life. Zachow was the ideal man for Handel because, while on the one hand he insisted on the need to acquire an absolute mastery of the composer's metier – especially through the rigorous study of counterpoint and figured bass – he at the same time stimulated his imagination by the variety and freedom of his own compositions, vocal and instrumental, and by introducing Handel to a great deal of new music that he certainly would not have met with in the Halle churches as a matter of course: the best there was to be discovered from the Catholic south of Germany, and new instrumental music from Italy and France. And surely at some stage, however loyal to his employers Zachow may have been, he will also have discussed with his ambitious pupil the recurrent frustrations of a cantor-organist's work, the Pietist wing of the Lutheran church always being on the alert for opportunities to complain about 'the excessively long, unedifying and unintelligible performance of elaborate music'.<sup>5</sup>

So the foundations for Handel's exceptional range as a composer were already in place before he left Halle. He knew an extensive repertory of music, old and new and gathered from all the musical nations of Europe; he had acquired, while still a boy, a mastery of contrapuntal skills, which Mattheson was to compare with those of the redoubtable Kuhnau at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig; he had been encouraged to make fine music

<sup>3</sup> G. Bimberg, 'Hallesche Anregungen zu einer Dramaturgie der frühdeutschen Oper', *HJb* 36 (1990), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Mainwaring reports that, at the age of seven, Handel was already deputising for Zachow. See *George Frideric Handel Collected Documents, Volume 1 1609–1725*, Donald Burrows, Helen Coffey, John Greenacombe and Anthony Hicks (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2013 (hereafter *Documents I*), pp. 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> B. Baselt, citing W. Serauky, in 'Handel and His Central German Background', p. 51.

himself by opening up his imagination, giving his fancy free rein. And it is not difficult to imagine the relish with which he threw himself into all that: as he was to recall in later years, ‘I used to compose like the devil in those days.’

But what of opera? Since the removal of the court to Weissenfels, Halle itself had had none; but there were several centres of operatic activity within easy reach of the city. Two of these are certainly germane to our purpose.

In 1701, when Handel was still a schoolboy, he became a good friend of the four-years-older Telemann, who ran a Collegium Musicum at Leipzig University. Ostensibly Telemann was a law student, as Handel was soon to become, but in addition to running the Collegium Musicum he also found time to compose fortnightly cantatas for the Thomaskirche and to direct the music at the Leipzig opera house. By his own account – the autobiographical sketch he wrote for Mattheson’s *Ehrenpforte* in 1740 – he and Handel used to meet frequently, either in Halle or in Leipzig, encouraging one another particularly in acquiring the kind of ‘modern’ and ‘melodious’ style indispensable for success in opera.<sup>6</sup> So we can take it as certain that Handel will have gone over to Leipzig (roughly 25 miles distant) for at least some of the short seasons of opera that Telemann used to present each year around New Year, Easter and late September (St Michael’s Day).

The other operatic establishment with which Handel will have been familiar was that at Weissenfels, where his father had been court surgeon, and whose Kapellmeister Johann Philipp Krieger was distantly related to Handel’s mother. Being a court opera, Weissenfels might have been expected to provide a strikingly different model from that on offer in Leipzig, more Frenchified or Italianate. In fact it didn’t, since, remarkably among court operas of that period, it always performed its operas in German: indeed, the ducal house believed that it owed a responsibility to play an exemplary role in the development and purification of the German language, and that opera could be an important medium in pursuit of that aim.<sup>7</sup> Little survives of the music Krieger composed for the opera at this time; such of it as there is suggests that courtly audiences still found simple continuo-accompanied songs adequate for most expressive purposes, whether mythology or allegory or history was the matter in hand.

The operas mounted at Weissenfels included guest performances by ensembles from the public theatres of Leipzig and Hamburg, the latter under the direction of Reinhard Keiser. Almost certainly it was Keiser who

<sup>6</sup> *Documents I*, pp. 31–2.

<sup>7</sup> W. Felix, ‘Johann Philipp Krieger und die Hofoper in Weissenfels’, *HJb* 36 (1990), 43.

was in some sense responsible for bringing Handel to Hamburg, whether he went out of his way to encourage him to try his luck there, or whether Handel himself made the leap, feeling that a man of Keiser's talents and musical personality was just the kind he wanted to work with.

### Hamburg

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the free city of Hamburg, with something between 70,000 and 75,000 inhabitants, was, after Vienna, the most populous city in the ('Holy Roman') Empire; and since it was also its greatest international port, it was of all German cities the one most open to foreign, especially British, influence. Handel's residence fell within a period of religious controversy and political and social unrest which sometimes, and particularly in 1705–06, verged on anarchy; and the artistic community with which he was involved was not indifferent to these excitements of party. Nevertheless, Hamburg's commercial vitality was little impaired, its artistic life, if fractious, remained vigorous, and an established tradition of journalism ensured a well-informed and critical populace. Miniature havens of courtly seemliness were to be found at the residences of the diplomatic corps; music continued to flourish in at least some of the main churches and, most importantly for Handel, the city was the home of the senior and most illustrious of all German opera houses, the Theater am Gänsemarkt.

Handel spent two or three seasons at the Hamburg opera, the years during which he might have been continuing his studies at Halle university. He arrived in Hamburg in the summer of 1703,<sup>8</sup> and since he began his career as a second violinist in the opera orchestra, one assumes that that was for the start of the 1703–04 season. Mattheson gives a pleasant account of his graduation from so humble a position, but tells us neither when it happened, nor which opera it involved: 'at first he played second violin in the opera orchestra, and behaved as if he couldn't count up to five – for he was by nature much inclined to dry humour. But on one occasion, when the harpsichordist was missing, he let himself be persuaded to take his place; and he proved himself a Man.'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The earliest report, 9 July (or possibly 9 June) 1703, is of his meeting with Johann Mattheson at the organ in the chapel of the former Maria-Magdalene cloister. Johann Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte*: Hamburg, 1740 (hereafter Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*), p. 191; in *Documents I*, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 93–4; in *Documents I*, pp. 37–8.

Early in the second season, indeed presumably before the season had even started, Handel was commissioned to compose two operas to librettos by Friedrich Christian Feustking. *Almira*, the first of these, had been intended for Keiser; but he had mysteriously abandoned it, and gone off to compose a revised adaptation of the same libretto for Weissenfels. Whose idea it was that Handel should take it over we do not know. Even less is known about the circumstances surrounding *Nero*, the second Feustking opera. But *Almira* was premiered with great success in January 1705; so in the space of some eighteen months preceding his twentieth birthday Handel had progressed from being a rank-and-file violinist, who ‘behaved as if he couldn’t count up to five’, to become a feted composer of opera. Indeed, he might by this stage be said to have rounded off his education as a composer of German opera completely – except that there was one small crack in the comprehensiveness of his musicianship, which Mattheson, one feels, rather enjoyed pointing out; Handel couldn’t, or didn’t, really sing – at least not with any expressive finesse.<sup>10</sup>

What happened after this second, 1704–05, season in the opera house we do not know. Mattheson’s account in the *Ehrenpforte*, in many particulars so exact, is here disappointingly vague, no doubt because he had himself retreated from the scene. Handel could certainly have stayed on for the 1705–06 season, but with teaching commitments too, which only allowed him to play a relatively modest role at the theatre; Mattheson remembered him having ‘very many pupils’ at this time.<sup>11</sup> Whatever he was up to, he needed to earn a substantial sum of money to finance the Italian journey which he was now determined to undertake, and on which he will have set out in the late summer or early autumn of 1706.

### Excursus 1.1 – the mystery of *Florindo* and *Daphne*

So far I have accounted for only two of Handel’s four Hamburg operas. The other two, *Der beglückte Florindo* and *Die verwandelte Daphne*, provide one of the most inscrutable enigmas of his operatic career. We have no sure information whatsoever about how and when they came to be composed, or when exactly, under what circumstances and with what measure of oversight on Handel’s part they were performed. Such facts

<sup>10</sup> Mattheson noted this on a number of occasions, for example in *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 206–7; in *Documents I*, p. 517.

<sup>11</sup> Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, p. 95; in *Documents I*, pp. 49–50.

as we do have – really only two of them – are poor things. The first and more certain is that the librettos were both printed in Hamburg with the date 1708 on their title pages; and this date was endorsed in the catalogue of Hamburg opera premieres in Mattheson's *Patriot*. The circumstance in itself does not absolutely exclude the possibility of a 1709 premiere: the libretto of *Almira* had been printed in 1704, and was listed under 1704 in Mattheson's catalogue; however, it was premiered only in January 1705. But the likelihood of a similar circumstance having arisen with *Florindo* and *Daphne* is very small indeed. In 1704 *Almira* was the last opera listed, in 1708 *Florindo* and *Daphne* were the first, and the assumption must be that they were performed early in the (calendar) year. The other Hamburg fact is simply a rather vague testimony. In his translation of Mainwaring's biography of Handel, Mattheson asserts that in 1709, that is to say even after the two operas had been performed, 'Handel was still in Hamburg'.<sup>12</sup> The assertion flatly contradicts the usual understanding of these years, but as John Roberts has pointed out in this context, Mattheson did insist that everything he reported about Handel's Hamburg years was based on letters, diaries and his own first-hand knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

What happens when these Hamburg 'facts' are set alongside Handel's activities in Italy? Because the years surrounding the *Florindo* and *Daphne* premieres, 1706–09/10, were of course the years of Handel's Italian sojourn. Much of this Italian period is documented with gratifying fullness and specificity. But there are two lacunae: nothing is recorded about Handel's activities in Italy between early/mid November 1707 and late February 1708, nor between the autumn of 1708 (it is impossible to be more specific) and November 1709. While we do not know what Handel was doing in January 1708, we may agree with Ursula Kirkendale that it is difficult to imagine him popping back to Hamburg in midwinter to stage two operas there and being back in Rome before the end of February.<sup>14</sup> But there is no reason at all why he should not have spent much of 1709 there, as Mattheson reports. And that raises the question, whether *Florindo* and *Daphne* might

<sup>12</sup> John Mainwaring, *G. F. Händel, nach Johann Matthesons deutscher Ausgabe von 1761 mit anderen Dokumenten herausgegeben* Bernhard Paumgartner (ed.), Zurich: Atlantis-Verlag, 1947 (hereafter Mainwaring–Mattheson), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Roberts, 'A New Handel Aria, or Hamburg Revisited', in Klaus Hortschansky, and Konstanze Musketa (eds.), *Georg Friedrich Händel – ein Lebensinhalt. Gedenkschrift für Bernd Baselt (1934–1993)* (Halle, 1995) (hereafter *Baselt Gedenkschrift*), p. 125. This essay is the most interesting contribution to the *Florindo/Daphne* puzzle.

<sup>14</sup> A hypothesis offered in Roberts' 1995 essay – see U. Kirkendale, 'Händel bei Ruspoli: neue Dokumente aus dem Archivio segreto vaticano, Dezember 1706 bis Dezember 1708', *HJb* 50 (2004), 344.

not in fact have been composed and performed under Handel's direction during those months of 1708–09 when there is no account of any activity in Italy. At present the conundrum cannot be solved.

The presiding genius at the Hamburg opera was Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739), and he was surely the model for Handel's early achievements in the theatre. Mattheson declared him simply 'the greatest opera-composer in the world';<sup>15</sup> he was certainly one of the most productive, even if the 'well over 100' works attributed to him in Scheibe's 'Obituary' seems an exaggeration.<sup>16</sup> Given Handel's close personal links with Weissenfels, it is virtually certain that it will have been there that he first came across Keiser's music; for Keiser was a native of those parts and – as I mentioned earlier – reappeared there from time to time with visiting performers from Hamburg.

The relationship between Keiser and Handel developed and changed rapidly. It must surely have been Keiser who, directly or indirectly, sowed in Handel's mind the idea of giving up his university studies and his organist's post and trying his luck in Hamburg. During that first, impressionable season playing in the orchestra, it was Keiser's music almost exclusively from which Handel will have observed at close hand how opera worked.<sup>17</sup> The decision to give Handel the opportunity to set Feustking's *Almira* libretto, presumably in the summer of 1704, if not Keiser's alone, could hardly have been made without at least his agreement. *Almira*'s success may, however, have made the older composer a little nervous; and it is difficult not to agree with Roberts that *Octavia*, the exceptionally carefully composed and richly scored opera which Keiser produced in 1705, with its list of dramatis personae closely matching that of Handel's second opera, *Nero*, was designed 'to put his young competitor in his place'.<sup>18</sup> Feind and Hunold – neither of them, one must note, was an impartial witness – both asserted that *Octavia* drove *Nero* from the stage, 'a fierce flash of lightning [striking] Nero's bays of laurel', as Feind put it.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The tribute comes in a poem Mattheson wrote in Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, p. 133; it was inspired by Keiser's death in September 1739.

<sup>16</sup> *Der critische Musicus*, Part 56, (22 September 1739).

<sup>17</sup> During Handel's first season and a half at the Hamburg opera (up to the premiere of *Almira*) the entire repertory, with the single exception of Mattheson's *Cleopatra*, was composed by Keiser.

<sup>18</sup> J. H. Roberts, 'Keiser and Handel at the Hamburg Opera', *HJb* 36 (1990), 65.

<sup>19</sup> In his panegyric on Keiser included in Keiser's *Componimenti musicali* of 1706: in *Documents I*, pp. 65–6.



Despite their best efforts, modern critics have not found it easy to give Keiser his due. He was not a master craftsman in the manner of Handel, or even Telemann; architectural design and tonal strategy are evidently not high priorities; Dean and Knapp find ‘breathlessness’, and a lack of poise even in his lyricism; ‘cramped’ and ‘awkward’ are other epithets bestowed. Keiser’s contemporaries would have found these surprising perceptions. Mattheson, for instance, declared that ‘everything he composed, especially in love-scenes, sang in the most charming way, falling on the ear so melodiously, spontaneously, richly and easily, that one had to love it almost more than admire it.’<sup>20</sup> And he did not doubt that Keiser’s ability to sing his own music ‘quite beautifully’ helped him develop this gift. It was the relationship between poetry and melody in his operas that prompted Quantz to identify Keiser as one of those to whom the advance of ‘good taste’ in German music owed most. Be that as it may, whatever we think of Keiser’s music, the important thing is that the memory of it haunted Handel for the rest of his life. Much of it he carried with him (whether literally in the form of early printed editions or copies of scores, or simply in his capacious memory, we do not know), and he returned to it, dipped into it, ‘borrowed’ or cribbed from it, reworked and adapted it throughout his career. This question will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

For young Handel the inspirational example of Keiser was complemented by a close friendship with Johann Mattheson (1681–1764). The fact that, compared with Handel, Mattheson was a very minor composer should not blind us to his exceptional accomplishments as a musician: at the very least a thoroughly capable composer, a superb harpsichordist, solo tenor in the Hamburg opera house between 1697 and 1705, and in due course the most encyclopedic musical theorist and journalist of the age. The range of his intellectual curiosity away from music was boundless too, and his work as a translator, principally of English novels, essays and pamphlets, and his responsibilities as tutor and secretary at the English ‘Court’ in Hamburg, entitle him to be regarded as the leading Anglophile in Germany’s most Anglophile city – a fact of some interest in the light of Handel’s later career – and therefore a figure of some importance in the German Enlightenment.

It is true that the friendship between the two men became a little edgy, and in due course faded, leaving Handel with we know not what feelings, and Mattheson with a residue of sadness and sometimes indignation. But the first year of their acquaintance, from the summer of 1703

<sup>20</sup> Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, cited in K. Zelm, *Die Opern Reinhard Keisers* (Munich and Salzburg: Katzbichler, 1975), p. 9.

to the autumn of 1704, was probably, I would suggest, the happiest of both their lives, its flavour nicely caught in the youthful ‘affection and urgency’ Mattheson felt so touched by in the letter Handel wrote him in March 1704.<sup>21</sup> It is amusing to find, both in *Ehrenpforte* and *Critica musica*, Mattheson making the same claim as Telemann: that Handel was already a past master at counterpoint, but that he knew nothing of the modern melodious operatic style until Mattheson took him in hand. But it is certain that Handel learned a huge amount from him: three years older, a worthy sparring partner in practical musical accomplishments,<sup>22</sup> vastly more experienced in opera, and surely someone who would already have been encouraging his younger friend to reflect more carefully on the relationship between dramatic action and poetry and music. Handel’s admiration for Mattheson’s authority in operatic matters comes out in that same March 1704 letter: ‘without your presence it will be impossible to undertake anything at the opera.’ Something of a cloud came over their relationship in November, when Mattheson was appointed to replace Handel as music tutor to the Wyche family; and the tension between the two men came to a melodramatic climax a few weeks later when they fought a duel after one of the performances of Mattheson’s opera *Cleopatra*.<sup>23</sup> Mattheson rounds off his account of this episode: ‘we were soon reconciled; because, on the same day, that is to say 30th December, I had the honour of giving Handel dinner at my home. Immediately afterwards, in the evening, we both attended the rehearsal of his *Almira*, and became better friends than before.’ That last phrase doesn’t ring quite true: for once *Almira* and *Nero* had been staged, the detailed, first-hand accounts of what the pair of them did together disappear from Mattheson’s writings. Even so, I see no reason to doubt his claim to have exercised a kind of mentoring role at the time *Almira* was being composed – of how, as he put it, ‘I well remember how [Handel] brought me his very first opera, scene by scene, and every evening wanted to hear what I thought about it; such was the labour it cost him to conceal the pedant.’<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> He quotes part of the letter in *Ehrenpforte*, p. 94; in *Documents I*, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> See Mattheson’s account of their journey together to Lübeck in August 1703: *Ehrenpforte*, p. 94; in *Documents I*, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Mattheson’s version of the incident is in *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 94–5; in *Documents I*, pp. 44–5. A slightly different account, which must have come indirectly from Handel himself, is in John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*, London, 1760 (hereafter Mainwaring, *Memoirs*), pp. 30–5; in *Documents I*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>24</sup> J. Mattheson, *Critica musica*, 9 (January 1723); in *Documents I*, pp. 621–3. The music of *Almira* will be discussed in Chapter 4.