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978-1-107-42145-5 - The Indebtedness of Handel: To Works by Other Composers: A Presentation of Evidence

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THE INDEBTEDNESS
OF
HANDEL
TO WORKS BY OTHER COMPOSERS
A PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

BY

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PREFACE.

IN the following pages I attempt to place before my readers sufficient materials for forming an independent judgment on Handel's indebtedness to the works of a number of composers who were his predecessors or contemporaries.

The task of singling out the compositions on which he appears to have drawn most largely, and the labour of publishing them, have been already performed, principally by the late Dr Friedrich Chrysander, ably followed by Dr Max Seiffert. But something, I thought, still remained to be done in the presentation of this pioneer-work, before its results could become effectively accessible to musicians in general.

The published editions of "Handel-sources" were, indeed, prefaced by full references to the places in his works where he had used specified passages from them, but the process of comparison still necessitated the acquisition of half-a-dozen such volumes and of a dozen works by Handel, followed by the hunting-up and confronting of the corresponding passages, not unfrequently complicated by the need of transposition.

Convinced that nothing would persuade the British musical public to take all this trouble, I determined to present in a single volume a study of the whole subject, based on a selection from the above-mentioned materials, doing my best by suitable collocation of musical extracts, aided, wherever requisite, by transposition, to render the process of comparison as easy as possible.

After an Introduction which sketches the history of opinion as to Handel's originality, five chapters are occupied in proving that he borrowed as freely from the compositions of other masters as he worked up into new shapes earlier productions of his own.

In chapters VI and VII a full presentation is made of the processes by which older materials were transformed—sometimes really *transfigured*—into large portions of that choral masterpiece, *Israel in Egypt*. The contents of these chapters will, I venture to hope, prove of permanent value to students of composition, as they afford a close view of Handel obtaining some of his mightiest effects by methods of the most unexpected and wonderful character.

The concluding chapter contains a discussion of the question whether Handel was morally justified in dealing as he did with works by other composers.

My various personal obligations are acknowledged in the sequel at the points where they are severally incurred, but I wish here to thank the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum in this University, by whose kindness I am enabled to publish extracts from the Handel autographs preserved in their custody, which have a decisive bearing on the subject treated in this volume.

My cordial thanks are due to my friend Dr Charles Wood, who read the work in manuscript and afforded me valuable assistance during its passage through the press.

SEDLEY TAYLOR.

TRINITY COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE,
July, 1906.

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INTRODUCTION.

OUTLINE OF HISTORY OF OPINION AS TO HANDEL'S ORIGINALITY: SIR JOHN HAWKINS, MAINWARING, WILLIAM HORSLEY, BURNEY, CROTCH, CHRYSANDER, MAX SEIFFERT. EVIDENCE SUPPLIED BY THE FITZWILLIAM HANDEL AUTOGRAPHS.

HANDEL'S mode of turning to account the works of other composers is characterised by a writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in the following uncompromising terms:

“The system of wholesale plagiarism carried on by him is perhaps unprecedented in the history of music. He pilfered not only single melodies but frequently entire movements from the works of other masters, with few or no alterations and without a word of acknowledgment.”¹

With this it is instructive to compare an equally sweeping, but diametrically opposite, assertion on the same topic made by Sir John Hawkins about seventeen years after Handel's death:

“And here it may not be impertinent to observe, what every person conversant with his works will be inclined to believe, viz. that his style was original and self-formed: and were evidence of the fact wanting, it is capable of proof by his own testimony, for in a conversation with a very intelligent person now living, on the course of his studies, Mr Handel declared that, after he became master of the rudiments of his art, he forbore to study the works of others, and ever made it a rule to follow the suggestions of his own fancy.”²

I adduce this statement solely in order to show that during, and for some years after, Handel's life-time no whisper of his being a plagiarist had reached a man so well situated for hearing it as was Sir John Hawkins. That Handel, after reaching maturity, forbore to study the works of other composers, admits, as will be seen later, of such decisive refutation that I cannot believe him to have asserted it, and prefer to attribute to Hawkins the acceptance of incorrect information from his anonymous source.

¹ Article ‘Handel,’ written by the late Mr F. Hueffer, 1880.

² History of Music, vol. v. p. 412.

Handel's earliest biographer, Mainwaring, also lays stress on his originality as a composer, describing "that grandeur of conception which predominates in his choruses" as "coming purely from Nature," and saying that "in his fugues and overtures he is quite original" and that "the style of them is peculiar to himself and no way like that of any Master before him."¹

It is interesting to hear the distinguished composer of the beautiful glee "By Celia's Arbour," William Horsley, taking, half-a-century later, the same ground with even greater emphasis:

"If ever there existed a musician who could lay just claim to originality, that man was Handel. He drew all his stores from Nature and from the force of his own genius and was indebted to no one either for his style or his thoughts. He could not bend his talents to think after anybody else; conscious of the strength of his own powers, he disdained imitation, and trusted confidently to them alone. His music therefore is, properly speaking, his own. . . ."²

This judgment fairly represents, I think, the practically axiomatic belief in Handel's originality entertained by the bulk of English musicians until quite recent times.

A very different opinion had meantime been gradually forming itself, the progress of which shall next be traced.

Burney, in the preface to his "Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in commemoration of Handel,"³ which took place in 1784, says something which may imply that, a quarter of a century after Handel's death, a tendency to question his absolute originality had begun to make itself heard. Writing in the following year (1785), Burney remarks:

"I know it has been said that Handel was not the original and immediate inventor of several species of Music for which his name has been celebrated, but with respect to originality it is a term to which proper limits should be set before it is applied to the productions of any artist." He goes on to explain that "The scale, harmony and cadence of Music being settled, it is impossible for any composer to invent a *genus* of composition that is *wholly and rigorously new*, any more than for a poet to form a *language, idiom and phraseology* for himself."⁴ Whether the objections which Burney had in view here were of such a kind as could be fairly met by these somewhat platitudinous considerations we are left uninformed. Some twenty years later,

¹ "Memoirs," London, 1760, pp. 192 and 202.

² This passage is taken from an article in the *Quarterly Musical Review* for 1818, p. 282. The article is unsigned, but in my copy of the volume containing it, which belonged to my grandfather, Richard Mackenzie Bacon, who was then Editor of that periodical, it is headed in manuscript "W. Horsley, Esq."

³ London, 1785.

⁴ Preface, p. 39.

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however, the charge of plagiarism was formulated against Handel with the utmost directness by no less a person than Samuel Wesley, one of the best organ-players of his time, author of that admirable 8-part motet, "*In exitu Israel*," and father of the still more celebrated composer, Samuel Sebastian Wesley. In a letter to his friend Jacob, dated Oct. 19, 1808, he wrote as follows :

"Salomon has said truly and shrewdly enough, that the English know very little of the Works of the German Masters, Handel excepted, who (as he observes) came over hither when there was a great dearth of good Musick, and here he remained (these are his words) establishing a Reputation wholly constituted *upon the spoils of the Continent*. This would nettle the Handelians desperately, however it is the strict truth, for we all know how he has pilfered from all manner of Authors whence he could filch anything like a thought worth embodying."¹

There can be no doubt that, if Handel had committed such depredations on Continental compositions, the celebrated German violinist Salomon (1745–1815) was exceptionally qualified, by varied experience on the Continent and long residence in England, to detect and expose them. But, whatever was the source whence Wesley derived his information, he evidently claims for himself, his correspondent and their associates, a direct knowledge of the "pilferings" and "filchings" here attributed to Handel.

In 1831 the names of twenty-nine composers, whose works he asserted to have been laid under contribution by Handel, were published by Dr William Crotch, then Professor of Music in the University of Oxford :

"Handel quoted or copied the works of Josquin de Prez, Palestrina, Turini, Carissimi, Calvisius, Uria² (*sic*), Corelli, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, Sebastian Bach, Purcell, Locke, Caldara, Colonna, Clari, Cesti, Kerl, Habermann, Muffat, Kuhnau, Telemann, Graun, Mondeville, Porta, Pergolesi, Vinci, Astorga, Bononcini, Hasse, etc."³

Further, in his published adaptations of Handel's works for the organ or pianoforte, and in some manuscript notes of his preserved in the Library of the British Museum, Crotch proceeded to allege details by giving lists of passages in Handel's works which he asserted to have been borrowed from, or modelled on, specified compositions by other masters. To these I shall have occasion to recur when we come directly to compare portions of Handel's works with the passages from compositions by other masters from which they are asserted to have been

¹ Letters of Samuel Wesley to Mr Jacob edited by his daughter. London : Partridge & Co. 1875. p. 9.

² Should be Urio.

³ "Substance of several courses of Lectures on Music." London : Longman and others. 1831. Note on p. 122.

derived. To do this in Crotch's time was possible only to erudite and exceptionally well situated musicians like himself, the works from which Handel was alleged to have borrowed being then for the most part unpublished and practically inaccessible.

This state of things lasted for more than another half-century until Dr Friedrich Chrysander, well known as the learned biographer of Handel and as the Editor of the great German edition of his works, brought out, as "Supplements" to that edition, between the years 1888 and 1892, a series of five volumes containing compositions to which, in his opinion, Handel was principally indebted.

These compositions, arranged in the order of their publication, are: 1. Erba's *Magnificat*. 2. Urio's *Te Deum*. 3. A Serenata by Stradella. 4. A collection of duets by Clari. 5. Gottlieb Muffat's harpsichord pieces entitled "*Componimenti Musicali*." To these must now be added an edition of Keiser's opera 'Octavia' which was left in a complete state by Dr Chrysander at his death, in 1901, and has since been published under the care of his literary executor, Dr Max Seiffert, as No. 6 of the Handel "Supplements." Each of these volumes, with the exception of No. 2, contains a preface enumerating the passages in Handel's works where the composition in hand has been drawn upon. An edition of four oratorios by Carissimi, from whom Handel also borrowed, had been published by Chrysander at an earlier date, independently of the Handel Society and without any reference to the use which Handel had made of them.

In 1903 Dr Seiffert effected an important advance in an article¹ on Franz Johann Habermann containing large extracts from masses by that composer, together with precise indications of the places where, and the extent to which, Handel had used them. Dr Seiffert is careful to explain that it was Chrysander's intention, if his life were prolonged, to prepare an edition of Habermann's masses to form the next number in his series of Handel "Supplements." Lastly, in 1905, Dr Seiffert published² the collected works of Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow³, organist at Halle, and the only teacher in executive music and composition that Handel ever had.

These works show very few traces of creative power, which perhaps explains why Handel seems to have borrowed next to nothing from them. But they constitute evidence that Zachow had an easy control over the forms of composition with which a choirmaster in an important North German church at the end of the seventeenth century had to deal, and that he was accordingly well fitted to lay a durable foundation for his great pupil's future superstructure.

In enquiring what is actually proved by the valuable published matter cursorily described above, we shall be materially assisted by evidence contained in the collection of Handel autograph manuscripts preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum of the University of Cambridge.

¹ Published in the *Kirchenmusikalisches Jahrbuch*, Regensburg: Pustel, 1903, pp. 81—94.

² In the *Denkmäler Deutscher Tonkunst*.

³ Or, as his name has hitherto been spelt, Zachau.

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A number of its pages contain movements—some complete, some incomplete, some consisting of mere fragmentary scraps a few bars long—which used to be regarded as compositions, or sketches for compositions, of Handel's own, but have now been in numerous cases identified as extracts made by him from works by other composers, not a few of which have analogues in his published writings. Where, in such instances, a question of priority arises, evidence that one of the parties knew, and copied from, the work of the other is obviously of great weight. We shall in the sequel come across several instances in which decisive evidence of this kind is supplied by the Fitzwilliam autographs.

We will now proceed to a detailed comparison between portions of Handel's works, and passages in those of other composers from which they are asserted to have been—with greatly varying degrees of alteration, curtailment and addition—directly taken. The number and extent of the instances where this is alleged are so very considerable, that to apply such a comparison to anything like all of them would entail a process of huge length and portentous wearisomeness. Selected cases are, therefore, all that can be dealt with here, and these will be grouped under the names of the several composers from whose works the appropriations are alleged to have been made.

When the printing of this volume was already in its final stage, an accident recalled my attention to certain arguments published, in a letter to the *Musical Times*¹, by Mr P. Robinson, of Manchester, supporting the view that Handel may have composed not only the *Magnificat* attributed by Chrysander to Erba, but also the *Te Deum* and the *Serenata* ascribed by him to Urlo and Stradella respectively. I read that letter at the time of its appearance, but afterwards, to my regret, allowed its contents, which ought to have been noticed in the sequel, to escape my memory while I was engaged on the present work. All, therefore, that I can now do is to refer my readers to Mr Robinson's letter, leaving to further research the task of investigating the issues which he has raised in it.

¹ December, 1905.