

LIFE OF HANDEL.

CHAPTER I.

1685—1709.

BIRTH OF HANDEL—HIS MUSICAL TENDENCIES—HIS EARLY STUDIES—JOURNEY TO BERLIN, WHERE HE APPEARED AS A PRODIGY—RETURN TO HALLE, AND NEW STUDIES—JOURNEY TO HAMBURG—A DUEL—FIRST DRAMATIC WORKS, “ALMIRA,” “NERO,” “DAPHNE,” AND “FLORINDA”—JOURNEY INTO ITALY—EXPLANATIONS AS TO DATES CONNECTED WITH THE EARLIER PART OF HANDEL’S LIFE—“RODERIGO” PRODUCED AT FLORENCE—“AGRIPPINA” AT VENICE—SACRED MUSIC AT ROME—“LA RESURREZIONE”—“SILLA”—“IL TRIONFO DEL TEMPO.”

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL was born at Halle, on the Saale, in the Duchy of Magdeburg, Lower Saxony. One of his compatriots, a laborious compiler, such as Germany only produces, M. Karl Eduard Förstemann, has published his genealogy, at Leipsic,¹ and he proves, by the registers of the Lutheran Church of Notre Dame de St. Laurent, at Halle, where the great musician was baptized, that his true German names are Georg Friedrich Händel, and that the family name is written in five different ways—Händel, Hendel, Händeler, Hendeler, and Hentler; but most commonly Händel. A trace of this fluctuation of the family name may be found in the will of Handel himself, in which he leaves £300 to his “cousin Christianna Susannah Handelin.” In Italy he constantly signed his name Hendel; but from the commencement of his residence in England, down

¹ See list of works consulted.

to the day of his death, he invariably signed, George Frideric Handel; and that, therefore, appears to be the orthography of his names which has the best right to be preserved. The English have been quite as ingenious as the Germans in discovering variations for this name; for it has been written Hendall, Hendell, Handell, Handle, Hondel, and Haendel.

All the biographers—English, French, and German—agree in stating that he was born on the 24th of February, 1684. This also is the date which is carved upon his tomb in Westminster Abbey; but, nevertheless, it is erroneous. M. Förstemann thus refers to the subject:—“Dreyhaupt, in his ‘Description of the Province of the Saale,’ has alone given the correct date of Handel’s birth; which is the 23rd of February, 1685. (Vol. ii., p. 625.) In fact, it may be seen by the books of the Church of Notre Dame de St. Laurent, at Halle, that Handel was baptized there on the 24th of February, 1685, and it is known that at that time the baptism always took place on the day after the birth. In addition to this, the rare veracity and perfect information which Dreyhaupt manifests in everything that relates to our town speak for themselves in favour of his assertion.”

Handel himself had previously confirmed this rectification of this date, without anybody perceiving it. In the manuscript of *Solomon*, after having signed, and dated it the 13th of June, 1748, he adds, “Ætatis 63;” in that of *Susannah*, dated the 9th of August in the same year, he again adds, “Ætatis 63;” finally, *Jephtha* is signed, “30th of August, 1751, Ætatis 66, G. F. Handel.” If the author of *Susannah* and of *Jephtha* had been born in 1684, he would have been sixty-four years old in 1748 and sixty-seven in 1751. As Handel has himself declared his age upon several occasions, it is difficult to explain the obstinacy with which, for more than a century, this blunder has been persisted in, otherwise than by the blind readiness with which writers copy certain assertions from each other when once they have become current. The truth, however, did not escape all his contemporaries. In the list of celebrated deaths for the year 1759, in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, may be found—“G. F. Handel, Esq., a great musician. He was born in Germany,

in 1685.” But Mainwaring, who wrote the earliest biographical notice of the great musician,¹ placed the date at 1684, and every one has copied his mistake. It is, however, quite certain that Handel was born on the 23rd of February, 1685, and not on the 24th of February, 1684.

All vocations, be they ever so strong, do not invariably lead to something great: frequently they become abortive; often, after casting a supernatural light for a time, they are suddenly extinguished, or at best never surpass mediocrity. Nevertheless, all great artists come into the world with a vocation which manifests itself, in their earliest years, in a remarkable, imperious, and irresistible manner. George Frideric Handel was such a one. His father, who was a surgeon, and was sixty-three years old when this child first saw the light, determined to make a lawyer of him; but Nature had resolved to make him a composer, and the struggle between Nature and the father commenced at the very cradle of the future author of *The Messiah*. Scarcely had he begun to speak, when he articulated musical sounds. The doctor, who was the son of Valentin Handel, a master coppersmith, was terribly alarmed when he discovered instincts of so low an order in his eyes. He understood nothing of Art, nor of the noble part which artists sustain in the world; he saw in them nothing but a sort of mountebank, who amuse the world in its idle moments. “Music,” said he, “was an elegant art and a fine amusement; yet, if considered as an occupation, it had little dignity, as having for its subject nothing better than mere pleasure and entertainment.”² Uneasy, and almost ashamed at the inclinations of his son, the father of Handel opposed them by all possible means. He would not send him to any of the public schools, because there not only grammar but the gamut would be taught him; he would not permit him to be taken to any place, of whatever description, where he could hear music; he forbid him the slightest exercise of that nature, and banished every kind of musical instrument far from

¹ For this and all other authorities that may be quoted in this volume, see list of consulted works.

² Mainwaring, p. 10.

the house. But he might as well have told the river that it was not to flow. Nature surmounted every obstacle to her decree. The precautions taken to stifle the instincts of the child served only to fortify by concentrating them. He found means to procure a clavichord, or dumb spinet,¹ and to conceal it in a garret, whither he went to play when all the household was asleep. This fact, incredible as it may appear, is positively affirmed by Mainwaring, and both Hawkins and Burney also attach credit to it. Although the clavichord was a sort of square box, which was placed upon a table, we must at least suppose that either the nurse or the mother of the child were his accomplices, and that he had acquired certain ideas upon the subject before music was forbidden him. However that may have been, Nature is said to have been his first teacher. Without any guidance, finding out everything for himself, and merely by permitting his little fingers to wander over the key-board, he produced harmonic combinations; and at seven years of age he discovered that he knew how to play upon the spinet. If all this be not true, we must recognize in it one of those extraordinary fables in which the poetic imagination of the Middle Ages loved to conceal extraordinary truths.

It was in the following manner that the poor father discovered his defect:—He had, by a former marriage, a son, who was valet-de-chambre to the reigning Duke of Saxe-Weisenfelds. He wished to go and visit him; and George, who was then seven years old, and who was not acquainted with this brother, begged of his father to take him with him. When this was refused, he did not insist, but watched for the moment when the coach set off, and followed it on foot. The father saw him, stopped the coach and scolded him; when the child, as if he did not hear the scolding, recommenced his supplications to be allowed to take part in the journey, and at last (thanks to that persistence which predicted the man of energy which he eventually proved to be) his request was granted. When they had arrived at the palace of the Duke, the boy stole off to the organ

¹ The strings were banded with strips of cloth, to deaden the sound. They were much used in the cells of nunneries.

in the chapel as soon as the service was concluded, and was unable to resist the temptation of touching it. The Duke, not recognizing the style of his organist, made inquiries; and when the trembling little artist was brought before him he encouraged him, and soon won his secret from him. The Duke then addressed himself to the father, and represented to him that it was a sort of crime against humanity to stifle so much genius in its birth. The old doctor was greatly astonished, and had not much to answer; the opinion of a sovereign prince must have had, moreover, a great influence over the mind of a man who judged of musicians as we have already seen. He permitted himself to be convinced, and promised, not without some regret, to respect a vocation which manifested itself by such unmistakable signs. Handel was present, his eyes fastened upon his powerful protector without losing a word of the argument; never did he forget it, and for ever afterwards he regarded the Duke of Saxe-Weisenfelds as his benefactor, for having given such good advice to his father. On his return home, his wishes were gratified, and he was permitted to take lessons from Sackau, or Zackau, the organist of the Cathedral at Halle. Sackau was an organist of the old school, learned, fond of his art, adoring the fugue, the canon, and the counterpoint. He was not long in discovering what a pupil Fortune had sent to him. He began by carefully instructing him in general principles, and then laid before him a vast collection of German and Italian music which he possessed, sacred and profane, vocal and instrumental compositions of different schools, different styles, and of every master. They analyzed everything together. When the pupil was from eight to nine years old, the master would set him to write a sacred motet or cantata weekly; and these exercises, which consisted generally in fugues on a given subject, lasted for three consecutive years. There remain of that epoch "six trio-sonatas for two hautboys and a bassoon," of which, according to Burney, there are copies in the library at Buckingham Palace; but all my endeavours to discover them there have been utterly fruitless.

Whilst these studies were proceeding, the little Handel continued to practice upon the harpsichord, and learnt to play the

violin, the organ, and, above all, the hautboy, then the object of his predilection.¹ This taste of his childhood explains, perhaps, the great number of pieces which he composed for that instrument. At that time he discovered more than he learnt. Sackau was every day more and more astonished at his marvellous progress, and, as he loved wine nearly as well as music, he often sent him to take his place at the organ on Sundays whenever he had a good *dejeuner* to take part in. At length, although he found him of great use, this worthy man confessed, with excellent and admirable pride, that his pupil knew more than himself, and advised that he should be sent to Berlin, where he might strengthen himself by studying other models. The Elector of Brandenburg had at that time a well-appointed opera-house, and attracted to his court all that Italy produced that was remarkable in music.

For his part, the old doctor instructed his son very regularly in Latin, secretly hoping to bring him, one day or other, over to his own ideas. But, being at length over-persuaded, he offered no obstacle to the proposed journey, which took place in 1696, under the protection of a friend of the family. Mainwaring, Burney, and other authors, put the date of this journey at 1698, but this evidently wrong. They all admit that Handel lost his father after his return from Berlin, and it seems to be certain that it was his father who recalled him from that city. But M. Förstemann has proved, by the register of the parish of Halle, that the old doctor died on the 11th of February, 1697, at the age of seventy-five years. And, besides this, Mainwaring is not consistent with himself; for he says Handel was sent to Sackau when he was seven years old, and then he continues, "during this interval of three or four years he had made all the improvements that were any way consistent with the opportunities it afforded; but he was impatient for another situation, which should afford him better. Berlin was the place agreed on."² After these words, Mainwaring adds—"It was in 1698 that he went to Berlin;" but 1698 would give thirteen years instead of eleven to the young organist. It was at

¹ Burney.

² See Mainwaring, page 18.

Berlin (Mainwaring says again) that Attilio “ would often take him upon his knee, and make him play on his harpsichord for an hour together.” But a boy of thirteen or fourteen years is not usually taken upon the knee, and kept there for hours. In placing the journey to Berlin in 1696, not only is the positive date, as discovered by M. Förstemann adopted, but a probability is given to the details furnished by Mainwaring¹ which they would otherwise not possess.

Handel, being then eleven years of age, made the acquaintance of Attilio and Bononcini at Berlin, two Italian composers, whom subsequently he was to meet again in London. Attilio, a simple and benevolent man, abandoned himself heartily to the enthusiasm which the talents of the new-comer inspired ; he praised him everywhere, and made him play the harpsichord and the organ, without either of them appearing ever to grow tired. Bononcini, on the other hand, who had a harsh, sombre, and jealous disposition, and who enjoyed a great and merited reputation, treated the little fellow with scorn. Tired of hearing his skillful execution praised, this man composed a cantata for the harpsichord, which he filled with a multitude of difficulties, and requested Handel to play it ; feeling sure that even a professor of music could never decipher it without study. But the pupil of Sackau executed this formidable cantata at sight, as if it had been a mere bagatelle. Bononcini was amazed, and treated him thenceforward as a rival. But Bononcini was a character ; and whilst he conceived hatred for a child, he was logical, and showed him the politeness due to a man.

At Berlin, Handel passed for a prodigy. The Elector wishing to become the patron of so rare a genius, manifested a disposition to attach him to himself, and to send him to Italy to

¹ The Rev. John Mainwaring, the anonymous author of the *Memoirs of the Life of Handel*, was a member of St. John's College, Cambridge, and professor at that University. Born in 1735 (according to a note by Mr. Townsend), he was only twenty-five years old when he wrote his Biography in 1760. It is extremely useful for reference ; but must, nevertheless, be read with caution. Mainwaring gathered together many things that were generally unknown. He received notes from Smith, Handel's secretary, but he did not examine what he wrote with sufficient care. He was not gifted with an analytical mind, and, therefore, he is frequently inexact.

complete his musical education. But when the father was consulted, he did not think it wise to enchain the future of his son to the Court of Berlin, and he excused himself, saying that he was now an old man, and that he wished to keep near him the only son who remained to him; and as in those days it was not prudent to oppose a prince on his own land, Handel was brought back somewhat hastily to his native town.

The homage of which he had perceived himself to be the object, had by this time, doubtless, given him some notion of his superiority; but this only rendered him more assiduous in his studies. What he had learnt at Berlin had enlarged his ideas, and he set himself to work again with Sackau, seeking out the secrets of his art, analyzing the defects and the qualities of the different masters of every nation, copying and composing large quantities of music, working constantly to acquire the most solid knowledge of the science. Study is the fertilizing agent, without which the richest and most fruitful of soils must soon become sterile. We read in the *Anecdotes of Handel and Smith*:—“It has long been a matter of curious research, among the admirers of Handel, to discover any traces of his early studies. Among Mr. Smith’s collection of music, now in the possession of his daughter-in-law, Lady Rivers,¹ is a book of manuscript music, dated 1698, and inscribed with the initials G. F. H. It was evidently a common-place book belonging to Handel, in the fourteenth year of his age. The greater part is in his own hand, and the notes are characterized by a peculiar manner of forming the crotchets. It contains various airs, choruses, capricios, fugues, and other pieces of music, with the names of contemporary musicians, such as Zackau, Alberti, Frobergheer, Krieger, Kerl, Ebner, Strunch. They were probably exercises adopted at pleasure, or dictated for him to work upon by his master. The composition is uncommonly scientific, and contains the seeds of many of his subsequent performances.” The precious “book of manuscript music,” mentioned in this extract, is no

¹ She was the daughter of Mrs. Coxe, the widow of Dr. Coxe, Physician Extraordinary to the King. Smith, himself a widower, but childless, married the widow Coxe in 1795.—(*Anecdotes, &c.*, p. 56.)

longer to be found in Smith's collection.¹ What has become of it?

About this time Handel contracted relations with another studious young composer, which was much to their mutual benefit. Telemann, born at Magdeburg, in 1681, says, in his notes upon his own life, which were entrusted to Mattheson:—"Soon after my arrival at Leipsic, the direction of the opera was confided to me. At this epoch, the pen of the excellent Mr. Jean Kuhnau served me as a model in the fugue and the counterpoint; but as for as the exercises of melody, I was in constant communication with Handel, both by letter and verbally in the visits which we paid each other."² Leipsic is distant from Halle not more than six or seven leagues. This took place (according to Telemann) from 1701 to 1703. Handel praised warmly the facility which this companion of his studies possessed, and said that he could compose a piece of church music in eight parts, in less time than another person would take to write a letter.³

Handel's father died shortly after the return of his son from Berlin, in 1697, leaving him poor, and it became necessary to provide for his existence as well as his renown. Halle was too small to contain him. He wished to visit Italy, but not having the means of making such a journey, he went to Hamburg in

¹ This collection, which was supposed to be either dispersed or lost, was offered for sale a few months back, and has become the property of the author of these pages. A more worthy possessor might have obtained it, but not one who would appreciate it with greater reverence. Its value is inestimable. Out of the 160 volumes of which it is composed, 60 or 70 are the very books which Handel used to conduct his operas and oratorios, and which he bequeathed, in dying, to Christopher Smith, his pupil and secretary. These are, in great part, covered with notes, directions, and corrections in the handwriting of Handel himself, such as cast a new light over his works. Some contain variations and airs which are unedited. An analysis of these Handelian volumes will be found in the *Catalogue*. However, the present possessor only regards himself as the custodian of these precious treasures, and they are at the disposal of all musicians who wish to consult them. The MSS. of great men cannot be the property of any one man exclusively: they belong to the archives of that humanity which they glorify.

² *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte, etc.*; von Mattheson, Hambourg, 1740. (Foundations for a Musical Triumphal Arch). This very curious book is a biography of the musicians of the epoch. The articles on Handel, Kaiser, and Telemann have been translated for me by my friend and companion in exile, Dr. Dick.

³ *Musical Biography*.

the month of July, 1703.¹ This town was, at that time, in the apogee of its commercial prosperity; possessing a German opera-house, which rivalled that of Berlin, and had for its composer-in-chief the Saxon Kaiser, a man of very great reputation.

Handel commenced by entering this theatre as *violon di ripieno*.² He was, perhaps, willing to content himself with so small a position, less through modesty than through vanity. The young man of eighteen years reserved to himself the satisfaction of enjoying the general surprise when his capacities should be discovered. This is rendered probable by what Mattheson says:—"At first he played the *violon di ripieno* in the orchestra of the opera-house, and he acted the part of a man who did not know how to count five, for he was naturally prone to dry humour. But the harpsichordist being absent, he allowed himself to be persuaded to replace him, and proved himself to be a great master, to the astonishment of everybody, except myself, who had often heard him in private."

Soon after his arrival at Hamburg, the place of the organist of Lubeck was offered for competition, upon the retirement of the old incumbent, Dietrich Buxtehude, and Handel, accompanied by Mattheson, went to canvass for the vacancy, on the 17th of August, 1703. But they found a rather singular condition attached to the programme, which was, that the successor was to marry the daughter of the retiring organist; and as this was not quite agreeable to them, they returned to Hamburg as happy as they went. This adventure, at the very outset of his career, appears all the more original, when we remember that Handel never manifested any taste for matrimony.

Mattheson was a young citizen of Hamburg, a composer, a singer, and an actor, very clever on the organ and the harpsichord, and afterwards a writer of astonishing fecundity. Born in 1681, he prided himself, when eighty-three years old, on having written as many books upon all sorts of subjects as he had lived years. Many of his works (from which Hawkins and

¹ Mattheson.

² The instruments of *ripieno* are used in orchestral compositions to distinguish those *parts* which are only occasionally introduced to fill up and supply the chorus.—Bnsby's *Dictionary of Music*.