

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Excerpt
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THE LIFE OF HANDEL.

CHAPTER I.

THE HÄNDEL FAMILY.

ON the banks of the River Saale, in Lower Saxony, some fifty miles from Magdeburg, and somewhat less than half that distance to the north of Leipzig, and north-west of Weissenfels, stands the once picturesque but now comparatively uninteresting town of Halle.

Two centuries ago, this favoured seat of modern learning presented a very different appearance from that which now prompts the jaded tourist to pass it by unnoticed. Originally held in feoff by the Electors of Saxony, as an appanage of the Bishopric of Magdeburg, it was ceded, after the close of the Thirty Years' War, to the Electorate of Brandenburg. The actual transfer of the executive power did not, however, take place until after the death of the Herzog Augustus of Saxony, who ruled it for many years, under the modest title of Administrator, fixing his residence at the Moritzburg, and surrounding himself with a Court, less splendid in its appointments than those of Dresden or Vienna, yet far more interesting for the glimpses it afforded into the

B

domestic life of one of the noblest houses in Germany. Under this form of government, the town continued to prosper, and its inhabitants to dwell together in laudable contentment, until the year 1680, when the death of the Administrator wrought a notable change in its prospects. In 1681, the supreme power was formally claimed by the Elector of Brandenburg, who, after duly receiving the homage of his new subjects, left their beloved Vaterstadt to subside into the dulness naturally to be expected in a princely residence suddenly abandoned to the unbroken routine of sober burgher life. Henceforth, the courtly phase of its existence lived only in the memory of the past. Its famous University had not yet sprung into existence. The presence of no grave body of professors vouched either for its classical dignity or for the respectability of its mundane status. No troops of cloth-capped students paraded its suburbs by day, or made night hideous over their *Lager Bier* while grave professors slept. Yet, even then, it was not without its 'objects of interest.' Its brave old Moritzburg, no longer tenanted by reigning Princes, but consecrated still by a thousand chivalrous traditions of stirring times not yet wholly forgotten, and golden memories of men and deeds to be forgotten never. Its dim *Liebfrauenkirche*, surpassing in wealth of ornament, and fitness of proportion, the stately charms of many a proud Cathedral. Its giant Roland, and mysterious *Rothe Thurm*, suggestive of secrets unknown to living antiquary. Its dark well-trodden streets. Its quaint old mediæval *Rathhaus*, scarcely less picturesque than that of Leipzig. Its busy *Marktplatz*, hemmed in by an aerial rampart of tall, steep, red-tiled roofs, each pierced with tiers of countless dormer-windows, like portholes in the sides of a bold three-decker, and

1609-1685.]

HALLE.

3

dominated by an interminable phalanx of dusky chimney-stacks, which, hospitable as those of Basle and Strassburg at the present day, crowned the habitations of the industrious *bourgeoisie* with 'a dwelling for the stork.' All these remained, after the last feeble ray of princely sunshine had glided from Halle to Berlin; and to these must now be added a later attraction, which speaks, not to the heart of Germany alone, but to that of the whole civilised world; for it was in this old town that the Composer of 'Messiah' was born.

Two hundred years ago, the neighbourhood of Halle was celebrated, as now, for a chain of salt springs, rich enough to represent the wealth of an entire province. Endowed with these natural treasures, the working of which involved a vast amount of capital and labour, the town could not but have been a prosperous one, in its commercial relations, from very early times. At any rate it was prosperous enough, during the opening years of the seventeenth century, to attract the serious attention of a certain worthy burgher of Breslau, Valentin Händel¹ by name, who, forsaking his birthplace, in the year 1609, settled in Halle as a master coppersmith, and, having secured the necessary 'freedom of the town,'² spent the remainder of his days within its walls, in the enjoy-

¹ The family name is known to have been spelled in a variety of ways, which do honour to the uncertain orthography of the seventeenth century. The following forms were common: Händel, Haendel, Hendel, Hendall, Hendell, Handel, Handell, Hondel, Handle, Händeler, Hendeler, Händtler, Henttler, Händler, Handelin. In the following pages we have adhered to the three forms used by Handel himself—Händel, Hendel, and Handel, —confining the employment of each to the period at which he himself adopted it.

² *Das Bürgerrecht.*

ment of a comfortable competency, earned by honest labour and characteristic German thrift.

Before taking this decisive step, the worthy Breslauer had prudently endeavoured to strengthen his domestic relations by one still more important—a matrimonial connection with Anna, daughter of Samuel Beichling, a brother coppersmith of Eisleben. The marriage took place in 1608, and, in process of time, was blessed with five sons and a daughter. Two of the former—Valentin the younger, and Christoph—followed the family calling. Samuel and Gottfried died young. The fifth son, Georg, was ambitious. Born in September, 1622, and deprived of his father's protecting care before he had completed his fourteenth year, he soon found himself quite capable of making his own way in the world. With laudable determination to succeed, he began life by studying the rude surgery of the period, under the auspices of Christoph Oettinger, the town barber. This functionary died on the 15th of April, 1639; leaving behind him a thrifty widow, Frau Anna Oettinger, who afterwards carried on her late husband's business by proxy. On the 20th of February, 1643, Georg Händel married the prosperous relict; and, by this masterstroke of policy, became entitled both to the freedom of the town and the style of 'Meister Göрге,' some months before he attained the ripe age of twenty-one.

Though twelve years older than her second husband, Frau Anna Händel¹ gave birth in due time to six children, of whom two only—Dorothea Elizabeth, and Karl—lived to perpetuate the race. Meanwhile, Meister Göрге worked diligently at his profession, and with

¹ This lady's identity must be carefully distinguished from that of her mother-in-law, of the same name.

1609-1685.]

DOROTHEA TAUST.

5

such success, that, in 1652, he was appointed town surgeon¹ of Giebichenstein, a suburb of some importance, now almost continuous with the town of Halle. This was much for a young man of thirty, and doubtless formed a stepping-stone to better things; for, not very long afterwards, he received the additional appointments of Surgeon in Ordinary, and Valet-de-chambre,² to Prince Augustus of Saxony. The exact date of this last preferment has not yet been ascertained; but it is certain that Georg Händel enjoyed it for some considerable time before the Prince's death, and that he afterwards held the same confidential position in the household of the Elector of Brandenburg.

Frau Anna Händel died on the 9th of October, 1682, at the venerable age of seventy-two; and, on the 23rd of April, 1683, Meister Görge contracted a second marriage, with Dorothea, daughter of Pastor Georg Taust, of Giebichenstein, a lady then just thirty-two years of age, and equally respected for the gentleness of her demeanour, her loving submission to parental and conjugal authority, her earnest piety, and her reverence for and intimate acquaintance with the text and teaching of the Holy Scriptures; qualities which were all faithfully reproduced in the character of her children.

The first fruit of this second marriage was a son, who, born in 1684, died within an hour after his entrance into the world. The second—the subject of the present memoir—first saw the light in the February of the following year. Two daughters completed the family: Dorothea Sophia, born on the 6th of October, 1687, and afterwards married to Michael Dietrich Michaelsen,

¹ *Amts Chirurgus.*

² *Leib Chirurgus and Geheimer Kammerdiener.*

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Doctor of Jurisprudence ; and Johanna Christiana, who was born June 10th, 1690, and died, unmarried, in 1709.

In Meister Görge's second family, our interest in the genealogical tree of the House of Händel reaches its culminating point. Except for the purpose of identifying certain legatees, to be hereafter mentioned, we need pursue its ramifications no farther ; nor need we encumber our pages with a network of biographical details, concerning even the founders of the race. For, in tracing out the history of these worthy burghers, whose only claim upon our notice lies in their invincible respectability, we find no mention, anywhere, of a predilection for that delightful Art among the votaries of which the name of Handel has so long been 'familiar as a household word.' The Bach family transmitted its precious heritage of talent, from father to son, through six generations, at least, of earnest students. The name of Domenico Scarlatti is scarcely less illustrious than that of his father, Alessandro. Mozart and Beethoven learned the language of Music in their cradles. But the House of Händel was not an artistic one. Ready enough to direct its energies to the attainment of an honourable position in the world, it was utterly dead to all loftier aspirations. The clever surgeon himself seems to have practised medicine with no higher aim than the accumulation of the most profitable Court appointments he could compass. To his son alone was it given to glorify the family history with the fire of heaven-born genius. And the lustre thus imparted to its annals died out with its first possessor, who neither inherited it from a past generation, nor bequeathed it to a future one.¹

¹ See the genealogical tree of the Händel family.

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CHAPTER II.

GEORG FRIEDRICH'S CHILDHOOD.

It is difficult, after the lapse of nearly two hundred years, to identify the site of Meister G \ddot{o} rge's residence in Halle with absolute certainty. There is, however, strong evidence in favour of the general belief that he occupied the house known as 'Grosser Schlamm Nro. 4,' now the property of Herr F. W. R \ddot{u} precht, and the object of many a pious pilgrimage. Notwithstanding its unattractive name,¹ this dwelling was, in reality, a very pleasant one, situated in a busy part of the town, within a few minutes' walk of the Market-place, in one direction, and of the Moritzburg, in the other—a position which the Surgeon in Ordinary must have found exceedingly convenient, and which certainly does not tend to weaken the authority of the tradition which points to the premises as having once been his property.

It was here, then, in all probability, that the second and only surviving son of Georg and Dorothea H \ddot{a} ndel drew his first breath on the 23rd of February, 1685.² It was from this house that he was taken, on the following

¹ *Am Schlamme* means, literally, 'on the mud.'

² See Appendix A.

8 GEORG FRIEDRICH'S CHILDHOOD. [CHAP. II.]

day, to be baptized, in the Liebfrauenkirche, by the name of Georg Friedrich; his Sponsors, on that solemn occasion, being Herr Philipp Fehrsdorff, Court Administrator¹ at Langendorff; Herr Zacharias Kleinhempel, town barber of Halle, residing in the Näumarekt; and Jungfer Anna Taust, his mother's sister. And, in this same house, within hearing of the great Church Bell, he spent his happy childhood—the darling of his father's old age, and the fondest hope of a mother, to whose tender solicitude he owed the training, which, through all the trials and vicissitudes of a long and more than ordinarily eventful life, kept him honest, and just, and true, and secured him the respect of Princes, and the affection of all who were not blinded by jealousy to the splendour of his genius and the depth of his moral worth.

Georg Friedrich was a born Musician; and scarcely waited for his emancipation from the nursery to begin the practice of his Art. His earliest delight was a mimic Orchestra of toy Drums and Trumpets, Horns, and Flutes, and Jews'-harps. For a time, the kind old surgeon bore patiently with this childish fancy; but, finding that it was rapidly developing itself into a passion, he grew more anxious with regard to its probable effect upon the future of the young enthusiast, whom he had determined to educate for the legal profession, and sternly forbade the practice of any kind of Music whatever. He 'would have no more of such jingling,' he said: 'henceforth, all houses in which Music was practised must be avoided.' This was a sore trouble to the child. In all other matters he was docile and obedient; but, without his beloved Music he could not live, and against this cruel prohibition he rebelled. By

¹ *Hochst. Sächs. Verwalter.*

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1685-1690.] THE STORY OF THE CLAVICHORD. 9

means of some friendly help, the nature of which has not transpired, he managed to obtain possession of an old Clavichord.¹ This he smuggled into an unoccupied garret, constructed in the roof of the house; and here, beneath the storks' nests, he practised, at night, while the rest of the family slept. And he was able to hear good Music, too, sometimes. On certain evenings in the week, it was (and still is) the custom to sing or play a Choral on the tower of the Liebfrauenkirche. To this performance the little *virtuoso* listened with rapture; no doubt endeavouring to reproduce the sweet strains of *Am ruhen alle Wälder, O Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält, Vater unser im Himmelreich*, and other pious Hymns, on his darling Clavichord; and, as subsequent events sufficiently proved, making extraordinary progress both in executive power and artistic expression, though unable to obtain any instruction whatever, save that afforded by his own true natural instinct. It was a happy time; and the stolen practisings did good service as a preparation for greater things.

Of all this the unsuspecting father remained profoundly ignorant, until his attention was drawn to the subject by an event as singular as it was unexpected. It happened,

¹ The Clavichord was a keyed instrument, the wires of which were so muffled by a general damper of cloth that the tones they produced were scarcely audible. On this account, the instrument was much used in the cells of Monasteries, when studious Monks or Nuns wished to practise, without disturbing the Community. Small Clavichords were sometimes made without legs, and placed, for use, upon a table. Some were even small enough to be carried under the arm; and it was, no doubt, an instrument of this description which Handel succeeded in conveying to the garret. (See the article, CLAVICHORD, in the *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.)

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about this time,¹ that he was summoned to the Court of Sächse-Weissenfels, where his grandson, Georg Christian Händel, held the appointment of valet-de-chambre in the household of the reigning Duke, a prince of high intellectual culture, and a liberal patron of Art.² The child, who had, no doubt, heard the music at Weissenfels deservedly praised, was most anxious to participate in the delights of so tempting a journey; and, finding that he could by no amount of persuasion obtain permission to accompany his father, conceived the bold idea of running after his carriage, which he followed successfully until it reached a convenient halting-place. Though extremely angry at this act of disobedience, Meister Görge had not the heart to offer any farther resistance to the entreaties of his little one, whom he permitted, when the first outburst of his wrath was over, to occupy the much-coveted vacant seat in his coach. The tired little feet found rest at last; but the kind-hearted surgeon's change of purpose proved fatal to the success of his long-meditated scheme. Georg Friedrich was not born to be a lawyer.

On arriving at the Castle, the child made immediate friends with some members of the Duke's *Kapelle*, who admitted him to their rehearsals, and took him, on Sunday, into the Organ-loft, where, after the conclusion of the Service,

¹ Mainwaring describes this journey to Weissenfels as having taken place when Georg Friedrich was seven years old. Chrysander relegates it to a somewhat later period, but without any certain evidence to support his case.

² Georg Christian was the second son of Karl Händel (the fifth child of Meister Görge's first family) and Justine Margarethe, *née* Frankenberger. He was born on the 6th of July, 1675, and was, therefore, ten years older than his little half-uncle, Georg Friedrich. Schœlcher (misled, no doubt, by Mainwaring), erroneously describes him as Meister Görge's son. Christian Gottlieb Händel of Kopenhagen, was his youngest child.