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The Life of George Frederick Handel

Beloved not only in Britain, George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) is admired as a composer the world over. His inventive and sensitive melodic genius and his exuberant brilliance in depicting the spectacular are best displayed in his *Messiah* and *Zadok the Priest*. Larger than life, Handel impressed all who met him and was adept at promoting his works, arranging for their publication and even selling them from his home in London's Brook Street. His dogged determination to triumph over the many reverses of his career and the fickle enthusiasms of the Georgian public is the stuff of three-volume novels. This sympathetic and highly readable biography by the composer and author William Smith Rockstro (1823–95) was first published in 1883. Wherever possible, autograph manuscripts have been consulted and the book contains the first detailed catalogue of Handel's output. Among other works, Rockstro's biography of Mendelssohn is also reissued in this series.

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[More information](#)

The Life of George Frederick Handel

*With an Introductory Notice
by George Grove*

WILLIAM SMITH ROCKSTRO



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[More information](#)

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[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



*G. F. Handel. 8 Septemb: 12
1741.*

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE LIFE
OF
GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL

BY
W. S. ROCKSTRO,
AUTHOR OF 'A HISTORY OF MUSIC FOR YOUNG STUDENTS,' 'PRACTICAL HARMONY,
'THE RULES OF COUNTERPOINT,' ETC. ETC.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
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Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

NOTICE.

CONSIDERING the position which Handel holds in England, and the manner in which certain of his compositions have penetrated the existence of a large portion of the English people, it is remarkable that so long an interval should have elapsed without a satisfactory memoir of him being attempted in English. It is probably accurate to say that his name is as widely known in this country as Shakespeare's; at any rate it may be taken as certain that no play of that great poet's has been performed as often as the *Messiah* has. And yet until recently Mainwaring's *Memoir* was the only attempt at a biography of this popular and influential writer; and that book—an octavo of two hundred pages—is not only an inadequate compilation, but has proved its inadequacy by never having demanded a reprint, and by becoming so rare that many persons well informed on such

b

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

subjects have never even seen it. The other books dealing with Handel's life, by Mattheson, Burney, Coxe, Hawkins,¹ &c., are mere collections of anecdotes and desultory memoranda, equally inaccessible and unknown to the general reader with Mainwaring's work. Still they are the work of Handel's contemporaries, and therefore show that the absence of an adequate Biography is not due, as it is in Shakespeare's case, to the want of sound materials.

Within the last few years two attempts have been made to fill the blank, but neither of them with success. Dr. Chrysander's 'G. F. Händel,' though a model for pains and enthusiasm, is not only in German, and old German type, but shares with many other German biographies the defect of excessive length, and of stating every fact regarding its subject in equal proportions, mixing up the sources of information and the conclusions of the writer in one dense and difficult mass, without divisions into paragraphs, head-lines, marginal notes, or any other aid to a decipherment of the impenetrable page. Moreover—probably owing to Dr. Chrysander's absorption in the magnificent edition of Handel's works to which he has devoted

¹ See page 377, &c.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

NOTICE.

vii

his money, his knowledge, and his time during a quarter of a century—his Biography has, since 1867, remained a fragment of two volumes and a half, reaching down only to the year 1740, and hardly likely now ever to be completed.

The curious book of M. Schœlcher ('The Life of Handel,' 1857), though in English, and satisfactory as to size, is deformed by such rampant partiality, by such a want of method and technical knowledge, and by so unfortunate a style, as to be equally inadequate for its purpose with Chrysander's work, though on different grounds.

Mr. Rockstro's Biography has at least the advantage of avoiding some of the errors of its predecessors. Whatever else the book is, it is readable and well-proportioned. We are carried along through Handel's life, with his commanding figure always well in front; while the back and sides of the picture are filled with landscapes, buildings, persons, all characteristically drawn, and all helping on the course of the story. On this point nothing farther need be said. But the book is much more than this. It is the work of one who is not only a practised writer, but an able technical musician. Its readableness and picturesqueness are based on ample materials, skilfully

b 2

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii

NOTICE.

and cautiously used, often for the first time. A prominent instance of this is the admirable way in which the original manuscripts of Handel's music in the Queen's Library at Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Library at Cambridge, and other places—a strong contrast, if the parallel may be again permitted, to the total want in Shakespeare's case—have been utilised. Mr. Rockstro has himself pointed out the vast importance of such autographs in the case of a man whose letters are as few as Handel's are. Among the rich material yielded by these precious documents, not the least valuable are the minute memoranda of date, which Handel in the latter part of his life was so careful to make throughout his scores. In Mr. Rockstro's Biography we have, for the first time, a complete reproduction of these interesting and important statements (pages 167, 213, &c. &c.), which may all be traced by means of the very copious Index. We have here also for the first time a complete Catalogue¹ of the whole of the Composer's works, in every department; in itself a truly prodigious picture of a long life spent in untiring industry. All that can be done to connect the works them-

¹ See pages 432–439.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

NOTICE.

ix

selves with the active, frivolous, intriguing society, in the midst of which they were created, and to bring out the gigantic personality, and the indomitable and versatile character, of the great artist-manager who produced them so rapidly, and under such unfavourable conditions, is given with all possible vivacity and force. The book will, I think, be found to solve satisfactorily the difficult problem of writing the life of an artist so that it shall be welcome and interesting at once to the scientific and the general reader.

One subject alone seems to demand more notice than it has here received; I allude to the singular question of Handel's borrowings and adaptations from his own works and those of other composers. On this Mr. Rockstro has touched more than once (pages 221, 275, &c.). But since to do it justice would require very full investigation and long quotations, quite out of place in a popular 'Life' like the present, he is no doubt wise to have refrained from going farther into it here. It is, however, a subject which continually calls more and more earnestly for examination, and I trust that either Mr. Rockstro, or some equally competent writer, will before long treat the whole matter from its foundation, with the care and knowledge,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x

NOTICE.

and freedom from partiality, that so very difficult
a question emphatically demands.

With these few remarks I leave Mr. Rockstro's
excellent Biography to the appreciation of its
readers.

GEORGE GROVE.

LOWER SYDENHAM,
May 25, 1883.

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William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

THE purpose of the following Memoir will be found so fully explained in the course of the work itself, that it only remains for the Author to express his obligation to the kind friends who have assisted him in its preparation.

And first, in fulfilment of this pleasant duty, he begs to offer his best thanks to Mr. W. G. Cusins, for the courtesy with which, by Her Majesty's gracious permission, he afforded him every possible facility for subjecting the magnificent collection of Autographs in the Royal Library to a minute and exhaustive examination, of indescribable value for critical purposes.

To the kindness of the Rev. Sir Frederick Ouseley he is indebted for permission to describe the famous 'Dublin MS.' of the *Messiah*; and for valuable information, and assistance of various kinds, he begs to offer his sincere acknowledgments to the Lady Llanover, the Earl of Aylesford, Mr. Otto Goldschmidt, Dr. John Hullah, Mr. W. H. Husk, Mr. W. Barclay Squire, Mr. H. Barrett Lennard, Mr. W. H. Longhurst, Dr. F. Hoggan,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

Mrs. Lyttleton, Mr. W. S. Wintle (Secretary to the Foundling Hospital), the Rev. J. R. Lunn, and other friends, whose help has tended greatly to increase the value of his work.

If, assisted by these kind coadjutors, he has been able to throw any new light upon the Art-life of the Composer to whose transcendent genius the English School of the eighteenth century is indebted for its brightest triumphs, he will be more than satisfied.

W. S. R.

ELM COURT, BABBICOMBE, TORQUAY,
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Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
 Notice by George Grove
 William Smith Rockstro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—THE HANDEL FAMILY	1
II.—GEORG FRIEDRICH'S CHILDHOOD	7
III.—THE JOURNEY TO BERLIN	12
IV.—THE STUDENT-ORGANIST	18
V.—THE JOURNEY TO HAMBURG	24
VI.—'ALMIRA'	34
VII.—THE JOURNEY TO ITALY	42
VIII.—THE FIRST ITALIAN OPERA	47
IX.—THE FIRST VISIT TO LONDON	56
X.—IN LONDON AND HANOVER	71
XI.—THE UTRECHT TE DEUM	81
XII.—AT BURLINGTON HOUSE	87
XIII.—CONCERNING THE 'WATER MUSICK'	96
XIV.—THE SECOND PASSION ORATORIO	100
XV.—CONCERNING THE DUKE OF CHANDOS	103
XVI.—CONCERNING THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC	122
XVII.—CONCERNING THE SUCCESS OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC	134
XVIII.—CUZZONI AND FAUSTINA	144

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
 Notice by George Grove
 William Smith Rockstro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xiv

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
XIX.—CONCERNING THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC	151
XX.—HANDEL AS MANAGER	159
XXI.—CONCERNING THE REVIVAL OF ‘ESTHER,’ AND ‘ACIS AND GALATEA’	169
XXII.—THE THREATENING STORM	180
XXIII.—THE RIVAL OPERAS	189
XXIV.—PERFORMANCES WITHOUT DRAMATIC ACTION	199
XXV.—THE LAST ITALIAN OPERAS	208
XXVI.—‘SAUL.’ ‘ISRAEL IN EGYPT’	215
XXVII.—THE DISPUTED MAGNIFICAT	221
XXVIII.—THE ‘MESSIAH’	227
XXIX.—THE TECHNICAL HISTORY OF THE ‘MESSIAH’	243
XXX.—THE RETURN TO LONDON	264
XXXI.—THE VICTORY OF DETTINGEN	271
XXXII.—THE SECOND BANKRUPTCY	278
XXXIII.—BRIGHTER PROSPECTS	285
XXXIV.—NATIONAL REJOICINGS	292
XXXV.—THE LAST ORATORIO	305
XXXVI.—ENGLISH DRAMATIC WORKS	313
XXXVII.—PASTICCIOS	322
XXXVIII.—INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC	326
XXXIX.—EVENTIDE	350
XL.—THE CLOSING SCENE	359
XLI.—THE WILL	369
XLII.—THE MAN	377
XLIII.—THE GENIUS	405
XLIV.—DE RELIQUIIS	423

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-06481-1 - The Life of George Frederick Handel: With an Introductory
Notice by George Grove
William Smith Rockstro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS.		xv
		PAGE
CATALOGUE OF WORKS		432
FAC-SIMILE OF HANDWRITING.		440
APPENDIX		442
GENEALOGICAL TREE	<i>-facing</i>	447
INDEX		447