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978-1-108-07094-2 - Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith: With Select Pieces of Music, Composed by J. C. Smith, Never Before Published

William Coxe

Excerpt

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A N E C D O T E S

OF

GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL.

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ANECDOTES

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IT has been a long received opinion, that the offspring of persons advanced in years are generally weak in frame as well as intellect, and evidently show the languor of the stock from which they sprung; but George Frederick Handel, the subject of the present Memoirs, is a strong instance that such conclusions are not founded in truth: for though his father at the time of his birth was sixty-one years of age, his son astonished the world as an uncommon example of early approach to excellence, great strength of constitution, and continued abilities.

Handel was born on the 24th of February, 1686, at Hall, a city in the dutchy of Magdeburg, in the circle of Upper Saxony, where his father resided as a physician. He was the child of a second marriage. His father destined him to the profession of the civil law; but Handel discovered in his early childhood a strong passion for music.

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Few instances occur of a more early, decided, or fortunate propensity to a particular science. Pope said of himself that

“ He lisp’d in numbers, and the numbers came ;”

Handel, though he never possessed a fine voice, could sing as soon as he could speak, and evinced such a predilection for music, that the father carefully kept out of his reach all instruments, with the hopes of weaning his mind from what he deemed a degrading attachment. But the child contrived to obtain possession of a clavicord, which he secreted in the garret, and at night, when he was supposed to be asleep, the young enthusiast was awake; and the imagination may fondly view him striking the strings of his lyre,—that lyre which was to charm all Europe with its energy.

It is the property of Genius to possess that inflexible spirit, and unalterable adherence to a resolution once formed, which defies opposition, diminishes danger, and surmounts impediment: this disposition tyrannically checked, preys on the temper, and settles into gloominess and misanthropy; but if cherished, and warmed with moderate success, it produces the noblest and most expansive efforts of human energy. This disposition was the characteristic of Handel; and his inflexible spirit of perseverance is marked by a trivial occurrence, which took place in the seventh year of his age. His father, purposing to visit one of his sons, who was valet de chambre to the Duke of Saxe Weisenfeld, Handel earnestly intreated that he might be allowed to accompany him; but his request was peremptorily rejected. The father set off in a chaise; and when he had travelled a few miles, he was surprised at the sight of his son, who, with a strength

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greatly surpassing his years, had set out on foot and overtaken the carriage, the progress of which had been retarded by the badness of the roads. After a sharp animadversion, and some reluctance, the little suppliant was permitted to take his seat, and gratify his earnest desire of visiting his brother.

At the Duke's court, Handel was not so closely watched by his father, as at home. He enjoyed many opportunities of indulging his natural propensity; and he contrived, occasionally, to play upon the organ in the Duke's chapel at the conclusion of divine service. One morning the Duke hearing the organ touched in an unusual manner, inquired of his valet who was the performer. The valet replied that it was his brother; and mentioning at the same time his wonderful talents and predilection for music, and his father's repugnance, the Duke sent for them both. After other inquiries, the Duke was so much pleased with the spirit and talents of the boy, that he pleaded the cause of nature: he represented it as a crime against the public and posterity, to rob the world of such a genius; and, finally, persuaded the father to sacrifice his own scruples, and to permit his son to be instructed in the profession for which he had evinced so strong an inclination. A more interesting scene can hardly be conceived, than Handel listening to the arguments of his powerful advocate, and marking his final triumph over the reluctant prejudices of his parent. The Duke became so much interested in his success, that, at his departure, he made him a present, and promised his protection if he zealously applied to his studies.

At his return to Hall, his father placed him under the tuition of William Zackau, organist to the cathedral; a man of science and

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judgment. Zackau carefully instilled into his scholar, a thorough knowledge of the principles of harmony, and by explaining to him the different styles of Italian and German composition, he laid the foundation of that fame, which was to claim so distinguished a place in the annals of music. Handel made so rapid a progress, that before he had completed his seventh year, he was able to officiate on the organ for his master; and at the age of nine, he began to study composition. At this early period of his life he is said to have composed, every week, during three successive years, a spiritual cantata, or church service for voices, with instrumental accompaniments.*

Having exhausted his source of improvement at Hall, he became desirous of enlarging his knowledge, and was eager to obtain applause on a more distinguished theatre. He made choice of Berlin as the

* 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, 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, Frobergher, 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.

Sir John Hawkins says, that at the age of *nine*, Handel composed motetts for the service of the church, and continued to make one every week for three years. *Hist. of*

spot, where the Opera, under the patronage of Frederick the First, was in a flourishing state, and boasted the aid of the most distinguished musicians of Italy; among whom Buononcini and Attilio were not the least conspicuous. The fame of Handel had preceded him; but these two musicians considered him a mere child, whose abilities had been greatly exaggerated: Buononcini, therefore, in order to try his skill, composed a cantata in the chromatic style, in which he comprized difficulties sufficient to puzzle an experienced master. Handel, however, treated this formidable composition as a mere trifle; he executed it at sight, with a degree of accuracy, truth, and expression, hardly to be expected from repeated practice, and from an aged performer.

But the display of congenial powers, did not impress Buononcini with one sentiment of friendship, or draw from him any symptom of kindness; though civil, he behaved to Handel with such reserve, as seemed to imply, that the foundation of future animosity was laid at that moment. Attilio, on the contrary, shewed him a partiality; the result of a generous and honourable disposition. He would place him for hours at his harpsichord, and was anxious to aid his progress in composition, or facilitate his readiness in execution.

Music. Dr. Burney observes, that when only ten years old, Handel composed a set of Sonatas in three parts. It seems as if they were published. He adds, that “ Lord Marchmont picked them up in his travels, and that they are now in the King’s Collection.” The exercises to which Handel was accustomed, observes Sir John Hawkins, were compositions and fugues upon airs, or subjects delivered to him from time to time by his master. He adds, this is the mode of exercise for young proficient in music, and is also the test of a master.

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Proud to patronize so promising a genius, Frederick frequently invited him to court, made him considerable presents, and, finally, proposed to send him to Italy at his own charge. This proposal Handel was eager to accept; but his father, foreseeing that it would impose a restraint on his son, declined; alleging as an excuse, that his very advanced age required his son's presence. In compliance with his father's injunctions Handel left Berlin, unwilling to expose himself to further solicitation.

Though Handel perfectly acquiesced in the propriety of the motives which induced his father to reject the proposal of Frederick, yet the flattering reception he had met with in his two excursions from home, opened to his view the fairest prospects of profit and celebrity. His father dying, a diminution in his mother's income induced him to repair to Hamburgh, where the Opera was next in repute to that of Berlin. On his arrival he secured an engagement at the opera-house, not as a principal performer on the harpsichord, but as second ripieno violin. So extraordinary a step of voluntary self-abasement will appear singular; but it was the effect of a principle unbecoming the dignity of a great mind, which led him to affect a simplicity, or rather humility of conduct, founded on vanity, and which his youth only could excuse, that he might enjoy the surprise excited by an unexpected display of his powers. Such an opportunity soon occurred. Reinhard Keiser, the leader of the band, encumbered with debts, was obliged to absent himself; and to the general astonishment, the unobserved performer on the violin took his seat before the harpsichord, and soon convinced his audience, and the band, that they had no reason to regret, but ought to exult in the change.

There is a received account of a contest for this enviable precedence, and an attempt to assassinate Handel, which was founded on a misrepresentation of the following occurrence. Matheson, who was afterwards Secretary to the English Resident, and wrote several books on the subject of Music, was at that time a principal singer, and occasional composer. He had set to music the opera of Cleopatra, in which he himself performed Antony; but his part being over in an early period of the piece, it was his custom to take his seat at the harpsichord, and conduct the band during the rest of the performance. This had been submitted to by Keiser; but Handel was not of a disposition so accommodating. He refused to resign his seat; and Matheson, in a rage, as they were going down the steps of the orchestra at the close of the opera, gave him a blow. Their swords were instantly drawn; but Matheson's weapon fortunately breaking against his antagonist's button, put an end to the rencounter. They had been in habits of intimacy, which they soon resumed; and were rejoiced at the lucky conclusion of so serious an incident, arising from so trifling a cause.

In addition to the profits of his engagement, Handel had scholars sufficient to render all assistance from his mother unnecessary; and he returned the first remittance she sent him, with a supply from his savings. Before his quarrel with Matheson, he had travelled with him to Lubeck, where there was a vacancy for the organist's place. They performed this journey in the public caravan, with all the thoughtless hilarity of youth, singing extempore duets, and amusing themselves with all imaginable frolics on the road; to which the affected simplicity and archness of Handel gave an exquisite zest. Finding the

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acceptance of the place coupled with a condition, that the organist was to take a wife, who was to be chosen for him by the magistrates, they each of them declined offering themselves on such conditions, and returned together to **Hamburgh**.

During his residence at **Hamburgh**, he composed his first Italian opera of **Almira** (1704). It met with great and flattering success, and ran thirty nights without intermission. The next year he produced **Nerone**; and the two succeeding years **Florindo**, and **Dafne**; all which were eminently successful. But he was at this time so much engaged with his scholars, and in the production of lessons for the harpsichord, that he did not give to the public so many operas as the fertility of his genius would have enabled him.

At this period the Prince of Tuscany, brother to the Grand Duke, came to **Hamburgh**, and engaged Handel's attention, by introducing to his notice a considerable variety of Italian music; dwelling with patriotic enthusiasm on the pre-eminence of his countrymen. He lamented that Handel had not visited a region, where every branch of the musical science was carried to the highest perfection, and offered his patronage if he would accompany him to Florence. Though Handel had been long desirous of going to Italy, he politely declined this offer, from a noble spirit of independence, which was never known to forsake him, even in the most distressful seasons of his life. But his visit was only postponed.

Having acquired a sufficient sum to defray his expences, he left **Hamburgh** in 1708, and repaired to Florence; where his reception was