

FORTY-EIGHTH PROGRAMME OF MUSIC.

GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL.

AUTUMN TERM, 1920.

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GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL was born in Halle on February 23rd, 1685. Two other great musicians were born that same year: J. S. Bach in Eisenach on the 21st March, and D. Scarlatti in Naples on the 26th October.

Handel's father had come from Silesia to Halle as barber-surgeon attached to the armies of Saxony in 1665. He was a rich man and bought a handsome house for his numerous family. George Frederick was his eighth child. At this time Halle belonged to the Elector of Saxony, but by the Treaty of Westphalia it came to belong to the Elector of Brandenburg, who entered into possession in 1680, five years before Handel's birth. Thus Handel was born a Prussian, but, strangely enough, he was called "the Saxon" all his life. To the Italians he was always the "Caro Sassone," or the "Sassone famoso," and later in England he was often termed the "great Saxon."

Frederick showed signs of musical genius at a very early age, but at first he met with steady opposition on the part of his father. The Duke happened once to hear the child play and remonstrated with his father, who thereupon gave his consent to the music lessons and chose a very remarkable musician to undertake the instruction. The influence of this teacher, Frederick W. Zachau, on Handel was not only very good, but also very lasting. He was a composer of merit, though he never was recognized as he should have been in his life time. His pupil, however, always appreciated, in later life,

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what this first master had been to him. His first efforts were directed to giving Frederick a good foundation in harmony, and it is in harmony that Handel's greatness best shows itself. It is said of him that melody did not come easily to him. And yet he was perhaps the greatest improviser that ever lived. He had a most retentive memory, and all his life had a collection of melodies gathered from everywhere, which he seems, consciously or unconsciously, to have woven into his works, often (indeed mostly) harmonising and beautifying them out of all recognition, but for a few hearers. Thus he had in these early years already memorized many melodies of his beloved master, melodies which he used later.

The young musician visited Berlin when he was eleven years old. The life at the Court of Berlin was very brilliant at that time, and music, especially Italian music, was held in great honour there. Handel played on the Clavecin before the Court and inspired great enthusiasm. His stay in Berlin was cut short by the death of his father, out of respect for whose wishes the boy set himself seriously to the study of Law, at the University of Halle. But he soon saw the uselessness of a study so uncongenial to him, and in 1703 he suddenly decided to go to Hamburg. Here he met several musicians who were held in high esteem all over Germany, with three of whom he formed a warm friendship: the great Capellmeister, Cousser, who had been a pupil of Lully, Reinhard, Keiser and Mattheson. The latter gives his impression of Handel in the words:—"He was rich in power and strong in will." Thanks to *Mattheson's* guidance, Handel soon felt at home in the musical circles of Hamburg, where he quickly won general admiration, especially through his improvisations. Besides being a remarkable clavicist, Handel was a very

good violoncellist, and he joined the Hamburg orchestra in that capacity. Here he met also the Prince Giovanni Gastone dei Medici, who pressed him to come to Italy, which he did, arriving in Venice in 1706. He went straight to Florence, Rome and Naples, and was received everywhere with the greatest cordiality and admiration. In Florence he produced for the first time his great opera "*Roderigo*." He then returned to Venice, and here he met Alessandro Scarlatti, the father of Domenico, and the greatest living Italian musician of the time. The fame of *Roderigo* had preceded Handel in Venice, and all were anxious to do honour to "Il Sassone famoso." Handel is so generally considered as a (and perhaps

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the greatest) writer of oratorios that one is astonished when one remembers that he wrote 59 operas, besides trios and other chamber music. In Florence he joined the "Arcadia," a society which united the nobility and artists as its members, who met every Monday for concerts and poetical recitations, and also had a numerous orchestra. Scarlatti, Corelli, Handel or others would often take their place at the key-board, while a poet would improvise some poem, which the musician in his turn would improvise on the clavecin. They thus had many friendly contests in virtuosity.

In Venice Handel met Steffani, an Italian Capellmeister at the Court of Hanover, and was by him presented to the Duke and his brothers, who invited him to enter their service as Capellmeister as Steffani was giving up the post. He accepted, but was never longer in Hanover than official duties required and the first leave he asked for was to go to England, in 1710. He was then twenty-five years old. Purcell had died fifteen years earlier and had had no followers, so the fount of English music appeared dried up and Italian music reigned supreme. Queen Anne who loved music, and herself played the Clavier well, welcomed Handel heartily. *Rinaldo* was produced in London with great success and was followed by less important operas and music for political or social celebrations: *A Birthday Ode* to Queen Anne and a *Te Deum and Jubilate* on the occasion of the peace of Utrecht. Handel returned to Hanover as early as possible and shortened his stay there to the utmost; and finally he remained away without leave although he was still holding the position of Capellmeister to the Duke. Then Queen Anne died in 1714 and the Duke of Hanover was proclaimed King of England. It was a dangerous moment for Handel, but the new King, who loved music passionately, granted his pardon easily. Handel was appointed music master to the little princesses.

The following years were for Handel years of work and anxiety and trouble, but also of triumph. Many of his troubles were the result of George the First's unpopularity, and his fondness for Handel on whom the general disfavour for the King consequently fell. He had taken over the whole responsibility, financial and artistic, of the Opera House, and on one occasion when he had quarrelled with his father, the Prince of Wales opened a rival theatre to which he had invited singers from Italy. The Court would arrange balls and concerts on the opera nights in order that Handel's theatre should remain empty.

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But Handel especially suffered from the rivalry of a famous Italian singer and composer Bononcini. He was several times near bankruptcy, and once his robust health gave way. But his indomitable energy never deserted him, and he finally came victorious out of the struggle. All through these struggles he was working with an incredible energy. Composing Operas in a few weeks, sometimes days, Oratorios, Choruses and Clavier works followed one another at the

same time as he was directing his operas and concerts. His Clavier pieces were at first all meant as improvisations, and he only published them later when obliged to, faulty copies having been brought out without his permission. Handel had to give up work for eight months, having been stricken with paralysis, but a cure in Aix-la-Chapelle in 1737 did wonders for him and he then resumed his work.

In 1738 he wrote two acts of *Saul* in two weeks and completed the work in two months; *Israel in Egypt* was begun and finished within 21 days. Romain Rolland says of these two works: "*Saul* is a great epic drama flowing and powerful, where the humorous and the tragic intermingle; *Israel* is one immense chorale, the most gigantic effort which has ever been made in oratorio, not only with a single, but with combined chorus. The audacious originality of the conception and its austere grandeur almost stunned the public of his day."

Then came quickly following one another *Ode to St. Cecilia*, *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso et Il Moderato*, *of Milton*. Tired and worn out with the continued enmity of the fashionable people of London he then decided to leave London. The Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland invited him to Dublin, and, as he said: "in order to offer this generous and polished nation something new" Handel composed the work that was to permanently establish his immortality: *The Messiah*. His music was already well known in Dublin and he was received enthusiastically. He spent a winter there and he counted these months with his early years in Italy to the happiest time of his life. *Samson* came next and was produced in London in 1743, and this was followed by a light opera *Semele*. In that same year he wrote his monumental *Dettingen Te Deum* to celebrate the victory of the Duke of Cumberland over the French.

When the Pretender Charles Edward landed in Scotland, Handel associated himself with the great national movement, and on November 14th, 1745, he brought out his *Song made for the Gentlemen Volunteers of the City of London*. It appeared [p 705]

at Drury Lane. He was now recognised as the national musician of England. His troubles seemed to be over, he was free from material cares. On May 27th, 1749, he conducted his *Anthem for the Foundling Hospital* at the Hospital, and in 1751 he began the score of *Jephtha*, but he had to stop working, his sight failed him, and though he seems to have still been able to see sometimes, it was the beginning of blindness. That was the end, and yet after the first fit of despair he resigned himself to his fate and even took again his place at the organ at the production of his oratorios. He also composed again: in 1757 appeared *The Triumph of Time and Truth*. On April 6th, 1759, he played the organ at a production of the *Messiah*. It was for the last time. His great wish that he might die on a Good-Friday was fulfilled; he died in the night between Good-Friday and Easter Saturday on April 14th, 1759. Another wish of his was that he might be buried in Westminster, and that wish was also granted him.

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I. & II. Forms. *Beringer's easy classics* 5153. 2/-. (This Album and all other music mentioned here can be had from Augener's, 18, Great Marlborough St., London W.1.).

The album contains many very pretty and easy pieces, of which the *Minuet* in F is a very dainty example of that most graceful dance. It is easy, if taken carefully at first. A *Sonatine* in B flat major, will be found most interesting, the different voices must be kept very clear.

Of single pieces we will mention *Fughette* No. 1 (6d.). It is a charming little piece, most interesting to play. Again a case of keeping each voice clear from the others.

Courante (6d.) a charming old dance, not very easy to play.

III. & IV. Forms. *The Harmonious Blacksmith*, (6d.), always a favourite. *Gigue* in D minor (6d.) not very easy but well worth a little trouble. Good practise for the left hand.

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V. & VI. *Largo*, (1/-) another general favourite (aria: *Ombra mai fu*). It is not difficult, but requires a good stretch.

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Fugue from Suite II. (1/-) young pianists should play fugues oftener. They are good practise for the fingers and more still for musical understanding, and they are most interesting.

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The Messiah, *Athaliah* and *Saul* are the best for Sunday music.