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Handel’s Glorious Development

George Frideric Handel (February 23, 1685- April 14, 1759), of German birth, is said to be one of the greatest composers of his time, with an impact that is still felt in the modern world. Although Handel contributed to every musical genre of his era, his historical reputation is based largely on his invention and establishment of the English Oratorio. The English Oratorio is a large-scale composition of music designed for an orchestra, a chorus, and solo voices. Handel’s most famous Oratorio, *Messiah*, is a world-renowned piece that was first performed in 1743. Its success would set Handel up for centuries of fame. The oratorio very quickly became a beloved type of concert piece, but in a sacred setting, as they were based on scripture from the Bible. Handel’s creative tendencies, even though it was controversial at times, made a lifelong impact on music, drama, and England.

Handel’s early years and personal life have been compiled by a man named John Mainwaring. This man was a biographer during Handel’s young life and kept a close tab on the Handel family; However, he was known to misinform his audience. For example, it is said that Mainwaring’s dates, when checkable, are usually found to make Handel about four years younger than he actually was (Hicks, *Handel, George Frideric*). Therefore, all that we know about Handel’s childhood is respective to Mainwaring’s writings, which may or may not be true. In his early years, Handel’s musical talents came easily, but opportunity was hard to come by. Handel’s father, Georg Handel Sr., was strongly opposed to his son becoming a musician. It has been said that Handel hid a clavichord in his attic to play at night after his family had gone to bed (Wikipedia contributors, *George Frideric Handel*). Around the age of nine, Handel was overheard by the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels while playing the court organ and it was then that his father was strongly ordered to give his son proper lessons. At this point, Friedrich Zachow became the only man Handel ever considered a music teacher and Handel would learn composition, the harpsichord, and the organ (Hicks, *Handel, George Frideric*). In the early 1700’s, Handel enrolled at the University of Halle. Here, Handel studied music, but also attended many lectures on law, probably to please his father’s wishes. After leaving the university, Handel was asked to be the organist at the Calvinist Cathedral in Halle. Although he was Lutheran, Handel considered this a prestigious opportunity and served for many years. After his time at the cathedral expired, Handel traveled to Hamburg to explore his talents and gain new experiences as a musician. His time in Hamburg was cut short when Ferdinando De Medici invited him to move to Italy (Wikipedia contributors, *George Frideric Handel*). Since opera was banned in Papal states at this time, Handel composed sacred music for the Roman clergy. After this, Handel was offered a position as the Kapellmeister for the German Prince George, who would later become King George I. Handel wrote his most famous arias here and for the royal family. He decided to settle permanently in England in 1712, where he would go on to become the Cannons composer at Middlesex and eventually join the Royal Academy of Music. This academy was carefully cast by aristocrats to ensure that they would have a constant supply of baroque music. For the rest of Handel’s life and career, he composed operas and eventually moved on to the oratorio. Handel enjoyed composing operas, and produced many famous shows. Once the opera business became too expensive, he resorted to his development of a similar piece called the oratorio. This work was Handel’s greatest accomplishment and made him very successful as a musician in England. In the later years of his life, Handel was seriously injured in a carriage accident, which he never fully recovered from. He also developed cataracts in his eyes, causing him to be completely blind by the end of his life. Handel died in the night in 1759 and is buried in Westminster Abbey. Handel was given full state honors and more than 3,000 guests attended his service (Wikipedia contributors, *George Frideric Handel*). Based on his funeral service, it is clear that Handel was a popular and well respected man in England. Part of this respect came from his many charitable donations to children’s orphanages and hospitals (Hicks, *Handel, George Frideric*).

Handel wrote over 1,000 pieces in his lifetime. His early career was focused on Opera, a new and trendy piece of music in the Baroque period. Handel’s operas contained many elements from Keiser’s operas and reflected royalty in many ways. Because Handel worked for royalty for most of his life, his music was dependent upon what they wanted to hear. In the 1730’s, Handel’s opera performances had decreased to about five performances and Handel fell on difficult financial struggles. After writing forty-one operas and Because operas became too expensive and were never as popular in England as they were in Italy, Handel wrote his final opera in 1740 named *Imeneo*. Now, Handel was able to fully pursue the oratorio. He had composed one oratorio before giving up on the opera and it was very successful, this marks a great turning point in Handel’s career and financial life. Handel went on to write twenty-five oratorios, in which some are still performed today. The differences in operas and oratorios are distinct; however, the dramatic factor unites the two genres in magnificent ways (Darlow, *Handel’s passion: A New Approach*).

The English oratorio was quickly replacing the unpopular opera in England, thanks to Handel. The oratorio is a concert piece with an orchestra, a chorus, and solo singers that tells a story, typically from the Bible. Because the oratorio has a dramatic component to it, it is thought of as both a concert piece and a drama (Webb, *Handel’s Oratorios as Dramas*). The oratorio is unlike the opera because it is not as dramatic or theatrical, but still tells the story. The music in these concert pieces are reflections and trends of styles in the Baroque era; However, they do have a “Handelian” style of their own (Hicks, *Handel, George Frideric).* These unique expressions are easily found in his harmonies and melodies. Handel’s melodic gifts were always boldly displayed in his arias, which he developed in Italy (Hicks, *Handel, George Frideric*). Often times, Handel’s work depended on who he was working for at that given time. His works that he composed while under the employment of the Royal family differ greatly from the works before and after. Later in his life, as he began to face death and illnesses, Handel’s work began to reflect his feelings and struggles. Even though his music became darker, his success never came to a halt. Over the years, Handel composed a total of 29 successful oratorios. One famous composition by Handel is *Theodora.* This piece is unique because it captures Handel’s various works in one. *Theodora* was written as an oratorio and was very unsuccessful in its time (Martini & Kantorei, *Theodora*). It was said to be discomforting and challenging by the audience due to the cruelty involved (Martini & Kantorei, *Theodora*). Today, this piece is famous as both an opera and an oratorio, making Handel’s pieces very unique. Sometimes, Handel’s oratorios are reproduced as operatic settings with actors and performers, but this is not how Handel wrote these compositions. Some even argue that without a dramatic factor, one cannot understand Handel’s compositions on the music alone (Webb, *Handel’s Oratorios as Dramas*).

Handel’s most successful oratorio, even into modern day is called *Messiah*. Messiah was written in about 4 weeks by Handel and was first debuted in Dublin, as Handel did not want to risk another failure in London (Kandell, *The Glorious History of Handel’s Messiah*). *Messiah* is considered a “sacred oratorio” for the Lenten season and is held in high regard to the Anglican church. This piece is described as a commentary on Jesus’ nativity, life, and resurrection. A unique feature of *Messiah* is that no musicians (or characters) assume a dramatic role, nor do any of them have dominance over the presentation. This differs from the opera, as operas are designed to tell a story through actors, not just musicians. The structure of the performance is in three pieces, or acts, and is then subdivided into scenes, which contain about 60 total numbers, including choruses, arias, and recitatives. Not only has this piece been important to audiences all over the world, but it is also considered to be so perfect, that all future composers should have examined the piece to understand its satisfaction (*Musical Times*, p. 17). *Messiah* contains several stylistic trends of the time, like recitative, points of imitation, and fugal entries. In the familiar *Hallelujah Chorus*, the points of imitation are evident throughout the piece, but specifically between minute 1:27 and 1:59 (YouTube, *Handel, G.F., Hallelujah Chorus*). Handel used a fanfare-style melody on the words “…and He shall reign…” making this number unique in many ways.

Handel’s life reflects success in many ways. Handel as a boy had a passion for music and a potential seen by royalty. He carried that potential into a career that was not only a positive experience to himself, but he also had positive reactions from the culture and the church. Royalty continued to respect him and utilize his talents for his entire life, even during challenging times. It is important to note that Handel’s *secular* works were often considered *sacred* to the church and society. His modern influence is felt today, especially with the popular performances of the familiar *Messiah*. Handel’s success lives on through his great contribution to music by his glorious development.

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