

George Frideric Handel:

The Great Bear of Baroque Music and a Silently Great Harpsichordist

The Baroque period was a period in the timeline of western history that followed right after the Renaissance. Set in the years of 1600 to 1750, the period was marked with an increasing influx of non-sacred instrumental music which further aroused musical innovation. This perhaps was the reason why it was called Baroque – Portuguese word for irregular pearl in a fine jewelry – for it stood out from the mainstream music of the times before it. During this period, inspiration for composers mainly hailed from Italian musical trends, such as cantata, concerto, sonata, opera, and rhythm of repeating pattern. This encouraged many composers to experiment on the typical music of that time. However, among tens of good composers in this period, there stood a giant – other than Johann Sebastian Bach. This figuratively and literally giant was George Frideric Handel whose musical style was cemented since childhood and who was silently also a great harpsichordist.

The childhood of George Frideric Handel became a significant stepping stone for his legendary musical life and his harpsichord skills. From a very young age, Handel's mother recognized his musical talent where he was then exposed to music at home and through his secretive exploration of harpsichord and organ. On one occasion, he played the organ for the duke's court in Weissenfels where he met Frideric Wilhelm Zachow who then tutored him in composing for the organ, oboe, and violin. Handel began his formal musical education in the Lateinschule in Halle despite his father's lack of support for a musical career. Then, at the age of 17, Handel moved to Hamburg which was the musical center of that time. Though he was a skilled violinist, Handel's prowess in playing the organ and harpsichord ultimately gained him the attention and opportunities to perform in operas giving birth to his first-ever composed opera in 1705, titled *Almira*. Although in his later life, Handel would focus more on operas and subsequently oratorios, harpsichord became a very important element in his works.

Handel's musical foundation from childhood was continuously expanded and perfected as he journeyed from place to place. In 1706, Handel decided to tour Italy. During his travels that spanned over three opera seasons, he worked with leading musicians, such as Arcangelo Corelli, and absorbed Italian opera, oratorios, and other vocal and instrumental works which would later become the basis of his style. At this point, Handel paid less attention to standalone works for harpsichord – or organ. Four years later in 1710, Handel moved to London and his operas and instrumental compositions quickly gained him huge success. Iconic compositions from Handel during this time were the Water Music and Music for the Royal Fireworks. These successes led him to the royal patronage of King George II. For his coronation in 1727, Handel composed yet another iconic and majestic anthem, *Zadok the Priest*. As a testament to his skills, *Zadok the Priest* was still played 300 years later in 2023 for the coronation of King Charles III. In London, Handel also became a leading opera composer with works, such as *Rinaldo* and *Alcina*. However, changing musical tastes and fleeting opera popularity had Handel to divert his efforts to another genre, the oratorios. Having experienced Italian oratorios, Handel continued his masterpiece which resulted in his most famous oratorio, *Messiah*, in 1741. In his later years and near the end of his life, he continuously shifted focus to oratorios, with other works, such as *Belshazzar* in 1744 and *Theodora* in 1750, being produced.

The early years of Handel in his native home of Germany and his exposure to Italian opera during his travels to Italy became the foundation of his musical style. As described by English National Opera (ENO), there were five main characteristics of Handel's musical style. The first characteristic was his mastery of dramatic expression which was mainly apparent in his operas and oratorios. The emotions displayed were sometimes very triumphant as heard in *Messiah* and sometimes contemplative as heard in *Il Penseroso*. Physically, they were amplified by the use of harpsichord to accompany the arias and recitatives of the oratorios and organ for the choruses. The second characteristic was his mastery of choral writing. In addition to the use of correct instruments to convey extreme emotions, Handel employed choral forces to further deepen the textual and emotional meaning of his works. The "Hallelujah" chorus in *Messiah* was a prime example where it delivered the majestic feeling of the oratorio. The third characteristic was Handel's skills in

melody which contributed to the uniqueness of his works. The next characteristic was the rich and sophisticated harmonic language. Lastly, the fifth characteristic was the presence of staple Baroque elements throughout his works, such as ornamentation, elaborate melodic lines, and basso continuo.

Although Handel was focused more on operas and subsequently oratorios, he in fact still wrote several suites and standalone pieces for harpsichord music itself. Records showed that there were around 25 suites that Handel wrote. Among these, eight named as the “Eight Great Suites” were published in 1720, another six named as “The Second Collection” were published in 1733, and others spread throughout his lifetime. Unfortunately, his harpsichord compositions never shone as bright as Bach’s did. Bach largely overshadowed Handel in terms of Baroque keyboard music. Furthermore, Handel’s own works in the oratorios and opera genre also largely contributed to the neglect of his keyboard music. Nevertheless, his harpsichord compositions were also characterized by the flamboyant drama and emotions making them as unique as his other works were.

All in all, George Frideric Handel was one of the pinnacles in the Baroque period – other than Johann Sebastian Bach. Handel’s childhood and his times in Italy gave the much-needed basis to develop his legendarily dramatic and strong musical styles. Although he was well-known for his oratorios, he was also a great harpsichordist marked by his standalone suites and pieces for the instrument though these were also largely overshadowed by Bach’s. Nevertheless, Handel’s music has added a gigantic piece into western music history and a small but not insignificant piece to harpsichord music.

Sources:

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