

## “Twelve Grand Concertos, compos’d by Mr. Handel”

Few composers have excelled in every musical genre as Händel did. In his long and successful career, he managed to cover all repertoires, although writing for the theatre was his main occupation for many years. For thirty-six years, Händel was essentially a composer of opera seria based on Italian librettos; he did not deviate from the compositional standards of the genre, but he achieved extremely high levels of quality and portrayed the depths of the characters' moods as few of his colleagues were able to do with the same refinement and mastery. The oratorio genre was mostly practised by Händel from the 1730s until the latter part of his life, after leaving the world of drama for music. His extensive catalogue also includes sacred and secular cantatas, odes, hymns, antiphons, motets, vespers, on Latin, Italian, English, German, French and Spanish texts.

Alongside such a remarkable vocal music production, Händel has passed on to us, through numerous manuscripts and valuable printed editions, a wealth of instrumental music. Concerti grossi, for organ and orchestra, for harp, concertos for two choirs, suites, overtures, dances, marches, sonatas for three, for solo instrument and continuo, for keyboard instrument, etc.

The context where Händel lived and worked undoubtedly influenced his work. He spent most of his life and career in the lively and exuberant London (he moved to England in late 1710, at the age of twenty-five), which can be considered the birthplace of the public concert. The pioneer of this practice was, according to tradition, the violinist, flutist and composer John Banister, whose concert on December 30th, 1672 started a practice that soon became customary. For a shilling, one could attend the concert directly at Banister's house, who hosted the event every evening. London soon proved to be fertile ground for the rise of numerous concert societies and halls where audiences could attend mixed vocal/instrumental programmes. One of the most popular was Hickford's Room, a public concert hall that operated from 1713 to 1779. No musician or singer who visited London would not give a concert at Hickford's Room. Among others, Francesco Scarlatti, Veracini, Geminiani, Gluck, even a very young Mozart performed there in 1765.

The hall was established by John Hickford, a dancing-master famous mainly as a concert organiser. The season at the Hickford ran from December to April and featured some twenty concerts. One could buy an annual subscription, for four guineas (roughly equivalent to the earnings of a month and a half's work for a skilled tradesman). Or else one could attend a single concert at the cost of half a guinea, if seats were still available; discounts to get a ticket for a friend were also available. The Hickford's Room was attended by Pierre-Jacques Fougereux, a French traveller who wrote about it in a letter in the 1720s:

«[...] I must tell you about the public concerts in London, which are not much compared to ours. We attended one that took place in a low-ceilinged room, decorated but with dirty paint, and usually employed as a dance hall. At one end is a stage raised by a few steps, and that is where the musicians stand. They performed some sonatas and cantatas in English and German. We attended another concert on the first floor of a 'coffee-house', where the violinists of the theatre orchestra perform every Thursday. The musicians, all German, played very well but rather inexpressively. One of them played the flute excellently. We also saw a member of the clergy playing the cello.»

The players who animated the music scene in London and in provincial towns were professionals often mixed with amateurs and sometimes clergymen.

Händel's concertos, published as Opus 3, 4, 6 and 7, soon entered the repertoire and were regularly performed not only in concert halls, but also in cafés and taverns.

However, it is worth mentioning that the concertos were not written specifically for these occasions: in fact, Händel wrote most of them to be performed in the intervals of theatre performances of operas and oratorios.

The Concerti Grossi Op. 3 turned out to be a commercial operation by the publisher Walsh, who unbeknownst to the author and without his permission assembled six concertos from pieces previously composed by Händel, with the purpose of profiting from their sale; on the other hand, the twelve Concerti Grossi Op. 6 were drafted and prepared for printing by the author himself. Händel finished his work in just over a month, between September 29 and October 30, 1739, in an especially happy burst of creative energy. The maestro commissioned its publication to Walsh, an eminent family of music publishers, who had been printing music by the most prominent composers since the end of the 17th century. From 1711 onwards, Walsh began publishing Händel's music, contributing greatly to the circulation of his masterpieces. On October 29, 1739, while Händel hadn't fully completed the concertos yet, Walsh placed an advertisement in the London Daily for a subscription, to be paid directly to the composer's home in Brook's Street or to the publisher's office. The subscription brought together the royal family and the most prominent London aristocrats of the day: for the price of two guineas (one to be paid at once, the other on delivery) subscribers would receive booklets of 12 new Concerti Grossi, printed on fine paper in a beautiful elegant typeface. In addition, their name would appear on the title page of the work, a remarkable sign of prestige and pride.

The references to Corelli's concerti grossi are instantly apparent, first and foremost the use of the same opera number. The orchestration is the same: a solo Concertino consisting of two violins and a cello, contrasting with the four-part string-only orchestral Tutti (two violins, viola and bass).

Later, Händel added two oboes in the score of four out of the twelve concertos, although only in the orchestral filling and with the main function of doubling the violins.

The oboes are missing in Walsh's printed editions and appear only in the autograph manuscript. Wind instruments were almost always included in the orchestra at theatrical performances, so Händel may have intended their use for these specific occasions.

While from a formal point of view Op. 6 faithfully follows the structure of the Corelli-style concerti grossi, certain details make Händel's concertos decidedly unique and sometimes innovative. What is striking is the profound homogeneity, the fusion of the group of soloists with the orchestral tutti, covering together a very wide range of expression. At times Händel proves to be a daring composer, introducing seemingly abrupt and unexpected tonal passages, the result of a skillful melodic-harmonic research.

Sometimes Händel reworked his own previously composed material and perhaps he was occasionally inspired by other composers as well. This is the case, for example, with Concerto No. 5, in which three movements are taken from his Ode for St. Cecilia's day.

These adaptations should not, however, detract from the value of the entire work, both because this was absolutely common practice at the time and because they are evidence of a masterful exercise in modifying existing elements into substantially new and more far-reaching structures.

The entire Op. 6 is an extraordinary example of merging the French style with the agile and fluid Italian style. Händel was strongly influenced by both styles, but he made them his own, transforming them into something new, utterly personal and distinctive.

The twelve concerti grossi are therefore the epitome of Händel's art, on a par with his masterpieces in the vocal genre. Together with Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, they stand as the apotheosis of the Baroque concerto, one of the highest expressions of the entire 18th century in music.

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