

# A survey of George Frideric Handel's life, music and selected portraits with and without his wig: a contribution to the celebration of the Handel year

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This year marks the 250th anniversary of the death of George Frideric Handel, one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period. There are and have been celebrations of his life and works world wide. Although he composed in every musical genre of his time, he is most famous for his oratorios, and in particular the *Messiah*. The details of his public life are well-known, but his private life remains obscure, especially in regard to his sexuality. It is of significance that he was associated with the Orpheus myth throughout his life, and also in one of his monuments. In the eighteenth century Orpheus was connected with both music and homosexuality. What the truth may be, Handel emerges as an even more human and interesting figure than ever. His authentic portraits are discussed in two sections: those with and those without his wig.

**Keywords:** Handel, portraits, monuments

Dit is vanjaar die 250ste herdenking van die dood van George Frideric Handel, een van die grootste komponiste van die Barok-periode. Daar is en was feesvierings van sy lewe en werke wêreldwyd. Hoewel hy in elke musikale genre van sy tyd gekomponeer het, is hy veral bekend vir sy oratoria, en in besonder die *Messias*. Die besonderhede van sy openbare lewe is welbekend, maar sy private lewe is grootliks onbekend, meer bepaald ten opsigte van sy seksualiteit. Dit is van belang dat hy dwarsdeur sy lewe met die Orpheus-legende geassosieer is, ook in een van sy monumente. In die agtiende eeu was Orpheus verbind met sowel musiek as homoseksualiteit. Wat die waarheid ook mag wees, Handel kom na vore as 'n selfs meer menslike en interessante figuur as ooit. Sy outentieke portrette word in twee groepe bespreek: dié met en dié sonder sy pruik.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Handel, portrette, monumente

**T**hough consistently acknowledged as one of the greatest composers of his age, Handel's reputation, from his death to the early 20th century rested largely on the knowledge of a small number of orchestral works and oratorios, *Messiah* in particular. In fact, he contributed to every musical genre current in his time, both vocal and instrumental (Hicks 2000: 747, Lang 1977: 570).

Handel's music consolidates the characteristics of the main European styles of his day. A solid foundation in harmony and counterpoint, derived from his early training in Lutheran church music, always underpins the daring melodic invention and brilliance associated with the best Italian composers, while the French influence is apparent not only in the overtures and dances that follow French models but also whenever a special stateliness comes to the fore. A specifically English influence is more elusive, but echoes of Purcell, perhaps mediated through his immediate successors, are present in the setting of anthems and canticles, and in the occasional harmonic inflections heard in the English choral dramas. The greatness of the music lies in the assurance with which Handel unites these styles and often quite disparate thematic elements under the control of well-directed harmonic progressions, and fashions melodic lines that are themselves shapely and memorable (Hicks 2000: 766).

In the English-speaking world the oratorio form is dominated by Handel, though not by Handel the composer of a score of oratorios but by Handel the composer of *Messiah* (Lang 1977: 357). Handel became famous, first and foremost, as the composer of *Messiah*: the first

work to enter and remain continuously in the great canon of western music. Ian Bostridge wrote in the *Guardian*, July 6, 2007:

It is a choral warhorse that still animates amateur singing, and one of the cultural mainstays of Britishness. It was in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century that *Messiah* became part of the ritual of national identity, a religious work that could draw together dissenters and Anglicans, and which expressed a new consensus and sense of equipoise.

Handel achieved with this work the most widespread critical recognition ever accorded a composer, for among his acclaimers are not only every English-speaking church congregation, but also Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms and every musician who ever tried his hand at choral writing (Bostridge 2007: 8, Keates 1985: 246). Handel's compositions equal almost all those of Bach plus all of Beethoven in number – yet the overwhelming public preference for just one work has meant that most of his enormous output remains unfamiliar.

Within his lifetime Handel achieved classic status; this he never lost – unlike most of his contemporaries, who at one time or another have been out of fashion. During the century and a half after his death performances of Handel's music were kept in Britain within the common experience and from 1776 formed a principal part of the programmes of the newly established "Concerts of Ancient Music". If the Handelian reputation was in danger of fading, the 1784 commemoration put it firmly back into the centre of London's consciousness, supported by the personal enthusiasm of the King. The commemoration turned into a national celebration with five large-scale performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon, with huge choral and orchestral forces collected from all over Britain. It was an event without precedent in musical history and helped establish the fashion for such festivals (Hicks 2000: 776, Simon 1985: 235, 249, 17).

Although not fêted in Germany on the same scale as in England, Handel was by no means forgotten there. Haydn carried the memory of the 1791 Handel festival at Westminster Abbey back with him to Vienna; Beethoven was pleased to receive printed editions of Handel's work and encouraged his pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph, "not to forget Handel's works, as they always offer the best nourishment for your ripe musical mind, and will at the same time lead to admiration for this great man"; Mendelssohn performed Handel's works at Leipzig, along with his more famous revivals of Bach's music. In 1885, the bicentenary year, performances of Handel's music in Germany outnumbered Bach performances (Simon 1985: 17).

*Messiah* retains the iconic status it had acquired by 1750 and has never relinquished, and will no doubt continue to do so while the great Christian festivals are celebrated, but it now takes its place alongside many other peaks of Handel's achievement (Hicks 2000: 776).

This year marks the 250th anniversary of Handel's death. A search on the World Wide Web for "Handel anniversary" in February 2009 by the authors of this article yielded 255,000 results. BBC Radio 3 began the Handel celebrations on air on 8 January 2009 with the first opera in the first complete Handel opera cycle on Radio 3. All 42 of his operas will be broadcast once a week for the entire year (except during the BBC Proms season). BBC Radio 3 in partnership with Westminster Abbey staged a performance of *Messiah* on the day of the anniversary of Handel's death (14 April) and in the place where he is buried, which was broadcast live on Radio 3 and across Europe via the European Broadcasting Union. The year long Handel celebrations were most intense during Easter week, when Handel's life and work were featured in almost all Radio 3's strands.

Two exhibitions were held in London, one at the Foundling Museum, called "Handel the Philanthropist" (16 January to 18 June) and another at the Handel House Museum (8 April – 25 October). The most significant celebration was "Handel the Philanthropist" which highlighted his musical achievements as well as his personal contributions to social welfare and charitable

causes. The programme included lectures by leading Handel scholars as well as many concerts and performances of Handel's music. A facsimile publication of Handel's will, which included a large number of bequests including those to the Foundling Hospital and the Society for Decay'd Musicians, was published by the Gerald Coke Handel foundation.

His work can be divided into chronological events: Germany, Italy, and England. Even the almost half-century spent in England is divided into two areas which, though they overlap at certain points, are easily distinguishable; the period of the operas and the period of the oratorios (Hicks 2000: 747, Lang 1977: 570). In a recent study, Harris has also identified what she calls "a clearly circumscribed period", bounded on the one side by Handel's departure from his German homeland in 1705 or 1706 and on the other by his moving in July 1723 into the London house that was to remain his residence for the rest of his life. During this period he wrote his cantatas, the least known of all his compositions (Harris 2001: 5 and 7).

### **Public life and reputation**

George Frideric Handel was born at Halle on 23 February 1685 and died in London on 14 April 1759. He was baptised Georg Friedric Händelson (as he is still called in some European countries) and was the son of Georg Händel, a barber-surgeon in the service of the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels, and his second wife Dorothea Taust. Although the boy's early interest in music was at first frowned upon by his father, the Duke heard him playing the organ in the palace chapel when he was about nine and persuaded his father to give him a musical education under Friedrich Zachow, one of the finest musical teachers of the day (Hicks 2000: 747, Simon 1985: 51; Keates 1985: 19).

Shortly after the death of his father on 14 February 1697 Handel left Halle for good, to return only as an occasional visitor. His new life was to be spent in the great opera centres of Europe, beginning with Hamburg. Hamburg had the only regular opera company in Germany operating outside the courts. Handel went to the opera house as a second violinist, but was soon directing the orchestra from the continuo harpsichord. He wrote his first operas, *Almira* and *Nero*, for performance in 1705 (Hicks 2000: 747, Keates 1985: 21, Simon 1985: 11).

In the second half of 1706 he travelled to Rome. It was Italy which gave Handel the experience and confidence he needed as a composer. Between his arrival at about the age of 21 and his departure some three or four years later, he wrote his first large-scale religious works for performance in Rome, and two operas, *Rodrigo* for Florence and *Agrippina* for Venice, as well as many other cantatas and compositions. While he spent much of his time in Rome, he also worked in Naples and probably visited Siena. When he returned to Germany in 1710 he spent some months at Hanover, where he was appointed Kapellmeister to the Elector, and a similar period at Düsseldorf. Both were courts where opera had thrived but was in abeyance due to the War of Spanish succession. It was to London, the richest city in Europe, but the last to succumb to the lure of Italian opera, that Handel went next. His duties of service as Kapellmeister at Hanover seem to have been very liberal, and he was free to travel to other music centres (Hicks 2000: 750, Simon 1985:11, 49).

London offered great prospects. By the time of his first visit in the autumn of 1710, the infighting between the different interests that had characterised the introduction of Italian opera into the capital's theatrical life had given place to a more settled regime. At the Queen's theatre, Haymarket, Handel found a regular opera company with a permanent orchestra, supported by an aristocratic audience sufficiently enthusiastic to ensure a measure of financial security. Italian opera was flourishing, yet still a fashionable novelty. The composer's need for an operatic outlet

was matched exactly by the Haymarket opera's need for an outstanding composer (Simon 1985: 11).

Handel's presence in London was also to the advantage of his Electoral employer. The Elector of Hanover's eventual succession to the British throne was a certain and not too distant prospect, given the parlous state of Queen Anne's health by 1712. Anne supported this succession but would not allow any of the Hanoverian family to reside in her country, so the presence of a cultural representative in the form of the Hanoverian Kapellmeister was welcome to both sides. The pattern that was already apparent by 1713 formed the basis of Handel's career for the rest of his life. This centred on activity as a composer and musical entrepreneur in the London theatres, supported by a wide circle of the nobility and gentry, and also by the court. Handel's royal pensions gave him a background of financial security and, of course, his association with the court led to the composition of music for state occasions (Simon 1985: 11, 95, Lang 1977: 132).

In 1719, the Haymarket opera house closed down – principally, it seems, because politics affecting the Royal Family had divided the patronage on which the opera depended. On 9 May 1719 the former Elector of Hanover, now King George I of Britain, ordered the incorporation of the Royal Academy of Music. Handel was appointed “master of the orchestra, with a salary”; this appointment carried the implication that, while the composition of operas in the early years was to be allocated variously to Handel, Bononcini, Ariosti, Porta and others, the day-to-day running of the opera seasons was in the hands of Handel in collaboration with manager-librettists such as Haym. Handel had the best singers in Europe to work with, including Francesco Cuzzoni and the castrato Senesino. The success of the academy was enormous. *Radamisto*, its first opera by Handel, performed in April 1720, was extravagantly received. For the rest of the decade Handel's activities were closely bound to the fortunes of the Academy, which gave seven more seasons, the last closing in June 1728. His three operas, *Tamerlano* (October 1724), *Rodelinda* (February 1725) and *Giulio Cesare* (February 1724) marked the artistic peak of the Academy's operations (Hicks 2000: 749, 753, Simon 1985: 13).

By spring 1725 the directors, ever anxious for new sensations, had determined to obtain the services of a second great soprano, Faustina Bordoni, and thereby sowed the seeds of dissension which were ultimately to prove disastrous to the Academy. The choice of subject for *Alessandro* (Alexander the Great's simultaneous wooing of the princesses Roxana and Lisaura) and Handel's ingenious equalization of Cuzzoni's and Faustina's music, amusingly but perhaps unwisely pointed up the rivalry between the two prima donnas. The rival sopranos, no doubt egged on by their supporters, became increasingly hostile and finally came to blows on the stage during a performance of Bononcini's *Astianatte* on 6 June. The incident caused great offence to the Princess of Wales, who was present, and brought the season to an abrupt end. The Academy collapsed (Hicks 2000: 753, Simon 1985: 112).

Following the death of George I in 1727 Handel continued to receive the same support from his successor, encouraged by Queen Caroline and by Princess Anne, King George II's eldest daughter and apparently Handel's favourite pupil. The new reign began auspiciously for Handel as, probably at the King's own instigation, he contributed four magnificent anthems to the coronation service at Westminster Abbey. His music has been used at every coronation since. It is a fortunate coincidence that Handel had taken British nationality earlier in 1727, because otherwise he might not have been eligible to contribute to the coronation music. He had also changed his name from Georg Friedrich Händel to the now commonly used George Frideric Handel. His naturalisation was the final event in a series during the 1720s that reflected Handel's now settled life in London. From 1723 he rented the house in Brook Street which was to remain his home. In the same year Handel was given an appointment as composer to the

Chapel Royal, and from the next year he was also music master to the royal princesses (Simon 1985: 14).

In June 1733 a subscription was begun to form a new opera company (the so-called Opera of the Nobility), the directors of which acquired the services of the greatly acclaimed castrato, Farinelli, and immediately engaged Senesino and other members of Handel's company to sing for them the following season under the direction of Nicola Porpora. The rival opera company opened its operations with Porpora's *Arianna in Naxos* at Lincoln's Inn Fields on 29 December, beginning four years of operatic warfare (Hicks 2000: 755, Simon 1985: 11).

On 23 February 1732 Bernard Gates, master of the children of the Chapel Royal, celebrated the composer's birthday with the first of three private performances of the oratorio *Esther*, beginning a long series of related events that eventually led Handel away from operatic composition and established English oratorio as his main form of composition. The late 1730s must have held little joy for Handel: 1737 was a particularly bad year, as his health broke down in the last throes of the battle with the Nobility Opera; and hardly had Handel returned from convalescence than Queen Anne, probably one of Handel's most faithful patrons through these difficult years, died. Opera seemed no longer Handel's prime interest, though he was wary of abandoning it altogether. Ironically, just at the time that Handel's mainstream career was in its greatest difficulty, Jonathan Tyers put up the monument to him in Vauxhall Gardens that seems to symbolise the beginning of a wider popular reputation (Simon 1985: 15, Hicks 2000: 756).

The 1740s saw two of Handel's best known works, *Messiah* and the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. It was also the decade when he abandoned opera. Now in his mid-fifties, he was committed by financial and artistic ties, as well as by routine, to a career in London. His visit to Dublin in 1741-42 must be seen against that background. *Messiah* had been composed in London in 1741, before Handel set off for Dublin. It was the highlight of his Dublin programme, and was produced at the end of a season that had been successful and well received. *Samson*, also composed in 1741, was not included in the Dublin programme but was the major new work for Handel's all English season at Covent Garden theatre in 1743. In contrast to the welcome given to *Messiah* in Dublin, it did not reach the London stage without a certain amount of controversy, demonstrating the doubts some people had as to the propriety of performing works on a sacred theme in the theatre. Despite this and his increasing concern with his health, Handel had, by the end of the 1740s, evolved a successful pattern of oratorio seasons each spring at Covent Garden theatre (Simon 1985:173, 199, 223, Lang 1977: 173, 174, Burrows 1991: 18, 19, 26, 27).

Handel's last oratorios *Theodora* and *Jephtha*, concentrating on themes of endurance in the face of personal tragedy, seem to reflect the personal preoccupations of the aging composer, and blindness interrupted the composition of the second. His sight continued to deteriorate. An attempt at an operation was made in November 1752 but any relief it produced was temporary. In January 1753 he was reported to have "quite lost his sight". Blindness was a severe blow to Handel's activity as a composer and after 1752 he never produced another entirely original work (Hicks 2000: 763, Simon 1985:15, 200, Keates 1985: 297).

The last oratorio season Handel was able to supervise began on 2 March 1759. The composer was in poor health, and found it difficult to attend the performances. After the final concert (*Messiah* on 6 April) he became confined to his bed. On 11 April he dictated a signed last codicil to his will. He added a wish to be buried "in a private manner" in Westminster Abbey, making provision for a sum "not Exceeding six hundred Pounds" for the erection of a monument. He died "a little before eight o'clock" on 14 April (Hicks 2000: 763).

He was buried in Poet's Corner in the south transept of Westminster Abbey on Friday 20 April. The choirs of the Chapel Royal, St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey sang William

Croft's burial service and more than 3000 people attended. The spare room at his feet was used over a century later for the author Charles Dickens. At his grave an imposing monument bears a life-size statue of the composer by the sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac, completed in 1762 (figure 14). Above the monument a tablet records the Handel festival or "Commemoration" of 1784 (Hogwood 1988: 230, 231).

Handel was arguably the first composer to be seen as truly great in his own lifetime (Bostridge 2007). Taken overall, the general pattern of his life was fortunate, in spite of occasional storms and set-backs. As a young man he gained acceptance with kings and princes on the basis of his musical talents; in maturity he survived a career in the London theatres which was nearly twice as long as Bach's period of service at Leipzig; few composers have enjoyed such an honoured position in their last years as Handel; and he died in comfortable financial circumstances (Simon 1985: 17).

### **Private life and personality**

Lang points out that any biographer of Handel quickly discovers an imbalance in the surviving material about the composer. The externals are well-known: his public and professional life has been documented fully and precisely: there are periods when even his movements day by day have been accounted for, but of his personal life little is known. It has long been considered a mystery. Familiar as the picture of Handel is, some of its most vital aspects elude us. There is surprisingly little firm evidence about his private life and many aspects of his personality. There are few historical characters who display so little of their secret thoughts, and few who make us more inclined to believe that the inner man differs markedly from the outer. We know what he looked like, what he liked to eat and drink, what he wore, what jokes he made, and whenever he lost his temper we are told about it. It is his silence that is so baffling (Lang, 537, 538).

That Handel had a strong personality is clear from the reactions of his contemporaries. He had no illusions about either himself or his works; he succeeded by sheer force of character and talent in making himself the musical ruler of England. Irked by stability and settled jobs, he followed the beckoning of adventure with unconquerable optimism. His ingenuity and confidence would never recognise obstacles. He was intolerant of delay, indifferent to formalities, had a genius for organization and great powers of persuasion, and his driving force was incalculable. He had a fierce ambition and an awareness of his superiority as a musician. He always possessed a central calm, however, and found the fortitude, even in the midst of the time-consuming and vexatious affairs of theatrical production, to muster the exacting labour necessary for large new works. Bluff, sagacious, immensely persevering, but consistently human alike in his virtues and his failings, he was a real man dealing with a real world. Questions of whence and where did not interest him; he was not a philosopher nor a religious contemplative (Lang 1977: 536, Simon 1985: 9, Hicks 2000: 763).

His stormy temper remained a force to be reckoned with. When affronted he could burst out violently. Burney, in a contemporary report, quoted by Keates, attests that Handel could swear fluently in five languages, Huth, in 2007, says nine (Lang 1977: 537, Keates 1985: 266). He alienated many singers by his uncompromising standards; he was not a servant either to the singers or to the public. Burney remarked that, although he was impetuous, rough and peremptory in his manners and conversation, he was devoid of ill-nature or malevolence.

He was possessed of a good stock of humour, no man ever told a story with more. But it was a requisite for the hearer to have a competent knowledge of at least four languages, English, French, Italian and German, for in his narrative he made use of them all (quoted by Lang 1977: 243, 539, Hicks 2000: 763).

He was well received by both ecclesiastical and temporal princes in Italy, and the nobility in England. The two periods when he was attached to a noble household, with Ruspoli in Rome and Brydges at Cannons, he was not a salaried employee, but a guest who honoured his host with compositions in return for the honour of association. In his youth he seems to have gained almost immediate favour with such diverse patrons as Roman cardinals, German princes and electors, and Queen Anne of Great Britain (Lang 1977: 539, Hicks 2000: 763).

While Handel's silence about his private or inner being helped ensure an exalted afterlife as mythic icon and consumer commodity, it also worked to generate a lot of mysteries to be pondered, puzzles to be solved. Questions, trifling or serious, have flourished in the vast literature of Handel scholarship over the years. None has proved more insistent or troublesome, however, than the one euphemistically couched as his "relationship to women": Did Handel sleep with them? Was Handel gay? The composer's interest, or noninterest, in the opposite ("apposite") sex has been a vexed question for biographers, music historians, and others from Handel's time to the present; it has constituted, in the words of Paul Henry Lang, a "problem [that has] puzzled his biographers for the last two hundred years" (1977: 543). Lang also pointed out that this problem has produced ingenious and conflicting theories, a few of them cogent, most of them dubious, if not inept. Although Keates seems to impute that the question was raised because of Handel's rejection of Margareta Buxtehude,<sup>1</sup> that was a very small indication of the "problem". After all, she was also rejected by J.S. Bach, whose sexuality has never been in dispute, and perhaps the problem lay with her (Lang 1977: 543).

There is practically no documentary evidence regarding this aspect of Handel's private life, and he is the only major composer of the last three centuries firmly to have barred the doors on the subject. We must make what we can of Paolo Antonio Rolli's comment in 1719 that Handel was secretly in love with a certain "Denys woman, alias Sciarpina" and of George III's annotation in his copy of Mainwaring's biography: "G.F.Handel was ever honest, nay excessively polite, but his amours were rather of short duration, always within the pale of his own profession." Earlier the king had remarked: "Handel was very well built and lacked nothing in manliness" (Simon 1985: 9). According to Keates the assumption that as a lifelong bachelor he must perforce have been homosexual is untenable in an eighteenth-century context, when the vagabond life of so many musicians made marriage a distinct hindrance (1985: 19). According to Lang Handel was attracted to women in all stages of his life, although his amorous encounters with them were as carefully screened from view as were his political and religious inclinations. All of these were peripheral affairs, he writes. One might say that he simply did not have time for serious engagement with women.

Solitude for him was not loneliness, it was his deepest inspiration. He was imbued with a mixture of creative frenzy, the rapacity of a conqueror, and the enterprising zeal of a businessman, all goading him to incessant activity. He saw no place for a woman in his scheme of things. What woman would have been willing to keep pace with this driving personality, who made his work a religion and expected others to treat it as that, who organized every moment of his life and every detail of his household with hearty but thorough dictatorship (1977: 543).

Thomas, after a lengthy discussion of the excuses offered by these biographers as well as earlier ones, like Hawkins, Coxe and Rousseau, points out that Keates's argument falters on two grounds; first, gay men from Handel's time married more often than not, and for a variety of reasons (as a means of fulfilling social obligations, in order to pass, sometimes because they wanted a family); and second, Handel's trips to Italy and Germany hardly qualify him as an itinerant. Regarding Lang's argument he points out that Handel's inspired solitude did not preclude his spending a lot of time on banking and financial speculation, as well as eating and drinking, and fussing over his collection of exotic houseplants (2006: 166, 170, 171).

Lang further argues that considering the extremely wide range of character of Handel's heroines, and the infinite nuances in their femininity, it seems incontrovertible that he must

have been a man not only of normal masculine constitution but one attracted by and sensitive to feminine charms, as is borne out by his marked predilection for the women among his friends (Lang 1977: 543). Thomas refutes this by referring to the moving lament of David over Jonathan in *Saul* and to music critic Joshua Kosman's comment that *Susanna* does not prove that Handel was celibate or *Messiah* that he was the Redeemer (2006: 182, 183). Thomas refers to Burlington House, the residence of the Richard Boyle, the Earl of Burlington, where he mingled with people like Alexander Pope and the painter William Kent, both gay men, and Cannons, the residence of James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon and later Duke of Chandos. Thomas comments (2006: 180) that in the light of Handel's extensive and intimate association with demonstrably homosexual men and/or milieux, the question becomes: on what basis can or ought one argue that Handel was everywhere he went an exception?

After an extensive discussion Thomas comes to the conclusion that "by the preponderance of the evidence" Handel was a gay man, though probably, like many others of his day, a conflicted one. Not because he was single and silent; not because, in the absence of evidence of any erotic interest in women, those who knew him were silent or enigmatic about "it"; not because his commentators have filled those silences with alibi, fabrication, and prevarication, ignoring evidence; not because he chose to leave the provinces and live his life without complaint in the venues most closely associated with homoerotic men; not even because he loved opera and houseplants – not because of any one of these, each in itself perhaps subject to interpretation, but rather because of the overwhelming effect of their confluence, and because as an "explanation" it accounts without need of excuse for virtually every aspect of the composer's life (Thomas 2006: 180).

He concludes, however, by saying "I must nonetheless confess to doubts about the question, at least about the terms in which it is framed" (2006: 180). Handel is the first modern composer whose sexuality could pose a "problem" in the terms that it did, he points out.

Handel's physical and musical bodies impede the suture required to maintain the safe and comforting, disciplined object we've come to know as his image. Out of the widening spaces of a fissured closet there may, however, emerge in their stead a new polyvocal subject, a Handel finally more intelligible, more human, more interesting, and maybe even more amusing, than we ever imagined (Thomas 2006:189).

Harris, in her book that appeared before that of Thomas, but after he first brought the question of Handel's homosexuality out of the closet in a paper read at the 1989 meeting of the American Musicological Society, pointed out that the specific period during which Handel's cantatas were composed was the period in which he lived and worked as a guest in aristocratic houses. After leaving aristocratic patronage, Handel rarely returned, and then only under special circumstances, to the genre of the Italian secular cantata. Also, he never published any of his cantatas – the only genre in which he composed of which that can be said. The cantatas thus represent the clearest example of private music in Handel's life and understanding them demands a closer look at the aristocratic patrons in whose houses they were composed, she says (2001: 7).

From 1706 to 1723 Handel passed through the Medici court and the palaces of the Roman cardinals Pamphili, Ottoboni, and Colonna and the Marquis Ruspoli – where he performed in private salons (or academies) as well as the larger Arcadian Academy hosted in these years by Ruspoli – and then to the court of the Elector in Hanover, the house of Lord Burlington in London, and the villa in Cannons outside London owned by James Brydges. Among the distinguishing features of this patronage is the role of same-sex friendship, love and desire. The thread of male love can be documented in a range of sources stretching from clear archival evidence concerning the homosexual activities of the Medici princes, to the homosexual undertones of poetry written for the Arcadian Academy based on classical models, to the same-sex erotic atmosphere of Burlington House. Although not limited to this topic, Handel's private



house music for these patrons cannot be understood without consideration of its context of same-sex love, Harris points out (2001: 7).

In the cantatas women are typically depicted as dangerous, and their uncontrolled voices are heard as a threat to male power and artistic creation. Not only do Ariadne's threats and Diana's anger wreak havoc on Theseus and Actaeon, but it is only by drowning out his voice with their cacophony that the Thracian women are able to kill Orpheus. In contrast, the Arcadian shepherd, borrowed from classical literary sources, offers artifice and distance, as well as a same-sex model, for the expression of male love as opposed to unchecked female emotion. Throughout the cantatas, a progression away from passionate expression and formal irregularity toward more stylized and formally controlled rhetoric can be musically associated with a retreat from the uncontrolled female voice to the idealized male voice (Harris 2001: 7).

Within the context of the eighteenth century, it would have been normal for Handel to share his creative and intellectual interests with men. Generally speaking, women were still not given the benefit of a serious education, so that the "marriage of true minds" could only occur between men – suggesting at least one possible reason the biblical David could say of his deceased friend Jonathan, "Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women". Thus it is not at all surprising that, as in Shakespeare and the Bible, male friendships in Handel's time were passionate in expression, whether or not there were sexual relations involved. Harris comes to the conclusion that although Handel's love life remains veiled, the eighteenth-century context demonstrates that a component of same-sex love and desire is far from untenable (Harris 2001: 22).

At the time public references to homosexuality frequently occurred through the use of classical names understood as coded epithets. Context is a critical factor in reading such codes and implicit homoerotic references can often be confirmed by their deliberate alteration or elimination in later revisions of works. The Orpheus myth runs as a thread through Handel's life, its same-sex implications always available, but rarely obvious. In the earliest known written version of the myth, the Hellenistic poet Phanocles from about 250 BC specifically relates that Orpheus was killed because after Eurydice's death he was "the first in Thrace to desire men and to disapprove the love of women", thus defining the Orpheus story as an origin myth of homosexuality. Ovid repeats this claim in his *Metamorphoses*, calling Orpheus the originator of male homosexuality. Virgil's version avoids a definitive statement about Orpheus's sexuality, saying only that Orpheus rejected the interest and advances of women and was killed by women because he disdained them. Although this passage is frequently interpreted to mean only that Orpheus rejected other women because he remained faithful to the memory of Eurydice, such is not actually stated by Virgil as the reason for Orpheus's murder. Implicit depictions of the homosexual motive date back to the fifth century B.C. in Greek vase paintings, where Orpheus is often shown surrounded by admiring men while women approach to attack him, and explicit literary versions continue into the Renaissance. Orpheus's homosexuality was known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly through Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* formed the basis of many Baroque operatic and vocal works. In terms of a sexual reading, the most interesting parallels between Handel and Orpheus are those that specifically refer to the end of the legend (Harris 2001: 260, 32, 33, 256).

Alexander Pope and Handel collaborated during Handel's first decade in London in an environment of private patronage that was imbued with homoeroticism. Pope's *Pastorals* play with classical images of same-sex desire, and his contribution to Handel's *Acis and Galatea* provides a key to a homosexual reading of that text potentially connected to the Orpheus myth. In the 1730s Pope and Handel both revised artistic work from earlier years, eliminating same-sex references. Whether or not the poems published between 1739 and 1745 associating Handel's

situation with the end of the Orpheus story contain a specific homosexual subtext, they openly suggest that men were more attracted to Handel's music and better able to understand it (Harris 2001: 260).

The association of Orpheus both with musical or poetic artistry and with homosexuality at the end of the eighteenth century leads one to ask whether both meanings could have played a part in other, earlier Orphic allusions. The question does not imply that such would be the case in every use of Orpheus's name; nor does it mean that, in any or all cases where this was intended, this reading would have been the general interpretation. One possibility is that the name of Orpheus openly referred to the highest musical attainments but at times took on a second, sometimes covert meaning. Harris emphasises that in the cantatas, too, their association with same-sex desire in the eighteenth century does not exclude other meanings, but rather adds an essential element to their full appreciation (Harris 2001: 35, 265).

### **Handel's physical appearance**

Handel's monumental musical *oeuvre* is the true portrait of the man who, in all respects, was larger than life. Several of his British contemporaries left us descriptions of the man, of which only two are quoted below.

In 1776 Sir John Hawkins (Simon 1985: 34) wrote:

[Handel] was in person a large made and very portly man. His gait, which was ever sauntering, was rather ungraceful, as it had in it somewhat of that rocking motion, which distinguishes those whose legs are bowed. His features were finely marked, and the general cast of his countenance placid, bespeaking dignity tempered with benevolence.

Charles Burney wrote in 1785 (Simon 1985: 34):

The figure of HANDEL was large, and he was somewhat corpulent, and unwieldy in his motions; but his countenance [...] was full of fire and dignity; and such as impressed ideas of superiority and genius [...]. HANDEL wore an enormous white wig, and when things went well at the Oratorio, it had a certain nod, or vibration, which manifested his pleasure and satisfaction. Without it, nice observers were certain that he was out of humour.

Descriptions of British contemporaries confirm that Handel was a corpulent, and portly man, dignified, and his bearing recognizably superior and genial. As a characteristic official attribute he wore an enormous white wig which, according to Burney, enhanced his body language. Furthermore, the shape of his earlobes and head (features not recognisable under his wig) was characteristic, as was his blue eyes and the birthmark on the left cheek.

### **Representations of Handel**

Handel is the most frequently portrayed artist before the invention of photography: painted portraits and likenesses, sculpted busts and monuments add up to some 400. However, only about fourteen of these are considered to be authentic, since portraits are defined as those that the portrayed person actually sat for the artist at least once or during various sessions.<sup>2</sup> A painted or sculpted portrait is supposedly a likeness of the sitter, albeit often idealised, with some formalised emphasis to enhance his or her looks and to emphasise status by means of an elaborate ambience. The hundreds of likenesses of Handel can therefore not all be portraits in the true sense of the word because the master could not have had the time or the patience to pose for them all. Jacob Simon (1985: 33) states that "Little is known of Handel's attitude to portraiture, either from his own pen or the hands of his patrons or the artists commissioned". The authentic portraits are listed on the Handel House website,<sup>3</sup> even though it is not clear by whom some of them were commissioned and to what extent the composer influenced the way

he was portrayed, since portraiture is always a two-way undertaking, requiring an interaction between the sitter and the artist. For Handel not only his musical image was important, but also the way in which he was portrayed – if Aspden’s (2002: 44) insight is to be taken literally that “in the late 1730s and early 1740s, [...] Handel was himself most energetically engaged in forging his image” – that is, his public image.

Of the fourteen authenticated original portraits<sup>4</sup> – paintings and sculptures – reproduced in this article it is curious that nine paintings portray him with an elaborate wig and two paintings and three sculptures with a velvet cap or without a head cover. These portraits are discussed separately in two sections below.

### ***Handel with his wig***

Wigs were worn throughout the ages to cover bald heads, for ornament, as part of official dress, and to denote status because they were costly to produce from human hair. Especially in the Baroque era<sup>5</sup> dignitaries and rich men and women wore wigs. It is notable that Handel’s father, a distinguished citizen of Halle, wore a wig. Most Baroque composers, such as Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Henry Purcell and others, wore wigs – some elaborate and some more modest.

In the authentic portraits of Handel (and almost all of the likenesses) Handel is portrayed with an elaborate wig, with curls hanging below shoulder height. It is scarcely remarkable that this aspect of his portraits has not received much attention since wigs were a common feature of most official portraits of Baroque composers. Those portraying Handel with a wig are no exception.

Even in early manhood Handel apparently wore a wig. The first authentic portrait of the composer at the age of 25 is by Christof Platzer, the court painter at the bishop’s principality at Passau (figure 1).



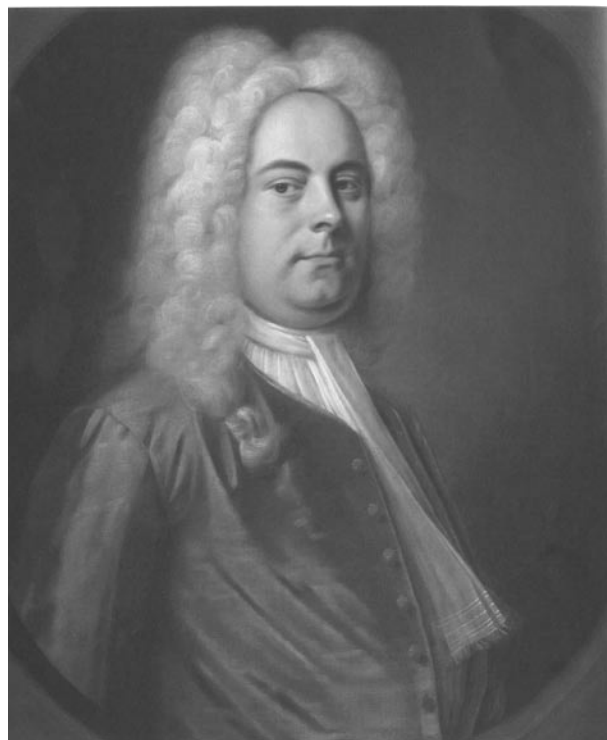
**Figure 1**  
**Christof Platzer (dates unknown), *Portrait of Georg Friedrich Handel*, circa 1710, oval format, parchment, 6,77 x 4,78 cm, stolen from Handel House in 1948 and its whereabouts is unknown (source: free internet).**

By 1710 Handel had left Italy and was in Hannover. This date also marks the end of the Italian cantata period in his career, but as the composer of two successful operas, *Agrippina* and *Rodrigo*, he could well feel confident and happy, as the portrait shows him. Looking directly at the viewer over his right shoulder his face is shown almost fully frontal. The curly wig, taking up a large portion of the format of the picture, frames the youthful oval face and elaborate locks stream down his back. Equally elaborate is the chiffon neck scarf and a blue woolen coat covering the neck and right shoulder. The pictured elaborate oval frame of silver filigree, decorated with jewels, adds to the impression of preciousness.

However, there are flaws in the portrait: Handel's eyes are too big and his blue eyes are depicted as dark. Nevertheless, his content smile characterises the sitter as a sensitive, attractive young man communicating with the viewer. The message the painter conveys about him is not of a haughty, otherworldly young musician, but as a youth of high birth who looks into the future ahead of him with self-assurance.

The portrait by Balthasar Denner, a German painter who worked in London from 1721-28, portrayed Handel at the age of forty-one, or a few years later (figure 2). By this time in his career he was very busy and had completed many successful operas such as *Admeto*.

The composer is shown with a full-bottomed white wig framing the oval face turned almost full-frontally towards the viewer, the left cheek in shadow, apparently hiding the birthmark; the upper part of the body turned to the right of the picture composed within a dark oval shape as background. The sitter's corpulence is visible in the double chin and the bulging waist. His reserved expression and strangely dark eyes reveal less of the man than the attire in which he is posing. The fine silk chiffon neckerchief has a fine silver gilt thread finish at the bottom breezing the lightness of the material. The luxurious coat of silk satin with buttons from top to bottom, is clearly a status fabric, as is the waistcoat in gold brocade visible below the neckerchief.



**Figure 2**  
**Balthasar Denner (1685-1749), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, circa 1726-28, oval format, oil on canvas, 74,9 x 62,6 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London, displayed at Berningbrough Hall (source: free internet).**

The portrait attributed to George Andreas Wolfgang, the Younger was painted when Handel was forty-six years of age. At the time he was very much part of the London scene and the opera company was still going strong, performing works such as *Scipione* and *Poro*.

The portrait shows the composer half-length and full-face, looking to the left, the body turned to the right, and the right hand, with ruffles on the sleeve edge, is placed inside the waistcoat under the plain coat (figure 3). The pose is obviously somewhat contrived and the detail of the body is given equal emphasis with the head, covered by an elaborate white wig that frames the face. However, as the main feature of the face the broad forehead receives emphasis, whereby the portrait becomes a statement of the dignity of Handel as an intellectual at the height of his creative powers.



**Figure 3**

**Attributed to George Andreas Wolfgang, the Younger (1703-45), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, circa 1731, oil on canvas, 61 x 73 cm, owned by Musikmuseet Stockholm (source: free internet).**

The Denner portrait represents Handel at the age of fifty-one (figure 4). At the time he was competing with a rival opera group, and even though he was losing interest in opera he was still producing masterpieces such as *Ariodante*, *Alquina* and *Mars*.

He is represented with a wig and neckpiece that emphasise the characteristically oval face. Since it idealises the sitter as more youthful than his real age, doubt has been cast on the authenticity of the portrait. However, if the words “FREDERICK HANDEL. AETATIS. 52.OB.T.75”<sup>6</sup> is accepted at face value, the portrait can be accepted as authentic. The pose is similar to figures 1 and 2, showing an almost full-frontal view of the face, but hiding the left cheek somewhat. Compared with the first Denner portrait of Handel (figure 2) of ten years earlier, it seems strange that the later representation seems to represent a more youthful man, even though it is known that his health deteriorated at the time. Most probably the artist did this portrait from memory after a previous encounter with the composer.

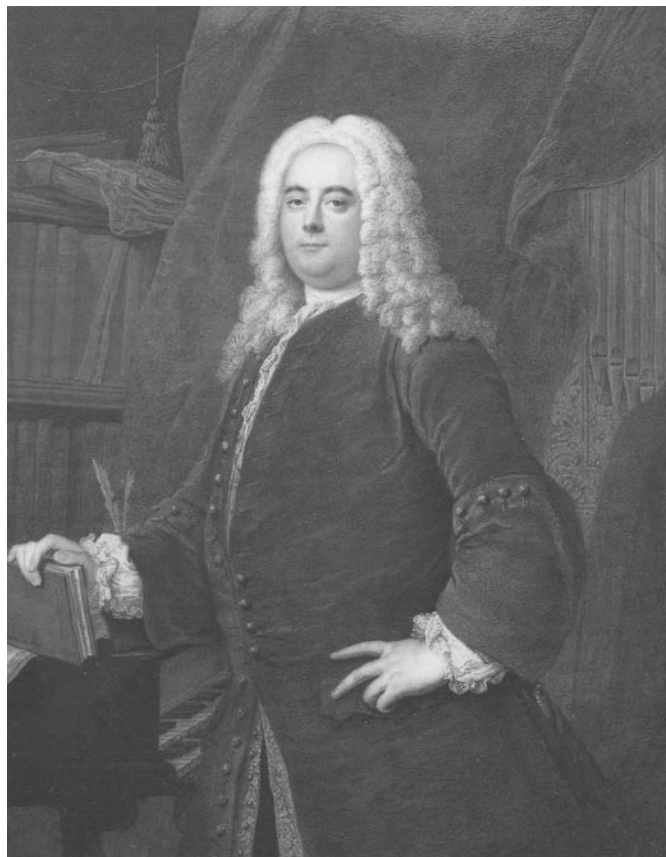
The portrait by George Andreas Wolfgang, the Younger, probably painted in 1737, is a more realistic portrait of the composer than the man idealised by Denner in figure 4. It depicts a much older man, even if painted only one year later (figure 5). It is known that Handel suffered from health problems at the time and visited the baths at Aix-la-Chapelle. He also experienced financial difficulties of which he was cleared.

Handel's bearing is that of a grandee, wearing an elaborate wig. The pose resembles that in figure 3, but with more of the upper body included, his hands prominently displayed and the

line of his coat emphasising his corpulence. Handel is portrayed with a relaxed visage, clear blue eyes and a hovering smile, implying contentment – most probably because he was cleared of financial problems (see the discussion of figure 11). He is dressed in a chiffon shirt with necklace of lace that was very precious and indicated importance, as did the costly white wig. There are golden buttons on his chestnut brown coat with a broad fold over the cuff buttoned up above the elbows. The red and gold brocaded waistcoat underneath the overcoat is an almost concealed item in the lavish dress.



**Figure 4**  
**Balthasar Denner (1685-1749), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, circa 1736, oval format in a square frame, oil on canvas, 67,3 x 35,6 cm, owned by Lord Sackville, Kent (source: free internet).**

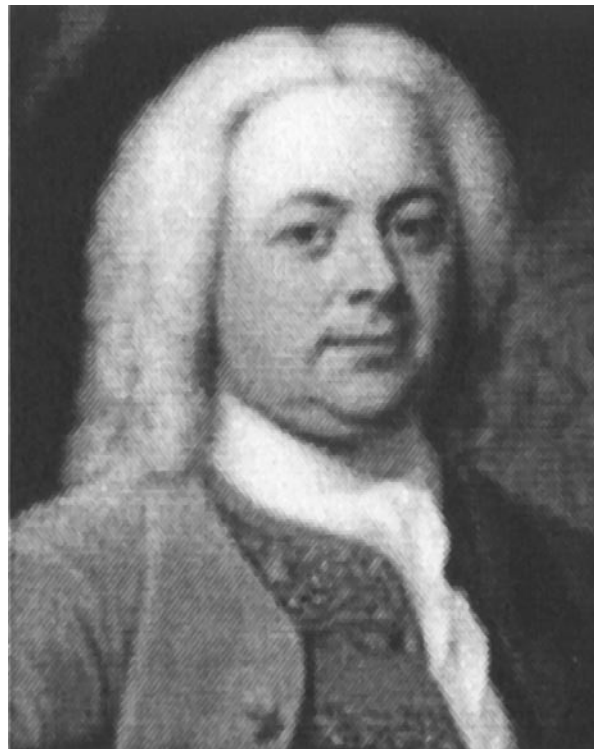


**Figure 5**  
**George Andreas Wolfgang, the Younger (1703-45), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, probably 1737, oil on ivory (miniature), 17 x 13,64 cm, Royal Collection (source: free internet).**

The background shows books bound in leather and ebony, with a fine silk taffeta drape with tassels, partly concealing an organ in the background that is an innovative feature. One cannot guess if this picture was posed in Handel's home or in the interior of Royal Society of Musicians that opened in 1738. To heighten the aesthetic impact the painter employed subdued contrasts of brown and red hues to contrast the sitter with his background, but the focus is clearly on the sitter's face and hands portrayed as if respectively haloed by the wig and white lace.

The three-quarter length portrait, signed by John Theodore Heins, a painter of German birth who was active in England, was painted when Handel was 55 years of age, at the time when he reached the end of his career as a composer of opera with works such as *Ineneo* and *Deiodamia*.

It shows the composer with his face turned to the right, but not hiding the seldom-shown birthmark on the left cheek (figure 6). The wig seems less elaborate than in previous portraits, but his brown velvet coat and neckpiece remains characteristic. His steady gaze at the viewer is once again evident; he is not represented as aloof, but nevertheless as reserved and private. This suits Sir John Hawkins's description (quoted above) of Handel's countenance "bespeaking dignity tempered with benevolence".



**Figure 6**

**John Theodore Heins (1697-1756), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, 1740, oil on canvas, 123 x 13,64 cm, Sparkassenstiftung Halle-Saalkreis (source: free internet).**

The portrait by Francis Kytte, an English painter and engraver, was painted when Handel was 57 years of age (figure 7). In April of the year the portrait was painted the *Messiah* was performed in Dublin for the first time. Kytte's rendering of the composer has been documented as "executed from life, that it might be engraved ... at Amsterdam, for publication in London", and that "of all the portraits which had been painted, this conveyed the best likeness".<sup>7</sup> Most probably Kytte based it on an original prototype for the Amsterdam engraving, done by an anonymous artist in 1738. The bust-like view of the sitter is enclosed in a dark-toned circular form within the frame which contrasts with the brightly lit face which is turned slightly to the right, his richly embroidered dark brown coat is seen full-frontally and his wig is symmetrically draped over the shoulders. The facial expression is reserved, but dignified, showing his corpulence and traces

of aging. If Handel did indeed sit for this portrait he must have been aware of the fact that it was not flattering in any way. However, his costly wig and attire are prominently represented. The coat is of wool or silk velvet with a silver brocade meander decoration and a border around its edge, while the neckwear is a cravat of silk chiffon.



**Figure 7**

**Francis Kyte (active between 1710 and 1745), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, 1742, oil on canvas, 17 x 98 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London (source: free internet).**

The first portrait of Handel by Thomas Hudson, an English portrait painter, shows the composer seated at three-quarter length, the body turned slightly to the right and the head to the left, looking out of the picture, not at the viewer as in previous portraits (figure 8). At the age of 63 or 64 Handel – with clear blue eyes – is shown looking somewhat younger than in Kyte's portrait. His eyesight is not yet impaired, even though a slow deterioration has set in. Until 1751 he was still composing and produced the *Royal Fireworks* and oratorios.

Unlike in previous portraits the head fills less than a quarter of the format and as he aged Handel seems to have preferred dressing in brown. This portrait shows a meticulously dressed gentleman in a wig. His coat with perfect tailoring properties is of worsted wool and silk serge, embellished with a double row of brocaded braid in silver thread, including the sleeves. Beneath the coat there is a hint of a red and silver silk brocaded waistcoat with silver buttons over taffeta ruffled cuffs and a silk cravat.

The sitter's right hand is posed on his hip while his left hand rests on a book lying on the table containing sheets of paper, on one of which is written "MESSIAH AN ORATORIO", though the words are only partly visible. The elaborate pose "of a statesman"<sup>8</sup> fills the format of the picture, emphasising his importance in his adopted society. Handel must have been pleased with this portrait – notwithstanding the emphasis on his corpulence – because he is said to have taken it with him on the occasion of visiting his relatives in Halle in 1750.<sup>9</sup>

When Handel was 71 and blind he was again painted by Thomas Hudson (figure 9). In this authentic portrait the composer is shown full-length and seated at a table, the body turned





**Figure 8**  
**Thomas Hudson (1701-79), *Portrait of Frideric Handel, 1748-49,***  
**mezzotint, 29,5 x 24 cm, State and University Library, Hamburg (source: free internet).**

to the left and the face turned almost completely frontally towards the viewer, with the eyes gazing at the viewer as if they are able to see. Once again the dignified composer's attire is lavish and his white wig is immense and long, as usual. Unusual features are the three-cornered hat under his left arm and the sheathed sword at his left side.

Even more than the previous portrait (figure 8) this depiction of the dignified composer is a study in browns, with highlights seemingly reflected from the symbolic sunset in the upper right part of the background seen beyond a balcony and an arch, and the full-bottomed wig framing the aged face is highlighted, as if reflecting the last light of the day. Also the strange detail of a braided tassel above the sitter's head to enable him to ring a bell, is a reminder that the depicted man is no longer independent. However, he is seated comfortably on a indigo blue velvet furnished chair with supporting black velvet cushions, one under each arm. He is dressed in a medium brown silk velvet coat embellished with a rich saffron yellow brocade or brocatelle border design. The coat is tailored according to vogue with three vents and coordinated with knee breeches that fit tightly over the knees and is fastened with a buckle and buttons. The cravat is of silk and the silk chiffon shirt is embellished with lace that forms a floral pattern on the cuffs. The textiles of the dress and chair all have a high sheen and tactile quality with textual embossing allowing a blind man to feel the surface of warm silk produced by skilled craftsmanship.

The dignity of the sitter in this portrait confirms that Handel's blindness did not cause him to suffer the usual dotage of advanced age. Even though he no longer composed he supervised performances of his works, notably *Judas Maccabeus* and the *Messiah*.



**Figure 9**

**Thomas Hudson (1701-79), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, 1756, oil on canvas, 76,8 x 89,9 cm, Windsor Castle (source: free internet).**

### ***Handel without his wig***

Handel portrayed without his wig is a different person from Handel portrayed with his wig. The latter is the important composer with a statesmanlike stature in his adopted country which venerated him for his musical genius. The former is the private man, not keeping up haughty appearances, of which his wig was an outward symbol. The wigless portraits are more to the taste of modern viewers used to the informal naturalism that was principally introduced by the Impressionists, combined with the psychoanalytic acumen that characterises the best portraiture of the past.

Figure 10 shows the 35 year old composer informally playing a keyboard, most probably in the privacy of his home, since he is not wearing his usual wig but a smart red velvet silk cap pushed back to expose his forehead and characteristic oval face. In a rare instance his ear lobe is shown as well as the birthmark on his left cheek, which may be taken as signs that the portrait is authentic.

The collarless coat is well tailored according to the fashion of the time. The dull surface indicates a woolen fabric, highlighted with silver buttons down the front and on the outsized cuffs turned back and buttoned below the elbows, the equally outsized buttonholes finished with silver thread. Beneath the coat the sitter wears a silk taffeta shirt of which the ruffles of the cuffs match the front exposed by the unbuttoned coat.

His youthful body, without any signs of the corpulence of his later years, is turned towards the instrument, but his gaze is toward the right, as if distracted, but not to make eye contact with

the viewer. Rather, the composer sits smartly dressed in solitude, connecting with his music. Indeed, it was a inspiring time in Handel's life since the Royal Academy of Music began and as an opera composer he achieved success with *Radamisto*.



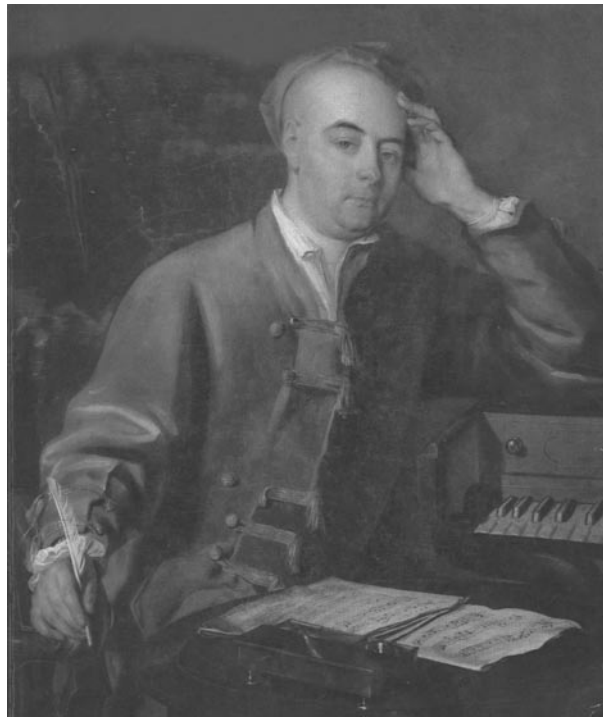
**Figure 10**

**Anonymous, *Portrait of George Frideric Handel (called the Chandos)*, 1720, oil on canvas, 87,7 x 102,2 cm, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (source: free internet).**

Philip Mercier, born in Berlin to French parents was an portraitist active in England. He portrayed Handel at the age of 45 or 50, seated at a table with sheets of music and a rectangular ink holder. The composer is holding a quill for writing in his outstretched right hand and supporting his head with his left hand, the elbow resting on a cembalo harpsichord (figure 11). The sitter seems aware of the viewer or painter to whom his gaze is directed, indicating an awareness that he is being observed in his private world as a self-conscious composer in a contemplative posture. The mouth seems sad and turned down in the corners, even though the face is relaxed and his clear blue eyes with raised eyebrows betray no emotion. The cap pushed back reveals a shaven head and the large forehead of the genius. He is dressed in a reddish-brown worsted wool serge coat and a plain shirt, reminiscent of English country clothes that tended towards practicality and simplicity, which in a private setting is more appropriate than the wig that adorns the Handel's official persona (as portrayed in figures 1-9).

The informal elegance of composer and his reserved but sad expression seems to indicate that, notwithstanding his harmonious amity with his musical instrument and the score he is working on, his contemplative mood is somehow tainted with sorrow or nostalgia that is revealed in his refined features. He is portrayed with deep psychological insight by Mercier as a private man guarding his inner feelings during a difficult period in his career because of competition from Opera of the Nobility. Nevertheless, Handel was still composing opera in 1730, notably *Poro* and *Ezio*, and by 1735 he had completed *Ariodante* and *Alcina*, two of his of his best known operas.

The statues in honour of Handel by Louis-François Roubiliac both reveal and conceal his private persona (figures 12 and 14). This French sculptor who worked in Britain in the eighteenth century executed many monumental commissions, among which the statue of Handel (figure 12), commissioned by the impresario Jonathan Tyers, the owner of the Vauxhall



**Figure 11**  
**Philip Mercier (1689-1760), *Portrait of George Frideric Handel*, 1730 or 1735,**  
**oil on canvas, 127 x 101,6 cm, Windsor Castle (source: free internet).**

Gardens where Handel's operas were often performed in the open to entertain the leisured citizens. It was commissioned when the composer was in mid-career, two years before he was to write the *Messiah* – the first time that a living artist has been honoured in this way. More unusual still was that it was commissioned from a sculptor, virtually unknown at the time, who created a work strikingly different from previous British statuary.

J. Patricia Campbell (2004: 1473) gives the following description of “his most famous and innovative statue” that Roubiliac produced for Tyres:

The Vauxhall statue represents Handel in informal dress, leaning on a pile of his own compositions and testing his ideas on a lyre. A small boy or putto accompanies him, acting as an amanuensis, transcribing the composition as it finds form. Set in a grove, as a modern embodiment of Music, Handel replaces traditional, Classical representations of Music, such as Orpheus or Apollo. The terracotta for this statue is particularly successful in capturing the impression of arrested movement, but the finished marble also retains the spirit, variety and realism of Roubiliac's model.

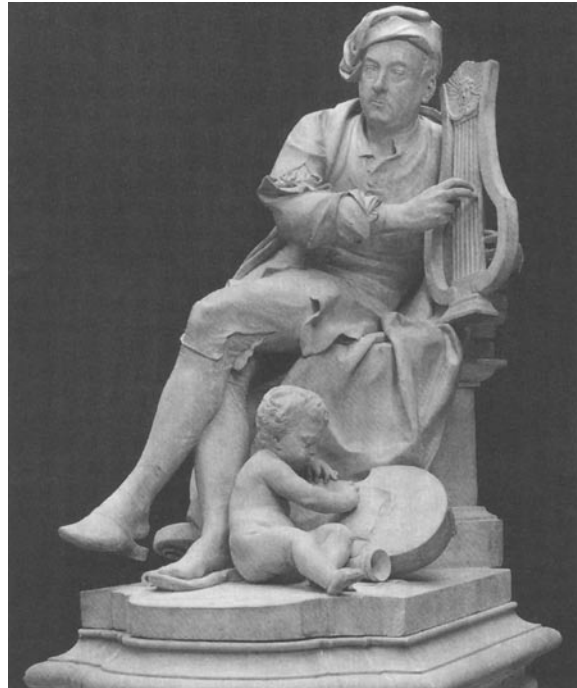
While the politics involved in the image making of Handel as a national “genius”, as explored by Suzanne Aspden (2002), was extremely important to the composer, the mythologising aspect of the Roubiliac sculpture, with which the composer was well pleased, seems paradoxical. In the present analysis the focus will be on Roubiliac's approach to a public portrait of the composer in which he is presented, like in the small group of painted portraits, without his wig (figures 10 and 11). It is clear that there is a conflict in the Vauxhall statue between his transformation “from a Bavarian outsider – a Hanoverian writing Italian operas – to a truly British worthy” (Aspden 2002: 44).

So what did Handel as “a truly British worthy” look like in 1738, the date of the completion of the sculpture?

He is casually dressed in a nightcap and slippers and three layers of clothing. The lightweight overcoat with a fold-over collar sleeves is twisted around the back and the composer is shown sitting on it, while on the opposite side it is draped onto the pedestal, emphasising the twisted mannerist pose. Underneath the coat the waistcoat is visible with the top button open with

the collar turned up on one side, looking rather untidy. Its relaxed folds are draped over the tight-fitting knee-breeches, unbuttoned at the sides. The stockinged legs are crossed, pointing in the opposite direction from the upper part of the body, one foot placed on a slipper and the other loosely waving in free space above the pedestal to the rhythm of the composer's mental music.

One may comment that in the case of the Vauxhall Gardens statue the sculptor gave to posterity an image of Handel influenced by the free thinking and the more natural taste of the Enlightenment, not of a bigwigged British "worthy". However, a huge concert on 38 March 1738 of *Alexander's Feast*, a choral setting of an ode by Dryden established him as precisely that, a British "worthy".



**Figure 12**

**Louis-François Roubiliac (1702-1762), *Statue of Georg Frideric Handel (Handel as Orpheus)*, 1738, marble, created for the Vauxhall Gardens, London, presently in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (source: free internet).**

Roubiliac's bust of Handel was executed at a time that the composer was occupied exclusively with oratorio, such as *Saul*. The composer's public acclaim nevertheless allowed him moments of being himself. Thus Roubiliac portrays Handel as a private man looking to his right, not making eye contact with the viewer (figure 13). Since no exterior activity is suggested and all tension is eliminated from the face, an idealised Handel without his wig is put on display, detached in a private, genial world of the mind. As always, he is richly but decorously dressed. Like in figure 10 he wears a smart velvet silk cap pushed back to expose his forehead and a strand of hair above the left ear. The upper part of the coat as shown can be buffed leather, indicating a country outfit, with leather plaited buttons with loops connected to a detailed ornamental pattern and tassels, one of which also crowns the cap. Underneath the coat the sitter wears a delicate lightweight pleated silk chiffon neckerchief.

A year later the sculptor who collaborated with Handel on the Vauxhall Gardens statue gave to posterity what could possibly be regarded as a more authentic image of Handel as a private man (figure 14).

Handel died on 14 April 1758. In his will he expressed the wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey and that his executor "may have leave to erect a monument for me there" (Bindman

and Baker 1995: 120). The obvious choice of sculptor was Roubiliac who had had a long association with the composer, as attested by the sculptures discussed above (figures 12 and 13). According to Bindman and Baker (1995: 120) it is even possible that they discussed the design of the future work before the composer died. Since Handel was a composer of religious works space for his monument could be found in the upper level of the south transept of the Abbey, in the company of sacred figures and theologians.



**Figure 13**  
**Louis-François Roubiliac (1702-1762), *Bust of Georg Frideric Handel*, 1739, terra cotta model for the marble bust in Windsor, height 72,4 cm, owned by The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (source: free internet).**

Roubiliac's depiction of Handel in a framed niche shows the deceased man at the height of his powers. He is placed on a narrow pedestal, clad in a rich fur-lined cloak, among a still-life composition of musical instruments consisting of a bass, a horn and a harp (figure 14). His full-length muscular figure is idealised to correspond symbolically with the spiritual energy expressed in the *Messiah*, the score of which is placed on a composition of musical instruments and draping in front of the figure. The deceased man's image has both a forceful physical appearance and expresses his private spiritual communication with the transcendental sphere where the angel is seated on a cloud. With his left hand he is conducting a celestial rendering of the aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth" from the *Messiah* for a divine performance, his gaze directed upwards to the angel figure performing on a harp above. Conversely, it is implied that in real life he received his inspiration from the divine musicians above since with his right hand, holding a quill, he is writing the score.

The deceased composer is shown with a bare head and short, natural curly hair. The overcoat is of a silk satin fabric with a modestly high collar and short sleeves, bordered with fur. His waistcoat is an unusually light taffeta silk fabric and the shirt with puffed long sleeves and tight cuffs is a lightweight silk chiffon. Knee-breeches, socks and leather shoes complete the outfit that becomes Handel's image for eternity. Thus Roubiliac's final representation invites the viewer to remember Handel as a divinely inspired private man, standing between heaven and earth. Once again the composer is depicted without his wig, his head covered at the back by his own hair. Also revealing is the casual way in which the figure's left foot in a soft shoe protrudes over the edge of the pedestal, as if part of him is still in the earthly space of the viewer. Formally the picture is crowded with details in a typically "baroque" manner, but the way in which the sculptor plays with the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* – that every image and/or idea has a counterpart, nevertheless turns this monument to Handel into a memorable work of art.



**Figure 14**  
**Louis-François Roubiliac (1702-1762), *Monument for George Frideric Handel's Tomb***  
**(inscribed *George Frederick Handel Esq* on the pedestal), 1759,**  
**marble, Westminster Abbey, London (source: free internet).**

## Conclusion

While the portraits of Handel with his wig emphasise his stature as a talented artist or important public figure, only figure 11 can be presumed to have the artistic quality of portraits by great painters of the Baroque era, such as Jan Vermeer, Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt and Anthony van Dyck. Neither does the sculpture of Roubiliac compare with that of Bernini, notwithstanding his sensitive portrayals of Handel without his wig. Baroque artists elevated the status of portraiture and – it follows – also the status of the sitters who are often depicted in a historical or contextualised setting. In general, Baroque era portraits by the great masters show a facility in depicting facial expressions and emotions, which are difficult to interpret in the likenesses of Handel, who most probably did not invite psychological analysis beyond his affable communication with the portraitist or viewer, the emphasis on his genial status, while being reserved, guarding his interiority.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. The daughter of the Lübeck organist and composer, Dietrich Buxtehude, who was offered to him in marriage.
2. See Campbell (1996).
3. Listed by Handel Haus, (<http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27]).
4. Copies, such as the one by Jacobus Houtbraken, printed in 1737/8 from a copper plate, was based on a lost original by an anonymous artist. It was used in publications of Handel's works, as the only printed portrait of Handel "which we know to have been approved by Handel" (<http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27]).
5. The Baroque era in the visual arts is usually dated *circa* 1600-1740; in music it started later and lasted some decades longer.
6. See <http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27].
7. See <http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27].
8. See <http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27].
9. See <http://www.haendel.haendelhaus.de/enPortraits/1736-1738/> [accessed 2009/05-27], for the further vicissitudes of the portrait.
10. The authors wish to thank Carla Wasserthal, Tshwane University of Technology, for her assistance with the identification of details of Handel's dress and background details in the portraits.

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