

George Frideric Handel is a composer who, because of *Messiah* has never suffered a total eclipse of public interest. Yet paradoxically, the overwhelming popularity of that single masterpiece has tended to obscure the monumental breadth and quality of his other works, particularly opera, the form with which he was most closely associated in the minds of his contemporaries. Recently there has been something of a revival for Handel's operas, which for most of the twentieth century appeared mainly in specialized festivals but now increasingly appear in the programs of opera houses around the world. This cannot be said, however, of the other large body of vocal works that in some ways formed the foundation of both his operas and his oratorios: the cantata.



George Frideric Handel

Handel's cantatas have not been singled out for neglect, as the whole genre of the Italian cantata of the 17th and 18th centuries is one of the largest buried treasures of European musical history. On the one hand, musicology has barely scratched the surface of this enormous repertoire—a mountain of music too large for any one researcher to scale—and on the other hand, our modern musical life has provided the oratorio a refuge in the church and concert hall, the operas their place in festivals and opera houses. But we lack the original setting for the cantata: the musical soirees in stately homes. The original patrons of the cantata, those of Handel and of other composers, were the aristocracies of both church and state—men and women who often housed the artists they were cultivating and who were deeply involved in the poetry and music that they sponsored.

When Handel traveled from Hamburg to Italy in 1705 on the heels of a triumph at the Hamburg opera with his first opera *Almira*, he quickly found himself surrounded by patrons vying for his talents as a composer and performer. The Roman cardinals

Pamphilj and Ottoboni, and the Marquis Ruspoli, became his patrons. At their palaces, and at the Arcadian Academy hosted by Ruspoli, Handel was given the opportunity to work with the greatest singers and musical colleagues of that time. Handel was aware of his enormous gifts, but also that he was entering a well-established musical world. As in

Hamburg, he quickly set about to absorb the lessons of his Italian seniors and then to outshine them in their own sphere.

The Italian cantata was formulated in the early seventeenth century—the first use of the term is traced to Alessandro Grandi's book of "Cantade" in 1620—and a swath of mid-century composers including Giacomo Carissimi, Luigi Rossi, and Barbara Strozzi developed the form both structurally and dramatically to become a vehicle for the virtuosity and flair of

leading singers. They also broadened the concept to include duos and trios as well as the original solo cantata. It was this long and distinguished tradition of the cantata into which Handel stepped at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and from 1706 to 1723 (the period in which, as musicologist Ellen Harris has pointed out, Handel frequently lived and worked in the homes of his aristocratic patrons) he contributed a large body of works from which he borrowed throughout his career, and which arguably represent the pinnacle of the cantata form itself.

In the field of the duo cantata, Agostino Steffani emerged in the late seventeenth century as the leading



Scroll of Baroque viol

proponent of the form. It has been generally recognized that Handel's works in this genre were influenced by Steffani's achievement; in the early 1970s an important discovery was made of a particular collection of Steffani duets that Handel apparently acquired in Rome in late 1706 or early 1707. Our program contains a Steffani duo from the collection that Handel owned: *Tengo per infallibile*. A 1987 essay by the preeminent Steffani scholar, Colin Timms, entitled *Steffani's Influence on Handel's Chamber Duets* included



Ornate instrument carving

not only that important discovery, but also the fact that the duet between the soprano and bass voice was a pairing cultivated by many Italian composers, and even Steffani and Handel wrote for these two voices together only when in Italy and not for their patrons north of the Alps. This information, together with the panoramic view of Handel's Italian sojourn contained in *Handel as Orpheus* (Ellen T. Harris, Harvard University Press, 2001) gave us the *raison d'être* for this particular program and choice of singers.