



Handel, George Frideric (1685-1759)

by Gary C. Thomas

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A portrait of George Frideric Handel by Thomas Hudson.

One of the towering figures of Western classical music, George Frideric Handel was a native German who lived much of his life in England. Unlike his contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach, who never set foot outside Germany, Handel was a cosmopolitan who spent extended periods at aristocratic courts in Germany and Italy before settling into the vibrant urban culture of London.

Handel is widely known for certain of his flashier instrumental pieces such as the *Water Music* (1717) and *Royal Fireworks Music* (1749), as well as the large-scale English oratorios with soloists and chorus, above all *Messiah* (1742). But his prolific output includes many other instrumental works, cantatas, and numerous operas in Italian, some of which, such as *Giulio Cesare* (1724), attract considerable interest today.

Handel was born on February 23, 1685 in Halle, Germany, into a staunchly Lutheran family. His father was a court barber-surgeon. Handel was powerfully drawn to music from an early age, but his father wanted him to study law and he enrolled at the university in Halle in 1702.

However, the composer left home in 1703, at the age of eighteen, in order to pursue a career in music, in which he was largely self-trained. After a brilliantly successful career, he died in London on April 14, 1759.

One of the few composers to enjoy a large measure of fame and mythic stature in his own lifetime, Handel after his death went on to become a British cultural icon. He became the hero of a musical cult (the Handelians), darling of the Christian choral establishment, and, more recently, a lucrative consumer commodity with more than one album of "Greatest Hits" to his credit.

Given Handel's exalted status and the unwritten rule that no star in the classical galaxy may be homosexual, least of all the composer of *Messiah*, it is hardly surprising that scholarly investigation into Handel's personal life, particularly his sexuality, has met with resistance.

In Handel's case, homosexual panic set in early: even biographers in his own time appear troubled about this celebrity's apparent lack of interest in women, the more so since he never came anywhere close to marriage but did spend a great deal of time in private, all-male social circles.

That Handel himself maintained strict silence about his private life only fueled suspicions of homosexuality, leading scholars and critics over the years to a general "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

However, neither that policy nor some of the most remarkable feats of invention and denial on record (discovery of "secret" lady friends and lovers, assumptions of chastity on religious grounds or the "holy solitude of the artist," and so on) have allayed the suspicions.

Over two centuries' worth of prevarication--some of it amusing, despite the underlying homophobia--has labored mightily to certify Handel as acceptably straight, a man of "normal masculine constitution," in the words of one of his nervous biographers, or to embalm him in a state of non-sexual purity.

The attempt has been to remove both the composer and his works from the dross of history in order to canonize them into "timeless universality." Thus, around Handel was constructed the first biographical closet, of many to come, for a major composer in the West.

Whether Handel was in fact homosexual (or its eighteenth-century equivalent; the word itself was not coined until 1869) or had same-sex sexual relations will probably never be known with certainty; such records were compiled only for the hapless victims of criminal arrest.

What we do know, however, is that from the time the composer left provincial Germany, especially during his formative years from the age of 21 to 38, his social orbit coincided with the most important homosexual venues of the eighteenth-century elites: aristocratic courts and "Arcadian" academies, especially those in Florence and Rome (the latter known colloquially at the time as the "City of Sodom"); the English country retreat; and the London theater and opera scene itself.

In these settings, Handel mingled variously with princes, cardinals, and other aristocratic men of means and influence, as well as with artists, whose homosexuality was known in closed circles or more generally as the "open secret."

From these years the picture of a distinctly "private" Handel emerges with striking clarity, not simply because of all this circumstantial evidence but also on the basis of his work.

Especially important in this regard is a set of cantatas--works for various combinations of solo voices with instrumental accompaniment--written precisely during this time (1706-1730). These largely ignored pieces, written for and in the company of private circles of mainly homosexual men, and which (significantly) Handel never published, give rich expression to the pleasures and dangers of same-sex love.

Standing in opposition to the religious view of homosexuality as sin (sodomy), and the political view of homosexuality as exotic threat to the British nation, these texts connect with the classical pastoral tradition in which male same-sex erotic desire is both idealized and celebrated.

The classical and thus "legitimate" pastoral, with its elaborate system of mythical references and coy Arcadian disguises, functioned much in the same way as the coded references to homosexuality in Hollywood film during its censorship under Will Hays and Joseph Breen--that is, as a screen of metaphorical displacements and double-meanings through which what was publicly forbidden could be privately expressed, understood, and enjoyed.

The figure of Orpheus, connoting both "musician" and "homosexual," and with whom Handel was often compared, is one salient example.

It is also significant that when a series of crackdowns on the burgeoning and increasingly open homosexual subculture of London began in the 1730s, Handel reworked many of these texts from which he had borrowed liberally over the years. In so doing, he sanitized them of their more obvious homosexual content.

In light of all this, and in the absence of even a shred of credible evidence to the contrary, we must ask the question on what basis--more to the point, *in whose interests*--can it be argued that Handel was anything other than queer?

Though discomfiting to many, such questions are urgently political, made so not by any "homosexual agenda" but by the persistence of homophobia in our culture. More important, finally, than the question of Handel's sexual identity are the socio-cultural contexts and political struggles in which the composer's sexuality was meaningful--for Handel, for his biographers, and for us.

We must take these contexts into account if we are ever to escape the politically suspect myth of "timelessness" and properly appreciate both Handel and his magnificent work.

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