



Handel: A Classical Icon OR Handel's 250th Anniversary

Professor Donald Burrows' Research

Donald Burrows

I am Donald Burrows and I am Professor of Music at the Open University. This is being recorded in the Recital Room of the Music Department at the University. One of my major research interests is the music of George Frideric Handel.

This year, 2009, is the 250th anniversary of Handel's death.

And, in fact, the big anniversaries: 1834, 1859, and so on, have all been marked by major events in Britain.

The present anniversary comes at a time when Handel has really had a major established place in modern musical life. In fact, a lot has happened in the fifty years since the anniversary in 1959. I think in 1959 no-one would have believed that all of Handel's operas and his oratorios have been recorded and are available as recordings you can buy and listen to at home.

There's also been a great advance in background scholarship. In many ways the starting point for this was when the Queen presented the Royal Music Library to the British nation....because the Royal Music Library, collected originally by King George III has the vastest collection of Handel's autographs, about eight thousand pages of his written music, and this has made Handel's music available for study.

Along with the study of the music actually is the study of Handel's biography. He is actually one of the first really well documented composers. People wrote about him in letters, diaries, he was a person that people remembered and told stories about, and also 18th century London when he was working was really the first place in Europe which had a really flourishing newspaper industry, Handel's performances are advertised in the papers. And also the fact that he's a public figure means that they record in the papers what Handel did when he was ill and had to go abroad for a health cure or something like that, and there are one-liners about when his singers arrived in London, when Handel went to perform to give private views of his next opera to the royal family at Kensington Palace, there's a whole range of documentary sources about Handel and his life.

At the moment I'm involved in a very large project to try and trace all the known documents about Handel.

He was quite a private person so that one knows relatively little about his private life. I've recently been involved in doing a major publication about Handel's Will and the people that he leaves the money to. There is a great focus there on his musical associates, and his family back in Germany. There are letters to members of his family, there are letters to other people, these are things that reflect his various interests in some ways. You get the tone of his voice sometimes in the letters.

One of the interesting things was, of course, that he'd moved around Europe very easily, not only moving in different social circles in great sort of comfort, but he seemed to have a sort of talent for languages....and it seems that Handel was fairly fluent in English, in French, Italian, in German, and in Latin and people said when you had a conversation with him he would sort of slip from one to another from time to time, and it made him sometimes quite difficult to follow but it made the conversation very lively.

Although I'm pretty heavily involved with the Handel documents project at the moment I've always tried to keep, as it were, both sides of the brain going in dealing with the literary and

documentary historical side of Handel on the one hand, and his music on the other. So books and music editions have run in parallel in my life, things about Handel, and actually at the same time coming to grips with the music itself...how this music works, how it was composed, and I think in the course of this one gets this sort of sense of a really great sort of musical brain at work.

A lot of the repertory of Handel's music has been studied but there's still a lot left to do, a lot of very good music to look at, a lot of little problems about what Handel meant, what he wrote, how he performed certain things, when he performed Messiah in one year it wouldn't be the same as another year 'cos he had different singers. How did he change the music, how can you reconstruct what he did when you know who the singers were, what the circumstances were from one year to another? So we are really getting a sense, not just of what a particular Handel work is, but that...each work has its own history.

Handel Scholarship is something which is very active in Britain, in America, in Germany, Japan even, so throughout the year there is a round of conferences taking place in different countries. I shan't be able to get to all of them but obviously I'd like to be there taking part, finding out what other people are doing, presenting some of the latest things that I've done, and one wants to actually try and get in contact with as many people as possible in the course of this year.

One of the controversies about Handel as a composer has been the way that he uses musical ideas that he gets from other composers, this is simple theft, I mean he takes good ideas wherever he finds it.

But whereas you might regard that as a bit of deficiency it's also really quite exciting because you can see how he takes someone else's idea and composes it into something rich and strange, and rather special, and you get an idea from that about how he worked as a composer, and I think one's view of Handel is actually strengthened rather than weakened at the end of this process because you do realise that a composer is someone who in more than a technical sense, but in a much broader sense, writes music well and can make the sound, as it were, sing to you, so I think I'm very happy that I've in my research been associated with a composer who has both this historical interest and this great musical value at the end of it.