



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

Handel's Opera

VOICE OVER

Handel had a very successful and prosperous career writing opera for the theatre.

The type of opera that Handel wrote was developed in Italy. It had a noble and serious style, and was called "opera seria".

In London, Handel developed opera seria in a very individual way, creating some of the best operas of the baroque period.

DONALD BURROWS

In order to carry the story, and the drama, and the interaction between the characters, the musical forms of the opera were basically of two types. You had recitative which was quite fast-moving which was for conversations between different characters, one after another, and then from time to time the action would stop for a song, or an aria as it was called, in which the singer or ...the character in the opera would tell about their feelings or the situation they were in.

VOICE OVER

Handel's arias, with their ornate flourishes, are the hardest works to sing.

DONALD BURROWS

When people went to the opera I think they wanted ...to hear these..... very special singers, some of the best in Europe, doing really remarkably virtuosic things....which might be sometimes very fast and quick-moving passages, sometimes very lyrical, rather slow tunes that everyone would remember afterwards.

VOICE OVER

Handel's characters and music enact intense human dramas often involving a conflict between love and duty, building to rivalry and even, to war.

Great music and performance was what drew people in – but part of a good night out at the theatre was the stage production itself.

DONALD BURROWS

When people went to the theatre in London, particularly if they were going to the opera, they wanted to see something very special in the way of stage spectacle. The appearance of the stage had to be very rich and lavish, depending on the type of scene it might be a palace, it might be a ruin, it might be the site for a battle, an outside scene. But it always had to look rather rich and special, so scenery was a fundamental part of the experience of opera for the audience.

One of the most remarkable surviving theatres is in Český Krumlov, now in the Czech Republic. This was built in the Summer Palace of one of the families from Vienna, and it was actually built just after Handel's lifetime but it's got the type of technology that you would have found in Handel's theatre.

One of the things that was fundamental to opera at the time were the scene changes, and the various effects that they could do with the scenery.....

For a typical complex scene change in one of Handel's operas you would have needed quite a lot of people, and what happened was actually to give the signal they blew a whistle so that all these people would all move at the same time and then, magically for the audience, this might happen in the course of about eight or nine seconds, but this would have been worked by perhaps thirty people doing different things to achieve this visual effect.

And it's very interesting that Handel actually was thinking about this as he was writing the music in his house in Brook Street in London. He'd be sitting there in his room with the manuscript paper writing the score. But from time to time he writes things about the scenic effects,

about what would be seen in the theatre, so as he's writing the scores he's always thinking about what it's going to look like on the stage, how this is going to work, what the audience is going to see, as well as what the audience is going to hear.

VOICE OVER

Handel took classic stories and enriched them with magnificent music, drama and scenery. Each of his operas is like a time capsule, waiting to be re-discovered.

DONALD BURROWS

For quite a long time after Handel's death these operas were not very well regarded.....But in fact in the C20th we as it were re-found Handel's operas...and from about the 1930s onwards these were put back on the stage and it was found that they were really marvellous musical dramas. In fact they stand as some of the masterpieces of opera that were written at any time in any place.