



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

Handel's Water Music

VOICE OVER

We've all heard of Handel's Water Music, but originally it was composed for an elite royal gathering.

DONALD BURROWS

Soon after George I became King of Great Britain in 1714, there are these tales, which are also written up in the newspapers, of Royal water parties on the River Thames, usually on fine, sunny days, going out on the boats....

George I himself didn't very much like appearing in public but they went out for these little parties on the river. And we have several reports of these in the years 1715 and 1716.

VOICE OVER

And, in 1717, Handel wrote the music for the biggest water party on record

The reason

....a royal quarrel

DONALD BURROWS

Whereas in the earlier water parties all of the Royal Family had gone out at the same time, in 1717 there'd been a major row between the King and the Prince of Wales....

actually the Prince and his family were thrown out of Saint James' Palace. They had to go and live somewhere else. And so you had to choose whether you were going to attend on the King or the Prince of Wales.

VOICE OVER

Illustrious and wealthy nobles in the King's entourage were invited to a lavish supper on the river, they toured with the tide from Lambeth to Whitehall, stopping to dine at Chelsea.

DONALD BURROWS

The thing about the water party was that it was literally a party for the supporters of the King and it was not one that took place inside the Palace but outside where everyone could see what was going on so therefore you have both with the river trip and then with this supper at Chelsea you've got something that people knew about. It was happening out in public.

VOICE OVER

The king was in the spotlight,

Handel saw an opportunity and a challenge.

His music had to set the tone for the finest water party London had ever seen.

DONALD BURROWS

Writing music for a party sounds easy but it's actually rather complicated. What sort of thing do you do? And actually what happened was that Handel found a very interesting mix on the one hand of fairly simple dance movements, dance type rhythms. Things like minuets, there's even one called a country-dance, you know the English dance. And on the other hand he wrote these grand longer pieces that made full use ofthis great gathering of players that he had on another barge accompanying the King.

VOICE OVER

In the course of the journey, Handel's spectacular water music was repeated 3 times

To keep the party going Handel used a mixture of long and short movements,

And to make sure the king drew everyone's attention, Handel introduced an unusual new type of sound.

DONALD BURROWS

The Water Music actually is something that goes down in history because as far as we know this is the first time horns have been used in the orchestra in Britain and the instrument of course was associated with the hunting field. But it's, as it were, art use in an orchestra was something that was really new and Handel's Water Music is one of the first pieces ever to turn it into something that you can use within the orchestra.

Just as we would talk about a visual spectacle of something that attracts you when you look at it, a picture or a scene, the same can be true of music that with the Water Music you've got something that as it were draws the listener towards it. people would stop talking and listen and it would do something to the way they felt about the sort of life they were having at the time. And of course this was just the type of thing that George I wanted at that moment.

There were other composers on the Continent who also composed music for water parties but Handel is certainly the person who wrote the grandest form of it and the most varied....

The tunes and the sound of the orchestra means that Handel's Water Music has become as it were the classic of this type.