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Handel in Rome

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By Ingrid Matthews

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) is claimed by both the Germans (his compatriots by birth) and the English (he became a naturalized British citizen); but his widely acknowledged status as the most universal of composers perhaps owes most of all to his time in Rome. Handel's musical training in his native Halle was somewhat thwarted by his father's disapproval (Handel practiced in secret on a clavichord he had smuggled into the family's attic). Though he did eventually receive a good German education in music, and found work as a second violinist for the Hamburg Opera, the ambition to develop as a composer led him inevitably to Rome. The seat of so many musical innovations, from opera and oratorio to the instrumental sonata and concerto, Italy drew composers from all over Europe like a magnet. Handel arrived there in 1707, at twenty-two years old. Within a year he had won the acclaim of the city's most important patrons, including the powerful cardinals, noblemen and intellectuals who made up the *Arcadian Academy*. For the household of the Marquis Francesco Ruspoli, he provided weekly cantatas (on secular subjects) for performance every Sunday. All in all, Handel composed some 150 cantatas during his three years in Italy, as well as operas, oratorios, motets, and other sacred works. All of the pieces included on tonight's program are from this period (although there is some conjecture regarding the recently discovered *Gloria*, which has not been definitively dated).

Coelestis dum spirat aura is an example of the young Protestant composer's respect for, and ease within, the tradition of Roman liturgical music. The influence of Alessandro Scarlatti is evident, while the melodic content of the motet shows Handel's great affinity for the human voice.

The concertmaster for many Handel premieres was the eminent violinist **Arcangelo Corelli** (1653-1713). This working relationship must have been enhanced by Handel's deep respect for Corelli as a composer; the intelligent craftsmanship of Corelli's style had a lasting impact on Handel's string writing. Like Corelli's music, the organization of his publications demonstrates an orderly sense of design: the four volumes of trio sonatas alternate, in groups of twelve, by "church" and "chamber" styles. The fifth book, containing the solo violin sonatas, is comprised, again, of twelve pieces—this time six of each type; while his sixth and final volume, the (twelve) *concerti grossi*, synthesizes the two styles. While the "church" sonatas are built around the alternation of slow movements and fugal ones, the "chamber" style, like *opus 4 no. 10* heard here, incorporates dance movements.

Besides Corelli, the other Roman composer who influenced Handel the most was **Alessandro Scarlatti** (1660-1725). Scarlatti was known primarily as an opera composer but also produced hundreds of dramatic cantatas, which are likely models for Handel's. While it was Scarlatti's son, Domenico, who would revolutionize keyboard writing, Alessandro himself wrote at least forty toccatas for harpsichord. The G minor piece on this program represents a more formalized approach than earlier composers had applied to this rhapsodic form; however, Scarlatti reveals his operatic bent as the driving perpetual motion gives way to a surprising keyboard recitative.

Armida Abbandonata is one of the numerous secular cantatas Handel composed for Francesco Ruspoli, the marquis in whose home he lived and worked for much of his time in Rome. Although this, like many of Handel's dramatic cantatas, is scored for economical forces, it contains all the emotional intensity of opera, as the abandoned heroine moves from disbelief to rage to despair. The opening recitative is highly unusual in that there is no *basso continuo* to support the singer; in fact there is no bass at all, only an ominous shimmering of the violins, creating a chilling and unsettling effect. The unison strings in the final aria echo the hollowness of Armida's grief.

Handel's B flat *Sinfonia* offers a clear demonstration of the influence of Corelli: the violinistic figuration, as well as the interplay between the two violins, owes much to the latter's trio sonatas. As an extraordinarily prolific composer, Handel reused and recycled his own work frequently throughout his career; the early Roman music seems to have provided raw material for a great deal to follow. This *Sinfonia* turns up in 1733 as the first movement of a harpsichord suite.

Georg Muffat (1653-1704), a generation before Handel, anticipated the rise of truly international composers. He was born in Savoy, and spent most of his career in Vienna, Prague and Salzburg. However, as a young man he had studied in Paris with the great arbiter of French style, Jean-Baptiste Lully; later he took leave from his Austrian post to travel to Rome. There he learned from Pasquini and others, and had works performed in the home of Corelli. The *Passacaglia* on this program (a set of variations over a repeating bass pattern) reveals Muffat's interest in both French and Italian methods of composition. It takes the form of a French *rondeau*, while the increasing virtuosity of the variations lends an excitement which is unquestionably *italianate*.

This brings us to the interesting story of Handel's *Gloria*, a work only rediscovered in 2001. It was found at the Royal Academy of Music in London, appearing in a manuscript which had come from the library of a musician named R.J.S. Stevens (1757-1857); Stevens had inherited much of his own collection from one William Savage (1720-89), a singer who had known and worked with Handel. The score contained in the manuscript bears no attribution. But a set of parts survives along with the score, and the cover of one part-book cites Handel as the composer. Since mis-attributions were legion in the 18th century, and since the handwriting of the ascription is inconsistent with the rest of the part-books, it was overlooked by scholars until

recently. Dr. Hans Joachim Marx was the first to claim the authenticity of the *Gloria's* attribution to Handel, which is now widely accepted. As Clifford Bartlett, responsible for the first modern edition, writes, "The attribution to Handel is confirmed by the *Gloria's* quality and style." In the buoyant opening movement and the joyful *Amen*, the soprano is given spectacularly florid lines, while the serenity of *Et in terra pax* is palpable. Throughout, Handel's characteristic empathy for the text is evident. SBO is very pleased to present the first Northwest performances of this welcome addition to our repertoire.