

## Chapter 10: Class of 1685: Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel

### I. Introduction

A. Bach and Handel were both born in 1685.

### II. Bach's and Handel's changing reputations

A. The most familiar compositions represent only a portion of the vast outputs of these composers. The pieces performed today are also not necessarily the ones for which they were most famous in their time.

B. Handel's career was more secular, while Bach's was religious. However, now, Handel's most performed work is his oratorio *Messiah*, while Bach's secular instrumental works are often performed.

### III. Bach's life and career

A. Bach never left Germany.

B. He held a series of organist positions early on, worked at a ducal court, and then became music director in Leipzig.

C. Bach's career was provincial, and he composed what was needed at the time.

D. Most of his great vocal music dates from Leipzig.

E. His later years saw the composition of esoteric and old-fashioned masterpieces of counterpoint that have never been surpassed.

### IV. Bach's instrumental music

#### A. The chorale prelude

1. Bach belonged to a family of church musicians that stretched back to the sixteenth century.

2. Bach sought out the greatest composers in the Lutheran tradition for study, walking some three hundred miles to hear Buxtehude.

3. Bach inherited the genre of chorale prelude, a single-stanza setting of the chorale that introduced congregational singing or served for meditation.

#### B. The fugue

1. Pachelbel began to separate the free and strict sections of a toccata, and by Bach's time they were separated into distinct pieces, such as prelude and fugue or toccata and fugue.

2. Bach wrote two series of preludes and fugues in every key (major and minor) for keyboard known as the Well-Tempered Clavier, *Das wohltemperierte Clavier*.

3. A fugue can be a stand-alone piece or part of a piece, texture, or procedure.

4. Bach's Fugue in G Minor is an example of the composer's approach to the fugue in his early years and is relatively straightforward.

#### C. The Well-Tempered Clavier

1. The C-major prelude from Book One is famous for a number of reasons.

2. The B-minor fugue differs in almost every way from the Prelude in C.

#### D. From France to Germany: The Baroque dance suite

1. Even though Bach never left Germany, he was able to assimilate various national styles and idioms.

2. German musicians had long brought in other styles, including the French dance suite.

3. Chief among the proponents of the dance suites was Johann Jacob Froberger.
  - a) Froberger helped establish the standard dance sequence in a suite: allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue.
  - b) Bach adopted this model as a basic pattern for all of his suites.
4. These four dances were all in binary form, but varied in meter and tempo.
5. Bach learned French style through publications.
6. His position at Cöthen did not require him to write (or play) elaborate church music.
7. For almost six years, Bach wrote mostly instrumental music, including concertos, sonatas, and suites.
  - a) He wrote for a variety of groups and soloists, including the unaccompanied suites for violin and cello.
  - b) Most of his suites are organized into groups of six, including the six English Suites and six French Suites, for keyboard.
  - c) The French Suite in G Major contains elements that demonstrate some of the aesthetic contradictions of eighteenth-century style.

#### E. The Brandenburg Concertos: stylistic hybrids

1. By combining elements of familiar styles in unfamiliar ways, Bach produced new pieces that sounded somehow familiar, but not quite.
2. He put six concertos together in hopes of attaining a position in Berlin, but the concertos were never acknowledged or performed there. Their unusual scoring may be part of the reason.
  - a) Bach required different soloists for each concerto, including rare instruments such as the violino piccolo.
  - b) The fifth has a written-out harpsichord part.
  - c) The sixth does not include a violin part.
3. The Fifth Brandenburg Concerto
  - a) This atypical concerto is ambitious in several aspects.
  - b) Bach sets up the flute as protagonist, only to have the violin and harpsichord join it.
  - c) Ultimately, the harpsichord proves the dominant instrument.
  - d) The second movement contrasts markedly with the first, a soft *affettuoso* in B minor.
  - e) The last movement fuses different genres: fugue, concerto, and gigue.

#### V. Bach's vocal works

##### A. Bach's cantatas

1. Bach's contemporaries considered his sacred vocal music his chief contribution.
2. Texts published by Neumeister altered the traditional biblical verses associated with chorales into little poems that contained an emotional response to the texts, functionally as arias do.

- B. Bach's cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (BWV 4) dates from early in his career: 1707 Mühlhausen, as part of his application for the organist position.

1. The work consists of variations on the chorale, and the text matches the chorale exactly.
2. Each verse is set differently.

C. Passions

1. Bach's most familiar religious works are the large-scale works: Passions based on the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John, and the Mass in B Minor, which became part of the concert repertory in the nineteenth century.
2. The Passion oratorios were written for church use, for Good Friday, in the 1720s.
3. The Passions are the closest pieces to opera that Bach wrote.
  - a) St. John is more like an opera in its drama.
  - b) St. Matthew is more contemplative.

VI. Handel's life and career

- A. Handel moved from Halle when he was eighteen, traveling to Hamburg. There, he played violin and harpsichord in the opera house.
- B. Handel went to Italy (Florence and Rome) to study.
- C. In 1710, Handel became the court music director for George Louis, Elector of Hanover, who became King George I of England in 1714.
- D. Handel moved to London before George I ascended to the throne and lived there the rest of his life.
- E. Handel presented thirty-odd operas for London theaters.
- F. Competition from younger opera composers caused Handel to turn his efforts to oratorio.

VII. Handel's music

A. Handel's instrumental music

1. Even though Handel is remembered chiefly for his vocal music, he left a considerable amount of instrumental music.
2. His orchestral suites are his largest instrumental pieces.
3. The most famous are the "Water Music," composed for performance while the king floated down the Thames, and "The Musick for the Royal Fireworks"—composed for just that.

B. Operas

1. In every idiom, Handel's music is imbued with aspects of music for theater.
2. In the early eighteenth century, opera tended to be formulaic, which made it possible to compose several in a short period.
3. Handel's *Giulio Cesare* is a prime example of the composer's operatic style, written at the height of his career (1724).
  - a) The aria "Empio, diró, tu sei" contains several exciting aspects of what Handel could do within a da capo aria.
    - (1) Ritornello
    - (2) Word painting in both harmony and melodic line
    - (3) Contrast (B section)
    - (4) Counterpoint, which unlike the previous elements, reflects his German background

4. Handel eventually fell out of favor with London audiences, who came to prefer the lighter works, such as the genre known as *ballad opera*.

C. Oratorios

1. As his operas declined in popularity, Handel realized that he would need a new outlet to continue his career in England. He returned to the genre of oratorio.

D. *Messiah*

1. The *Messiah* includes aspects associated with Handel's other works, but it differs in its New Testament subject.
2. Handel composed *Messiah* supposedly in twenty-four days.
3. It has never gone out of the repertory—an unusual feat—although it took a few years to gain true popularity (1742–50).

E. Handel's "borrowing"

1. Handel's alarming speed in composing *Messiah* was due in part to being able to recycle precomposed music.
2. Such borrowing was common, and Handel partook frequently.
3. Some scholars have attributed Handel's numerous borrowings in the 1730s to a stroke in 1737.
4. Others comment that it was not until the nineteenth century that modern ideas about copyright came into being, and to apply them to Handel is unfair.
5. Some of Handel's contemporaries commented (negatively) on his excessive borrowing.