
Stop, Look, and Listen!

Musical Diversions and Commentary — by Rodney Flora

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Issue 02



What is this? Well, at the moment, this is still an experiment. Now that I am retired here in Castine, it is an outlet for the skills that I have developed and honed during my career, and during this period of social isolation to open up a wider world of classical music to my readers, giving all of us something to focus on other than dreadful news and the tedium of isolation. Besides, music is itself a healthy preoccupation and a source of enjoyment and fulfillment. I hope this will make a small contribution to that.

Who am I? I've spent my 40+ year career as a professional classical music broadcaster, more than 15 of those years as Music Director for a Boston classical radio station and the last 10+ years as music director for a classical network that distributes programming to stations around the country. My role was very much a curatorial one, finding and evaluating music and recordings that fit our format and identity as a serious yet accessible source of classical music, and then creating appealing programs that showcased that music to best advantage.

FEATURED COMPOSER - George Frideric Handel

George Frideric Handel was the *other* great baroque composer. He and Johann Sebastian Bach were both born in Germany in 1685 and within 100 miles of each other, but they never met. Though they were both great composers, and despite a few superficial similarities, they inhabited vastly different worlds.



Bach never traveled outside Germany. He was a provincial musician, wrote mostly church music, and might have been forgotten after his death but for his rediscovery and revival by Mozart, Beethoven, and especially Mendelssohn. Bach devoted his life and work to the glory of God and the Lutheran Church.

Handel took a different path. Ambitious to achieve success on a larger stage, after period of study with Friedrich Zachow, a provincial but very capable organist and composer in Halle, Handel set off for Italy to complete his training on his own and to thoroughly immerse himself in the "Italian Style". Handel absorbed the Italian style with gusto and became thoroughly "Italianate" in his musical language, which was the dominant style for both vocal and instrumental music in the Baroque era, the Italians having for all practical purposes invented both the opera and the concerto.

Bach had 2 wives and 20 children but Handel's private and romantic life is largely a mystery. He had no recorded "*liaisons*" and never married, but of course most of Handel's personal life is a closed book. Both Bach and Handel left little evidence of their personal thoughts and feelings, but thankfully a great deal of music.

In 1710 Handel headed to London where he would spend the rest of his life, with the express purpose of becoming a successful composer and impresario of Italian opera, for which London then had a growing appetite. Handel took London by storm with his first opera *Rinaldo*. Over the course of some 20 years Handel made and lost fortunes composing and producing Italian operas for London audiences. Many of them were successful, some were not.

Eventually the taste for Italian opera in London wore thin, partly because it was in Italian which the Londoners never really wrapped their heads around. The ever resourceful Handel then switched to oratorio, which are dramatic but un-staged vocal works on sacred texts and far less expensive to produce. They were not church music *per se* but were based on familiar stories from the Bible and sung in English, hence rather less challenging for the audience. They were a form of entertainment which could still be staged during periods like Lent when opera performances and other "profane" entertainments were often proscribed.

Opera in the baroque period was not the dramatic theatrical spectacle that it later became. It contained little stage action and was almost static, a series of arias linked together by recitative. It has been described as a "concert in costume." Most were on themes from classical mythology. Indeed the original intention of opera was to resurrect ancient greek drama.

Although Handel's fortunes ebbed and flowed throughout his life he did achieve the fame and fortune he had sought. He died in 1759 a wealthy man and was buried with full honors at Westminster Abbey.

DOCUMENTARY - MESSIAH AT THE FOUNDLING HOSPITAL

October may seem a bit early in the season to be talking about Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*, but it is Handel's most famous and popular work and probably the most beloved choral work of all time. If you already love *Messiah* (and who doesn't) this program will make you love it even more.

Messiah at the Foundling Hospital

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3RRsi6cOPM>

And of course, you can always watch this again in December.



DOCUMENTARY - HANDEL THE CONQUERING HERO



For a more generally biographical program about Handel and his music, check out this episode from a series called The Birth of British Music.

Handel The Conquering Hero

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYR5TP_Y_JA

Curiously of the four episodes in the series only one is about a composer (Purcell) who was actually British. The other three: Handel, Haydn, and Mendelssohn, were hugely influential in the subsequent development of British musical taste and style, however.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING - HANDEL: OPERA & CHORAL

When I chose Handel as featured composer I soon realized I had grabbed a tiger by the tail. Handel wrote so much wonderful music and much of it is so well known, how was I to focus on just a few listening recommendations? Well, it's just a sampling of many possibilities, but here goes...

Handel was first and foremost an opera composer so at least one opera recommendation would seem *de rigueur*. Whatever I recommend will only scratch the surface. Handel was a prodigiously productive composer.

Again, in Baroque opera, there's not a lot of on-stage "action" so the choice of whether to watch and listen or just listen is entirely yours. Either way the music is beautiful.

Rinaldo

Handel's first opera was a true masterpiece and his first big success in London. This is a full performance with staging and costumes and a bit of action, if you can call it that, (i.e. people moving around a little), so at least it has some visual interest.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_uUympHwJw

If you want, you can find a history and synopsis of Handel's *Rinaldo* here on Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rinaldo_\(opera\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rinaldo_(opera))

And if you are really committed to watching the whole thing, a downloadable eighteenth century full Italian/English libretto is available here:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B-T232fYNQwGT2t1Z2VZeEVzcjA/edit>

When the appeal of Italian opera had run its course in London Handel turned to the oratorio. In addition to *Messiah*, one of his best is *Israel in Egypt*.

Israel in Egypt is a real choral tour-de-force! I had the good fortune to sing it with Boston's Handel and Haydn Society in Symphony Hall in the mid-1970's. It was an amazing experience. It is a choral singer's delight and a very powerful and colorful work. This is a lovely performance in a beautiful setting. I hope you agree.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPuKHelZyL4>

Messiah (of course!) You may want to save this until December...or maybe not. You can always watch it more than once or look for a different performance for next time.

Stephen Cleobury conducting The Academy of Ancient Music and The Choir of King's College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAaqIAEPgP8>

RECOMMENDED LISTENING - HANDEL: INSTRUMENTAL

Handel also wrote lots of Italian style concertos and sonatas for various combinations of instruments, and suites for solo harpsichord. Handel was quite the celebrity in his own day and his appearance as soloist on the program could put more "bums in seats" as the Brits say. Often Handel would play one of his concertos during an interlude in the featured opera or oratorio.

Water Music

You've probably heard the story that the King's enjoyment of the *Water Music* caused him to finally forgive Handel for being AWOL from his court at Hanover. In reality it seems that the King had actually forgiven him long before this (if indeed any forgiveness was required at all). However it is well documented that the King liked this music well enough to ask that it be played three times over during the evening's outing on the Thames.

Everybody already knows Handel's *Water Music*, but have you listened to it recently in a really good early instrument performance? This one gives me goosebumps!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVAB2z1RPu4>

Violin Sonatas

Andrew Manze, one of today's foremost Baroque fiddlers and conductors, with harpsichordist Richard Egarr:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRhiIRnQOI0>

Concerti Grossi, Op. 3

Handel's Concerti Grossi Opus 6 are pretty widely known, less so his Opus 3.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXUvSu5Cg50>

Recorder Sonatas

Intimate, gentle trio sonatas, yet also lyrical and tuneful.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zKAPa0Eb2w>

Concerti a Due Cori

Large scale concerti. You will notice a few recycled (or pre-cycled?) tunes from Messiah.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AzlzLJ_2Vw

Organ Concertos, Op. 7

Solo vehicles for Handel himself to play. But of course it's Handel so it's great.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQ69oeNmA6Q>



Harpsichord Suites

I love the harpsichord. I love its precise articulation and bell-like clarity, but not everybody does. I recall someone I once worked with saying that “it made his fillings hurt.” Conductor and wit Sir Thomas Beecham famously described the harpsichord as sounding like “a birdcage played with a toasting fork”, and more colorfully as “two skeletons copulating on a tin roof.” Love it or loathe it it is the characteristic sound that underpins nearly all Baroque music.

Handel's suites are, of course, beautiful. These performances by Michael Borgstede are more florid and highly ornamented than some others, but I think they're wonderful.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGNGBRe4Kkc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FoRFIMOd9o>

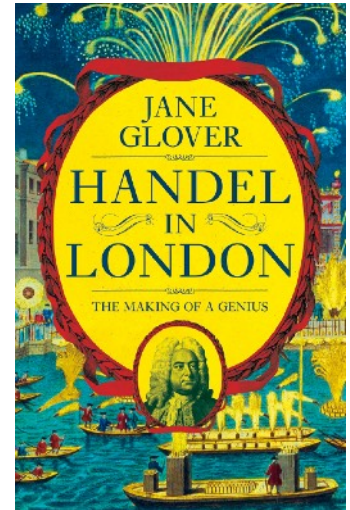
RECOMMENDED READING

Handel in London - The Making of a Genius by Jane Glover

Handel in London tells the story of a young German composer who in 1710, preceded his princely master to London and would remain there for the rest of his life. That master would become King George I and the composer was George Frideric Handel.

Handel, then still only twenty-seven and largely self-taught, would be at the heart of musical activity in London for the next four decades, composing masterpiece after masterpiece.

Here, Jane Glover, who has conducted Handel's work in opera houses and concert halls throughout the world, draws on her profound understanding of music and musicians to tell Handel's story. It is a story of music-making and musicianship, of practices and practicalities, but also of courts and cabals, of theatrical rivalries and of eighteenth-century society. It is also, of course, the story of some of the most remarkable music ever written, music that has been played and sung, and loved, throughout the world – for three hundred years.



Jane Glover, author also of *Mozart's Women*, has had a long and hugely successful career as a conductor. She has been Music Director of the Glyndebourne Touring Opera, Artistic Director of The London Mozart Players, and has conducted all the major symphony and chamber orchestras in Britain. She appears regularly at the BBC Proms and is a regular broadcaster for television series on Mozart. She lives in London.

For an interesting 3-part discussion about Handel and Bach with Jane Glover and Sir John Eliot Gardiner look here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRvpsR3Tc2k>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80qZioxXQxk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MlPhM0oRt0>

DISCOVERIES and RE-DISCOVERIES

One of the things I have always enjoyed is “discovering” lesser known composers and their music. Obviously someone has already discovered them or there wouldn’t be recordings for me to discover, but they are not generally well known.

Without doubt there are many obscure composers who richly deserve their obscurity, and I have certainly listened to lots of those. In many cases they are technically competent, but either sorely lacking in ideas or the skills to develop them, and often both. It’s like a story without a plot, characters come and go randomly without really doing anything or being developed, the music seems like it might be going someplace but never gets there. Sometimes it’s just endlessly “treading water” and there doesn’t seem to be any point to it at all. Needless to say, these are a waste of time, and I won’t waste your time with them.

But there are gems to be found if you are willing to “kiss a lot of frogs” along the way (and mix a lot of metaphors). Here are a few pieces that I find interesting and appealing. I’d love to hear what you think of them.

Isabella Leonarda (1620 - 1704)

This year is the 400th anniversary of the birth of early Baroque Italian composer Isabella Leonarda. She was a cloistered nun and eventually Mother Superior of her convent, but this seeming limitation actually freed her to use her musical gifts in ways that would have been otherwise unavailable to her as an upperclass woman in 17th century Italian society.

Although her vocation was religious she didn’t write only explicitly religious music, she wrote instrumental music as well, and it’s all quite good. Late Renaissance/Early Baroque music can sometimes drone on a bit, but her music is lively, lyrical, and melodically inventive. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.



There are a number of celebrations of her 400th anniversary available on line. Some are just music, others include some biographical narrative too.

Isabella Leonarda: A 400th Birthday Celebration by Pacific Music Works. Includes commentary.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5rU9-xW2E0>

Isabella Leonarda – 400 years in 2020. This is an all music celebration by a Finnish early music group.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaCL3_fJuE

A Celebration of Isabella Leonarda 1620 - 2020. By Cappella Artemisia. Includes commentary.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_y7V0VOdmI

For a briefer purely instrumental sample here is her Sonata Prima, Op. 16 no. 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXHmS--6iS0>

You can also find some of her masses and other sacred and instrumental works by searching on her name.

Elias Parish-Alvars: Mid-nineteenth century English harpist and composer. After the obligatory dramatic introduction it's lively, tuneful, and fun. What more could you ask?

Concertino in D-minor for piano & harp (ca. 1840)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VOi42tHUDI>



Rosalind Ellicott (1857 - 1924) English late 19th century composer. Known mostly for gorgeous chamber music.

Here is a brief biographical piece with some lovely music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3DcM2JWr3U>

Here is her beautifully lyrical Piano Trio No. 1 (1884)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzRPPv1FCZQ>

And here the slightly more brooding Piano Trio No. 2 (1891)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh6OW4ujy1E>

For more biographical information on any of these composers I suggest Wikipedia as an easy starting point.



OFF-TOPIC MEANDERINGS (or Peripheral Peregrinations?)

This being a non-traveling year for most of us, one of the things I look for besides classical music videos is travel videos. Many of us have places in mind that we hope to visit (or visit again), bucket-list destinations, or even places we are unlikely to go but that we're still curious about.

Recently we watched the six part series *Great Australian Railway Journeys* with Michael Portillo.

Here's the link to the first one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2BsrMiHKO0&list=PLxQ8F81rvGmeWXw62ZKWGKM3atFhanjBB&index=1>

Similarly enjoyable are *Great Indian Railway Journeys*. There are four episodes in the series.

Here's the link to the first one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruTWWeu7Zc8>

Other related series include Great Asian Railway Journeys, Great Canadian Railroad Journeys and Great Alaskan Railroad Journeys. Of these series many but not necessarily all of the episodes can currently be found on YouTube.

For those whose tastes run more to the literary there is a 6 part BBC dramatization of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. I've never been able to make it all the way through the book but we enjoyed this over six evenings. You can find it here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4B2goaLxExw&list=PL1AA_AedTJX9dVrn9eeYMU_gcZ28XMqj3&index=1

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