

Rockport Chamber Music Festival
Sunday, June 21, 2009
Notes on the Program

The Theater of Music
Program notes by David Douglass

The arts flourished in London over the turn of the eighteenth century. By the final quarter of the seventeenth century, the city was well on its way to recovery from a devastating plague, civil war, and its near total destruction by fire. Things were looking up, and once again the citizens of London began to flock back to the theaters and concert halls. The productions they enjoyed were predominantly based on mythological and allegorical themes, flights of pastoral fantasy that were a welcome break from the devastating events they had lived through. But the English had always shown a penchant for utopian escapism. As far back as the legends of King Arthur, or, more recently for them, *Arcadia*.

The *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, known also simply as *Arcadia*, is a work of prose by Sir Philip Sidney written towards the end of the 16th century. It's popularity allowed for many editions to be published well into the 18th century. Many authors borrowed from it, including William Shakespeare in *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale*. The work is a romance that combines utopian pastoral elements of the shepherd's life with courtly fantasies of jousts, political treachery, kidnappings, and battles. It's extremely complex, especially when compared to other works of its period: stories are nested within each other, and different story lines are intertwined, similar to ancient Greek models.

Writers were not the only imitators of *Arcadia*. Most seventeenth century English composers also adapted Sydney's idealized worlds in vocal and instrumental works that told stories of love and loss, mythological adventures, and fantastic impossibilities. Masque entertainments, mythological stories told with music, dance, and oration that began with the reign of Henry VIII can also be connected, both directly and indirectly, to *Arcadia*. The final and greatest composer of Masques, Henry Purcell, was also the composer most beloved of Londoners at the end of century.

Purcell's masques, spectacular works such as *Dido and Aeneas*, *King Arthur*, *The Fairy Queen*, and some fifty other works for the stage crowned him in his day as the premier creator of comedy and drama in music. The secret of his success lay in his ability to convey the emotion of the story through his music. The story and the music, in that way, were one and the same. This was not only music for the theater, this was the theater of music, and the theater of music wasn't limited to the stage. All of Purcell's music, whether instrumental or vocal, will draw you into their storybook worlds. Even Purcell's simplest songs are irresistibly evocative. *Music for a while* proclaims the power of music to transport and enlighten, while *Sweeter than roses* brings to life the moment of a first kiss. The songs couldn't be more theatrically affective with costumes, scenery, and a large orchestra. In fact, it is the music's intimacy drawing you into your own imagination which makes it so powerful.

Composers and publishers were well aware of this. In fact, several of the works from the first half of the program were published by Henry Playford in a collection he called *The Theater of Music*. Many more of Purcell's songs were published in a book which illustrates the high esteem in which he was held: *Orpheus Britannicus*, Britain's Orfeo.

George Frideric Handel was undoubtedly the biggest hit-maker in London at the beginning of the eighteenth century – not to mention one of the few composers to remain continuously popular from his heyday until our own time. His popularity, then and now, didn't lie solely in his ability to create theater in music. His success was a testament to his combined skills of composer, showman, and marketing genius. By introducing Italian-style opera to English society, Handel was able to reach large audiences. By composing memorable melodies and operatic characters, and creating affective theatrical drama, he found a place in the hearts of his audience. And by marketing editions of his music that were tailored to private, parlor performance, he reminded the audience of his talent and ensured a continued market for his future endeavors.

The publisher who brought editions of Handel's works to the public was a new kid on the block, an Irishman by the name of John Walsh. By the 18th century John Playford's typeset editions looked old fashioned by European standards. John Walsh soon carved out a niche for himself by employing the process of engraving. Engraved plates appeared far more elegant, allowing for a variety of scripts and printing effects that better reflected the more ornate aesthetics of 18th-century music. Walsh easily gobbled up the market that had been established by Playford, publishing lesser-known European composers as well as Handel. In many ways, Walsh, through his publishing, and Handel, through his status as an adopted foreigner opened up English tastes to a wider variety of foreign styles.

We're thankful that John Walsh published so much of Handel's creative output, but we're even more grateful that he published it also in arrangements by Handel for small forces appropriate for the parlor. Four of those editions—of the many from Walsh's publishing house that reside at the Newberry Library—figure prominently in the second half of our program. In the editions I've chosen to work from, compositions Handel wrote for large forces are condensed to just two or three parts.

First published in 1726, *APOLLO'S FEAST, or the Harmony of the Stage, Being a well-chosen Collection of Favourite and most Celebrated SONGS out of the latest OPERAS compos'd by Mr. Handel* grew to six volumes that were popular enough to be issued in numerous editions. Hundreds of arias from many of Handel's operas appear here with chaste accompaniments of a simple bass line for harpsichord realization and obbligato part for violin or German flute (recorder). Here and there a song is presented with fuller forces that more closely resembles the version that would have been heard in the opera house, in which case it is likely the parlor performance would have adapted the music to whatever forces were available.

The most charming feature of *Apollo's Feast* is the attributions of the songs to the singers who made them famous. The tabloid lives of the opera stars Handel brought to London from Italy and Germany were as smarmy as Handel's music was sublime, but the publicity machine of and scandal gossip was ideal for popularizing his music. Francesca Cuzzoni, the soprano diva who first sang the hit arias from *Julius Caesar*, *Da tempeste* and *Caro! Bella!*, is a prime example. She was already enormously famous before coming to London for the role of *Teofane* in Handel's *Ottone*. The part had not been composed for her, and at rehearsal she refused to sing her first aria until Handel threatened to pitch her out of the window. But in the end she triumphed, dazzling the audience and garnering rave reviews, assuring her of a starring position in Handel's opera company, the Royal Academy.

Cuzzoni remained a member of the Royal Academy until it closed in June 1728 and sang in every opera. She feuded with the other singers constantly, especially with the soprano Faustina Bordoni. The rivalry between the two great divas was notorious and became a public scandal when ovations, whistles and catcalls from the audience led to an on stage scuffle during a

performance of *Astianatte* on June 6, 1727. Cuzzoni was dismissed from the company by Handel, but was reinstated when the king threatened to withdraw his subsidy.

Anna Maria Strada del Pò, the performer of *Se nel bosco* from *Ariadne*, was one of Handel's favorite singers. He composed many roles specifically for her, and took the trouble rewrite arias for her that had been sung previously by Cuzzoni and Bordoni. The 18th-century diarist and critic Charles Burney attributed Strada's success largely to Handel, calling her:

"...a singer formed by himself, and modelled on his own melodies. She came hither a coarse and aukward singer with improvable talents, and he at last polished her into reputation and favour ... Strada's personal charms did not assist her much in conciliating parties, or disposing the eye to augment the pleasures of the ear; for she had so little of a Venus in her appearance, that she was usually called the *Pig*. However, by degrees she subdued all their prejudices, and sung herself into favour."

Another *Grand Dame* of London society, Mary Delany Pendarves, wrote extensively about the London music scene. Of Signora Strada Mrs. Pendarves said that

"...her person is *very bad* and she makes *frightful mouths*, though she is clearly no negligible artist."

The writings of diarists such as Burney and Pendarves pass along valuable information about how the music of their time was performed and appreciated, but they also describe a culturally vibrant society where the arts were a vital part of everyday life. *Music mattered*, and so it was worth the investment of time and energy to learn to play it at home. Perhaps these writings also show us that the boundaries between theater, music, and life were beginning to fade. The drama began to leap off the page of music and stage, and into life itself.

Many of Handel's works were published by John Walsh in arrangements for solo harpsichord. Sometimes the arrangements were done by Handel himself, as in the *Celebrated Water Music* published in 1743, but sometimes they were arranged by others, such as the harpsichordist William Babell. Babell was a student of Handel's, as well as a member of Handel's opera orchestra. He was recognized as one of the great keyboard virtuosos of his day, and contemporaries of Babell often remarked that he had surpassed his teacher. The examples of Babell's virtuosity on this concert, from his *Lessons to the Harpsichord* published by Walsh in 1730, demonstrate why some from his day thought him to be too extreme, condemning his playing as empty display. Charles Burney found Babell's style offensive and lacking in "taste, expression, harmony, and modulation." These arrangements, he continues, "enable the performer to astonish ignorance, and acquire the reputation of a great player at a small expense."

But as you will hear, the ability to perform these song ornamentations is acquired at no small expense, and many of Babell's contemporaries praised him highly. At the very least, William Babell show us how Baroque performers went to virtuosic extremes to decorate the music. In an age when we're attempting to recover the aesthetics of musical styles from previous ages through adherence to historical details, the example of William Babell tells us we're not even close to the extravagant ornamentations that were prized in the 18th century. We know that Handel himself decorated *Vo' far guerra*, the final aria of Act II of *Rinaldo*, in a reputedly dazzling style not unlike what you'll hear in Babell's setting. One wonders what signora Cuzzoni did as the attention was drawn away from her to the harpsichordist! No doubt she battled back with her own decorations. It must have been amazing to hear, or perhaps not, which would explain why the aria was often dropped from later revivals of *Rinaldo*. Some things we'll never know for sure.