

Tafelmusik

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL



TEACHER AND STUDENT MATERIALS

This guide was created by Alison Mackay to accompany Tafelmusik's music education initiatives.

The CD referred to in this guide is:
Handel: *Water Music* (CD# SK 68257)
Sony Classical: Vivarte 1996

Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, Jeanne Lamon, Music Director

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George Frideric Handel was born in Germany in the same year as J.S. Bach, 1685. Although the two famous composers never met, they both suffered from failing eyesight in old age and both went blind after botched eye operations by a shady English eye doctor named John Taylor.

Unlike Bach, who came from a long line of professional musicians, Handel was the son of a barber-surgeon (a common combination at the time) who was determined that his musical son should become a lawyer. He forbade Handel from playing any instruments but the boy smuggled a quiet keyboard into the attic and secretly learned to play. On a visit to the duke who employed his father, Handel gave a dazzling performance on the organ and was then allowed to take lessons in violin, harpsichord and composition, as long as he also promised to study law.

At the age of 18 Handel went to the north of Germany, to play the violin and the harpsichord in the orchestra of the Hamburg opera theatre. This experience inspired a life-long love of opera which three years later took him to Italy. In Florence, Venice, and Rome he became a great success for his church compositions and instrumental music as well as for his operas. For *Rodrigo*, his first Italian opera, the grand duke of Florence paid him 100 "sequins" (gold coins after which the sewing decorations are named) and a set of silver knives and forks.

In 1710, Handel returned to the north of Germany to become the official composer to Georg Ludwig of Hanover who later became King George I of England. During his time as Georg Ludwig's employee Handel made many trips to London where he became idolized for his Italian operas and keyboard performances; like most baroque composers, Handel was also famous as a performer. He found London a much more congenial setting for his talents than the city where he was supposed to be working and he was entertained and housed in the mansions of the rich and famous.

When his German employer came to England to become the king in 1714 Handel was able to stay in London and he lived there for the rest of his life. By the time of his death in 1759 at the age of 74 he had become England's most beloved composer. He composed over 30 operas for the London public; when his style of opera fell out of fashion he turned to the composition of 30 "oratorios", dramatic but unstaged sacred works for soloists, orchestra and choir. The most famous of these was *Messiah*, which remains one of the most often performed pieces of music today. Handel also wrote hundreds of instrumental works. The most famous of these is the orchestral suite known as *Water Music*.

HANDEL'S LONDON

Handel first arrived in London on a chilly day in the autumn of 1710. Visitors at this time often remarked on the thick black smoke which hung over the city from the coal which people used to heat their homes.

Like modern Toronto, eighteenth-century London was a city of contrasts. Although it was a time of great prosperity, many people lived in extreme poverty and some had to sleep on the streets. Well-to-do people gathered in coffee houses to drink the new hot beverage which had just arrived from Turkey. They also loved to attend the opera and it was this audience which first attracted Handel to the city.

After 13 years of living as a long-term guest in various mansions around the city, Handel moved to his own house on Brooke Street, which was within walking distance of Hyde Park. He spent his time in a variety of London buildings, depending on what kind of music he was composing.

HANDEL'S MUSIC

1. Church Music

Handel was a famous organist and often went to St. Paul's Cathedral in the evening after the services were over to improvise on the organ. Afterwards he went to the nearby Queen's Arms tavern to eat, drink and play the harpsichord!

He also composed music for the choir of Westminster Abbey, including the famous anthems for the coronation of George II in 1727. The music was performed by a choir of 40 singers and a huge orchestra of 160 players.

2. Operas and Oratorios

As a composer of dramatic works, Handel was closely associated with two theatres in the centre of London – the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and the Covent Garden Theatre, so-called because it was built on the site of a former convent.

Handel often had preliminary rehearsals for the singers at home where he was famous for his hot-headed but humorous rehearsal style. Then when the orchestra arrived, he kept up a punishing schedule at the theatre leading to performances of up to five different oratorios in a matter of days. In the intermissions of performances he often performed organ concertos.

3. Music for the King

Handel often visited at St. James Palace, the main residence of King George and Queen Caroline, to attend social functions, to perform concerts and to give music lessons to the two princesses. He composed music for national occasions such as victories in war and royal funerals. His most famous royal commission was the music for the water party that took place on the Thames river on July 17, 1717.

WATER MUSIC

From a report of the German ambassador to London:

A few weeks ago the king expressed his desire to have a concert on the river. The necessary orders were given and the entertainment took place the day before yesterday. About eight in the evening the king repaired to his barge. Next to the king's barge was that of the musicians, about 50 in number, who played on all kinds of instruments. The music had been composed specially by the famous Handel, a native of Halle and his majesty's principal court composer. His majesty approved of it so greatly that he caused it to be repeated three times in all - twice before and once after supper.

Handel's *Water Music* is made up of three suites of overtures and dance pieces. The three movements which the participants in the Tafelmusik project will learn are the hornpipe (CD track 8), the sarabande (CD track 12) and the rigaudons (CD track 13).

1. Hornpipe (track 8)

The hornpipe was a lively English dance, often in 3/2 time with intricate dancing steps. Like most baroque dances, it has two sections, each of which is repeated. In the *Water Music*, Handel indicates that the entire piece should be played three times. If you listen to the piece while counting along in three you will hear some cross rhythms or syncopations which give this music its characteristic flavour.

2. Sarabande (track 12)

The sarabande from *Water Music* is the first piece from the G+ suite, originally scored for flute and strings. It is a stately French dance with a characteristic accent on the second beat of some of the bars (see bars 1,3,5,7, for example). Each of the

two main sections ends with a "hemiola" - a cadence where the rhythmic emphasis shifts from three to two.

3. Rigaudons (track 13)

This pair of dances follows a typical baroque format; the first is in G+, the second in G- followed by a repetition of the first movement. The rigaudon was originally a French folk dance which became popular at the court of Louis XIV and then was adopted by English royalty. In 1711 a "Royal Rigadoon" was composed for the birthday of Queen Anne. It is a lively dance in duple metre with its phrases preceded by an upbeat, which was danced by couples at balls or on stage at the theatre.

For further reading about Handel:

The article on Handel in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 1980), which can be found in the reference section at your local library, contains extensive biographical and bibliographical information. Two other excellent books are *Handel and his World* by H.C. Robbins Landon (London, 1984), and *Handel* by Christopher Hogwood (London, 1984).

Any students wishing to pursue further studies on this or any other subject related to baroque music are encouraged to contact Tafelmusik's education department at 964-9562, ext. 229.