

The overture to *Tannhauser* ... so much incessant noise, so uninterrupted and singular an exhibition of pure cacophony, was never heard before. – J. W. Davidson, London Times, June 12, 1855.

Handel meets Bach



William Hogarth painted this scene of Handel composing in London. It's a wonder that he got anything done!

George Frideric Handel was well acquainted with some of the more interesting aspects of life in Georgian England. He mixed with Kings and Queens and made fortunes and lost them like an 18th century Alan Bond. He hired one of the best stockbrokers in England, and when the South Sea Company went under in 1720, Handel sold his shares a week before the collapse. King George II, along with hundreds of other investors, was not so lucky.

When a colleague, Johann Mattheson, annoyed him during the performance of one of his operas, Handel challenged him to a duel.

One account records that "Luckily the sword of Mattheson was broke against a metal button upon Handel's coat, which put an end to the combat."

Handel has been diagnosed (posthumously) as suffering from bipolar disorder; some say he was homosexual although no record exists of anyone, man or woman, having an intimate relationship with him.

When one of his fifty operas, *Theodora*, failed commercially he explained "The Jews will not come because it is a Christian story, and the ladies will not come because it is a virtuous one."

Handel's father didn't want him to be a musician, but fortunately for us Handel would have none of that. He practiced secretly on a clavichord hidden in the attic, and later became a violinist in the Hamburg Opera.

In our first concert for 2011, *Choral Masterpieces*, the choir will sing three of Handel's works.

You will recognize *Zadock the Priest*. The words have been used in every English coronation since King Edgar in 973, and Handel's setting has been used since 1727. The text is from the King James Bible, and describes the anointing of Solomon by Zadock. It was also sung at the wedding of Mary Elizabeth Donaldson to Crown Prince Frederick of Denmark in 2004, has featured in plays and movies and in P&O ads on TV.

Awake the Trumpet's Lofty Sound is from the oratorio *Samson*. Samson, blind and in chains, celebrates his release from work for the Feast of the Dragon, and his opening recitative is followed by this stirring chorus sung by the priests with trumpets.

This will be followed by a tenor solo: *Total Eclipse: no Sun, no Moon, all dark amidst the Blaze of Noon*: a moving aria reputed to have brought tears to Handel's eyes many years later when he too was blind.

The concert will conclude with the *Hallelujah Chorus* from *Messiah*.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in the same year as Haydn. He was probably regarded more as a performer than a composer during his lifetime. Chances are he never heard one of his finest pieces performed: his six Brandenburg concertos, which were first performed nearly 100 years after his death,



and now probably his most popular compositions. His original manuscript survives, he sent it to the Margrave of Brandenburg in late March 1721.

His *Goldberg Variations* were written for Count Kayserling, who supported Bach in obtaining an important position in court. Perhaps they were designed to put him to sleep. The Count suffered from insomnia; the original works were composed for one of Bach's pupils, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, 14 years old at the time. Goldberg played them to help the Count through his sleepless nights. But the work has been described as "perhaps the ultimate display of the full range of Bach's art, as well as the outlet for his deepest, most personal feelings".

The *Goldberg Variations* lay unacknowledged until their revival in 1903 by the Polish pianist, Wanda Landowska (pictured), who dedicated her career to their performance. When she was criticised by another pianist for her insistence on the use of a traditional harpsichord, she replied "That's fine - you play Bach your way and I'll play Bach *his* way!" You can see her and her harpsichord at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qw3FstKlse0>.

Bach wrote three great Passions: *St Matthew*, *St John* and *St Mark*. The latter has apparently been lost, but the others are now popular favourites.

In this concert the choir will sing the final chorus from the *St John Passion*. According to Wikipedia, when performed "There is no applause, neither at the beginning nor at the end. The Passion contains quite a few choruses that are in regular use in worship. The congregation and the audience are to remain silent, as no one is supposed to sing along with the professionals."

We will also sing *Qui Tollis* and *Dona Nobis Pacem* from Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. Beautiful music – again, Bach never heard it performed in full – for a very interesting description of the full work I recommend the notes of the Aylesbury Choral Society at [http://www.choirs.org.uk/prognotes/Bach B minor mass.htm](http://www.choirs.org.uk/prognotes/Bach%20B%20minor%20mass.htm)

Bach married twice, had 20 children and went blind. Handel outlived Bach by nine years, but also went blind. It is believed that the same English travelling oculist operated on both men.

Bach's music was out of fashion before he died, until it was revived more than eighty years later, notably by Mendellsohn and Stanley Wesley, and subsequently by Landowska. At the same time, Handel's work was becoming obscure, revived in the early 20th century.

Both men wrote as the Baroque era ended and the Classical began, and the choir is pleased to perform some of their best-known works.

When? April 3, 2011, at the Great Hall, Jesmond.

More about the rest of the programme in our next issue.

Ever thought of singing in a choir?



"Music exercises the brain and the body. Singing is a very physical process, and when you're singing your song, your body responds as if you were giving it a physical workout". – *BBC World Service*.

It will do you the world of good. Get fit! Come and join us!

Rehearsals start for *Choral Masterpieces* on Monday January 31 at 7pm at the University Great Hall, Jesmond. You won't have to audition - just be willing to join in.

Go to www.newcastleuniversitychoir.com. if you would like more information - and you'll be sure of a warm welcome.

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com

For more about Newcastle University Choir, go to www.newcastleuniversitychoir.com