

THE PIANOFORTE AND ITS MUSIC

IX.

Handel and Bach—A Comparative Study—Latin and German Influences and Environments—"The Harmonious Blacksmith" and "The Well Tempered Clavichord."

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I have now reached the two men in whom the polyphonic school reached its culmination and in whose lifetime the pianoforte came to the fore, though too late and too timidly to influence the style of writing or the manner of performance. They are Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759) and Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Before recording their labors, however, or commenting on the character of their compositions I shall venture to bring them into juxtaposition for comparison in order to make it plain why two men whose names are so intimately associated in musical history and who, in common and simultaneously, mark the highest achievements of their time, yet differ so greatly in the value of their contributions to the art whose story we are tracing. All creative artists are the product of their environment. The national traits of the people among whom and for whom Bach and Handel labored had much to do with fixing the character of their music, as well as the degree and nature of the influence which their compositions have exerted. Both were Germans by birth, but before they reached mature manhood their paths in life were widely divergent. Handel fell into the current of Latinized culture which dominated the larger cities of Germany two and a half centuries ago as completely as it did Paris and London. He was the son of a surgeon, went to a university and became familiar with the humanities. He met the grandees of various courts and was patronized by them as a prodigy in music. Their influence was thoroughly Latin. When he began composing it was in a style to fit the taste of the polite society of the period. He connected himself with the opera at Hamburg. Everywhere, save in Italy, opera was at the time a monstrosity. It had sprung from the efforts of Florentine amateurs to revive the classic drama. The Germans had tried to suit the entertainment to their ruder tastes and harsher language. The vernacular came to be used, and the discovery was made that German words lent themselves ill to Italian music. The opera books were built on classic stories, such as were utilized in Italy. These German poetasters worked over into mongrel books, half German, half Italian, and the composers had to set them according to rigid formularies. Handel's first opera, "Almira," contained fifteen Italian airs and forty-four German songs.

The artistic culture which tolerated such anomalies was assuredly debased compared with that which would have been the normal outcome of purely German tendencies. The Prince of Tuscany heard "Almira" with admiration, and offered to take the composer with him to Italy. Handel declined the generous offer, but soon after set out for the home of the arts on his own responsibility. He produced an Italian opera, "Rodrigo," in Florence and "Agrippina" in Venice. His triumph was complete. Scarlatti became his devoted friend and sincere admirer, and the nobility, resident and visiting, showered honors and attentions upon him. He went to London, composed operas, managed a theatre, bankrupted himself over and over again, and finally, compelled by sheer force of circumstances and in the bitterness of disappointment, struck out a new path and became the master of the fashion to which thitherto he had been a slave.

In many respects the career of Bach was the very opposite of that of Handel. He was a child of German simplicity. He came into the world the repository of the feelings, beliefs and aspirations of a line of musicians extending over more than a century. His ancestors were church and town servants who had provided sacred and secular music for Thuringia so long that the family name became a generic term. He never went to a university and never enjoyed the privilege in his youth of drawing on such a clearing house of the world's knowledge, beliefs and speculations as had honored the intellectual drafts of Handel. He travelled little, and seldom came in contact with the class of society whose tastes determined the early career of Handel. At eighteen he was organist at Arnstadt, at twenty-two organist at Mühlhausen. He accepted a post at Weimar, made a few visits to neighboring towns and cities to give organ concerts, was for five years chapelmaster at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen, and thence went to Leipzig, and became cantor of the St. Thomas school and director of the music in four of the churches of the old city.

Thenceforward his activity was confined to the promotion of music in a sphere which, while it was restricted in many respects, nevertheless left him free to develop his ideals without concern touching his livelihood. He could build on the solid ground of German feeling, and was not obliged to watch the shifting whims of an artificial and unnatural culture. If we had not the works to prove the accuracy of the deduction, we could yet safely argue from the character of Bach's domestic and artistic surroundings that his compositions would show greater ideality, greater profundity of learning, greater

boldness in invention and greater variety of form than those of Handel. In the things which were dearest to him he could work either with complete indifference to the caprices of the public or in harmony with its most intimate feelings.

Bach remained a German; Handel became a cosmopolitan. Handel went to Italy to learn how to write for the human voice. He went to London, and under stress of circumstances abandoned dramatic writing and took up oratorio. His style in the former was conventional; in the latter, not wholly divorced from convention, it was yet original. In the former he composed, as we now know, chiefly for the day in which he wrote; in the latter he composed, as the phrase goes, for all time. In both forms the human voice was the chief vehicle of expression.

Bach came of a race of instrumentalists. He was unequalled as an organ and clavichord player; a master of the technical part of violin playing; he knew thoroughly the structure of the organ; was the inventor of the viola pomposa (an instrument which occupied a place midway between the viola and violoncello); he combined the clavier and lute into an ingenious peyed instrument, and if he did not invent a method of tuning the clavier in equal temperament, he at least demonstrated that it could and ought to be so tuned, and fixed his demonstration for all time with one of his most charming and vital works, "The Well Tempered Clavi-



GEORG FRIEDRICH HANDEL.

chord." The men were contemporaries—born in the same year. The period in which they lived was still dominated by the vocal art. Handel followed the tendencies of the time without hesitation; Bach, impelled by inherited inclination and incomprehensible genius, worked to bring in the new era, the instrumental era of music. We are in the midst of that era to-day; it has taken possession of the art. Nothing has yet happened to check a progress the march of which in the space of a century and a quarter is unparalleled in any one of the other arts. Naturally and inevitably that composer exerts the most puissant influence now who, something less than two centuries ago, pointed out the line along which Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner were to hew a road. That composer was Bach.

So we find Bach's clavier music more varied, more voluminous, more significant and more vital by far than that of Handel. Of Handel's music specifically written for the harpsichord very little is to be found upon the programmes of to-day. The air and variations popularly known as "The Harmonious Blacksmith" appears in the concert lists most frequently, and is the most generally admired of his compositions. Originally it constituted the last movement of a harpsichord suite. Aside from the charm of its melody (the origin of which has caused large discussion which may be said to have failed of definite result) the piece has interest as illustrating a brilliant style of variation which Handel introduced into the suite form. Tradition has added to the interest by wrapping an ample cloak of fiction around it. The familiar story runs that Handel was once caught in a rain-storm while walking through the village of Edgeware on his way to Cannons. He took refuge in the shop of a blacksmith, who sang a song while at work, keeping time to the music with his hammer on the anvil. Handel remembered the tune, and on reaching home wrote variations on it. It was thus that the tune acquired the name of "The Harmonious Blacksmith." A vast deal of labor has been spent in investigating the story, even the ham-

mer and anvil which figure in it having been hunted up and preserved, and the observation made that the anvil (reverentially written in the books with a big A) when hit by the hammer (spelled with a big H) gave out the tones B and E, dominant and tonic respectively of the key in which the air stands; but, unhappily for the lovers of musical romance, nothing has been found to substantiate the story. In the early editions of Handel's suites the movement has no other designation than "Air et Doubles."

As for the rest, Handel's name is oftener seen nowadays bracketed with that of Brahms as the composer of the latter's Twenty-six Variations (Op. 24) than alone on the programmes of pianoforte players. In the complete edition of Handel's works published by the German Handel Society (the title is little else than a euphemism for Dr. Friedrich Chrysander) the clavier pieces are included in a single volume, which, in four divisions, contains sixteen suites, three chaconnes (one with sixty-two variations), two capriccios, six fugues, a fantasia, a prelude and air with variations, a lesson, a coranto and two minuets, a prelude and allegro, two sonatas and a sonatina. His fugues, like his concertos, were for either organ or harpsichord. A light-hearted, glad devotion to simple, sensuous beauty, the dower received in Italy and husbanded among the English aristocracy, characterizes this music. Everything is clear, everything natural, everything plastic, everything shows the typical physiognomy of the period.

Were I discussing Bach's church compositions it would be an easy and a delightful task to show how the influence of the German Reformed service, to which I have referred in connection with his predecessors of the North German school, made Bach's music in a peculiar degree an expression of true, tender, deep and individual feeling—the hymning of a sentiment, sprung from a radical change in the relative attitude of Church and individual accomplished by the Reformation in Germany. Bach was a supreme



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH.

From a painting by Johann Jakob Ihle, preserved in the Bach Museum at Eisenach.

master in the treatment of the chorale, in which the secular folk song was in a manner sublimated, and the romantic elements found in their melodies, coupled with the vast freedom allowed to him in their treatment (as hymns, organ preludes, the foundation of cantatas, motets, oratorios, etc.), emancipated him from nearly all conventional shackles. Polyphonist he was of a necessity, but with what a wonderful presence of the future is shown in his "Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue."

This composition is one that has held musicians in wonder and admiration as long as it has been known. Forkel, who was practically Bach's first biographer, got a copy of the work from Wilhelm Friedemann, the great Bach's son. Accompanying it was a bit of paper containing the following doggerel, written by a friend of the biographer:

Anbey kommt an
Etwas Musik von Sebastian.
Sonst genannt: *Fantasia Chromatica*
Bleibt schön in alle Secula.

In this monumental work the treatment of a purely vocal element—the recitative—is such as to bring it a century nearer us than it was in the works of Vivaldi and the Northern organists from whom Bach borrowed it. Tendencies toward homophonic writing may be found in his instrumental pieces, as in Handel's, but in the interweaving of voices he found a more eloquent means of expressing emotions than the Italians commanded, with their fondness for melody *qua* melody. The seriousness of his nature is shown in the fact that the clavier pieces in which his individuality is most pronounced are those written for the instruction of would-be players and composers, chiefly of his own household. His French and English suites are written in the manner of the time, and his Italian concerto shows his appreciation of the sensuous beauty which was the be all and end all of Italian music at the time. The simplest form of his clavier music is found in his two and three part "Inventions," whose descriptive title confesses

that they were composed to help players to attain to a *cantabile* style.

His loveliest work, the forty-eight preludes and fugues in all the keys, major and minor, known as "The Well Tempered Clavichord," not only had the educational purpose already assigned to it, but was also a tribute to that one of the clavier instruments which was most capable of expression. Its melodies, whether treated freely, as in the preludes, or strictly, as in the fugues, are full of the charm of spontaneous song, and are in a spiritual sense as eloquent a voice of romanticism as the recitatives in the "Chromatic Prelude" and the efforts at the expression of set ideas in the "Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother" are in a material. It pleases me when I hear the C sharp major fugue to think that Bach probably found the inspiration for such themes on those Sunday excursions which, he tells us, he used to make in order to rejoice and refresh himself at popular merrymakings with the songs and dances of the folk. In further explanation of the title and purpose of "The Well Tempered Clavichord" it may be said that it was composed to illustrate the practicability of equal temperament. In claviers tuned according to the system approved by Bach all the twenty-four keys in chromatic succession are equally in tune, whereas in the system formerly employed certain keys had to be avoided. For instance, B major and A flat major were rarely used; F sharp major and C sharp major never. Bach gathered the first twenty-four preludes and fugues together in 1722 and the second set in 1744. Of the first set three copies are extant in Bach's handwriting; of the second there is no complete autograph. The work was not printed until 1800.

By Bach's four duets for two claviers, his variations for clavier with two keyboards, echo effects in other works and the compositions specified as written for clavicembalo (harpsichord), as well as other works in which the clavier figures in association with other instruments, the student should be warned that the notes as written down and afterward printed by no means represent the music as it was actually heard in Bach's time. The mechanical construction of the harpsichord, with its several sets of strings and its couplers, placed at the command of the player a much greater variety and volume of sound in proportion to the normal voice of the instrument than can be obtained from the pianoforte to-day. Since the name of Bach is so frequently bracketed with that of Liszt, it seems also well to explain that six of Bach's preludes and fugues for the organ were transcribed for the pianoforte by Liszt. The transcriptions were an experiment, Liszt desiring to see what effect could be produced on a pianoforte with works which their creator intended to be played upon the organ, with its multiplicity of keyboards—two or three for the hands and one for the feet. In reducing the mechanism which was at Bach's service to its lowest terms, so to speak, Liszt, anxious not to sacrifice any of the original polyphonic fabric, produced a set of virtuoso pieces which long remained his private property. He made the transcriptions in 1842, and it was more than ten years later that he yielded to the pleadings of Dehn and gave them to the public. H. E. K.

GROUNDLESS PLEASURE.

Leslie M. Shaw at the recent dinner in New York of the Commercial Travellers' League said of a silly argument against a great American merchant marine:

"This argument is groundless. It reminds me, really, of old Mother Taliaferro.

"Mother Taliaferro lived in a dugout in North Carolina, very near the line. When the boundary between North Carolina and Virginia was changed it shifted the old woman's dugout into the latter state.

"Well, mother," said a surveyor to her, "you don't live in North Carolina any more. You live in Virginia now. How do you like it?"

"Like it?" said the old woman. "Why, I likes it fine, o' course. Everybody knows that Virginia is a healthier state than North Carolina."

A LABOR-SAVING DEVICE.

Dr. Simon Flexner, the chief of the Rockefeller Institute, referred, at a dinner in Philadelphia, to the increasing number of clean-shaven doctors.

"It is cleaner, safer, to be clean-shaven," he said. "Certainly, as far as physicians are concerned, there was more truth than poetry in the dialogue of the two little boys on the street corner.

"Don't you hate to have your face washed?" said the first little boy.

"Oh, don't I, though!" the other answered. "You bet, when I grow up, I'll wear full whiskers."

PROFESSIONAL JEALOUSY.

"What made that prima donna demand your discharge?"

"I wrote an article," replied the press agent, "saying that she sings like an angel. She said she saw no reason for complimentary reference to anybody's singing except her own."—Washington Star.

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