

# COMING TO GRIPS WITH HANDEL

CONSIDERING THAT HE WENT on to write “the greatest single work in the English language,” Handel’s life began simply enough – almost hardly worth mentioning, really. He liked to wait for the right moment before making a big splash.

Handel was born into a simple middle-class family in February 1685 – on the 23rd, in case you were planning to send a card – and baptized the next day. The church registry gives his name as Georg Friederich Händel. Later in life, after he’d moved to England and become a British subject, he changed it to George Frideric Handel. (Yes, it would be easier all around if he’d gone all the way and Anglicized his given names to George Frederick – be he didn’t, so there you have it. Spelling was never his strong suit anyway.) Händel, or Handel, was born in Halle, a small German town on a lovely riverbank, not far from Leipzig. The town’s full name is *Halle an der Saale*, but the only people who call it that are picky Germans and tourism promoters.

Speaking of being picky, I should point out that at that time Halle wasn’t really a part of Germany. It was in Saxony, which in those days was sort of a separate little duchy. Saxony started out as a region, became a kingdom, then a duchy, then was annexed by Prussia for a while. (The Prussians were fond of annexing their neighbors. It gave them an occasion to wear those funny spiked helmets they liked so much.) Much later, between the First and Second World Wars, Saxony joined in as part of the flourishing Weimar Republic, but that didn’t last for long.

After the Second World War that area of Saxony became part of East Germany. But now that the Berlin Wall is gone, it’s just part of one big Germany again. Funny how that works out.

Anyway, through most of the 17th century the people who worry about this sort of thing would have considered Halle part of Saxony, which had its own bigwig, called an “Elector,” who held court there, complete with theatres, music dancing and general merriment. Halle in those days was a fun place to be. (Strangely enough, despite the title, being the elector was not an elected position. It was something you inherited from your parents, along with the horses and the family silverware. In theory it meant you helped “elect” the Holy Roman Emperor – but that was a bit of a formality too.)

Actually, Saxony (*Kurfürstentum Sachsen* in German, just so you know) was controlled by the Elector of Saxony only until just before Handel was born. In 1680, after the Peace of Westphalia, Halle was handed over to the Elector of Brandenburg next door, and he didn’t quite know what to do with it. But even though they had a new Elector, the people of Halle weren’t about to call themselves Brandenburgians, or Brandenburgers, or whatever. They still considered themselves Saxons, no matter what some silly old treaty tried to say. They were stubborn that way.

An enormous amount of land changed hands thanks to the Peace of Westphalia. (And don’t ask where Westphalia is. We haven’t got the time for that right now.) Under the terms of the Treaty of Münster and the Treaty of Osnabrück, Sweden got the Baltic coast, France got Alsace and most of Lorraine, and the German princes agreed to stop trying to kill each other – which seemed the most anybody could hope for from them. Nobody was entirely happy, but at least it brought an end to the Thirty Years’ War. And about time too. (The Thirty Years’ War ran from 1618 to 1648, so it actually did last for 30 years. The Hundred Years’ War, on the other hand, ran from 1337 to 1457, or 120 years. Maybe they were too busy fighting to count properly.)

Halle was an industrial town, chiefly known for the mining of salt, potash and lignite, a form of brown coal more important

in those days than it is now. When Handel said it was time to go back to the salt mines, he knew what he was talking about.

Having sort of inherited it, the new Elector of Brandenburg, Duke Johann Adolf of Saxe-Weissenfels, didn't really like Halle and had no intention of living there. So he up and moved his whole court to Weissenfels, where he figured he'd have a better time. From then on, as one historian rather quaintly puts it, "Halle relapsed from courtly splendour into the dull monotony of burgherdom." Well, that's the way it goes.

Anyway, for our purposes, it would save us all a lot of trouble if we just agreed to say that Handel was born in Germany and leave it at that. OK? (J.S. Bach was born in Thuringia, which is a whole different story. Don't get me started on that. Keeping abreast of German political geography took real talent in the 17th century. Nowadays it's something of a lost art.)

Handel's family had come to Halle from Breslau in the early 1600s. His grandfather, Valentin Handel, was a coppersmith who got himself elected to the town council and went on to become the town's official bread weigher. (Germans in the 17th century took their bread weighing very seriously – almost as seriously as they took their political geography.)

Tracing Handel's lineage can be tricky at times, since, as music historian Herbert Weinstock points out, members of the Handel family "were remarkable for the inconsistency with which they spelled their name." It could be Händel, Hendel, Hentler, Händler, Hendel, Handl, Hendall and a few more besides. Evidently no one in the family was much at spelling.

Handel's father, old Georg Handel, was Halle's own Horatio Alger story, having started out as the elector's valet. By the time Handel was born, he'd worked his way up to the post of official court barber-surgeon. (Georg was 62 when the young Handel was born, so he wasn't exactly a spring chicken. He'd had a while to get there.)

Nobody much thinks of becoming a barber-surgeon nowadays, but at that time it was a perfectly respectable

occupation. (Though potentially dangerous. You wanted to make sure when you sat down in the chair just exactly what sort of cutting old Georg was expecting to do. Monteverdi's father had been a barber-surgeon, too. I'm not exactly sure what this proves, but it must prove something.)

The Handel family lived in Giebechenstein, a Halle suburb, in a little house known as *zum gelben Hirsch*, or The Yellow Stag, which had once been a tavern. Georg Handel, no fool, had lobbied hard to keep the liquor licence, and made a tidy profit on the side by selling wine to soldiers and other passersby. Maybe the fact that he grew up in a tavern explains Handel's later extreme fondness for eating and drinking. An infamous caricature by the artist Goupy shows the great composer, with a pig's snout, sitting down at an organ overloaded with food. When Handel saw it he was not amused.

That would be Joseph Goupy, a French-born English artist who specialized in etchings, miniatures and fan-painting. Fan-painting was big in the 18th century, but nowadays you could hardly make a living at it. He was the nephew of Lewis Goupy, another fan-painter, whose biography states that he "painted portraits in oil, and also drew in crayons." (I drew in crayons, too, when I was a child. But you don't see me bragging about it to *The Dictionary of National Biography*.) Joseph Goupy's caricature seems especially ungrateful when you consider that he made about £100 off Handel by selling him his South Sea shares. ("South Sea shares" might make the basis for a nifty tongue-twister. How about this: "Should South Sea shares sell short, surely she'd seem slightly shaded.")

If you were to go to that Halle street today looking for The Yellow Stag, you'd find a simple house all decorated with fancy carving, a bust of the composer with the names of his famous oratorios – including *Messiah* – and a plaque that proclaims it as "Handel's Birthplace." He was born in the house next door. (What can I say? Somebody goofed.)

Old Georg Handel was a well-meaning father but rather stern, and he had no particular interest in music – certainly not enough to let his son study it. The boy was going to become a lawyer, and that was that. (Other composers also had fathers who wanted them to become lawyers, including Schütz, Schumann and Tchaikovsky, each of whom studied law for awhile. Elgar worked briefly as a clerk in a law office. Dvorak’s father just wanted him to become a butcher.)

Fortunately for our hero, Handel’s mother, Dorothea, was a bit more sympathetic. To hear Handel tell it, she helped the young boy smuggle a clavichord into the attic, where he would practise late at night after everyone else had gone to sleep. (The clavichord is a portable keyboard instrument that resembles a small piano or harpsichord. It’s so quiet you can hardly hear it from a few feet away, much less way up in the attic through all the snoring.) This sounds almost too good to be true, if you ask me. But that was Handel’s story and he stuck to it, so what can we say? In some versions of this story, it was Handel’s Aunt Anna who ran the clavichord-smuggling operation. Take your pick. It’s all the same to me.

Handel might have remained just a closet clavichordist but for a lucky break when he was about seven (some say nine) years old. He’d gone with his father to the palace of the duke (“Short back and sides, Georg, same as before”) and wandered into the chapel, where he began playing the organ. The duke, who had the good sense to be impressed rather than angry, made the boy’s father promise to let him have further music lessons.

So Handel began taking music lessons from Friedrich Wilhelm Zachau (or Zachow), a local church organist and composer. Neither John Mainwaring, Handel’s first biographer, nor Friedrich Chrysander, the editor of Handel’s collected works, thinks much of Zachau as a musician (his music was “innocuous and trifling,” they said, and “never rose to great heights”). But evidently he was better than that – or at least Handel himself