COMPANION TO

Contemporary Musical Thought

Volume 1

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Handel’s Ghost: 
The Composer’s Posthumous Reputation in the Eighteenth Century
ELLEN T. HARRIS

It does not surprise us that composers born three hundred years ago have become part of our popular as well as artistic life. Acknowledged masters from Bach to Beethoven to Brahms dominate our musical culture and our concert halls. For those who accept this situation as perfectly natural, the only remarkable feature is that the phenomenon in music is so modern.

Peter Burkholder has argued that the past one hundred years of music composition and performance have been governed by a historicist tradition that has turned our concert halls into museums (Burkholder 1983, 1984). He argues that Brahms is the first ‘modernist composer’ because he was the first to be ‘obsessed with the musical past’ and with his own ‘place in music history’, and because he sought ‘to emulate the music of those we call the “classical masters”’ (Burkholder 1984: 76–7), and measured the value of his music ‘by the standards of the past’. Of course, for the musical past to play such a role in modern music, it has to be accessible, and William Weber has commented on the changes in musical repertoire that occurred in the eighteenth century and observes that these were responsible for slowly undermining what he calls the ‘contemporaneity of musical taste’ (Weber 1984).

As Burkholder’s use of the term ‘obsession’ implies, this change in repertoire has transformed the role of the composer, who no longer writes for the moment, or, as Weber puts it, to celebrate or amuse, but rather in

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competition with the musical giants of the past for posterity. Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) has discussed this trend in poetry. He argues that ‘the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet’s fear that no proper work remains for him to perform’ (Bloom 1973: 48). Poetry has thus become the art of criticism, or, more properly, of misinterpretation. Poets of succeeding generations only succeed by misreading the poems of their predecessors, thereby giving themselves some creative space. Burkholder follows this line of reasoning in his discussion of Brahms: ‘This kind of dialectic within music approaches a species of criticism, as if Brahms were writing in his music a commentary on his own experience as a musician, or indeed, given his wide knowledge, a rumination on the entire previous tradition of music’ (Burkholder 1984: 79).

Just as Bloom identifies Wordsworth as the first ‘modernist’ poet, Burkholder identifies Brahms as the first modernist composer. Bloom also identifies Milton as the first ‘great inhibitor’ (Bloom 1973: 32). By corollary, George Frideric Handel appears as the first Great Inhibitor in musical composition. His ghost was the first to haunt—to compete with and inhibit—the creative skills of those who followed him.

In general, composers who lived before 1750 did not have to live with the past. A great composer would influence composition primarily through his students for one or at most two generations; then he was forgotten. In 1477 the music theorist Tinctoris could write, ‘Although it seems beyond belief, there does not exist a single piece of music, not composed within the last forty years, that is regarded by the learned as worth hearing’ (cited in Brown 1976: 7). Composers frequently heralded their work as ‘new’, as in Willaert’s *Musica nova* (1559) and Caccini’s *Le nuove musiche* (1602). Of course, this is not to say that composers were unaware of the past. For example, Gregorian chant formed the basis of polyphonic music. For centuries, composers began with the original chant, superimposed a new rhythmic structure on the chosen melodic fragment, and composed countermelodies that would be performed simultaneously. After some time, composers even took polyphonic pieces and treated them as the basis for new composition. This musical process also lies at the heart of many of J.S. Bach’s cantatas, in which a Lutheran chorale melody (already more than a hundred years old) serves as the pre-existent material. In this type of compositional practice, however, the old style is seen neither an impediment nor a hurdle; it is, rather, in Bloom’s words, absorbed into the new.

It was also common practice for composers pre-dating Handel to imitate an older style.¹ This became particularly popular in the seventeenth century,
when the new and old styles were distinguished by such terms as *prima prattica* and *seconda prattica*, or *stile antico* and *stile moderne*. Today we sometimes refer to the older style – which was used especially for sacred music – as the Palestrina style, naming it after the composer whose works are most often taken as models. Where previously the long and unbroken traditions of the Christian Church had been represented in music by the use of pre-existent material, the seventeenth century frequently made this link with the past by using music that was in itself antiquated or anachronistic. This preservation of an older style, however, still did not alter or inhibit modern secular trends. In fact, the new style, the *seconda prattica*, was defined by its separation from the older compositional practice.

It is difficult to say exactly when the term ‘new music’ acquired a pejorative meaning. Artusi’s *The Imperfections of Modern Music* of 1600 may perhaps be the first instance of a trend that has since led to works such as Henry Pleasants’s *The Agony of Modern Music* (1955). Without any doubt, in the period between Artusi and Pleasants, composers became more and more aware of the compositional past. For example, in 1751 Charles Avison not only urged historical awareness as a means towards improving contemporary composition, but also recognized that composers should be writing as much or more for posterity as for the present.

An Improvement of this Kind might be still more easily set on Foot, were there any History of the Lives and Works of the best Composers; together with an Account of their several Schools, and the *characteristic Taste*, and *Manner* of each:- A Subject, though yet untouched, of such extensive Use, that we may reasonably hope it will be the Employment of some future Writer.

Painting has long had an Advantage of this Kind, ... [but] many Professors [i.e. artists] in both Sciences [have] alike employed their Talents in the lowest Branches of their Art, and turned their Views rather to *instant Profit*, than to *future Fame*.

(Avison 1751: 98–9)

By the nineteenth century, composers were actively involved with their predecessors. To take only a few examples, Mendelssohn initiated the rediscovery of Bach’s sacred vocal music; Berlioz studied and edited the music of Gluck; Vaughan–Williams participated in editing the complete works of Purcell; Saint–Saëns edited the complete works of Rameau; and Webern edited the complete works of Isaac. One notes that whereas Mendelssohn and Berlioz were concerned with eighteenth-century masters, Vaughan–Williams focused on a seventeenth-century master, and Webern
on a sixteenth-century master. This helps to pinpoint the origin of the
humanist tradition, for after the past was discovered it quickly grew by
extension backwards. Handel was the first composer whose reputation did
not have to be revived after a period of obscurity.

Although there can be no doubt of Handel’s greatness, the growth of his
reputation in the eighteenth century and beyond did not rest solely on his
compositional skills. Rather, Handel’s continuing posthumous reputation
coincided with, and in some ways reflected and largely depended on, a
number of important societal trends: (1) the deterioration of the patronage
system for composers; (2) the change in the image of the composer from
craftsman to genius; (3) the change in musical repertoire due to the rise
of music publishing and the growth of the middle classes; and (4) a cultural
movement toward neo-classicism in art and architecture, in part as a reaction
to important archaeological discoveries. Handel’s temporal relation to these
trends contributed greatly to his becoming the first Great Inhibitor in
music. Although other composers later played this role, and some of these
were to become even greater inhibitors (Beethoven and Wagner are obvious
examples), Handel was the first, and from 1759 to 1800 the primary if not
the only, composer whose posthumous presence inhibited composers of
successive generations.

Handel was, for example, one of the first composers to break away from
the patronage system, and his independence added to his titanic image.
Before his time, and even during and after his life, composers were fre-
quently thought of as craftsmen. They worked for a patron in much the
same way as a tailor might: they furnished music on demand. Patrons
usually came from the Church or the court, and the composer was generally
in the position of having to please an individual – a prince, a king, or a
cardinal. Thus Handel, before he was thirty-five, worked at various times
and in various capacities for Prince Ferdinando de Medici of Florence;
Cardinals Pamphili, Colonna, and Ottoboni of Rome; the Marquis Ruspoli,
also of Rome; the Elector of Hanover; and Lord Burlington and the Duke
of Chandos in England. After 1720, however, Handel never again worked
directly for a patron, although he accepted commissions and support. He
became an impresario, founded his own operatic companies, and although
he certainly wrote to please his public, he mainly wrote what he pleased.
He had no stable position with its attendant benefits; his livelihood depended
largely on the box-office success of his compositions.

Handel did not, however, merely pander to public taste. If composers
can be thought to compose for patrons, the public, or posterity, Handel can
be seen composing for each, sometimes simultaneously. In a letter of 28

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July 1743, Handel’s primary copyist, Christopher Smith, writes to Lord Shaftesbury that the composer has absolutely rejected a commission from the nobility to compose an opera. He reveals that Handel has chosen instead to write a Te Deum and Jubilate, and he acknowledges that

This I think perfectly well Judg’d to appease and oblige the Court and the Town. . . . But how the Quality will take it that He can compose for Himself and not for them when they offered Him more than ever He had in His life, I am not a judge and could only wish I had not been employed in it either Directly or Indirectly.

(cited in Matthews 1959: 263–4)

Indeed, Handel did not let public opinion govern his composition, and some of his most remarkable works, notably Theodora, were distinctly unpopular during his lifetime. It was clearly with an eye towards posterity and future fame that the composer carefully preserved his manuscripts and left them to Smith in his will. Whenever it was possible for Handel to compose for his patrons, the public and posterity, he did; but he often rejected the first two in favour of the last.

Not only was Handel one of the first composers to break from the patronage system, but he was considered, even in his lifetime, a musical genius rather than a craftsman. Although the concept of a composer as technician, producing on demand, cannot be defended to the exclusion of inspiration and talent in any era (Lowinsky 1964), the composer as craftsman and the composer as genius are, at least to a certain extent, two conflicting perspectives that divide music history at about 1800. Handel became a model of the new aesthetic; his career as well as his music became the stick against which the talents of younger composers could be measured.

In a famous commentary from 1753, for example, Handel is described as a flawed genius who is able to overcome his deficiencies.

Mr Handel is in Music, what his own Dryden was in Poetry; nervous, exalted, and harmonious; but voluminous, and, consequently, not always correct. Their Abilities equal to every Thing; their Execution frequently inferior. Born with Genius capable of soaring the boldest Flights; they have sometimes, to suit the vitiated Taste of the Age they lived in, descended to the lowest. Yet, as both their Excellencies are infinitely more numerous than their Deficiencies, so both their Characters will devolve to latest posterity, not as Models of Perfection, yet glorious Examples of those amazing Powers that actuate the human Soul.

(Avison 1753: 50–1)
On the other hand, Handel's exact contemporary, J.S. Bach, was criticized during and after his life for writing in an artificial manner and for having an excess of art — in other words, for being a craftsman. In 1737 Johann Adolph Scheibe wrote of Bach that

This great man would be the admiration of whole nations if he had more amenity, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art. ... Turgidity has led [him] from the natural to the artificial, and from the lofty to the sombre; ... one admires the onerous labour and uncommon effort – which, however, are mainly employed, since they conflict with nature.

(cited in David and Mendel 1945: 238)

However much one may want to argue with these judgements (and in this century Bach's rigorous aesthetic has earned him the appellation of genius while Handel is sometimes seen as a 'mere' popularizer), they offer an explanation of Handel's posthumous reputation and Bach's relative obscurity during the second half of the eighteenth century. Whereas Bach, the Leipzig Kapellmeister, represented the past by his craftsmanlike approach and his humble position in the patronage system, Handel's persona, his lifestyle, and his music spoke to the future. Indeed, his reputation was evident as early as 1738 when Roubiliac's statue of him was placed in Vauxhall Gardens – an extraordinary happening and, I believe, a first for a living composer. From that time, tributes to Handel's greatness and genius are plentiful; frequently he is equated with Orpheus. It is these judgements, and particularly those that speak of a natural but flawed genius, that form the basis of the critical assessment of his music in the biography by Mainwaring published in 1760 – the year after Handel's death – the first full-length biography and criticism of any composer.3

The merit of Handel's music will be least discerned by the lovers of elegance and correctness. They are shocked with every defect ... while their very character hinders them from entering into those excellencies of a higher nature, in which he so much surpasses all other Musicians: excellencies, which are hardly consistent with a constant regard to those minuter circumstances, on which beauty depends. As taste [or knowledge] ... is of a tender and timid nature, it is apt to consider those bolder strokes and rougher dashes which genius delights in, either as coarse, or as extravagant. However, when it attempts to chastise or correct such passages, it mistakes its province. Art is here not only useless, but dangerous. It may easily destroy the orig-
inanity, tho’ it cannot create elegance; which if it could be had, would be ill purchased at the expense of the other’.

(Mainwaring 1760: 162–4)

This image of Handel is perhaps best represented by the mythology that sprang up surrounding the actual composition of Messiah in twenty-four days.

Handel is supposed to have sequestered himself in his study … ‘barely touching food’, and his servant and the few visitors that were admitted found him alternately weeping or praying, or just staring into eternity…. ‘I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God Himself’, he is said to have declared upon completing the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’.

(Lang 1966: 336)

It matters not whether this story is true or false; what matters is that it was widely disseminated and believed. It represents Handel as a genius in the nineteenth-century sense, as a recipient of inspiration from a spiritual source. Although Handel’s genius was flawed, it was great. It was polished by, but not dependent on, learned art.

The period of Handel’s immediate posterity coincided with the classical revival in the arts that was fuelled by the first important archaeological digs. Herculaneum was rediscovered in 1709; excavations in Pompeii began in 1748. An important expedition in Greece, begun in 1751 by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, led to the book The Antiquities of Athens, the first volume of which was published in 1762. Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s more famous book, Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (A History of the Art of the Ancients), was published in 1764. The imitation of antiquity, or neoclassicism, which derived from these discoveries, had its greatest impact on art and architecture, for in these fields direct models could be copied. In architecture, this led to the pervasive use of classic colonnades. In art, the neo-classical movement supported the increased use of historical and biblical subjects and a great reduction in the use of elaborate Baroque ornamentation in favour of purportedly Grecian simplicity of line.

Although music had no surviving classical models to imitate, it too was affected by the neo-classical movement. As in art, music returned to mythological and biblical subjects; even in Handel’s music there is a marked shift of emphasis in subject matter in the 1730s from relatively recent, historical, and heroic plots to mythological, biblical, and pastoral plots. The most decisive musical change, however, occurred in the music of Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714–87), whose chain of so-called ‘reform’ operas
began in 1762 – the same year as The Antiquities of Athens – and all have mythological subjects – Orpheus (1762), Alceste (1767), Paris and Helen (1770), Iphigenia in Aulide (1774), Armide (1777), and Iphigenia in Tauride (1779).

Music also reacted to the momentum of the archaeological finds by trying to discover its own past. In 1763, the year between The Antiquities of Athens and Winkelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums, John Brown published a Dissertation on ... Poetry and Music in which he discusses music in the ‘savage State’ (Section III), in ancient Greece (Sections V–VIII), among the ancient Hebrews (Section X), and in ancient Rome (Section XI). Only the last forty-eight pages of this 242-page book are devoted to music after ancient Rome and to what modern artists can learn from the classics (Brown 1763). Similarly, Charles Burney begins A General History of Music, From the Earliest Times to the Present Period, which was published in London in four volumes from 1776 to 1789, by discussing the music of ancient Egypt and that of the ancient Hebrews, even though, like his predecessor, he had no music on which to base this discussion. Burney addresses this problem directly:

The subject itself of ancient music is so dark, and writers concerning it are so discordant in their opinions, that every intelligent reader who finds how little there is to be known, has reason to lament that there still remains so much to be said. Indeed, I should have been glad to have waived all discussion about it: for, to say the truth, the study of ancient music is now become the business of an Antiquary more than of a Musician. But in every history of music extant in other languages, the practice has been so constant for the author to make a display of what he knew, and what he did not know concerning ancient music, that it seemed absolutely necessary for me to say something about it, if it were only to prove, that if I have not been more successful in my enquiries than my predecessors, I have not been less diligent.

(Burney 1782: 111)†

Although the historical foundation for musical neo-classicism was, as Burney points out, largely theoretical, it was frequently discussed, in part because it lent a lineage to musical composition that was on a par with the visual arts and literature. When the time came to ‘exhibit’ examples of ancient music, however, it was necessary to take a more pragmatic approach. Thus ‘ancient music’ was frequently defined as music composed in or before the seventeenth century. For example, Charles Avison (1751) writes: ‘By the Ancients are meant, those who lived from the Time of PAL–ESTRINA to the Introduction of modern Operas’ (Avison 1751: 43).
A similar definition was originally used also by The Academy of Ancient Music, an eighteenth-century organization of professional musicians dedicated to the revival and performance of older music. In time, however, this already lenient description of ancient music was further eroded. In a book from 1768 giving ‘The Words of Such pieces as are most usually performed by the Academy of Ancient Music, 2nd ed.,’ the only two composers whose works are listed in separate sections are Henry Purcell and Handel (who had died only nine years before). At this point, the only necessary criterion for being deemed ‘ancient’ in music was, apparently, being dead.

Although the Academy continued to perform until 1792, another group, the Concerts of Ancient Music, had sprung into existence in 1776 with the aim of not performing any music less than twenty years old. By 1785 these concerts had gained the patronage of George III, and it seems safe to assume that the success of this organization helped to undermine the earlier Academy. It also seems likely that the two groups were associated in some way, at the very least by their love for the music of Handel. Both organizations performed his music extensively, and it is probably no coincidence that the last president of the Academy, Dr Samuel Arnold, was also the editor of the first Handel edition (1787–97), which was the first retrospective edition of any composer’s work. Whereas Burney tried to create a classical past for music, these performing groups solved the problem by fiat: they decided by declaration what was ‘ancient music’.

In an archaeological sense, Handel had become an ancient artefact to be treasured, copied, and even worshipped. And this was happening not only in England. Among many landmarks was the first German performance of Messiah in 1772, conducted by Thomas Arne; in 1775 it was conducted by C. P. E. Bach. In the 1780s in Vienna, the Baron van Swieten, an important patron of music, introduced the performance of a number of Handel’s works. In 1788 Mozart participated in these concerts by reorchestrating Handel’s Acis and Galatea; he reorchestrated Messiah in 1789 and the St Cecilia Ode and Alexander’s Feast in 1790.

In Italy there were performances of both Alexander’s Feast and Messiah. In America performances of Handel’s works took place in New York and Boston as early as the 1770s, and in the 1780s the Moravians helped spread the popularity of European choral music in America with performances of Handel and Haydn especially. In 1815 Boston saw the opening concert of the Handel and Haydn Society, a group that is still in existence today.

The Boston Society is but one example of another important cultural trend which emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century towards amateur music-making and a wider music public. The revolutions in France
and America, and important social changes in England, were in part caused by and in part the cause of a significant middle class. Individual members of this class did not have the financial strength to hire or commission a contemporary composer, as aristocratic patrons had done, nor, by and large, did they have access to contemporary compositions in manuscript. Therefore, aided by the enormous growth in music publishing and the birth of many amateur choral societies, the idea of a musical repertoire was born—that is, a group of compositions that could be performed repeatedly in cycles. For example, the Three Choirs Festival, which was organized about 1715, and had at its core the choristers from the cathedrals of Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford, first performed Handel’s Messiah in 1757. According to a history of the organization dating from 1812, ‘it was received . . . with rapturous applause’ and (one assumes because of that) ‘has been repeated at every succeeding meeting of the Three Choirs’ (cited in Hogwood 1984: 245).

Handel’s role as the first Great Inhibitor derived in part from his relation to these various contemporary trends. He was an independent composer who was thought of as a genius rather than a craftsman. As such he stood in the forefront of a change in the conception of what a composer does and was idealized as a model for succeeding generations. He also lived in a period that both rediscovered the glories of ancient Greece and Rome and recreated them in art and architecture. Similarly the musical past was researched as it had never been before, and Handel’s music was heralded as ancient. Finally, the eighteenth century saw the rise of the middle class and the development of a musical public that demanded a musical repertoire to hear and perform. Handel not only had the reputation of greatness, but much of his music was published and easily available.

These attitudes were clear immediately after Handel’s death. In 1763, an Italian violinist in London wrote to a friend in Naples:

First then, madam, you must know that the English, a very few excepted, neither relish nor understand our music, the German manner has almost universally prevailed amongst them; and such is the force of prejudice. that the ponderous harmony of Handel outweighs, by far, with them, the elegant taste of Italian melody. This, Bach [J.C. Bach (1732–95), Johann Sebastian’s son], at first, did not suspect; but finding it, by experience, has prudently changed his style; and now his chorusses roar, his basses thunder, and his airs float in an ocean of symphony. In a word, he has Handelized; and acquired a reputation here.

(Petty 1980: 99)
Four years later, a reviewer wrote of J.C. Bach’s *Carattaco* (an opera composed for London in 1767),

> The masterly stile of the music, and particularly the grandeur of the chorusses, makes it to be wished that Signor Bach may meet with further encouragement, as his genius and judgment seem admirably calculated to reform the present corrupted taste of our modern music, and like a second Handel, once again restore that elegance and perfection we have for some time been strangers to.

(Petty 1980: 115)

Gluck is reported by Michael Kelly, a famous English singer in Vienna, to have worshipped Handel:

> One morning, after I had been singing with him, he said, ‘follow me up stairs, Sir, and I will introduce you to one, whom, all my life, I have made my study and endeavoured to imitate’. I followed him into his bed-room, and, opposite to the head of the bed, saw a full-length picture of Handel, in a rich frame. ‘There, Sir’, said he, ‘is the portrait of the inspired master of our art; when I open my eyes in the morning, I look upon him with reverential awe and acknowledge him as such, and the highest praise is due to your country for having distinguished and cherished his gigantic genius’.

(Kelly 1826: 252)

In 1791 Haydn travelled to London and while there heard the last of the Commemoration concerts, which had begun in 1784 to celebrate (incorrectly as it turned out) the centennial of Handel’s birth on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. William Shield, a contemporary English composer, wrote of this event:

> At this last Abbey Meeting, there was present one auditor, of all men the most capable of appreciating its excellence, the immoral Haydn, then on his first visit to this country; and from it he derived a confirmation of that deep reverence for the mighty genius of Handel, which, to the honour no less of his candid modesty than of his judgment, he was ever prone to avow.

(cited in Hogwood 1984: 243)

Haydn reputedly said to the Italian librettist Giuseppe Carpani

> that when he heard the music of Hendl in London, he was struck as if he had been put back to the beginning of his studies and had known nothing up to that moment. He meditated on every note and drew from those most learned scores the essence of true musical grandeur.

(*ibid.*: 243)
Indeed, upon hearing the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’, he is said to have burst into tears and exclaimed, ‘He is the master of us all!’ (Geiringer 1968: 121). When Haydn’s oratorio, The Creation, was performed in London, a number of English critics agreed with this assessment. One reviewer wrote, on 28 March 1800, ‘It is certainly a fine composition, in every respect worthy of its great author ... and although not equal in grandeur to the divine compositions of the immortal HANDEL, is, nevertheless, on the whole, a very charming production’. Another wrote, ‘It is correctly scientific, for all we know, and certainly not devoid of impressive harmonies; but it breathes no more the sacred inspiration of HANDEL, than KOTZEBUE does of that which immortalized our own SHAKESPEARE!’ (cited in Hogwood 1984: 248).

Mozart, who is quoted as saying, ‘Handel knows better than any of us what will make an effect; when he chooses he strikes like a thunderbolt’ (Hogwood 1984: 247), reorchestrated a number of Handel’s English oratorios, as we have seen. The English, showing premature signs of our twentieth-century craving for authenticity, were hesitant to accept these modifications. After the first English performance in March 1805 of one of these reorchestrations, one reviewer wrote,

We entertain a very high respect for the genius of Mozart, but we also hold the unrivalled powers of Handel in due reverence, and therefore must enter our protest against any such alterations in works that have obtained the sanction of time and of the best musical judges.

(Hogwood 1984: 246–7)

Beethoven is also quoted as affirming Handel’s greatness. To Edward Schulz he commented, ‘Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived. ... I would uncover my head, and kneel down at his tomb!’ (Hogwood 1984: 248). Johann Stumpff records the following partially written conversation he had with the deaf composer:

‘Whom do you consider the greatest composer that ever lived?’; ‘Handel’, was his instantaneous reply; ‘to him I bow the knee’, and he bent one knee to the floor. ‘Mozart?’ I wrote. ‘Mozart’, he continued, is good and admirable’. ‘Yes’, wrote I, ‘who was able to glorify even Handel with his additional accompaniments to The Messiah’. ‘It would have lived without them’, was his answer.

(Forbes 1967: 920)

In 1826, when he finally received his own copy of the Arnold edition of
Handel’s works, Beethoven remarked, ‘I have long wanted them, for Handel is the greatest, the ablest composer that ever lived. I can still learn from him’ (Forbes 1967: 1024).

Throughout the eighteenth century, therefore, and well into the nineteenth, Handel’s music exerted an enormous influence on composers and composition. He was revered, emulated, and perhaps even feared. Composers from J.C. Bach to Mozart and Haydn were unfavourably compared to the older master. Since genius was understood as a natural gift that could not be obtained through study, effort was only seen as an impediment to originality. How could a modern composer compete on these terms? As Harold Bloom writes,

> Ben Jonson has no anxiety as to imitation, for to him (refreshingly) art is *hard work*. But the shadow fell, and with the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime, there came anxiety too, for art was beyond hard work.

(Bloom 1973: 27)

The anxiety Handel engendered is already obvious in the last paragraph of the 1760 Mainwaring biography:

> Little indeed are the hopes of ever equalling, much less of excelling so vast a Proficient in his own way: however, as there are so many avenues to excellence still open, so many paths to glory still untrod, it is hoped that the example of this illustrious Foreigner will rather prove an incentive, than a discouragement to the industry and genius of our own countrymen.

(Mainwaring 1760: 208)

At the end of the eighteenth century, however, Charles Burney admitted privately that in England at least this hope had remained unfulfilled, ‘I dare not say what I have long thought. That it is our reverence for old authors and bigotry to Handel, that has prevented us from keeping pace with the rest of Europe’ (cited in Hogwood 1984: 245).

Handel’s posthumous reputation, the societal and cultural trends that nurtured it, and its importance for generations of composers can be easily documented. For example, John Roberts has written about Gluck’s borrowings from Handel (Roberts 1987); Haydn’s *Creation* also owes an enormous debt to Handel both in its overall shape as well as in specific pieces. Similarly, Beethoven composed variations on ‘See the conqu’ring hero comes’ from Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus*, and his overture *Die Weihe des Hauses* of 1822 is said to have been inspired by Handel. More examples
could be presented from J.C. Bach and Mozart to Mendelssohn and beyond. Influence, imitation, and even inspiration, however, are not evidence of anxiety.

The anxiety that fires creativity is very special, and the quotations given above from Mainwaring and Burney speak rather to the more common type of anxiety that dampens creativity. In his discussion of poets in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom writes, 'My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize . . .' (Bloom 1973: 5). He goes on to identify six types of 'poetic misunderstanding' that allow a creative poet to overcome the power of his predecessor. The music of the mid- and late eighteenth century offers parallel examples of such revisionist processes, which can be discussed without recourse to Bloom's complex terminology.

Bloom identifies the first category as a misreading or deliberate swerving away from the precursor, who is shown to have gone too far in a single direction. This can be found musically in the mid-eighteenth century in the galant and rococo styles that swerve away from Baroque complexity. Bloom's second category represents a completion of the precursor, who is now shown not to have gone far enough. The musical style of Empfindsamkeit in this way takes up the Baroque concept of emotional expression and makes it both more intimate and more volatile. The third category superficially looks like an attempt to humble oneself before the precursor, but actually succeeds in emptying the precursor's work of its original meaning. Thus, Classical counterpoint of the early 1770s appears to return to Baroque models but actually only uses counterpoint as a texture to demarcate sections or enliven whole movements that frequently are in sonata form, thereby stripping Baroque counterpoint of its meaning as a form-generating process. Bloom describes the fourth process, or 'Daemonization', as the reaching out towards a new and heightened level of power and energy in contrast to the implied weakness of the precursor. The increased dynamic range associated with the Mannheim symphonists and the musical Sturm und Drang exemplify this process. The fifth category offers in contrast a self-imposed curtailment of imaginative endowment that separates the poet from the precursor and simultaneously offers a constricted version of the precursor's achievements. It seems to occur musically in the reform-opera tradition and in the use of folk-song both operatically and symphonically. Finally, the sixth category represents the point at which the poet is able to respond directly to the precursor's work without falling into servile imitation; at this stage the strong poet may even appear momentarily to have
written the precursor’s work himself at an earlier period. In music this stage is found in the High Classical style of the 1790s.

Bloom’s categories follow in an implicit chronological order that appears to occur either within the single poet or in a continuously shifting and endless time frame. This is also the case in music, where the six musical revisionary styles tend to follow one another sequentially throughout the period and also appear in that order in the works of single composers. Haydn’s use of the galant style in his Missa brevis in F major from the early 1750s, for example, is followed by his introduction to Empfindsamkeit, which is manifested particularly in his piano sonatas of the 1760s. His flirtation with Classical counterpoint, especially in the Op. 20 quartets of 1772, is then succeeded directly by his Sturm und Drang period, which is particularly well-illustrated in symphonies nos. 45 (1772) and 67 (c. 1778). An ‘enforced simplicity’ can then be found in many of the ‘London’ Symphonies of the 1790s, where folk elements play a dominant role. And the final stage is clearly represented in the two last oratorios of the late 1790s and early 1800s. Similarly, in Mozart’s career one can point to the differing styles of the Singspiel and opera buffa of the late 1760s, the opere serie of the 1770s, the breakthrough of Idomeneo and Entführung in the early 1780s, the ‘daemonization’ in Don Giovanni, the deceptive folk-like simplicity of Die Zauberflöte and the final culmination in the Requiem. Clearly, one could easily devise a similar pattern for Beethoven.

Even more important than the apparent chronological succession of stages implying a grappling with anxiety and influence, however, is the co-existence of a multiplicity of styles in the late eighteenth century that seems to have no historical precedent. Its most obvious parallel occurs between 1890 and 1930, when styles can also be tentatively identified with Bloom’s six revisionist principles. For example, Bloom’s ‘misreading’ can be seen in impressionism, ‘completion’ in serialism, ‘emptying of previous meaning’ in neo-clasicism, ‘daemonization’ in expressionism or primitivism, and ‘enforced simplicity’ in neo-tonality. In both periods, however, the level of anxiety is manifested not simply in one-to-one musical parallels to Bloom’s revisionary processes, but specifically in the multiplicity of co-existing styles and in the clear stylistic shifts evident in the careers of individual composers. Before Haydn, for example, and between 1800 and 1890, it is difficult to name a single composer with similar stylistic disjunctions in his career.5

It is not surprising that the two periods in which this occurs were revolutionary politically as well as musically. Furthermore, the musical ‘revolutions’ of the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries follow a pattern similar to that described by Thomas Kuhn in The Structure of
Scientific Revolutions (Kuhn 1970). In both eras a musically-accepted style or paradigm was rejected, a number of new stylistic ‘solutions’ proposed, and, at least in the eighteenth century, a new stylistic paradigm accepted. The ‘revolution’, or the period of transition between paradigms, can be identified, following Kuhn, by the temporary multiplicity of solutions. Whereas scientific revolutions are sparked by an anomalous research result however, artistic change may well be fuelled, following Bloom, by a build-up of anxiety. In the history of musical style, Bloom’s and Kuhn’s theories interact because the six categories of ‘misreading’ exist most clearly in two ‘revolutionary’ clusters rather than continuously. Considering the potentially fertilizing influence of artistic anxiety, it can be no surprise that the first of these periods follows the death of the first Great Inhibitor, Handel, and that the second begins with the first ‘modernist’, Brahms.

Composers today all work under the shadow of the past, and their anxieties have only grown as the past has expanded. Immediately after Handel’s death ‘ancient music’ was anything more than twenty years old and rarely more than a hundred years old. Today, familiar ‘early music’ stretches back beyond Handel at least to the Renaissance – five centuries. That is, as the modernist period, defined as beginning with the birth of anxious influence, has lengthened in time, the distant past has expanded backwards almost proportionally. Both the expansion of the musical past and the obsession with this past that Burkholder rightly observes in Brahms’s music first began with the impact of Handel’s reputation during the fifty years after his death. Concurrent social and cultural changes, including the growth of archaeology, the neo-classical movement in art and architecture, and the crumbling aristocracy, helped fuel Handel’s overwhelming posthumous recognition, but it was the spirit of Handel’s musical creativity that drove his reputation. Both for musical and historical reasons, therefore, the beginning of the modernist trends in musical composition can be dated to the emergence of Handel’s ghost.6

NOTES

1 For a discussion of early examples see Brown (1982).
2 For a discussion of Handel’s manuscripts and their preservation see Hicks (1985) and King (1967).
3 For further information on Mainwaring’s work see Kivy (1964).
The mid-eighteenth-century period of multiple styles (about 1740–90) is separated by one hundred years from the late nineteenth-century period (about 1890–1930). It could be argued that a similar period occurred earlier, separated by another hundred years (1690–1740), but I believe this represents more of a unilateral style change typical of the belief, still strong, that ‘new is better’. Despite the investigations of the Camerata into the performance of Greek drama, and other such pursuits, there was no generalized preservation or performance of older music at this time that could have caused ‘anxiety’. It would, of course, be ridiculous to argue that before the ‘influence of anxiety’ there was no style change, but rather that in the mid-eighteenth century, anxiety became, for the first time, a prime factor in the process. The multiplicity of approaches, or Bloom’s six ‘misreadings’, at stylistic junctures may be the strongest evidence of this new relation to the past.

This article has undergone a lengthy evolution, during which time I presented various versions of it at the University of Chicago, Carleton College, the University of Nebraska (Lincoln), 1986 Conference of the Midwest American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and the 1987 Meetings of the American Handel Society. I would like to dedicate its publication to the memory of David J. Greenstone, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, who heard its first presentation as a paper and was my best critic.

REFERENCES


