I feel greatly honoured by the invitation to inaugurate this tercentenary conference, which I imagine has come to me because I have been haunting the Handelian scene for rather a long time. This is the third festival celebrating a major Handel anniversary that I have attended. The first was in Cambridge in 1935 under the auspices of Edward Dent, 250 years after the composer’s birth, the second in London for the bicentenary of his death in 1959. The presiding genius on that occasion was the chairman of the Arts Council Music Panel, Anthony Lewis, to whom I should like to pay a special tribute, personal and professional. I first met him during the 1935 festival, when he was to be seen, and heard, playing second oboe in the Cambridge student orchestra. He was also responsible for a memorable performance of the cantata Apollo e Dafne. By 1959 he had established himself as a leading Handelian, chiefly through his revival of Italian cantatas and operas on the BBC Third Programme. In due course he conducted a number of the operas on the stage at Birmingham and later as Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, and published vocal scores of Semele, Imeneo and Athalia. When the committee for organizing this tercentenary festival and conference was formed three years ago, we inevitably voted him into the chair. It is sad that his sudden death a year later prevented him enjoying a series of events to which I know he was greatly looking forward, and which would have fallen aptly just after his seventieth birthday. Many people will remember their debt to him for opening their ears to some of Handel’s greatest works.

The 1935 and 1959 festivals, though they witnessed the revival of much delightful and unfamiliar music, were not accompanied by scholarly conferences. In 1959 there were a few public lectures, embracing Purcell as well as Handel. But though many scholars were gathered together, including some from the German Democratic Republic on their first visit to England since World War II, they did not confer, except informally at parties and over a glass of wine. The present conference is, I think, more comprehensive than any yet devoted to Handel in the English-speaking world. This reflects a
recent acceleration in Handel studies which must be welcome to all of us; it also raises the question why such an event has been so slow in arriving. It seems appropriate therefore that I should take a hard and critical look at Handel scholarship over the last 50 years. I do not think I would be doing a service to Handel – which after all is why we are here – if I were to ignore its controversial aspects.

Until the last few years serious research on Handel lagged far behind that on every other composer of comparable stature, and many lesser figures as well. After the war the great masters of the past, especially in Germany, became the object of ever more thorough investigation, resulting in major monographs, new critical editions and on the whole higher standards of performance. One need only glance at the present state of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven studies – to name four prominent examples – to see the progress made. Handel is not exactly neglected; his works are performed often enough, unfamiliar ones are brought out of storage, and he inspires a copious flow of words, in articles, learned journals and sometimes in books. But most of them either deal with marginal matters or rewarmed old ideas from which all savour has long since boiled away. There are occasional exceptions, but scholarly monographs are rare, the new collected edition progresses slowly and uncertainly, and a high proportion of performances in all countries, especially of the operas, fail to reach an acceptable standard. Above all, a substantial amount of the primary source material is still underexplored.

Several reasons can be advanced for this. In the first place, Handel has been taken for granted. Outside the church, he is the only composer of the Baroque age or earlier whose music has remained continuously before the public since his lifetime. Unlike Bach or Monteverdi he did not need to be rediscovered and reassessed with a fresh eye. The few repertory works, assumed to be the best, acquired the status of institutions through their association with social, political, moral and religious ideas, which were accepted as true attributes of his genius. His position in the musical firmament had been secure for generations: like Jehovah in Samson he remained ‘fixed in his everlasting seat’, and there seemed no reason to disturb him. Of course the stereotypes were false: performing practices based on misunderstandings in the remote past had ossified into traditions. This was equally true of Britain, Germany and the United States, even if the traditions were not necessarily the same. But so firmly did they become bedded in the public consciousness, or sub-consciousness, that even today when so many idols have been overthrown the effort to eradicate them encounters resistance.

Secondly, Handel has suffered from the effects of one of his greatest virtues, his cosmopolitanism. He belongs to no single country. He was born a German and died an Englishman, having on the way assimilated the styles of Italy and France as well. To the Germans he was the one great native