The Case for Handel’s Borrowings: The Judgment of Three Centuries

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In the three centuries since the birth of George Frideric Handel, there have been frequent illusions to and discussions of his practice of borrowing musical materials from himself and from other composers. Many Handel scholars have participated in the analysis of this phenomenon; many others have wished the subject could be banned so that Handel scholarship might concentrate on other matters. Winton Dean has said¹ that much ink has been spilled over Handel’s borrowings; perhaps, rather, too much of the wrong ink has been spilled. In actuality, until Handel scholarship arrives at a solid understanding of what Handel’s borrowings mean as such for our comprehension of his compositional genius, until we face the issue of borrowings as a positive one charged with unique possibilities of probing into a great composer’s style and creative thought processes, and until Handel’s borrowings are studied with the same seriousness as Beethoven’s sketchbooks, Handel scholarship lives in a void of ignorance, suspicion and even embarrassment. Despite the many achievements of Handel research, in the late twentieth century we are still harbouring a subversive discomfort, a puzzlement of judgment, about Handel’s compositional practices, adding controversy to his art and threatening to diminish the stature of his genius.

The purpose of these remarks is to review and evaluate the opinions of others about Handel’s compositional practices. For it is not sufficient, in the tercentenary year, to bury or cover up this issue. We need to clear our minds of the mistaken attitudes of the past, and to begin to see Handel’s musical art in the appropriate and only true context of its own historical time. This context remains largely unknown to musicians and scholars alike, for if it were not, the whole issue of Handel’s borrowings would long since have generated many more studies into his creative genius than we already have.

The origins of Handel’s lifelong habits of composing are as obscure today as they were 200 years ago. Once the early student–teacher relationship with
Zachow in Halle is established, one is left with little more than the guesswork involved in tracing Handel’s growing compositional mastery as it evolved from his experiences in Hamburg with Mattheson and Keiser and the intensive conditioning of his art in Italy. What is certain, however, is that Handel lived on the edge of a vortex of social and intellectual changes, not the least of which were the outpourings of new and often revolutionary ideas challenging traditional concepts of creativity in the literary, visual and musical arts. England in the eighteenth century vibrated with the pursuit of new ideas, and the so-called Age of Enlightenment collided with much that had previously been assumed true and inviolate about artistic purpose and the means to achieve it.

But Handel was a German, and in many ways he typified the temperament of the German Baroque composer. It is well known that to compose music in the Baroque meant working as much as a craftsman as an artist. The concept of originality is rarely found in German writings on music before the end of the Baroque. Rather the composer’s goal was usually to demonstrate what he could achieve through his craft with one or more musical ideas. The centuries-old creative principles of working with pre-existing music, whether in a motet, a parody or paraphrase mass, in variations, as an operatic pasticcio, or other types of adaptations of different composers’ musical materials, was a vital aspect of the compositional art up to the end of the Baroque. It has often been stated that Zachow encouraged Handel to copy the music of other composers in order to formulate his own musical style, and such practices were certainly not unique to Zachow’s teaching. The imitation of previously composed works as an approach to creativity was not, of course, characteristic only of music. In all the arts, constructive principles – creating the new out of models, out of imitations, out of ideas from the distant past or more recent times – were part of the still flourishing humanism linked solidly to the principles found in Greek and Latin guidelines for rhetoric and oratory, which in turn influenced all forms of expressive creativity. But it is the fact that these principles no longer prevailed in Handel’s lifetime that leads us deep into the paradoxical problems faced by the world at large in judging Handel’s stature as a composer.

We do not know why Handel, more than any other composer, adopted a method of composing that often emphasized the craft of reworking, revising, adapting and transcribing musical ideas of his own and others. None of these procedures was new to music, and indeed Handel’s art can be seen as a culmination of these traditional values of compositional craft. But he did make use of these avenues to composing with astonishing frequency. Why this fact has caused so much difficulty for many writers on Handel is in part the result of his dynamic presence in English intellectual and social history, in part of the unique longevity of his influence on English music in the nineteenth century, and in part of the rupture of philosophical and aesthetic