Of the many questions raised by Handel’s penchant for musical borrowing, one has perhaps exercised more minds than any other. In Winton Dean’s words, ‘Why did so fertile a composer need to borrow at all?’

That Handel often used ideas more than once or transferred movements from one of his works to another is not in itself surprising; composers of all periods have practised similar economies, and never were such methods more prevalent than in the first half of the eighteenth century. But the spectacle of a great creative artist conducting regular raids on the stores of his predecessors and contemporaries seems to call for special explanation. Over the years most writers who have dealt with the borrowings have attempted, if only in passing, to dispose of this troublesome issue. An astonishing variety of hypotheses have been put forward, some more cogent than others. To date, however, no single theory has won broad enough acceptance to lay the matter to rest.

The first to broach the subject in print was probably William Crotch, whose countless identifications of Handelian antecedents provided the basis of so much subsequent scholarship. In his *Substance of Several Courses of Lectures on Music* (1831), Crotch observed that ‘in most cases [Handel] merely took ideas, and greatly improved them; but when he introduced the passages entire and unaltered, it must be considered as a quotation of a well known classical author, and not as plagiarism, which results from poverty of invention, and with the hope of escaping detection’.

In fairness it should be noted that the name of Erba, from whom Handel made several wholesale appropriations and who could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as ‘well known’, is absent from Crotch’s famous list of composers laid under contribution.

Friedrich Chrysander focussed instead on the adoption of individual themes. In the first volume of his Handel biography, published in 1858, he declared ‘it was the impulse of his artistic nature to save from oblivion musical ideas that he saw lying half-formed and, not coincidentally, in an alien setting’.

Not content with one explanation,
H. J. Gauntlett advised the readers of *Notes and Queries* the following year that Handel

did these importations from mixed motives. Sometimes, because the music was so beautiful and artistic. At others, because the jewel was splendid but badly set.

. . . Again, he evidently adopts odd and outside music as a foil. . . . And, lastly, no question he felt the necessity of some strong contrast in style as a relief or variety to his own work. Hence the charm of the *Israel in Egypt*; there are so many heads and hands engaged in its composition.  

Yet another possibility was suggested by Sir George Grove in 1882: ‘Handel was a very practical person; he had always a great deal more work to do than he could get through, and as long as he produced the effect he wanted was not at all particular as to the way he managed it’.  

Towards the end of the nineteenth century it was increasingly realized that Handel’s borrowing could be understood only in its proper historical context. This approach may already be seen in Mrs Julian Marshall’s popular biography of 1883. ‘Existing music’, she asserts,

was a huge vocabulary of words and phrases, capable of endless combinations and arrangements to suit different ideas and plans, and it was no more expected of a new composition that it should contain none but original themes, than it would be required of a literary work to contain an original proverb or aphorism in every paragraph. Hitherto, ownership had been acquired or conferred in virtue of treatment, and it was really not till Beethoven’s time that the principle of property in ideas became generally recognized.

For Mrs Marshall, and for many later commentators, contemporary practice fully explained Handel’s behaviour. But others thought his particularly heavy reliance on foreign material required further elucidation. Max Seiffert, in 1907, attributed it to a ‘critical-productive working method’ that Zachow had inculcated in his pupil and that Handel had continued to apply throughout his life, in which new styles and techniques were mastered by reworking outstanding examples.

So strongly had the method, employed since his youth, of critically surveying the surrounding world of art developed into a characteristic feature of Handel’s artistic being, that in the brief intervals of his creative activity he always sought and found in it relief from the work just accomplished and renewal for that about to be undertaken.

The apparent increase in borrowing in Handel’s last years Seiffert saw as a consequence of his switch from opera to oratorio: composing fugues reminded him of his German heritage.

Percy Robinson, after arguing at length that Handel’s contemporaries knew and approved what he was doing, turned briefly to the question of motivation. Like Gauntlett, he posited a procession of unrelated reasons: ‘a desire to display skill in treatment, or an artistic impulse, as Dr. Chrysander suggested, . . . occasionally perhaps lack of time’. He was particularly