

A Comparison of the Stylistic Differences between Bach and Handel

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When one discusses the masters of the Baroque period, two of the most common names to surface are often Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. While both were prominent figures of the late-Baroque style, they also employed a number of compositional elements which illuminated a sense of contrast between one another. To illustrate these differences, this discussion will examine J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2* and Handel's *Concerto Grosso Opus 6, No. 10*. Through these two works, the aim will be to isolate their late-Baroque elements that account for the most significant perceived differences between the compositional styles of these two composers, and reflect upon these findings.

When discussing Bach and Handel in any historical context, it is important to note that while considered contemporaries, according to current historical records, these two composers never actually crossed paths and met in person throughout their lifetimes.<sup>1</sup> This is somewhat surprising considering the interconnected nature of a number of aspects of their lives; they were both born during 1685, in the same region of Germany, and both received much of their musical education upon the organ.<sup>2</sup> They both suffered from visual degeneration and even shared a common oculist who operated upon them both, (and erroneously claimed that they had met).<sup>3</sup> It is widely believed that the two men likely had knowledge of one another's work, but never met for whatever reason (some going as far as to even suspect that Handel avoided Bach over concern he would be challenged on his musicianship; an unverified claim).<sup>4</sup>

In a general sense, one might describe Handel as a type of populist composer, embodying a cosmopolitan attitude towards composition. He was a well-travelled composer that mastered various national styles, and achieved great fame by fulfilling the demands of the public through his operatic works. One might describe Handel as the first composer to utilize the art of

composition within a public sphere. Bach, on the other hand, did not generate the same output of festive, populist driven works that Handel undertook. Totally negating the operatic genre, Bach remained within central Germany and primarily wrote for private court performances with little orientation towards public tastes and needs.<sup>5</sup> Handel has often been described as an extrovert, while Bach an introvert. Handel became skilled at each national style and incorporated it into his catalog, while Bach chose to generate a fusion of their attributes and create his own distinguishable style. This difference has caused certain musicologists such as Manfred Bukofzer to describe the work of Bach as superior in certain contexts,<sup>6</sup> but many would argue that Handel's work was not inferior, but rather different to that of Bach.

The first work to be examined in this discussion is Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2*, which was the second of six instrumental works presented to the margrave of Brandenburg-Schwedt Christian Ludwig, in 1721, but probably composed previously during 1717-1718.<sup>7</sup> Despite the date attached to the publishing of the Brandenburg Concertos, they were very likely not composed in any sequential or chronological order.<sup>8</sup> Upon examination of the score, one notes that the work is composed in the key of F major, and intended for performance with a somewhat unorthodox selection of instruments: trumpet, recorder or flute, oboe, solo violin, strings and continuo.<sup>9</sup> In terms of structure, this piece could be described much like the fifth Brandenburg Concerto that employs the *concerto grosso* form (residing with the Italian tradition of three *fast-slow-fast* movements); consisting of: *allegro*, *andante*, and *allegro assai*. The first and last movements reflect a sense of jubilation, with the intermediary *andante* being more introspective in nature with its violin, oboe, and flute soloists. Through the *concerto grosso* form, two ensembles are also employed; the *ripieno* or *tutti*, which consists of the orchestra, and the solo grouping referred to as the *concertino* (or "little concerto" group). The first movement

employs a skillful use of the *ritornello* in a manner probably inspired by Vivaldi.<sup>10</sup> Both the first and the second reoccurring theme for the *concertino* use the *ritornello*, along with proceeding variations by solo instruments. The second movement scored for three soloists and a continuo in 3/4 meter, omits the *ripieno* and only employs two themes. Being set in D minor, the strings are silent, and with the valve-less trumpet is also omitted (this creates a more introspective aesthetic of intimate chamber music, but could also be due to the fact that this particular instrument could only be played in the original key of F major).<sup>11</sup> The final movement is fugal, and brings forth a faster pace than the previous slower movement. This movement utilizes skillful contrapuntal interplay through the solo instruments, along with a similar returning theme played by the trumpet. In typical Baroque fashion, the continuo (or figured bass) parts are consistent throughout the entire piece, serving as the harmonic foundation, with the valve-less trumpet (or piccolo trumpet in some modern contexts) exuding a *clarino* style that dramatically cuts through the harmonic texture with its high register.

The second work to be examined is Handel's *Concerto Grosso Opus 6, No. 10*, which was part of the Twelve Grand Concertos (HWV 319-330) published in 1739. Scored for violins, cello, strings and continuo, and set in the key of D minor, this work is essentially modeled upon a Baroque dance suite. *Concerto Grosso Op. 6, No. 10* employs six movements which are: *ouverture*, *allegro*, *lento*, *allegro*, *allegro*, and *allegro moderato*. The first movement *ouverture - allegro - lentement* employs a French overture form that uses dotted rhythms similar to those in Handel's famed operas. The second *allegro* movement is in 6/8 time which embodies a more dramatic aesthetic effect, with the fugal section being concluded by the *lentement* passage based upon a variant of the prior stated ideas. The *lento* movement is relatively simplistic, employing a sense of modal harmony and a *sarabande* triple meter inspired dance movement. The following

*allegro* is composed in binary form, and also reminiscent of Baroque allemandes from keyboard suites. The preceding *allegro* is set in D major, and follows the Italian concerto style which also lacks a *ritornello*. The final *allegro moderato* movement is composed once again in binary form and exhibits a *gavotte*-like French folk dance.

When these two works of Bach and Handel are cross-referenced, they both share a number of predominant late-Baroque characteristics upon the surface such the constant use of figured bass parts and similar basic instrumentation, as well as the doctrine of affections.<sup>12</sup> Where they begin to diverge is when the overall structure is examined in greater depth. Like Handel's other *Concerto Grosso* works, *Op. 6, No. 10* exudes a definite influence from Arcangelo Corelli. With this said, unlike Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, Handel's concerto grosso works such as *Op. 6 No. 10* are relegated to this more conservative school of composition, though embodying the dimensions and thematic precision of Vivaldi in certain aspects. According to Bukofzer, this Corellian influence is often strong enough to border on parody,<sup>13</sup> and is in its most potent form throughout Handel's chamber music through his use of running basses and stereotyped harmonic formulas.<sup>14</sup> With this said, Handel still refined the melodic applications and should be also recognized as elevating the *concerto grosso* to the highest form of Baroque entertainment.<sup>15</sup> Handel tended to compose in a traditional manner, while Bach was more focused upon incorporating leaps of innovation within his style. Handel tended to be content to use pre-existing forms as a type of springboard, generating a uniformity that enabled him to extensively borrow from himself in later works.

Bach's works such as his *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2* are demonstrative of his intensive melodic form through complex expressive lines. Handel's *Concerto Grosso Op. 6 No. 10* on the

other hand, employs a broader sense of gestic motives throughout its composition. These works also illustrate ensemble differences. For example, Handel's *concerto grosso* works were appropriate for large ensembles due to their extensive melody quality, while doing the same to Bach's more "intensive" Brandenburg Concertos would lead to a less desirable outcome; clouding their interweaving contrapuntal texture.<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, Handel was less concerned with the complexity of elaboration than Bach was, and more centered about the flow and progression of the musical ideas. It also seems very apparent that Bach had a definite command over counterpoint with a rigid consistency that Handel never attempted to express.

It could be said that Handel's body of work leaned more towards Italian conservatism with a type of idiomatic and restrained violin writing in a *bel canto*-like style. With this said, *Concerto Grosso Opus 6, No. 10* exhibited a form bright and sensuous expression,<sup>17</sup> with simplistic form that almost foreshadowed the developing trends in the proceeding Classical period.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that Bach lacked any conventions of conservatism. While more progressive in form, one might say that he adhered to a strictness relating to polyphonic texture in a similar manner.<sup>19</sup> Bach was much more inspired by the brilliant and instrumental strength of Vivaldi,<sup>20</sup> which the trumpet of this Brandenburg Concerto exudes. The virtuosic skill required for the trumpet segments of the first and third movements have led many to believe that Bach actually wrote them for either Johann Ludwig Schreiber or Gottfried Reiche; both renowned court musicians.<sup>21</sup>

In context, Bach and Handel have definitely solidified their roles within the Baroque period, though through different avenues. Handel achieved his notability through majestic works rooted within a populist vein, while Bach followed a much differing path, opting to create deeply

introspective works rooted in spiritual inspiration that were quite independent of mass appeal and recognition. Despite these differences, both composers were masters of their own artistic domains, with Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2* and Handel's *Concerto Grosso Opus 6, No. 10* being excellent examples of their abilities. Perhaps Bukofzer summarized it best by paradoxically stating that Bach and Handel were indeed equals, only when they were incomparable.<sup>22</sup>

## Footnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Van Til, Marian. *Handel: A Music Lover's Guide to His Life, His Faith, & the Development of the Messiah, & His Other Oratorios*. Wordpower Publishing. Youngstown, New York. 2007. P. 70.
- <sup>2</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 343.
- <sup>3</sup> Kassler, Michael (Editor). *The English Bach Awakening: Know of Bach and his Music in England 1750-1830*. Ashgate Publishing. Burlington, Vermont. 2004. P. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Van Til, Marian. *Handel: A Music Lover's Guide to His Life, His Faith, & the Development of the Messiah, & His Other Oratorios*. Wordpower Publishing. Youngstown, New York. 2007. P. 70.
- <sup>5</sup> Wolff, Christoph. *Bach*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1991. P. 74
- <sup>6</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 346.
- <sup>7</sup> Rust, Wilhelm (Editor). Bach, Johann Sebastian. *The Six Brandenburg Concertos: BWV 1046-1051*. Dover Publications. Mineola, New York. 1997. P. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Maunder, Richard. *The Scoring of Baroque Concertos*. The Boydell Press. Rochester, New York. 2004. P. 107.
- <sup>9</sup> Rust, Wilhelm (Editor). Bach, Johann Sebastian. *The Six Brandenburg Concertos: BWV 1046-1051*. Dover Publications. Mineola, New York. 1997. P. 29.
- <sup>10</sup> Randel, Don (Editor). *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1986. P. 199.
- <sup>11</sup> Roeder, Michael. *A History of the Concerto*. Amadeus Press. Portland, Oregon. 1994. P. 88.
- <sup>13</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 321.
- <sup>14</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 342.
- <sup>15</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 343.
- <sup>16</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 348.
- <sup>17</sup> Rust, Wilhelm (Editor). Bach, Johann Sebastian. *The Six Brandenburg Concertos: BWV 1046-1051*. Dover Publications. Mineola, New York. 1997. P. 65
- <sup>18</sup> Rust, Wilhelm (Editor). Bach, Johann Sebastian. *The Six Brandenburg Concertos: BWV 1046-1051*. Dover Publications. Mineola, New York. 1997. P. 68.
- <sup>19</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 348.
- <sup>20</sup> Rust, Wilhelm (Editor). Bach, Johann Sebastian. *The Six Brandenburg Concertos: BWV 1046-1051*. Dover Publications. Mineola, New York. 1997. P. 65.



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<sup>21</sup> Geck, Martin. *Bach: His Life and Work*. Harcourt Books. Orlando, Florida. 2004. P. 553.

<sup>22</sup> Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 349.