

Handel loved Britain – but that doesn't mean we have to love him back

By Jessica Duchon

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Hallelujah! 2009 marks the 250th anniversary of Georg Friedrich Handel's death. In the UK, which has produced perhaps five musical geniuses in 350 years, the domicile of this German giant in London from 1712 is taken as something of a national triumph; he's been deified ever since. To question his supremacy is to blaspheme against three centuries of opinion. But does his music deserve such status?

Compare him with JS Bach, his contemporary and antithesis, who signed his works "Soli Deo Gloria" – "for the glory of God alone". Bach's job as kappelmeister at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig gave him the freedom to compose according to the truths of his own soul. Handel went commercial. He travelled widely, hobnobbed and wheeled and dealt. To please the wealthy, the powerful and the masses, he wrote for maximum impact and maximum income. Had he lived in the 1980s, his chief rival could have been Andrew Lloyd Webber.

His commercial instinct was first-rate. When the young Gluck asked his advice on a new stage work, Handel allegedly replied: "You have taken too much trouble over your opera. Here in England that is a mere waste of time. What the English like is something they can beat time to, something that hits them straight on the drum of the ear." Later, Mozart cottoned on: "Handel understands effect better than any of us," he wrote.

Handel was prolific. At times, he was paid to churn out multiple operas, at others he ran his own operatic seasons (at a huge loss). So he cut corners, recycled and borrowed from other composers. "He takes other men's pebbles and polishes them into diamonds," gasped the composer William Boyce.

Many of his operas' plots are impossibly convoluted, their stop-start action carried forward in a plodding succession of recitatives and "da capo" arias that turn up in a variety of operas, with different words. Occasionally, a gifted director will work their magic – such as David McVicar's *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne. But in lesser hands these operas can feel interminable, and today they are regarded as sacred, so cuts are frowned upon.

Our worshipping at the shrine of baroque potboilers is misplaced; that attitude was invented in another era, namely by Wagner, for Wagner. In Handel's time, business meetings, illicit trysts and so on took place in the theatre throughout; when you went to the opera, it wasn't for the music. Though you could – unlike now – enjoy throwing the odd vegetable.

Handel wrote stirring choruses, damn good tunes and enough instrumental pieces to occupy music students for centuries. But did he compose anything that has the intense, sublime, genuine spirituality of Bach's St Matthew Passion? Where can we find the degree of perception and compassion Mozart showed in Don Giovanni? And Handel's pleasant chamber and orchestral works are reduced to muzak when you encounter Beethoven's.

Beethoven said: "Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived." He was wrong: he deserved that epithet himself. Handel can't hold a candle to Bach, let alone Beethoven. A one-man baroque-and-roll hit factory, he compromised his art by selling out. Even if he did move to Britain.

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