

Face to Face with Handel

A Tireless Battler for Music

(By Bolton Woods.)

MOST of us know that the father of Handel was sternly opposed to a musical life for his son, George Frederick, and it is easy to condemn him on this account. The old man roundly declared that music was "an elegant art and a fine amusement," yet, if considered as an occupation, it had little dignity as having for its subject nothing better than "mere pleasure and entertainment." World-wide celebrations have started, in anniversary of his birth 250 years ago.

In his life of Handel, however, Abby Williams points out that "no doubt old Handel was not far wrong in thus condemning music from the point of view of a man living in a small German town, and knowing nothing of the great side of the art."

At that time, the town-musicians were often of a low class, who subsisted largely by "piping before the doors" of the inhabitants. Organists and cantors were, with few exceptions, poorly paid, and therefore thought little of, for the efforts of the Bach family to raise the position of their art would scarcely have had effect as yet in a town so far from Thuringia as Halle. German opera was not yet invented, and in Italian opera one would see only the fashionable amusements of the wealthy, carried out by foreign hirelings. The father, wishing to raise his son in the social scale, did all in his power to quench this terrible (musical) trait in his character.

Handel, as a boy, was prevented from going to any place where music was performed. All instruments were banished from the house, and the boy was forbidden to touch them or to enter any house where "such kind of furniture" was in use. The case appeared so desperate that someone suggested cutting off his fingers. But the boy was, at any rate, bound to hear music. Chorales were played every evening on the tower of the Liebrauen Church; the chorale and cantata would be heard by him when attending divine worship; and the father could not stop the music, which at Halle was weekly performed on the streets by choirs and church musicians.

"MOST SUPERB IN HISTORY"

But music, like murder, will out; and all the barber-surgeons in Europe could no more prevent George Frederick Handel from becoming a musician than Canute could keep the waves back. Here was one of iron courage and determination who triumphed over every obstacle, and became, in the words of John F. Runeeman, "by far the most superb personage one meets in the history of music." No description could be more apt than that.

If, as Cicero wrote, the countenance is the index of the mind, a study of Handel's portraits would be of considerable assistance in making some estimate of his character. It is remarkable, however, how great is the variation in the master's physiognomy, as it was painted by his contemporaries. Sir John Hawkins, who knew

Handel, made mention of the fact that "few pictures of him are to any extent tolerable likenesses." There are innumerable busts and portraits; but many of them might be—so far as their dissimilarity is concerned—of entirely different people. Thomas Hudson, who painted Handel frequently, would seem to have been more successful than many of his portrait-painting colleagues, in putting on canvas some of the characteristics which we know the composer of "Messiah" possessed.

One delineation in particular—an engraving made from one of Hudson's portraits—seems to reflect the real Handel. It is the picture showing the master seated, his figure very plump, the right arm posed in a rather aggressive fashion on the thigh, the left hand holding a piece of music, and the expression of countenance revealing that combination of dominance, cock-sureness, sly humour and irascibility which made Handel the man he was. To the outer eye, Handel was no elegant spectacle. According to Charles Burney, he was extremely fat and, having bowed legs, waddled as he walked. Both his face and his hands were heavy with fat; and, when he played the organ or the harpsichord, it was difficult, Dr. Burney adds, to make out the fingers or to distinguish the movement of them.

PERSONAL PECULIARITIES

It must have been an impressive, as well as a diverting spectacle, when Handel walked down the street. His gait suggested the rolling of a vessel in a heavy sea; and as he walked he also talked. This habit of conversing with himself grew upon Handel with advancing years; and, as he used his voice with the energy with which he used every other faculty, his opinions of men and things were offered to the world with distinct, and rather embarrassing, freedom. Moreover, as Borowski reminds us, Handel's conversation, either with himself or with his friends, was strange and peculiar; for although he lived in England for so many years, he was never able to master the intricacies of its language. His speech, therefore, was made up of very broken English mixed with frequent recourse to French, German and Italian. The age in which he lived also provided him with a copious supply of imprecations, which were current commonplaces of the speech of society.

Handel was what most abnormally fat people are not—he was extraordinarily energetic. If he had



achieved nothing else but to compose the mass of music he left us, he would have done as much as two average composers. But he managed opera houses and opera companies, travelling all over Europe to obtain artistry for them; and for years he fought innumerable enemies in the British aristocracy, never admitting defeat, becoming bankrupt twice, twice paying his debts in full, and leaving a fortune of £20,000 when he died.

To achieve what he achieved meant unceasing toil; it meant the deprivation of exercise, diversion, even sleep. His notes were driven on to the pages of his score all day, late at night, and often when the dawn made the candle at Handel's side look wan and pale. Nature may have taken her time in calling him to account for the infraction of her laws, but she made reprisals. Diagnosis, as a science, was in its swaddling clothes in the 18th century, as the following incident shows.

When, about 1735, Handel called in his doctor to explain various aches and pains that were tormenting him, the man of science, having drawn off some blood from the corpulent person of the composer, with the lancet which he kept in his pocket with his snuff and handkerchief, gravely pronounced the case to be rheumatism. It was an awkward time in which to be sick, for Handel had an opera house on his hands, and a company in it for which he had to write operas, as well as to attend to its managing. Moreover, he had been putting up a terrific fight against his rivals, who were doing their best to ruin him.

DECLINING HEALTH

Perhaps the composer knew better than his doctor, that what he needed most was rest. His right side was so racked with pain that to play on the organ or the harpsichord was agony for him. He was beginning to suffer from lack of sleep and worry. It was high time to do something for the "rheumatism," and the composer betook himself to one of the English watering places. A short period of rest and relaxation set up the great man, and he went back to London more filled than ever with the fever and fury of fight. But soon nature began again with her reminders that the wages of intemperance—the intemperance of overwork and lack of sleep—were about to fall due again. The pain came back, but paralysis came with it.