



- Clarinet Anthology
- Previous ClarinetFest Presentations
- Electronic Archived Issues
- Clarinet Journal Back Issues
- Links

## Handel and the Clarinet

R. B. Chatwin

*Galpin Society Journal*, March 1950

Used by permission.

It has often been stated that Handel did not write for the clarinet, but several well-known authors have expressed the opinion that certain parts composed by him were intended for this instrument. The evidence available to support this view is contradictory, and these notes are the result of an attempt to collect together and examine some relevant points of interest.

Handel may have intended that a clarinet (or clarinets) should be used in the following three works:

1. The opera *Tamerlane*, composed and first produced in 1724;
2. The opera *Riccardo Primo*, composed and first produced in 1727;
3. A score in three parts headed *Overture*, MS 30.H.14, pp. 17-23, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. This is undated.

The clarinet was probably invented between 1700 and 1707. Scarcely anything is known to have been composed for it until about 1740 but there is evidence to show that between 1720 and 1730 it was beginning to come into use on the Continent.

It is therefore not impossible that clarinets could have been available when *Tamerlane* was first produced and also when *chalumeaux* were indicated in *Riccardo Primo*, the latter being of interest because this word may mean clarinets. In connection with the Fitzwilliam *Overture*, it is particularly interesting to recall a newspaper announcement<sup>1</sup> of a Dublin concert of 1742, when solos on a clarinet and on a *shalamo* were played as separate items on the programme.

### Tamerlane

R. A. Streatfeild, in his well-known book *Handel*<sup>2</sup>, says: '*Tamerlane* affords an instance of Handel's employment of the clarinet.... In the autograph, the pastoral air "Par che mi nasca ..." is accompanied by two *cornetti*, but in one of Smith's copies the *cornetti* are replaced by *clar et clarin 1 et 2*. Possibly some German musicians may have brought over specimens of the new instrument, and Handel, always ready for new experiments in orchestration, gave them a trial.' In *The Musical Antiquary* of 1911, Streatfeild goes so far as to remark that although Handel had originally assigned some parts in this opera to *cornetti*, he had sanctioned the alternative use of clarinets when the opera was first produced in 1724, and he adds: 'As these parts are not the kind that would be given to the clarion, it is evident the clarinet was used by Handel.'

Streatfeild was not the first to suggest that Handel made use of the clarinet. Schoelcher, in the appendix to his *Life of Handel*<sup>3</sup> (1857), mentions that Lacy, responsible for the production of some of Handel's operas at Covent Garden *circa* 1830, found in the original MS that the air 'Par che mi nasca' has for the principal part of its accompaniment '*cornetti 1 et 2*', which in Smith's copy, he said, were replaced by *clar et clarin 1 et 2*. Schoelcher remarks that these parts could only be played by hautboys or clarinets, and adds: 'Certainly the *clar et clarin* of Smith's copy is only an abbreviation for *clarinettes*.'

The only transcription of *Tamerlane* known to give an indication for these particular parts is in the Granville collection of the British Museum<sup>4</sup>; in this, the parts are marked *Clar 1* and *Clar 2*. No trace can be found of a transcription with the words given by Streatfeild and Schoelcher in the same form and spelling, and one must

therefore presume that this is the MS to which they referred. It is considered to be in the handwriting of Smith, Handel's amanuensis; but it is neither signed nor dated. The date given in the British Museum Catalogue of MSS is 1724, but it is understood that when fixing this date it was assumed that Smith always made his copies when the work was first produced; *Tamerlane* was revived over and over again and other copies must obviously have been needed. Another point relevant to the date of this particular MS is that it is not one of those which Smith presented to George III; consequently it may have been especially copied for Granville, who survived Handel for some years, at a time when the clarinet had been given a permanent place in the London opera orchestra.

Although Streatfeild thinks that these parts would not be given to trumpets, it has been maintained that skilled *clarino* players of that time could have played them; it is, however, extremely improbable that two trumpets would have been used as an accompaniment for a vocal part of this kind. It seems that Handel originally intended to use *cornetti* (as his autograph shows); since players could not be found or perhaps they were not good enough - the parts were played by the violins, as shown in the printed score and in the other transcriptions. Later, perhaps between 1760 and 1770 when the opera was revived again, clarinets were available and were used. Smith, then making a transcription and being aware of the change, would make the alteration; yet it is very unlikely he would do so unless he knew that Handel had wished to authorize the use of clarinets.

Dr. Burney, writing about John Christian Bach's opera *Orione*, when it was first produced in 1763<sup>5</sup>, remarked that 'clarinets were then being used for the first time in our opera orchestra'. The value of this statement is considerably lessened by the knowledge that clarinets were probably used in Arne's *Artaxerxes* (1762) and (on the stage) in his *Thomas and Sally* (1760); perhaps he meant as *regular* members of the orchestra? Curiously enough he mentions he had never seen a full score of *Tamerlane*, but if clarinets had been used as early as 1724 in this opera, he would no doubt have known about it.

Riccardo Primo

Schoelcher was perhaps the first writer to mention that in the Handel autograph MS of this opera there were parts headed by the word *Chaloumeaux*. He remarks that as these instruments were not available when Lacy revived the opera in about 1830, clarinets were used instead.

This autograph is preserved in the British Museum<sup>6</sup>. On page 109, there is a passage headed *Chaloumeaux*, and this is evidently the indication referred to by Schoelcher.

The autograph is incomplete; in fact it appears to be a series of sketches rather than the complete score. The words which the *chaloumeaux* accompany are 'Quell' innocente afflitto ...'. Neither these words nor any mention of these instruments appear in the early printed editions and likewise they are not in the transcriptions. In the complete editions--but missing from the autograph--is an air 'Quando non credo ...' and here the first few bars of the accompaniment are very similar to the *chaloumeaux* parts, although the indication given is now *hautboys*. It may be suggested that Handel used the word *chaloumeaux* to indicate *hautboys*, but this is unlikely as he often used the latter word in his scores. Parts for a *chalumeau* (spelled also *shalamo*, *scialmo*, etc.) are to be found in twenty or more surviving scores, by well-known composers of the early eighteenth century; but although there is a not inconsiderable amount of information about it in contemporary music literature, it is impossible to say with certainty what instrument was intended.

One suggestion, first made by Curt Sachs, is that *chalumeau* was an early name for the clarinet; this would overcome many difficulties, but why was the range of notes written for it always limited to a twelfth, and why were the *chalumeau* and the clarinet always mentioned as separate, distinct instruments?

A second suggestion is that the *chalumeau* was a single reed instrument with a compass limited to about a twelfth, as described by Diderot<sup>7</sup> in about 1750 and as given an established place in music reference books by Victor Mahillon<sup>8</sup> in about 1880. If the latter's able and ingenious explanation is correct, at least three different sizes would be required: the smallest only about 10" long for some works by Hasse and Telemann and the largest probably over 3' long for some works by Graupner. But as the *chalumeau* was much in use c. 1730, much more so we believe than the clarinet, how is it that this new single-reed instrument was not more prominently described? And why have none of the smallest and largest sizes survived?

A third suggestion is that the *chalumeau* was a double-reed instrument--as H. C. Koch<sup>9</sup> and other writers have described it. It cannot have been the hautboy or the ordinary schalmey, as they are often mentioned together with the *chalumeau*, but several families of double-reed instruments were made in sizes that would cover the range required: from C up to c<sup>'''</sup> (and in one case to f<sup>'''</sup>).

The *chalumeau* parts in *Riccardo Primo* extend in solo passages from d<sup>♯</sup> to g<sup>''</sup>, which seems to imply that either the second or third suggestion is correct, but after the direction 'Tutti: V. et Chal. I.', a compass d<sup>♯</sup> to c<sup>'''</sup> is required, when the first or third suggestion is indicated. Perhaps further research may elucidate the contradictory evidence which at present makes a correct definition of a chalumeau impossible.

The Fitzwilliam Overture

This score is in three parts, headed:

*Clarinet 1.*  
*Clarinet 2.*  
*Corno di Caccia.*

According to the opinions of several Handel experts, it is undoubtedly an autograph Handel MS. In his notes in the catalogue of music at the Fitzwilliam Museum<sup>10</sup>, Dr. A. H. Mann, the well-known authority on Handel, suggested that these parts are a section only of the orchestration of an overture, and that string parts, which have probably existed, are now missing. On the other hand, a well-known authority on scores of this period has made a careful examination of the score and has given an opinion that the existence of other parts is very unlikely. Had such parts existed, there would have been some rest bars in the wind parts, whereas the three parts are musically complete as they now stand. The word *overture* certainly suggests a larger combination of instruments, but in Handel's time this word had not attained the rather exact significance that was given to it a little later.

Here seems to be a definite instance of the use of the clarinet by Handel. Streatfeild and others have supported this view, but some writers have firmly maintained that the word *clarinet* in scores composed before about 1770 was used to indicate high pitch trumpets. The opinions of experts in orchestration and players of high trumpet parts agree that, although it is possible these *clarinet* parts could have been played by exceptionally skilled trumpet players, it is very unlikely that two trumpet type instruments would be used together in such a very fully written score.

Unfortunately, this MS is not dated. Dr. Mann estimated that it was written in about 1740, but he does not give his reasons. Bound in the same volume are six pages of the well-known concerto in D, No. 5 of the Twelve Grand Concertos, also used as the *Overture to St. Cecilia's Day*; page 12 of this MS bears the signature 'G. F. Handel, Oct. 10, 1739'. A comparison between the two scores shows that the music writing is in many points similar, but Handel's writing retains this similarity during many years; no clue as to the date has come from a study of the style of the two works, as their nature is so different. So it must be concluded that Dr. Mann when deciding upon this date was influenced to a great extent by his intimate knowledge of the composer's life and work; present-day students of Handel have agreed that this date must be approximately correct.

If the first two parts of this score were intended for clarinets, it is difficult to decide what kind of instruments were used. Played as written, on C clarinets, both the *b'* natural and the *c"#* were constantly required. According to contemporary fingering tables, *b'* natural could only be obtained on a 2-keyed clarinet by fingering *c"* natural and then dropping the note a semitone with the lips. The same tables omit any fingering for *c"#*. It is, however, possible that the speaker key-hole might have been tuned to give *b'* natural instead of *b'* flat as on the Denner 2-keyed instrument (before the War at Munich <sup>11</sup>; but *c"#* could only have been attempted by 'half-holing' and the result would hardly have inspired Handel to write for the instrument. It must therefore be presumed that if C clarinets were intended, 3-keyed instruments were used. The third key, besides giving the *b'* natural, would be used to get *c"#* by closing it when *c"* natural was fingered; the note thus obtained, if not exact, might be capable of being played in tune.

If C clarinets were intended, it is strange that Handel should have chosen the key of D major, which cannot have been a good key on any of the early type clarinets. It may therefore be possible that these parts were written for D clarinets. If D clarinets were then in use, their players would doubtless be accustomed to transpose at sight; and finding themselves playing in C major, the above-mentioned difficulties would be reduced to a minimum.

There can be no doubt that Handel knew the clarinet, and, as we see from these three scores, he was interested in trying it out (or in one case a rather different instrument, the *chalumeau*--whatever that may have been). More than that we cannot say unless fresh evidence is discovered. Handel's use of the clarinet is not important, but could a more conclusive explanation be found as to his intentions with regard to these parts, some advance might be made towards the clarification of this rather vague period in the history of wind instruments.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Dublin Mercury* (April 27th to May 11th, 1742).
- <sup>2</sup> R. A. Streatfeild, *Handel* (2nd ed. 1910).
- <sup>3</sup> V. Schoelcher, *Life of Handel* (1857).
- <sup>4</sup> British Museum MS: Eg. 2920, Vol. XI, ff. 1-110 (1724 ?).
- <sup>5</sup> C. Burney, *A General History of Music ...* (1789), Vol. IV, p. 481.
- <sup>6</sup> British Museum, MS: RM, 20.c.2, ff. 1-146 (1727).
- <sup>7</sup> Diderot & d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie* (1753), Vol. 3.
- <sup>8</sup> R. V. Mahillon, *Cat. Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire de Bruxelles* (1880), Vol. I, p. 210, etc.
- <sup>9</sup> H. C. Koch, *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1802), art. Schalmey; cf. art. Chalumeau in *La Grande Encyclopedie* (1887-1902).
- <sup>10</sup> J. A. Fuller-Maitland and A. H. Mann, *Catalogue of the Music in the Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge

(1893).

11. Bierdimpfl, *Cat. Nationalmuseums München* (1883), No. 20 (according to information received in 1939).