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Handel's Clarinet

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DID Handel really write for the clarinet? This question has drawn considerable attention in recent years, yet the evidence and arguments cannot be considered entirely conclusive.¹ Now, unexpectedly in an early American source, we find Handel's name again linked with the clarinet. Once more the evidence is controversial; but the gradual accumulation of bits and pieces may eventually solve the puzzle.

The piece in question, a trio for two unspecified trebles and bass, occurs twice in *Silas Dickinson's Book*, a manuscript collection of fingering charts and popular tunes relating from about 1800.² On page 35 we find "Handle's Clarinet", two treble parts together, in the key of D; the bass part in C [!] follows on page 55. Later, on page 93, we find a score of all three parts together, transposed to the key of C, and with the title corrected (see opposite). This second version contains an upbeat not found in the first version, and there are other minor variants that make it slightly more interesting. For harmony teachers it should be noted that the fine parallels in bar two occur in both versions.

Dr. J. M. Coopersmith has kindly searched his monumental thematic catalogue of Handel's works³ and reports no traces of this piece. He finds the tune not particularly Handelian. To me it immediately recalled the *Beggars' Opera*: compare bars 3-4 with the second phrase of "Why, how now, Madam Flirt"; and the semiquaver figure just after the double bar somewhat resembles the march from *Rinaldo*, again used in the *Beggars' Opera* as "Let us take the road". Almost identical turns occur in the march mentioned below and in a collection of pieces of this sort, *Warlike Musick* (London, ca. 1760).⁴ But these specific resemblances merely echo generic martial flourishes of the time. No more positive identification of "Handle's Clarinet" has yet appeared.

Handel would have been pleased to know what a dominant figure he cut in the New World. In *Silas Dickinson's Book* the only composer mentioned prominently is Handel. In addition to "Handle's Clarinet" we find other pieces by the same composer, such as "Handle's Fire Musick" (p. 39) and "Handle's March" (p. 123), the latter an arrangement from "See the conqu'ring hero comes" (*Judas Maccabeus*). Even more inaccurate is the "March in Ship [sic] Scipio" (p. 121), titled without composer, though recognizable despite mutilations as Handel's *Scipione*.

As for the clarinet piece itself, the chief point of interest concerns its trumpeting style. Handel's known pieces for clarinet, notably the Sonata for Two Clarinets and Horn⁵ use many trumpet figures, but at the same time require a gamut unavailable on the natural trumpet. The case in "Handle's Clarinet" is similar both in the trio texture and the handling of the upper parts: despite the trumpet atmosphere, the *a'* of bar 2 and the leading tones of bar 4 would seem to eliminate trumpets from consideration for the second part, at least.

Actually, however, the presence of *a'* and *b'* in the second part does not firmly exclude the trumpet.⁶ These "lipped" notes not in the harmonic series can occasionally be found in genuine trumpet music. The second trumpet part of a *March royale* in the Philidor collection contains several uses of *b'*, and the *Capriccio detto del Carducci* in Fantini's trumpet method⁷ contains the identical *g'-a'-g'* triplet figure found in "Handle's Clarinet". Thus, Silas Dickinson's new material furnishes only new points of obfuscation. In the previous cases, parts seemingly for trumpets may have been played by clarinets; now, a piece titled for clarinets may actually have been played by trumpets - a new and perverse counterpoint to the question of clarinets in Handel.

Notes

- [1.](#) See R. B. Chatwin, "Handel and the Clarinet", *Galpin Society Journal*, III (1950), pp. 3-8.
- [2.](#) New York Public Library *MYR, Mus. Res. Amer.
- [3.](#) J. M. Coopersmith, "A Thematic Index of the Printed Works of Georg Friedrich Handel", vols. II-XII of unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 1932.
- [4.](#) Cited by Caldwell Titcomb, "Baroque Court and Military Trumpets and Kettledrums: Technique and Music", *Galpin Society Journal*, IX (1956), p. 78.
- [5.](#) G. F. Händel, *Sonata for Two Clarinets and Horn*, ed. J. M. Coopersmith and Jan La Rue. New York: Mercury Music, 1950.
- [6.](#) Example 2 in Caldwell Titcomb's "Carrousel Music at the Court of Louis XIV", *Essays on Music in Honour of Archibald Thompson Davison* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957) p. 211.
- [7.](#) Girolamo Fantini, *Modo per Imparare a sonare di Tromba* (Frankfort, 1683; facs. reprint: Milano, 1934) p. 46.