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Dating – How close can we get?

Handel and paper studies

In the course of working on music from the first half of the century, and in particular Handel's music, I have found the need to develop some sort of expertise in dealing with 18th-century paper as a useful means of determining dates of composition and performance. However, the study of paper has always been, for me, an accidental necessity to the study of music rather than an end in itself: I came to study paper because I needed to. So before dealing with paper studies two prior questions deserve brief consideration – 'Why do we need to worry about dates at all?' and 'What methods of assigning dates to particular sources are available to us?'

The answers to the first question can conveniently be considered in terms of the two broad frameworks in which music itself is studied: the historical and the aesthetic/analytical. The first time that I came up against the need to give some chronological placing to undated works was in connection with some of Handel's music for the Chapel Royal. One of the best general catalogues of Handel sources available in the mid-1970s was that provided by W. C. Smith for Handel: A Symposium (ed. Gerald Abraham, 1954). Under the entries for 'Te Deums', the Caroline Te Deum was ascribed to c.1714, with the mention that Arnold had given the rather dubious date of 1737 to it in his edition. The autograph of the work is not dated by Handel, but he did name some solo singers on the autograph and this information gave the beginnings of a chronological framework, though over a rather large date-range. The next step was to match the papers of the autographs with any others that Handel had used at some dateable time between 1714 and 1737. To cut a long story short, it turned out that the Caroline Te Deum had seen at least two separate revivals and that Handel had in fact performed it as far apart in time as 1714 and 1749. In the end it was possible to match internal evidence from the autograph with documentary material and with the results of a preliminary paper survey of all of Handel's autographs in order

to produce plausible performance dates - that is, to match the music to particular occasions.

Going beyond the point where we want to fit particular pieces of music into historical 'slots', there is an important crossover point between historical and aesthetic/analytical studies. If we want to trace, for example, developments in a composer's style we must work within the correct historical framework. You will find more than a few references to 'self-borrowings' in earlier Handelian literature that place the pieces concerned in the wrong order. To take one instance that should be a dead issue by now, it is quite clear that some material in Handel's Op.3 Concertos and Op.5 Trio Sonatas is taken directly from overtures to the 'Chandos Anthems'. Yet at one time one could find it seriously being argued that the 'Chandos' overtures were based on previous early trio sonatas that were later published as Op.5.

Obviously if you want to trace, for example, the development of Handel's style between 1720 and 1727, the first thing that you have to do is to line up all of the music in the right order, and to that end correct dating is important. Put that way, the final position seems simple. However, the basic complication encountered in Handel's music is the result of the source-confusion produced by the typical organic metamorphosis of his works from initial composition to first performance and then to subsequent revivals. In the case of Handel's operas or oratorios there are normally a fair number of sources whose contents superficially do not agree - a composition autograph, a conducting score or two incorporating versions from several different periods, word-books from theatre performances and secondary manuscripts derived from primary sources at various stages of their development. Here historical and aesthetic/analytical considerations cross over again. Starting with the assumption of, for example, the artistic integrity of the versions of Rinaldo that Handel produced in 1711, 1717 and 1731, the first task is to sort out what these versions were - i.e. what music they contained. On one hand this is a study of performance history, but on the other it is concerned with artistic considerations - it is no use drawing conclusions about

Handel's style in 1711 from a movement composed in 1731. Similarly, an analytical study of key-sequences or key-associations must begin by establishing what transpositions were made for particular occasions and which sets of transpositions belong together.

I hope that I have said enough to explain why I think that dates matter. Turning to the second question - 'How do we establish dates?' - I have to begin by admitting that much of the deductive process involved with Handel's works is necessarily rather circular. We explain the probable condition of source A in relation to what we believe source B looked like at a certain date - and information on the latter point may be partly derived from source A as much as from sources C-Z. What we are normally looking for, in fact, is a hypothesis (or set of hypotheses) that fits and can explain the conditions of all of the sources. How convenient it would be if composers dated their own manuscripts in detail. Handel dated commencements and completion pages for many of his works - and parts of his works - but even these need interpretation because the pages that fall between the dates might not all have been there when the dates were added. But the fact is, of course, that for every composition dated by a composer there are at least half a dozen that are not. As a first stage in the evolution of the deductive process, we need to have some idea of the period at which each source originated. The process itself demands rather sustained clear thinking and flexibility. The pitfalls in the way of a straight path are frequent and uncommonly deep, and the motto of the student of eighteenth-century sources must be 'One of my assumptions may be wrong'.

What are the means that enable a chronological placing to be given to a particular source, and thus to a particular work, movement or transposition? I shall for the moment omit the obvious one of 'musical content' on the assumption that this is not self-revealing and that the task to hand is the establishment of the date for the musical contents of a particular document. An obvious way of starting is to combine evidence from musical sources with that from literary or documentary historical sources - to match, for example, a particular piece of music to a

particular occasion on which music of that type is known to have been performed. Into this category also comes the process of relating music to the contents of word-books for theatrical (and other) performances. I would not argue too much with an approach to the reconstruction of Handel's performing versions of operas and oratorios that used these word-books as a starting point. The word-books for Rinaldo dated 1711, 1717 and 1731 should, indeed, begin to lead us towards an assessment of what was performed on each occasion. Nevertheless, our motto still applies, for the word-books can be wrong and can not be taken as an infallible 'assumption'. Particularly complex cases of the relationship between the word-book texts and the musical sources occur, for example, in connection with the first performance versions of Alexander's Feast and the Foundling Hospital Anthem.

Information on the handwriting of composers and scribes has frequently proved to be of assistance in dating musical sources. The revolution in the dating of J S Bach's cantatas that was partly the result of better information about the periods of activity of Bach's individual copyists is now part of the history of musical scholarship. I expect that we are all directly aware, also, that handwriting styles change: the recent rediscovery of my own school harmony exercises seemed to me to be the work of a totally different hand from my present one. Stylistic relapses can occur, of course, but consistent patterns of change can be useful chronological aids. J C Smith the elder, Handel's principal copyist, made irreversible changes to the form of his treble clef about the year 1720 and to his inverted semiquavers about ten years later. When working on the music of William Croft I also discovered an extremely useful 'life history' in the clef formations of one of the principal copyists of his music, James Kent.

It would have been helpful if Handel had subjected his own handwriting to such transmutations. Just over a century ago W S Rockstro claimed to have distinguished nine different forms of Handel's musical hand, apparently in an effort to outbid Chrysander's claim to having recognised six different styles. There are certainly differences between Handel's earliest and

latest hands, but beyond that I would challenge anyone to date a page of Handel's music on the basis of Rockstro's 9-fold descriptions. Handel simply did not play the game according to Rockstro's rules, and he was more likely to adjust the size of his note-heads to the paper size and format than in response to any aging process.

When the interaction of musical and documentary sources with such features as handwriting analysis fails to produce the desired information, however, then perhaps the relevance of paper studies becomes apparent. From my own experience, I would put the matter more positively than this: paper studies are not there simply to help when all else fails, but as a useful aid to the development of basic hypotheses about source-relationships. Some general points about the way that paper studies should proceed, and the ways in which they can help, may perhaps be useful. The procedure, as I see it, should be to identify as many dateable eighteenth-century papers as possible, and then to apply this information by matching papers of uncertain date to the bank of known information. Sometimes paper characteristics (by which I mean principally identifiable characteristics of watermarks and rastra or stave rulings) are rather slack evidence - if, for example, the same paper remained in use for a decade or so, then the dating evidence will not be very refined. At the other extreme, however, we find particular paper types being used by one person during a very limited period, and in such a case the answer to 'How close can you get?' is 'very close indeed'. I find that this proposition sometimes excites a certain amount of reaction, in the form of a counter-argument that a composer might at a later date have been using an old stock of paper that had lain in his drawer for some years. Much depends on the habits of the particular composer, and also on how prolific the composer was. In Handel's case my research indicates that he went through his paper stocks quickly and in rotation: the occasions when he might have had recourse to 'old' papers are so few as to draw attention to themselves, and they seem to be in the category of 'using up old scraps' rather than appearing as the manifestations of a hoarder.

I think that it is very likely that the good-quality paper available in London during the first half of the eighteenth century came through a limited number of suppliers and my guess is that John Walsh senior and junior played a key role in the supply of such paper. Before the Whatman mills came into their own in the mid-century this good-quality paper was probably all imported. Not all composers used paper of this quality: many manuscripts of English church music from the period were written on inferior paper and are disintegrating accordingly. For any paper type however, I think that it is a reasonable assumption that all composers in London relying on the same supplier used the same paper types at the same period.

It is worth remembering that composers' autographs are the result of at least three processes that were accomplished at different dates, whether closely or widely separated in time - the manufacture of the paper, the ruling of the stave lines and the addition of the music. I am told that the application of laser techniques may eventually become available that will enable independent dates to be given to all three processes for a given manuscript, provided that conservation and lamination processes have not destroyed the vital natural oils in the meantime.

In some ways studies of eighteenth-century English music have paid rather tardy attention to the development of even relatively primitive paper studies. The commentaries of the old Bachgesellschaft edition reveal that the Germans were into watermark studies a century ago. I am not sure how they tried to record the images of the marks, though I suspect that the process was fairly perilous to the objects concerned. Technology has come to the aid of paper studies in a significant way during the twentieth century, with direct photography giving place to beta-radiography. From the experience of my own work, beta-radiography has in its turn given place to tracing with the assistance of electroluminescent panels. In one respect this marks a return to the cottage industry of hand-tracing but, seen in another aspect, it is a technique in which modern technology has assisted the control exerted over the reproductive process by the scholar. The electroluminescent panel is both

user-friendly and document-friendly, a fact appreciated by most librarians and curators once initial suspicion has been overcome. Yet it is the uses to which the panel is put that count. By reproducing some 90 watermark types at full size in the catalogue of Handel sources that is currently being prepared by Martha Ronish and myself, and by giving such information as is possible about the date-ranges during which Handel used the paper types, we hope to provide an information bank about paper characteristics that can become the basis for some very close dating in eighteenth-century English music.