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HANDEL

GREAT SUITES

CHACONNE | BABELL SUITE

ERIN HELYARD
HARPSICHORD

HANDEL GREAT SUITES

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GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL 1685–1759

[1] Chaconne in G major, HWV435 7'26

Harpichord Suite No. 2 in F major, HWV427 [9'53]

[2] I. Adagio 3'16

[3] II. Allegro 2'04

[4] III. Adagio 2'01

[5] IV. Allegro 2'32

Harpichord Suite No. 4 in E minor, HWV429 [16'27]

[6] I. Allegro 3'59

[7] II. Allemande 3'08

[8] III. Courante 1'59

[9] IV. Sarabande 5'38

[10] V. Gigue 1'42

Harpichord Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV430 [14'05]

[11] I. Prelude 2'31

[12] II. Allemande 5'29

[13] III. Courante 1'50

[14] IV. Air and Doubles 4'15

Harpichord Suite No. 6 in F-sharp minor, HWV431 [10'23]

[15] I. Prelude 2'00

[16] II. Largo 2'36

[17] III. Allegro 3'04

[18] IV. Gigue 2'43

WILLIAM BABELL c.1690–1723

The Most Celebrated Lessons: Suit[e] No. 1 [Rinaldo] [19'40]

[19] I. Prelude: Presto 1'13

[20] II. Overture: Vivace – Allegro – 2'33

[21] Adagio 1'01

[22] III. Gigue: Presto 1'07

[23] IV. Soura Balza: Vivace 4'44

[24] V. Lascia ch'io pianga: Adagio 5'24

[25] VI. Sulla routa di fortuna: Presto 3'32

Total Playing Time 78'42

Erin Helyard harpsichord

Single-manual harpsichord, Jacob and Abraham Kirckman, London, 1773

Restored by Carey Beebe

2014 National Trust of Australia (NSW) Heritage Award

(Conservation – Interiors & Objects)

HANDEL AS HARPSICHORDIST

Handel's prowess at the keyboard was one of the defining traits of his early career; indeed, commentators throughout his life readily attested to his brilliance at the harpsichord and organ. In Venice in 1709 at Carnival 'he was first discovered there at a Masquerade, while he was playing on a harpsichord in his visor [mask]. Domenico Scarlatti happened to be there and affirmed that it could be no one but the famous Saxon, or the devil.' His first biographer, John Mainwaring, summed up the accolades in 1760: 'Handel had an uncommon brilliancy and command of finger: but what distinguished him from all other players who possessed these same qualities, was that amazing fullness, force, and energy, which he joined with them.' It is therefore surprising that his compositions for the keyboard are comparatively few for such an acclaimed performer.

When he moved to Hamburg in 1703 he gave many harpsichord lessons and there composed suites and lessons for his pupils; many of these works have survived. A complete absorption with operatic culture during his sojourn in Italy meant that he composed nothing for the keyboard at this time and it was only on his return to Hanover in 1710 that he took a fresh interest in keyboard composition. During these last years in Hanover and his first years in London he wrote virtually all the music that he was to compose for the harpsichord.

For a long time his compositions circulated amongst his friends. When Handel went abroad in 1719, a publisher, taking advantage of Handel's absence, issued an unauthorised publication of his works. On his return to London Handel was frustrated to see the pirated edition for sale; he promptly took out a Royal Privilege enabling him to publish his own works under a monopoly for 14 years, and turned to the task of preparing his own edition of keyboard suites. He was meticulous in this regard and his first book of *Suites de Pièces pour le Clavecin* appeared in 1720, published by J. Cluer. These are what we now call the 'Great Suites'.

The Cluer edition has a small preface by Handel in which he promises that 'if it meets with a favourable Reception; I will Still proceed to publish more, reckoning it my duty, with my Small Talent, to Serve a Nation from which I have receiv'd so Generous a Protection.' Although the edition was popular and went through a few reprints, unfortunately Handel wrote practically nothing more for the harpsichord. A 1733 'Second Volume' of pieces published by Walsh was by and large a reprint of the earlier unauthorised edition, which contained those works that Handel had probably composed in Germany before the 1720 set. The 'Great Suites', therefore, represent the pinnacle of Handel's compositional output for the harpsichord.

What is so remarkable about the 1720 collection is its extraordinarily eclectic and wide-ranging deployment of styles and genres. Besides the traditional dance elements of the Franco-German keyboard suite (allemandes, courantes, sarabandes and giges) there are dense fugues, overtures in the French style, Italian sonatas and arias, preludes in both incomplete and highly precise notation, and variation forms. The suites give us the impression of a performer and composer who was highly sophisticated, well-travelled, open-minded and cosmopolitan. They reveal a keyboardist who had quite a large hand span and a predilection for the German *vollstimmig* (fully-voiced) style, and was equally at home with Italianate virtuosity, German profundity and French élan.

The Suite in F major is the most Italianate of the set. The opening movement has Handel ornamenting an adagio in the Italian style. The 18th-century music historian Charles Burney observed later of Italian practice that 'an adagio in a song or solo is generally little more than an outline left to the performer's abilities to colour.' The beautifully engraved Cluer edition has the principal melody of this adagio in large notes; Handel's embellishments are notated in small notes in order to set off their decorative finesse. A virtuosic two-part invention follows, emulating the latest bariolage virtuosity of Italian violinists. A curious adagio-cum-sarabande, again ornamented (but more sporadically this time) with small notes, prefaces a beautiful four-part fugue. The balanced tunefulness of the subject reminds us of the concerted writing of his contemporaries: especially dall'Abaco, Vivaldi and Brescianello.

The Suite in E minor is one of the more traditional suites, conforming to the arrangement standardised by Froberger in the 17th century: allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue. Prefacing this is one of Handel's longest, most impressive and most difficult fugues. Beginning with three notes on the same pitch, the theme continues in a thoroughly keyboardistic manner and is worked through vigorously and seriously. Indeed, Mainwaring remarked of these fugues that the 'surprising fullness and activity of the inner parts, increases the difficulty of playing them to so great a degree, that few persons are capable of doing them justice.' The serious tone is continued in the suite proper: here again, in accordance with tradition, the allemande and courante are thematically linked. For Mattheson, Handel's friend and colleague, the key of E minor was said to represent grief but with some chance of consolation. Respite accordingly arrives in the final two dances: the sarabande is a small masterpiece of distilled operatic *cantabile* and the final gigue is generated from effortless (and not laboured) canonic interplay.

The E major Suite is one of the most tuneful and wistful of the set. A delicate and translucent prelude establishes the mood which is continued in a meditative allemande before a contrasting energised courante, more in the Italian than French style. The final piece is an air with doubles, or variations. This is the now very well-known 'Harmonious Blacksmith', a nickname it first received in the 19th

century when the work was popular as a standalone lesson. The air itself is quintessential English, at once 'airy' and earthy. The variations have clear divisions between the hands, alternatively showing off the dexterity of the right and the left hand in divisions that increase in rhythmic augmentation until a blazing finale.

The F-sharp minor Suite is set in a key very rare for the early 18th century. Reserved for sombre, grief-stricken or supernatural scenes in opera, its unusual nature is underscored by Mattheson: 'although it leads to great affliction, nevertheless F-sharp minor is more languid and love-sick than lethal. Moreover, it has something abandoned, singular, and misanthropic about it' (1713). These attributes are clearly present in the emotional landscape of this extraordinary suite. Handel's formal inventiveness comes to the fore; there are no traditional dance forms in this suite at all. Nothing is familiar, everything is 'singular'. It opens with a searching, restless and angular prelude. This settles into a resigned largo; a remarkable movement, thick, heavy and very serious, it certainly feels 'abandoned' and 'misanthropic'. A three-part fugue follows, reworked by Handel from his D minor concerto grosso, Op. 3 No. 5. A final gigue follows, very much in the English 'jigg' style; a relief after emotional torment.

The 18th-century keyboard chaconne, with its repeating variations on a ground-bass, was a genre favoured by music-masters and amateurs alike. The repetitive form made the chaconne an ideal piece for progressive instruction in fingering, velocity, and basic counterpoint. For amateur players who were instructed in these topics by their teacher, the chaconne's attraction lay primarily in its seemingly endless capacity for melodic and textural variety over an appealing harmonic progression. Skilled players could emphasise their technique, whereas less skilled players could omit the harder variations and concentrate more on their expressive skills, if they wished.

Handel's Chaconne in G major, first published by John Walsh in the 'Second Volume' of Handel's works in 1733, was exactly such a piece. The many copies that survive today in libraries across the United Kingdom are testament to the popularity and adaptability of the genre. No single 'authoritative' manuscript of this particular work survives; the closest we have is the Walsh print. In some sources there are additional, more difficult variations that may have been written by the music-master; in others the piece is shortened for players with less facility. I play from a handwritten copy found in the British Library (BL Add MS 31577) that was extensively fingered and ornamented by either a skilled player or a talented music-master. It provides us with telling clues to the articulation, phrasing and embellishment that might have characterised English keyboard playing in the 1730s.

Keyboard playing at that time, in England and also on the Continent, was distinguished by an almost compulsive desire to ornament, by amateur and professional alike. This enculturated attitude resulted

in the embellishment and adornment of all kinds of melodies and bass lines with graces, and by the 1750s there is much evidence to suggest that even a single unornamented note in an adagio was considered to be have been performed in bad taste. Sometimes amateurs took things too far; minute-books of musical clubs record continual frustrations associated with ripienists who ornamented too extravagantly, and writers and journalists pleaded with inept performers to leave the ornamenting to professionals. Accordingly, many treatises of the time (including, most famously, that of Quantz) have a section on how to ornament appropriately and tastefully.

What we consider 'tasteful' today is often at odds with the highly varied vocabulary of swift and expressive ornaments that seems to have been part of the repertoire of improvisatory play amongst soloists at the time. In 1955 the editor Rudolf Steglich opined that the reason the 'Great Suites' were 'not given by contemporary performers the place they deserve in homes and concert halls' was that 'Handel's notation, under many aspects, is not properly understood in Handel's terms anymore.' He was right; many of Handel's movements are skeletal, awaiting the skill of the performer to bring them to full life. In this recording I have been inspired by my own research into this improvisatory culture, and have attempted to ornament in the very florid style that I believe Handel and his contemporaries would have recognised. Along the way I introduce rare keyboard ornaments documented by the Edinburgh-based Niccolo Pasquali (1718–1757) in the 1740s and 50s. They include, amongst others, the *sdruciolato* (a glissando used 'only as a Whym' which nevertheless 'may afford a pleasing Variety') and the *tremolato* (another 'whimsical' ornament in which the same note is repeating by alternating fingers 'as quick as the Quill which strikes the String will permit').

One of Handel's contemporaries who exemplified this ornamental culture was a talented English musician called William Babell. He was a violinist and harpsichordist playing in the private band of George I, and his name appears frequently in London concert listings. He died in 1723, in his early 30s. Babell probably came into contact with Handel in both formal and informal settings. Mattheson in 1739 believed that Babell had studied with Handel himself (this was denied by Hawkins in 1776); certainly, it was his virtuosic harpsichord arrangements of Handel's arias and overtures from his operas that brought him international fame. Terence Best, co-General Editor of the monumental *Halle Handel Edition*, writes that these idiomatic works present an 'intriguing insight into early 18th-century practices of keyboard extemporisation and ornamentation'. Hawkins remarked in his 1776 *History of the Science and Practice of Music* that Babell's arrangement of favourite arias from Handel's *Rinaldo* 'succeeded so well [...] as to make from it a book of lessons which few could play but himself, and which has long been deservedly celebrated.' Some have posited that many of his extended fantasies might represent Handel's own improvisations, as it is highly likely that Babell was present at occasions where Handel publicly exhibited his rhapsodic genius at the keyboard. The transcriptions

represent the very best of English harpsichord textures from the period: inventive, difficult, showy and glittering, they are entirely reflective of the grandeur of opera under Handel at its most splendid. Mattheson thought Babel a finer organist even than Handel; certainly the young player had a formidable technique.

I was fortunate enough to be able to play upon a magnificent English harpsichord for this recording; this instrument is equipped with a particularly English piece of technology, the so-called 'machine stop'. This pedal enables me to make very quick and often nuanced registration changes in order to effect different dynamics and textures. I have used the device as idiomatically as the music suggests, mostly to enhance implied ritornelli / tutti contrasts in fugal movements as well creating more subtle and exciting effects that are rarely heard on recording or in performance. The earliest machine stop dates from the late 1740s, so it is entirely possible that Handel would have heard or experimented with one, even if his playing days were behind him in his old age. Certainly the Handel and Babel suites stayed in the repertoire through the 1760s and even into the 1770s, as Hawkins attests, when machine stops were common on both single- and double-manual instruments in England. English harpsichords were as highly prized on the continent as they were in their country of origin: magnificently crafted, they are both noble of tone and supple in voice. I am enormously grateful to Carey Beebe, the restorer of this beautiful instrument, for his support and generosity throughout the project.

Erin Helyard © 2017

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENT

Single-manual harpsichord, Jacob and Abraham Kirkman, London, 1773

Few of today's harpsichord makers could aspire to accumulate a fortune matching that of Jacob Kirkman, reported by Charles Burney as £20,000. The founder of a keyboard instrument making dynasty that was to remain active through the late 19th century, Jacob Kirchmann (1710–1792) was born in Bischweiler near Strasbourg. He went to England in the early 1730s to work with the harpsichord maker Tabel, and soon anglicised his family name.

The earliest of the perhaps 150 surviving Kirkman harpsichords is dated 1744. In the year before the harpsichord used in this recording, Jacob took his nephew Abraham into the business, and the instruments were signed with both their names from then until at least 1790.

Four Kirkman harpsichords have made their way to Australia.

For various reasons, few original instruments can be considered in performance-ready condition, completely reliable and capable of satisfying the demands of a top harpsichordist. Most have been altered in some form or other, usually by hands of varying expertise. Many are sadly only curious relics.

The 1773 Kirkman is an exception, with its well-preserved action. The consistent and precise workmanship of Kirkman's pearwood jacks has not been exceeded by makers then or since. The jacks retain their original tongues punched with curved mortises to suit crow quill, and sprung with boar bristle. The tuning pins are original and undrilled. Many of the action cloths are also original, having survived 240 years.

The listener may be quite startled that this harpsichord is endowed with means of expression, the so-called 'machine stop'. This device was relatively common throughout the entire second half of the 18th century, even before that modern upstart the pianoforte had been heard in England. The machine stop pedal overrides the hand-stop levers, allowing the player to produce diminuendo and crescendo effects without lifting his hands from the keys.

In usual operation, all three choirs sound. As the pedal is gradually depressed, the 4' is turned off, followed by the front 8', leaving only the back 8' sounding. By this means, quite rapid effects can be made which are impossible even on a larger double-manual harpsichord.

Carey Beebe © 2017



Inscription on the 1773 Kirkman nameboard batten

Further information: www.hpschd.nu/cln/kirkman.html

ERIN HELYARD



Erin Helyard has been acclaimed as an inspiring conductor, a virtuosic and expressive performer on the harpsichord and fortepiano, and a lucid scholar who is passionate about promoting discourse between musicology and performance.

Erin graduated in harpsichord performance from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music with first-class honours and the University Medal. He completed his Masters in fortepiano performance and a PhD in Musicology with Tom Beghin at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Montreal. He was named the Westfield Concert Scholar (Cornell) on fortepiano for 2009–10, and

from 2003 to 2012 Erin was a central member of Montreal's award-winning Ensemble Caprice.

Erin is particularly active in reviving, in both score and performance, neglected 17th- and 18th-century opera. As Artistic Director and co-founder of Pinchgut Opera and the Orchestra of the Antipodes, he has forged new standards of excellence in historically informed performance in Australia. He has conducted from the keyboard performances of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (Montreal Baroque Festival); Cavalli's *Ormindo* and *Giasone*, Purcell's *Dioclesian*, Vivaldi's *Griselda* and *Bajazet*, Salieri's *The Chimney Sweep*, Grétry's *L'Amant jaloux* and Handel's *Theodora* (Pinchgut); Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (NZ Opera) and *Orlando* (Hobart Baroque); and for Brisbane Baroque, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Handel's *Faramondo* and *Agrippina* (Best Opera at the Helpmann Awards in 2015 and 2016). In 2017 he conducted the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra for Handel's *Saul* at the Adelaide Festival in a fêted revival of a Glyndebourne production directed by Barrie Kosky, for which he won the Helpmann Award for Best Music Direction in 2017.

Erin duets in 19th-century repertoire on historical pianos with renowned Alkan exponent Stephanie McCallum; on fortepiano and harpsichord he has recently been described as 'Australia's most engaging soloist' by *Limelight* magazine. He also appears as guest conductor and keyboard soloist with the Australian Haydn Ensemble.

In 2017 Erin was awarded a major Australian Research Council Discovery Grant for a collaborative project with colleagues at the University of Sydney, Oxford University and the Australian National University (*Performing Transdisciplinarity: Image, Music, and Text in Eighteenth-Century Print Culture*). He is currently Senior Lecturer at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and appears by kind courtesy of that institution.

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Cover Photo Handcrafted marbled paper from the endpapers of a manually-bound French book c.1735. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

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Harpsichord prepared by Carey Beebe

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Temperament: Lambert 1774

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