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Handel's eight great suites for harpsichord

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Dr Gwilym Beechey gives some personal reflections on Handel's best-known harpsichord works.

HANDEL'S EIGHT SUITES, HWV 426–433, were first published by John Cluer in 1720. The sophistication of the contents and the large scale of many of the movements in these suites caused surprise for many players in the 1720s and 1730s, who, in England at least, had been used to harpsichord pieces of smaller dimensions and slighter content. Eighteenth-century players seem to have had many technical problems in playing these Handel suites, and in 1760 John Mainwaring wrote of these works:

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. Indeed there appears to be more work in them than any one instrument should seem capable of dispatching.

The textures of the music were sometimes fuller than in other harpsichord works available in England at the time, and the concentration demanded of the player was often greater in view of the length of many of the pieces, especially the fugues and the variation movements.

The free fantasia-like pieces have always presented problems for performers, especially those that come at the beginning of Suites 1 and 3. The opening *Prélude* of suite No.1 in A major is the more problematical of these pieces. Attempts have been made by various editors to provide performing versions of unmeasured preludes by French composers of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and indeed some detailed attempts in writing are sometimes called for to clarify possibilities of interpretation and to indicate ways in which improvisations might be attempted.

In bar 10 of this *Prélude*, for instance, Handel

shows a sample of a grand flourish, but might this idea (or something similar) be applied in bars 11, 12, 13 and 15 to the chord sequences? It is interesting to notice that the theme of the succeeding *Allende* is hinted at in bar 8 of the *Prélude*, and this dotted rhythm might perhaps be introduced again before the *Prélude* ends.

The A major *Prélude* needs a very free, relaxed and spontaneous interpretation, as does also the opening movement of the D minor suite. In Suite No.3, however, Handel's intentions are clearer. There a tempo mark is given and further extra notes are not necessarily called for. Bar 19 needs a carefully judged *rallentando* before the *Adagio* in the final bar. More akin to the A major *Prélude* are the opening movements of Suites 5, 6 and 8 — all of them wonderful pieces of great dignity, the last of them, in F minor, anticipating the moods of the F minor choruses in Part II of *Messiah*.

There are some very real problems of interpretation in the fugal *Allegro* of the third Suite. The basic question is whether or not the dotted rhythm of the opening pair of semiquavers needs to be applied to other pairs of semiquavers in the fugue subject, and thus, elsewhere in the movement later on. The rhythm may be applied to the opening notes of the subject as it is introduced, and possibly elsewhere in the music too — otherwise bars 5 and 6 may sound a little curious and disjointed.

It is possible, however, that the 1720 text is muddled and mistaken. The easiest way to make consistent sense of the fugue subject and its treatment is to remove the dotted figure altogether and play even semiquavers throughout the piece. This may be too drastic a plan for some players, but in view of the uncharacteristic rhythmic clashes that can arise in the movement, the dotted rhythm may be

better confined to the fugal exposition. Cluer's print of 1720 may thus be taken literally — with the dotted figure only being heard in bars 1, 2 and 5 in this 47-bar piece. In view of its musical attractions at the start, the effect of its loss later on can be a little disappointing. Unfortunately

the muddle and mistakes that might be attributed to John Cluer's print affect the third and fourth semiquavers of the subject. Here the dotted rhythm has already disappeared by the time the fugal answer is heard:



Ex.1.

The *Air* and variations in the same suite is an extremely unusual piece, as the theme and its content is very much more elaborate and complex than anything in the variations that follow. In fact the variations become simpler and less agitated in many ways as they proceed. The last two bars at the very end of the movement are marked *arpeggio*.

These bars may be played freely in terms both of tempo and chordal flourishes, especially for the repeat and the conclusion of the movement. On the other hand they may also be played, if preferred, with arpeggios in the tempo chosen for the variation, especially perhaps before the section is repeated, *viz.*

Ex.2.

Something much more elaborate may well be found pleasing for the repeat and the approach to the exciting *Presto* finale of the suite.

How much French harpsichord music did Handel know, and how many copies of French keyboard music had he seen and heard by 1720?

Considerations concerning *notes inégales* do not seem to be in question very often in these suites, but they may well be needed in the *Double 4* in the famous variation movement in Suite 5. The E major *Air* of this movement is not so much a lively dance, but a piece that calls for the establishment and maintenance of a *cantabile* and *sostenuto* style. Restrained and gentle performances of this movement are very attractive if the elegant and tuneful nature of the theme can be easily noticed as the variations proceed.

Various movements in these suites seem to call for varied repeats from the player, or even a variation or two in full. One such movement is

the Sarabande in the G minor Suite, No.7. This is a beautifully simple movement, and it may be treated as a singer would treat a melodic line in an operatic aria in the 1720s. The repeat of the second half of the movement was probably expected, and bars 25–32 may in addition be very effectively treated as a *petite reprise* (*à la française*) if desired.

The two opening movements of Suite No.6 in F sharp minor make an unusual pair. They form a sort of double introduction to the fugue that follows. They both need to be played with dignity, though probably not too slowly. The end of the *Prélude* may perhaps be played as follows:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a harpsichord or fortepiano. The top staff is labeled 'Arpeggio' above the notes. The bottom staff has dynamics 'molto rall.' above the notes. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. Various performance markings are present, including 'tr' (trill) over a note, 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte) dynamics, and a fermata over a note. The key signature is F# minor (one sharp), and the time signature is common time.

Ex.3.

This is a self-contained piece which does not lead directly to the piece that follows. It is the latter that really acts as a prelude to the following fugue by finishing on the dominant chord. Perhaps there is a movement missing here: should something fit in between the *Prélude* and the *Largo*?

Handel's use of the key of F sharp minor for a keyboard work was virtually unique for its time — he may not have known of any existing examples at all. Few have come to light in the course of time, and the famous ones are generally of splendid calibre. They include Buxtehude's organ prelude and fugue, J.S. Bach's *Toccata*, BWV 910, and the two preludes and fugue in the '48'.

Handel's *Suites de Pièces* of 1720 comprise his finest set of works for the harpsichord, and their grandeur, majesty and lyrical beauty can still feel and sound strikingly original and fresh today. They are not very widely performed as suites in full, and much of their music, curiously enough, is still not very well known. The strength of the composer's imagination and fertility of thought can be clearly perceived if these works are studied as a whole, and they do deserve to be heard in full.

Harpsichord & Fortepiano welcomes readers' personal insights into the music — whether from a well-known or neglected repertoire — which they have enjoyed playing.