

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# William Babell's recently discovered toccatas

Andrew Woolley

William Babell (1688–1723) is known to harpsichordists for his arrangements of arias from operas staged at the Haymarket theatre in London between 1706 and 1714, many of which were published by John Walsh within his lifetime. Selections focused on arrangements of Handel arias have been recorded by Claudio Astronio, Jane Chapman, Bridget Cunningham, Hank Knox and Fernando de Luca. In addition, a suite containing arrangements of the overture from *Rinaldo* and the aria 'Lascia ch'io pianga' has been included in collections of Handel's harpsichord music by Philippe Grisvard, Erin Helyard, Lars Ulrik Mortensen, Paul Simmonds and Sebastian Wienand. The Handel arrangements were republished in 1894, though a complete facsimile reproduction and a complete modern edition of their source, the 1717 *Suits of the Most Celebrated Lessons*, have more recently become available, as have facsimile reproductions of its two predecessors, *The 3rd Book of the Ladys Entertainment* (1709) and *The 4th Book of the Ladys Entertainment* (1711), containing arrangements of arias by Francesco Mancini, Alessandro Scarlatti and others.<sup>1</sup>

To judge from the number of recordings, many of which reveal Babell's effective and exciting writing for the harpsichord, his arrangements are widely enjoyed, so the recent discovery of original keyboard music by this composer preserved anonymously in an English manuscript today located in Bergamo<sup>2</sup> is of considerable interest.<sup>3</sup> Containing eleven toccatas, two suites and seven preludes, it seems to have been copied by a student or member of Babell's family towards the end of the composer's short life. Together with two suites of aria arrangements drawn from an autograph manuscript formerly in the library of the Dukes of Leeds at Hornby Castle,<sup>4</sup> I have included most of its contents in a new critical edition for Lyrebird Music, which draws on all of the available source materials.<sup>5</sup> Research for the edition also prompted me to investigate Babell's biography, partly to demonstrate that he enjoyed a brief but notable career as a harpsichordist, organist, violinist, teacher and composer in London.

Prior to my investigations, Babell's biography had been under-researched, in part because attention had been too much focused on his relationship to Handel. In the late 19th century, Friedrich Chrysander proposed

that Babell's flamboyant arrangement of 'Vo' far guerra' from *Rinaldo* (1711) might in some way have reflected the cadenzas that Handel himself played during the original performances of this aria:<sup>6</sup>

*we can make out [from William Babell's version] what Handel's famous improvisation of Cembalo Solos in this Rinaldo air really consisted of. Babell's brilliant gift of imitating upon the harpsichord what he listened to during opera performances deserves to be acknowledged.*

The idea that Babell was influenced by Handel's obbligato harpsichord playing has been widely accepted by later writers, including Gerald Gifford and Terence Best in their article on the composer for the second edition of *The New Grove* (2001).<sup>7</sup> Implicit in Chrysander's idea, however, is the suggestion that Babell was not merely influenced by Handel's performances but was also in the habit of imitating or even rewriting the actual notes that Handel had played. Perhaps with this idea in mind, Best has elsewhere suggested that some of the movements of the suite HWV441/2–7 – which is included in the Bergamo manuscript and seems to be Babell – may include movements by Handel borrowed by Babell.<sup>8</sup> A more extreme version was proposed by the late Graham Pont, who developed a strange theory that Babell's arrangements had been copied from lost Handel autograph manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

Criticism of Babell from the late 18th century onwards has implied that he drew on opera arias by other composers in keyboard music to make up for shortcomings of compositional technique. The late 18th-century historian Charles Burney's view was that Babell's celebrity was achieved 'by wire-drawing the favourite songs of the opera of *Rinaldo*, and others of the same period', which 'without the assistance of taste, expression, harmony or modulation', enabled him to 'acquire the reputation of a great player at small expense'.<sup>10</sup> However, Babell earned a considerable reputation in his lifetime for his ability as a harpsichordist and it is unlikely that he would have borrowed from the harpsichord music of his colleagues in any literal manner or tried to claim as his own their manner of performance. Moreover, the discovery of Babell's activity as a significant composer of original music for

the instrument changes the common perception of him. Babell seems to have stopped producing arrangements of opera arias after 1714, prior to a lacuna in his biography for the years 1715–16, and his final period of activity between early 1717 and c.1720 was marked by increasing prominence as a composer working in many genres, including not only keyboard music for his own use, but also ensemble sonatas and concertos, probably written for himself and colleagues to play in public concerts, and concerto vocal music, including music for an *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* that does not survive.

Babell was a cosmopolitan figure whose musical outlook reflected closely his status as one of the many immigrant musicians who flourished in London in the first two decades of the 18th century.<sup>11</sup> Born in Hannover in December 1688, he was the son of the French wind player and prolific music copyist Charles Babel (d.1716); after a period in the Netherlands, the Babell family settled in Britain shortly after Charles became a naturalised British subject in April 1699. As 'Babell Junior', William joined the newly-founded opera orchestra at the Haymarket theatre at the age of 18 or 19 along with his father, initially as a violinist, in 1707; and, only a few years later, in 1709, he secured a place in the royal Private Music. As early as April 1711 William Babell was performing 'solos' on the harpsichord in public concerts, possibly examples of his aria arrangements in versions with orchestral accompaniment, as suggested by the markings 'Simphony' and 'Harpsicord' that appear in the second of the two surviving autograph manuscripts.<sup>12</sup>

Babell started to become more prominent in London once he was performing regularly there in concerts. The Hornby Castle manuscript, bound in a handsome red Morocco binding and featuring a drawing by the French draughtsman François Boitard (1667–1719) acting as a frontispiece, may have been copied by him for a wealthy patron c.1714.<sup>13</sup> In 1714, a now-lost portrait of Babell was commissioned by John Hervey, first Earl of Bristol, from the Swedish painter Hans Hysing. It was probably painted around the time that Babell was active as a member of the Rose and Crown club, an informal gathering of artists and art connoisseurs that met in a tavern off Covent Garden piazza. Babell had certainly established himself as a leading musician in London by 1717, the year his *St Cecilia's Day Ode* was first performed, and when he was regularly organising concerts featuring his own music. His success was consolidated when, as 'the Famous Mr. William Babel', he was elected organist of All Hallows Bread Street the following year – but it was to be short-

lived. Contrary to the assertion of the late 18th-century historian Sir John Hawkins, who suggested that Babell 'shortened his days by intemperance', Babell's final years were overshadowed by tuberculosis; a newspaper reported in May 1723 that he was lying 'dangerously ill of a Consumption at Hampstead'.<sup>14</sup> Babell died, age 34, on 23 September and was remembered as a leading harpsichordist:

*Scarce ever was any Man, as we are inform'd, more famous for the Harpsicord than himself: He hath wrote Instructions for that Musical Instrument in three Languages, which have gain'd him Applause in many Parts of Europe.*<sup>15</sup>

Babell's harpsichord music draws on a wide range of influences that were largely unknown in England prior to 1720, and it is not difficult to imagine its considerable impact, not only for its virtuoso idiom but also its stylistic novelty. English keyboard composers of the period, such as William Croft (1678–1727), were still writing one-movement voluntaries for organ and preludes for harpsichord in a tradition consolidated by Henry Purcell's elder contemporary, John Blow (1649–1708).<sup>16</sup> Babell's toccatas, mostly in two movements consisting of a prelude followed by a fugue, show no sign of influence from this tradition and instead seem more closely aligned with continental models, in particular the praeludia and toccatas of north German organists such as Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707) and Johann Adam Reincken (1643–1722). Like these organists, Babell uses long and elaborate subjects, treating them as fixed 'themes' suited to manipulation through the technique of invertible counterpoint (ex.1). It is unclear how Babell came to be influenced by them, since he left Germany as infant, but he was introduced to a wide range of harpsichord music by his father who copied two large manuscript anthologies for his use in 1701 and 1702.<sup>17</sup> They are mostly devoted to French and English music, though the second and larger anthology<sup>18</sup> contains a complete copy of Georg Muffat's *Apparatus Musico-Organisticus* (1690) and it is possible that William was familiar with more keyboard music from German-speaking regions. The first movements of several of the toccatas as well as several of the preludes draw on a style of prelude writing apparently derived from Johann Kaspar Ferdinand Fischer's *Les pièces de clavessin*, Op.2 (1696), where passages of slow chordal movement are juxtaposed with rapid figuration. This style can also be found in preludes by Bach and Handel.<sup>19</sup>



Ex.1 William Babell, Toccata 3, second movement, opening

Another feature of Babell's harpsichord music that is striking and would have been considered novel is its adoption of elements drawn from the Italian concerto style. Babell's musical language, in common with other leading composers in England in the second decade of the 18th century, is strongly Italianate. His two suites of dances are in an Italianate treble–bass idiom that was popular among his contemporaries in England, such as John Loeillet of London (1680–1730). However, Babell's virtuoso manner and use of devices and structural techniques drawn from concertos, especially in the toccatas, seems to be unique among English harpsichord composers working prior to 1720. Babell was an experienced concerto composer and performer and the idea of incorporating elements of this style into solo keyboard music was doubtless influenced by these activities: there is a set of concertos with recorder parts that was published posthumously as his Op.3 (1726), a Concerto in A major (entitled 'Sinfonia' in some sources) that incorporates a solo harpsichord part in the final movement, and evidence that Babell performed his concertos in public concerts.<sup>20</sup> While clearly belonging to the realm of solo keyboard music, several of the fugal second movements of the toccatas are concerto Allegros in all but name, employing extended sequential passagework between statements of fugal themes acting as 'ritornelli'.

The Bergamo manuscript, which is the only surviving source for most of the toccatas, is unusual in several respects. While not an autograph, it appears to have been a private document belonging to the composer, which is reflected in the way it has been organised by genre and not in a manner prepared for performance. While the toccatas can be performed satisfactorily as individual pieces, complete or in groups, the seven preludes, which were copied in a sequence, were clearly intended for copying into other manuscripts where they would have been grouped with other movements

not included in the manuscript to form suites (they could potentially be coupled with some of the aria arrangements that appeared, without preludes, in the collections of 1709 and 1711). The main copyist's handwriting resembles Babell's own in several respects and he or she may have been his student or a family member whom he taught. The work was corrected by another person working in pencil, who may have been Babell himself; many changes were made to accidentals and there are refinements to the voicing of chords and other alterations, including the sketchy addition of a rather unsatisfactory final cadence for the second toccata in F major. My edition provides the musical text of the corrected version and describes the more significant changes in pencil in a Critical Report. However, the Bergamo manuscript's readings should not be regarded as infallible: some significant errors were left to stand. The user can gain a more detailed impression of this source via high-definition images online.<sup>21</sup>

Babell's music requires an instrument with a fully chromatic range from GG–d<sup>3</sup> and its frequent recourse to devices such as *harpeggio* passages notated in semibreves and successive bass notes reinforced at the lower octave suggest he envisioned an instrument resonant enough to best convey these effects.<sup>22</sup> The hallmarks of Babell's arrangements are found in abundance in the toccatas, including extended cadenza-like passages in demisemiquavers. From the perspective of compositional technique, this music is flawed; harmonic structures can be awkward and Babell's habitual use of small-scale repetitions and sequential passagework at times seems excessive and mechanical. That said, it is a distinctive contribution to early 18th-century English harpsichord music that I believe is rewarding to play and to listen to.

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## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Chrysander (ed), *Sammlung verschiedener Instrumental-Werke für Orgel und Klavier; Orchester-und Kammer-Musik*, Georg Friedrich Händels Werke, 48 (Leipzig, 1894); *Suits of the Most Celebrated Lessons Collected and Fitted to the Harpsicord or Spinet*, Performers' Facsimiles, 208 (New York, 2001); Edward Smith (ed), *4 Suites of the most celebrated lessons from Handel's 'Rinaldo' and other operas by Bononcini, Gasparini, Haym, Handel for Harpsichord*, 4 vols. (Bologna, 2001); *The 3d. Book of the Ladys Entertainment*, Performers' Facsimiles, 206 (New York, 2001); *The 4th Book of the Ladys Entertainment*, Performers' Facsimiles, 207 (New York, 2001). Digital reproductions are also available online. However, the online reproductions of the 1709 and 1711 collections (Google Books) have their pages jumbled: pp.12–31 of the 1711 collection are included with pp.1–12 of the 1709 collection and pp.13–22 of the 1709 collection are included with pp.1 and 3–11 of the 1711 collection. Also, in the online reproduction of the 1711 collection, p.2 is missing. For the arrangements, see especially Sandra Mangsen, *Songs without Words: Keyboard Arrangements of Vocal Music in England, 1560–1760* (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, 2016).
- 2 I-BGi, fondo Piatti-Lochis PREIS.H1.8751. This article uses RISM sigla when referring to the locations of manuscript sources. See *Online Directory of RISM Library Sigla* <https://rism.info/community/sigla.html>.
- 3 I have argued that the manuscript is a collection of Babell's music in Andrew Woolley, "New light on William Babell's development as a keyboard composer", *Early Music*, xlvi (2018), pp.251–270.
- 4 GB-Lfom, Coke 1257.
- 5 William Babell, ed Andrew Woolley, *Toccatas, Suites and Preludes for Harpsichord* (Tynset, 2021).
- 6 Chrysander (1894), p.viii. English translation as quoted in William C. Smith, 'Handel's "Rinaldo": an outline of the early editions', *The Musical Times*, lxvi (1935), pp.689–695 at 695.
- 7 Gerald Gifford with Terence Best, "Babell [Babel], William", in Deane Root (ed), *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.
- 8 *Georg Friedrich Händel: Klavierwerke II. Suites de Pièces pour le Clavecin Zweite Sammlung von 1733*, ed Terence Best, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, series 4, vol.5 (Kassel, 1999), p.xxix. According to Best, HWV441/1 is 'quite unlike Handel's allemandes of any period, and is more likely to be the work of an English composer of the period 1700–1710'. It is not included in the Bergamo manuscript (a source unknown to Best), which seems to support the conclusion that HWV441/2–7 are by a different composer. On the authorship of HWV441/2–7, see Woolley (2018), p.261 and the literature cited therein.
- 9 Graham Pont, 'An Early 18th-Century Manuscript of Harpsichord Music: William Babell and Handel's *Vo'far Guerra*', *British Library Journal*, xxi (1996), pp.176–83; Graham Pont, 'Reminiscences of "Rinaldo": the keyboard transcriptions of "Vo' far Guerra"', *Ad Parnassum*, ix (2011), pp.7–35.
- 10 Sandra Mangsen has responded by arguing that 'while they are certainly extravagant, I do not find Babell's arrangements to be without taste or expression' (Mangsen (2016), p.154).
- 11 Full references to sources for the information in this and the next paragraph are provided in the Introduction to Babell (2021).
- 12 GB-Lbl, Add. MS 71209, f.21v–73v. Illustrated in Pont (1996), p.178. See also Peter Holman, 'Did Handel invent the English keyboard concerto?', *The Musical Times*, cxliv (2003), pp.13–22. Music for keyboard instrument alone was usually known by the term 'lesson'; the word 'solo' implies Babell was accompanied in the manner of an ensemble concerto or sonata.
- 13 For an online reproduction of the manuscript, see *Gerald Coke Handel Collection*, <https://foundling.soutron.net/Portal>. For a higher quality reproduction of the drawing, which contains a tiny prelude inserted by Babell into a panel, see Woolley (2018), p.252.
- 14 *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer* (18 May 1723).
- 15 *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer* (28 September 1723).
- 16 William Croft, ed Richard Platt, *Complete Organ Works* (Oxford, 1976); John Blow, ed Barry Cooper, *Complete Organ Music*, Musica Britannica lix (London, 1996).
- 17 London, British Library MS Add. 39569 ('Babell MS'), facsimile with Introduction by Bruce Gustafson (New York, 1987). The other is GB-Ob, Tenbury MS 1508.
- 18 GB-Lbl, Add. MS 39569.
- 19 See, for example, BWV866/1 and HWV434/1.
- 20 On Babell's Concerto/Sinfonia in A major, see Holman (2003).
- 21 'Toccatte e preludi per clavicembalo / [Georg Friedrich Händel]', *Biblioteca Digitale Lombarda*, <https://www.bdl.servizi.it/vufind/Record/BDL-OGGETTO-18200>.
- 22 See a recording by Fernando De Luca, *Handel–Babell. Bergamo Manuscript I-BGi MS XIV 8751 H.1. The Complete Recording*, freely available from De Luca's *Handel Harpsichord Room*, [https://www.saladelcembalo.org/hpd/a1.php?p=a2020\\_01](https://www.saladelcembalo.org/hpd/a1.php?p=a2020_01). The title of the recording reflects an improbable theory developed by the late Graham Pont that the toccatas could have been written by Handel. They have been attributed to Handel in modern times because of a 19th-century or early 20th-century pencil inscription on a flyleaf of the Bergamo manuscript.