

A Brief History of the Göttingen Händelfestspiele and the Göttingen Händelgesellschaft

The birth of the Handel movement in Göttingen also heralded the rediscovery of Handel's operatic output, for apart from one attempt in Hamburg in 1878, there had been no performance of an opera by the great baroque master since his death. A significant part of Handel's oeuvre, some 40 operatic compositions in all, had hence fallen into oblivion. It was Oskar Hagen (1888-1957), lecturer in the history of art in Göttingen and pupil of Engelbert Humperdinck and Heinrich Wölfflin, who initiated the German premiere of *Rodelinde*. The beginning of the Handel movement in Göttingen is thus bound up with Hagen's name, and the *Rodelinde* premiere provided the fundamental impetus for the fresh interest in Handel's operas. Hagen's initiative was not only the starting point of the Göttingen Handel Festival, but also prompted others to follow his example elsewhere, in Hannover and Münster, for example.

The historic motives for this revival are likely to have their origin in the cultural and societal situation prevailing at the time, often described as "lacking in spiritual orientation". Referring to the premiere of *Rodelinde*, Hagen stated that "the music production of today is in dire need of closer contact with the spirit and forms of its infinitely more accomplished past". The early activities were borne mainly by University bodies: Most of the non-professional singers were university members, the first concerts were performed by the Akademische Orchestervereinigung of the university, and the official host was the Universitätsbund. In accordance to Hagen's artistic emphasis on musical drama, the first events were nearly all opera performances. After *Rodelinde* came *Otto and Theophano* (1921), *Julius Caesar* (1922), *Xerxes* (1924) and *Ezio* (1926). With Handel's *Concerto grosso in F major* and Mozart's *Serenata notturna* in 1927, other musical genres, composers and periods were included.

These developments characterised the future identity of the festival but also led to a temporary stagnation in terms of operatic performances: *Julius Cesar* was presented again in 1928, but thereafter the next opera to be performed was *Parthenope* in 1935. The city theatre was the main opera venue, but there were also some open-air performances (*Acis and Galathea* in 1934).

The character of the early phase of the Festival bore the stamp of single individuals. After Oskar Hagen left in 1925, and again following the resignation in 1929 of Alfred Bertholet, dedicated Chairman of the Festival board, the Festival had to be cancelled. Nobody could be found to shoulder the task with the same commitment and determination as Hagen and Bertholet and the Handel Festival Community as a provisional organisation broke up. It is likely that these events, together with the desire for a regular, professionally organised and institutionalised event led to the foundation of the Göttingen Handel Society in 1931. Walter Meyerhoff became its first Chairman.

A notable and influential figure for the artistic development of the Festival was Hanns Niedecken-Gebhards (1889-1954). He was, with some interruptions, Director at the Handel Festival from 1922 until his death in 1954. His endeavours were characterised by the emphasis he laid on choreographic elements and the term "tänzerischer Stil" was coined. Niedecken-Gebhard`s ideas were said to create "an opera style born from the emotional dichotomy of our times, filled with its special spiritual substance". To a certain degree, his concept of stage design contained elements of Massensuggestion: He introduced a choir that was divided into three groups, one observing, one acting, and one moving, i.e. a dancing group. Paul Thiersch and later Heinrich Heckroth were the stage and costume designers, the former being influenced by Expressionism, the latter by Cubism.

In the years between 1935 and the beginning of World War II, operas were performed again, including Scipio (1937) and Ptolemäus (1938). Throughout the war years, the Handel movement was able to continue, albeit with interruptions, a severely reduced programme, and harassment by the Nazis trying to gain ideological influence. It is therefore quite remarkable that in 1946 the Festival took place once again, and with an opera as its main event: Ariadne, which was a German premiere, was staged seven times. An important factor in overcoming the difficulties of the early post war years was the continuity of the team involved: Fritz Lehmann, Artistic Director since 1934, remained in this position until 1953, and Hanns Niedecken-Gebhards continued as Festival Director. When Walther Meyerhoff died in 1976, the Göttingen Handel movement lost the last great personality from its early years.

Another important event among the numerous developments of the 1960s and 1970s was the appointment of Günther Weissenborn as Musical Director in 1960. With him, the first splendid era of the Göttingen Handel Festival after the war got under way. Many famous artists came to Göttingen under his Directorship, for example Montserrat Caballé, Theo Altmeyer, Kurt Equiluz, Frans Brüggen, Hermann Prey, Agnes Giebel, Birgit Finnilä and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

When John Eliot Gardiner became Artistic Director in 1980, he brought the Festival new impetus. In the years before his appointment and especially in the early period of the renaissance of Handel's operas, the original drafts and scores were altered in many ways and the texts translated into German. These alterations were thought to give the performances a specific individuality and psychological significance. It was also considered that a more modern interpretation would reveal the "dramatic truth" in Handel's work. Gardiner, in contrast, rejected these alterations in favour of an interpretation that was as close to the original as possible. He said: "An interpretation can only be legitimate if its purpose is to remove from the music the debris of a 200 year-old history of performances and to grasp the music with the spirit of its time by performing it according to Handel's own practices." Gardiner's interpretations of Handel's operas and oratorios, such as *Tamerlano* (1985), *Jephtha* (1988) and *Saul* (1989), also Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* (1990) and Dietrich Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu Nostri* (1987) clearly set a benchmark and secured the Göttingen Handel Festival a high standing amongst the European music festivals. The recordings of the Göttingen Handel Festivals collected numerous awards.

In recent times, with the appointment of Nicholas McGegan as Artistic Director in 1991 and Prof. Dr. Hans-Ludwig Schreiber as Chairman in 1993, Gardiner's concept has been pursued further. At the same time, a connection to the early years has been established in that the central pillars of the Festival consist once more of an opera and an oratorio. Not only did Handel's original sound come to life in *Agrippina* (1991) and, in the course of the following years, *Ottone*, *Radamisto*, *Giustino*, *Ariodante*, *Serse*, *Tolomeo*, *Arianna in Crete*, *Rodelinda*, *Partenope*, *Alcina*, *Deidamia*, *Rinaldo*, *Atalanta* and *Poros* but these magnificent productions have also done much to promote the growing interest in the composition and dramaturgy of baroque music theatre.