



Debbie Loftus, *Handel*, 2016. Engraved Tetrapak, printing ink, 30 × 28.5 cm. What's in a name? Handel (1685–1759) was born in Halle, Germany, and baptised Georg Friedrich Händel. In Italy, where he lived from 1706 to 1710, he was known as Giorgio Federico Hendel, and affectionately as *il caro Sassone* ('the dear Saxon'). In 1710 he moved to London, and eventually changed his name to George Frideric Handel.

Introduction: The Spider and the Bee

Paul Williamson

He takes other men's pebbles and polishes them into diamonds.'

That is the well-known verdict, attributed to the English composer William Boyce (1711–79), on Handel's predilection for borrowing from the works of others.¹ Not everyone was so unequivocally positive about his appropriations. Charles Jennens (1700–73), a wealthy Leicestershire landowner, assembled the biblical texts that make up the libretto of *Messiah* (1741). Indeed, it was Jennens who came up with the idea for the oratorio and devised its theological framework. He was a man of broad accomplishments, who edited Shakespeare, oversaw the extensive remodelling of Gopsall Hall, his family home 17 miles west of Leicester (demolished in 1951), and put together a 'stellar collection' of music manuscripts and printed scores.² The basis of the Aylesford Collection (named after Jennens' cousin, later the 3rd Earl of Aylesford, who inherited it) was Jennens' extensive library of works by Handel.³ He subscribed to all Handel's subscription publications, often taking several copies, and commissioned manuscripts of other works from copyists Handel employed. Jennens was, without question, a Handel fanatic, but he also eagerly collected pieces by other composers – buying published works and arranging for manuscripts to be prepared for him. His great friend and faithful correspondent Edward Holdsworth (1684–1746), a noted classical scholar and Latin poet, travelled extensively in Europe, working as a private tutor. Like Jennens, Holdsworth was a nonjuror who upheld the rights of the deposed Stuarts. Unwilling to swear the 1715 oath of allegiance to the Hanoverian monarchs, he resigned from his post at Magdalen College, Oxford, and relinquished a promising academic career. Acting as Jennens' agent, Holdsworth bought music on his travels and sent it back to England. In 1742 he wrote to Jennens from Rome, explaining how he had purchased a large portion of the renowned collection put together by Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (1667–1740):

I have bought for you above 150l weight of musick, enough to fill a large box ... I mention the weight, because as you know I am perfectly ignorant of musick, I thought it the best way to buy it as some people do Libraries by the pound, and take my chance whether it prov'd good or bad. All that I can say of it is that 'tis part

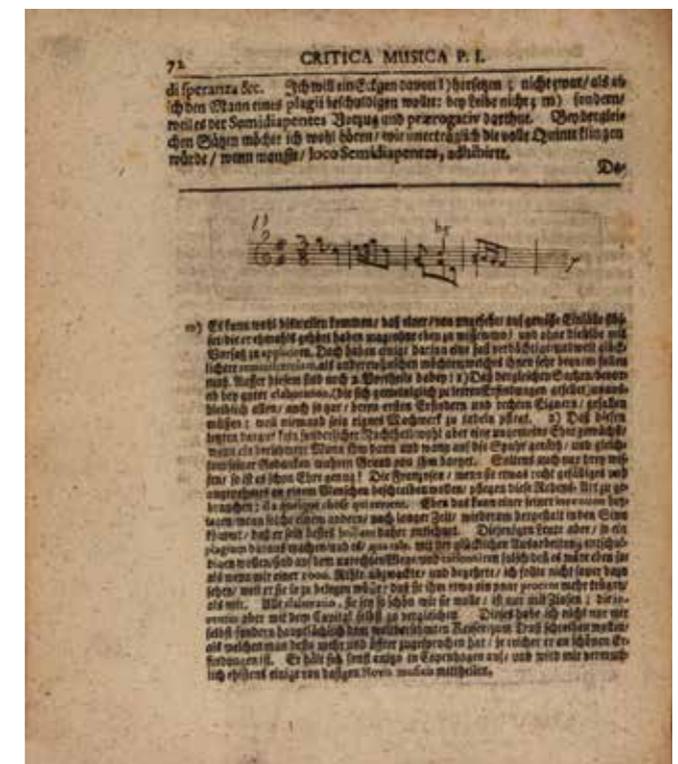
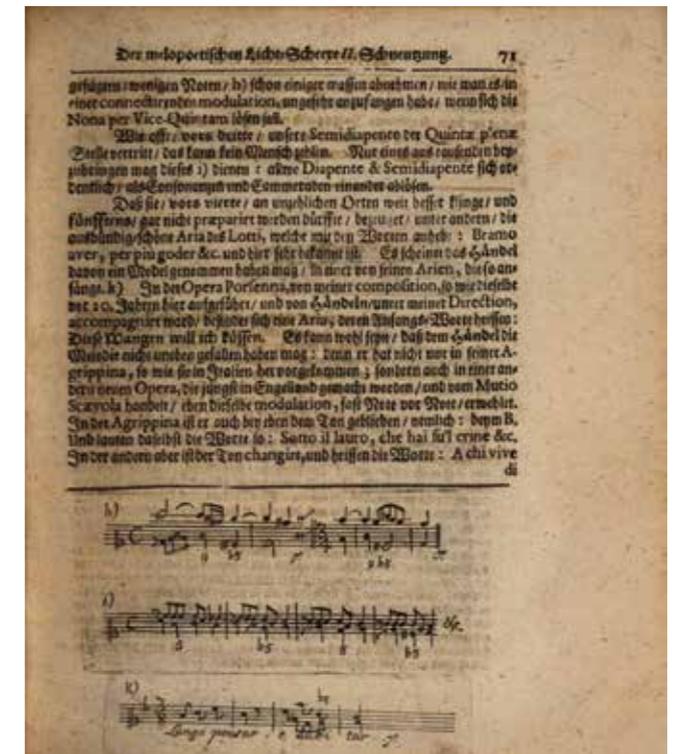
of Cardinal Ottoboni's collection; And most of it by celebrated hands, such as Scarlatti, Pollaroli, Mancini, Bencini, and Marcello. And the purchase not very great; the whole amounting to not above 40 shillings, besides the expences of sending it home, so that in case it should prove as bad as the rest you have from hence 'twill be almost worth the money for ye Housekeeper to put under pyes.⁴

Whether any of Ottoboni's treasures actually ended up lining pie tins it is impossible to say, but at thruppence ha'penny a pound this must rank as one of the greatest bargains in the history of music. And when the box arrived Handel made good use of it. Jennens reported to Holdsworth in January 1743 that Handel had borrowed some of the scores and he fully expected him to pilfer their contents:

I told you before that one of the Composers in my Box was good, I mean Scarlatti: & I shall not condemn the rest without a fair Trial. Handel has borrow'd a dozen of the Pieces, & I dare say I shall catch him stealing from them; as I have formerly, both from Scarlatti & Vinci.⁵

The first published discussion of Handel's borrowings had appeared twenty years previously in an article by the German composer and writer Johann Mattheson (1681–1764). He met Handel in 1703, when he apparently helped Handel find work as a second violinist and harpsichord player at the Hamburg opera. In 1704 they fell out. Handel was conducting from the harpsichord while Mattheson was onstage, singing the role of Antonius in his opera *Cleopatra*. After his character's suicide in Act 3, Mattheson rejoined the orchestra, intending to direct, but Handel refused to cede the podium. A quarrel ensued, and a duel was fought. It ended happily, even with a hint of comedy, when a big button on Handel's coat deflected Mattheson's sword and saved his life. The two quickly made it up, and Mattheson was afterwards pleased to stress his close ties with a friend who soon went on to become the most famous composer in Europe. He drew attention to Handel's penchant for borrowing in the July 1722 instalment of *Critica Musica*, the first ever journal devoted to music, which he had founded in May of that year. Handel, says Mattheson, took an aria from Mattheson's opera *Porsenna* (1702) and reused it 'almost note for note' in *Agrippina* (1709) and again in *Muzio Scevola* (1721).⁶ Mattheson explicitly states that he has no intention of calling Handel a plagiarist.

Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), *Critica Musica*, 1 (July 1722), pp. 71–2. On page 71 Mattheson says that Handel borrowed the melody of the aria 'Diese Wangen will ich küssen' ('These cheeks I long to kiss') from *Porsenna*. On page 72, footnote 1, he gives an example of the melody, and in note m he expatiates on general principles relating to musical borrowings. The obliques (/) that pepper the text are commas.



On the contrary, he basks in some reflected glory, mentioning the fact that Handel worked on *Porsenna* as an accompanist under his direction. Then, in a long footnote, he talks more generally about the reasons for musical borrowing: sometimes it's accidental – due perhaps to a lapse of memory on the part of the borrower; in other cases the borrower may have an exceptional ability to recall music previously heard. He also considers the feelings of the inventors and rightful owners ('Erfindern und rechten Eignern') of borrowed music: they will doubtless be pleased to find their musical thoughts well developed – particularly so when the borrower is a famous composer, for in such cases borrowing does great honour to the originator of a musical idea. Finally, however: 'All elaboration [*elaboratio*], be it never so beautiful, compares only with the interest; the invention [*inventio*] is like the capital itself.' For Mattheson the financial metaphor apparently clinched the argument. He repeated it seventeen years later in *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), his comprehensive manual for directors of music in churches, civic establishments and royal courts: 'Borrowing is permissible; but one must return the thing borrowed with interest, i.e., one must so construct and develop imitations that they are prettier and better than the pieces from which they are derived.'⁷

These varying opinions about Handel's compositional practices come at a critical juncture in the history of ideas. 'Of Property' – Book II, Chapter 5, of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) – and the Copyright Act of 1709 – the world's first copyright law – began the long and complicated process of establishing the principle that intellectual property should have the same status in law as land, real estate or any other kind of property.⁸ When Jennens says that Handel is 'stealing' the thoughts of other composers, therefore, and Mattheson finds no difficulty comparing the creations of the imagination to money, they are (wittingly or otherwise) contributing to the early stages of a legal and philosophical debate that has continued right up to the present day and shows no signs of abating. By contrast, when Boyce speaks of Handel making diamonds from other composers' pebbles, and Mattheson insists that imitations should be more attractive than the originals from which they derive, the emphasis is on *elaboratio*: the skill with which borrowed materials are redeveloped, and the quality of the work that results. This is essentially (and without pejorative connotations) a much more backward-looking position which, from the end of the seventeenth century, tied in with a debate that flared up in France in the 1690s about the relative merits of classical Greco-Roman culture compared to that of the moderns: *la querelle des anciens et*

des modernes. Champions of the ancients stressed the perfection of classical culture, particularly in the humanities: based on absolutes discovered in nature, the principles followed by the ancients were unsurpassable. To borrow from the ancients, therefore, was like borrowing from nature itself, and if the moderns sometimes seemed to see further that was only because (to use a time-honoured metaphor) they had the advantage of standing on the shoulders of giants. Conversely, those on the side of the moderns could point to scientific and technological advances unknown in the ancient world as proof of the superiority of contemporary achievements.⁹

Any art based on a categorical belief in the peerless excellence of classical models is inherently an art of borrowing. In such circumstances the practice of art becomes one of creative reimagining – studying the example set by canonic archetypes in order to produce new variations on those matchless precedents. The educated enjoyment of such art is a matter of connoisseurship – cultivating an ability to identify the taste and ingenuity with which an artist has responded to classical ideals and elaborated upon them. In such a climate the emphasis is not on originality per se, but on copying and reworking. Borrowing is not merely legitimised; it is an essential feature of artistic practice. In painting, these principles formed the basis of instruction in the many European academies of art that followed the pattern established by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris (founded in 1648). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, academy artists learned by first copying engravings, then drawing plaster casts, and eventually moving on to life drawing before finally being taught how to paint.¹⁰ 'Academic art' – it sounds like a grey amalgam but was far more varied than its reputation might suggest – was the establishment norm until at least the time of the Impressionists.¹¹

Jonathan Swift weighed into the 'quarrel' about the comparative value of ancient and modern learning with the publication in 1704 of *A Full and True Account of the Battel Fought Last Friday between the Antient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library*, known as *The Battle of the Books*.¹² This was first and foremost a defence of Swift's friend and employer, Sir William Temple, who in 1690 had published an essay championing the superiority of the ancients, in which he lavished praise on two texts, Aesop's Fables and a set of letters attributed to Phalaris, a part-legendary Sicilian tyrant who tortured his enemies by roasting them in a hollow bull made of bronze. Temple mistakenly called these the oldest extant classical prose works, dating from the time of Pythagoras (c.570–495 BC), and described the letters of Phalaris as having 'more Race, more Spirit, more Force

of Wit and Genius, than any others I have ever seen, either ancient or modern'.¹³ Richard Bentley, then keeper of the Royal Library at St James's Palace, the setting for *The Battle of the Books*, brilliantly and conclusively showed that the texts were counterfeits, written many centuries later than Temple supposed. Bentley's *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris, Themistocles, Socrates, Euripides, and Others; and the Fables of Aesop* (1697), a hugely significant contribution to textual scholarship, has been called 'a monument of Greek philology'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in *The Battle of the Books*, as a principal representative of the moderns, Bentley and his associates are on the receiving end of Swift's formidable wit. Treating the books in the Royal Library as personifications of their authors, Swift depicts the moderns asking the ancients to surrender the higher of the two peaks of Parnassus, the Greek mountain sacred to Apollo and the Muses. The onset of the ensuing battle is delayed by an argument between a spider living in a large window in the corner of the library and a bee that has flown in through a broken pane of glass and got temporarily caught up in the spider's web. Aesop himself elucidates the moral of the fable, explaining that the spider is like the moderns, who spin their learning out of their own entrails, while the bee is like the ancients who make honey from what they find in nature:

*For, pray, Gentlemen, was ever anything so Modern as the Spider in his Air, his Turns, and his Paradoxes? He argues in the Behalf of You his Brethren, and Himself, with many Boastings of his native Stock and great Genius; that he Spins and Spits wholly from himself, and scorns to own any Obligation or Assistance from without ... To all this, the Bee, as an Advocate retained by us, the Antients, thinks fit to Answer; That, if one may judge of the great Genius or Inventions of the Moderns, by what they have produced, you will hardly have Countenance to bear you out in boasting of either. Erect your Schemes with as much Method and Skill as you please; yet, if the materials be nothing but Dirt, spun out of your own Entrails (the Guts of Modern Brains) the Edifice will conclude at last in a Cobweb ... As for Us, the Antients, We are content with the Bee, to pretend to Nothing of our own, beyond our Wings and our Voice: that is to say, our Flights and our Language; For the rest, whatever we have got, has been by infinite Labor and search, and ranging thro' every Corner of Nature: The Difference is, that, instead of Dirt and Poison, we have rather chose to fill our Hives with Honey and Wax, thus furnishing Mankind with the two Noblest of Things, which are Sweetness and Light.*¹⁵

Engraved frontispiece to the 1710 edition of *The Battle of the Books* by Jonathan Swift (1667–1745). The spider and the bee are shown in the window, top left. The winged figure is Fame, carrying two trumpets: the golden trumpet of true praise and the 'posterior trumpet' of infamy or slander.

