George Frideric Handel's 1749 Letter to Charles Jennens

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A good deal of twentieth-century musical research about George Frideric Handel's great contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach has been occupied with the search for the "Bach organ." Since Bach's some 250 surviving compositions for organ are central to that instrument's repertory, modern performers and organ builders have been anxious to find out what sort of organ Bach preferred for his music. This is particularly crucial to the art of "registration," all the more so since Bach left few directions about choices of stops or changes of keyboard in his scores. About a third of the essays in the recent book *J.S. Bach as Organist*[1] are devoted to the interrelated areas of organs known and played by Bach, their survival and restoration, and questions of registration.

Had Handel remained in his native Germany with a career centered, like Bach's, in the organ loft, similar questions would have been more critical in Handel research. The principal role played by the organ in Handel's music came in his adopted Great Britain, where his introduction of the oratorio required the presence of an organ as a support for the choral sound. As Newburgh Hamilton put it in the preface to his word-book for Handel's oratorio *Samson*, Handel "so happily introduc'd here *Oratorios*, a musical Drama, whose Subject must be Scriptural, and in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage."[2] The solemn sound of church music consisted of that peculiarly English choral sound combining a choir of boy sopranos, countertenors (male altos), tenors, and basses, with the support of an organ. Handel hired his choral singers from the professional London church musicians active at the Chapel Royal, Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul's Cathedral, and the organ support to which they were accustomed came along as part and parcel of "the Solemnity of Church-Musick." With Handel presiding at the organ--or at times from a combined harpsichord and organ controlled from one keyboard[3]--it was natural that he would improvise on the organ, a time-honored part of the organist's art.

The historian Charles Burney cites two musicians--Michael Christian Festing and Thomas Augustine Arne--who heard Handel improvise during a performance of the oratorio Athalia in Oxford in 1733: they "both assured me, that neither themselves, nor anyone else of their acquaintance, had ever before heard such extempore, or such premeditated playing, on that or any other instrument."[4] The other great eighteenth-century British

Sir

Yesterday I received Your Letter in answer to which I hereunder specify my Opinion of an Organ which I think will answer the Ends You propose, being every thing that is necessary for a good and grand Organ, without Reed stops, which I have omitted, because they are continually wanting to be tuned, which in the Country is very inconvenient, and should it remain useless

on that account, it wou'd still be very expensive,
altho' that may not be your Consideration,
I very well approve of Mr Bridge who
without any Objection is a very good
Organ Builder, and I shall willingly (when
He has finish'd it) give You my Opinion of it.
I have referr'd You to the Flute stop in
Mr. Freemans Organ being excellent in
its Kind, but as I do not referr You
in that Organ, The System of the
Organ I advise is, (Vizt

The Compass to be up to D and down to Gamut,
full Octave, Church Work,
one Row of Keys, whole stops and none in halves.

Stops

An Open Diapason — of Metal throughout to be in Front.
a Stopt Diapason — the Treble Metal and the Bass Wood.
a Principal — of Metal throughout.
a Twelfth — of Metal throughout.
a Fifteenth — of Metal throughout.
a great Tierce — of Metal throughout.
a Flute Stop — such a one as in Freemans Organ.

I am glad of the Opportunity to show you my attention, wishing you all Health and Happiness, I remain with great Sincerity and Respect

Sir

Your

most obedient and most humble
Servant
George Frideric Handel

London. Sept. 30.
1749.

music historian, John Hawkins, says that Handel's practice was "to introduce [an organ concerto] with a voluntary movement on the Diapasons, which stole on the ear in a slow and solemn progression."[5] Following the practice of British organists, Handel drew the two Diapason stops--Open Diapason and Stopped Diapason--as the foundation of organ sound, improvising on this combination before he played the concerto itself, often registered as "full organ," i.e., all of the stops of the one-manual organ at his disposal.[6] Burney also mentions the improvisation of movements within the concertos, "an extempore fugue, a diapason-piece, or an adagio."[7] After the publication of complete four-movement organ concertos as Opus 4 in 1738, Handel's later concertos invariably called for improvised movements, and even improvised continuations of the solo organ part within a movement. (These concertos were posthumously published as his "Opus 7.")

Thus Handel's acclaimed improvisations had led him to create the genre of organ concerto in order to combine his art as a keyboard virtuoso with the orchestra present in the London theaters. These works were heard in the intervals between the acts of the oratorios or sometimes integrated with them.[8] Handel created the organ concerto in London much as Bach was inventing the harpsichord concerto about the same time in Leipzig, at first transcribing preexistent music for the new combination and then later writing original keyboard concertos.

The search for the sort of organ which Handel used in Britain reveals few surviving instruments which he played. The organ he used for his oratorio performances at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden--donated to the theater at his death--perished in a building fire in 1808.[9] Its specification was the same as what he recommended in the letter to Charles Jennens, though it had a trumpet stop rather than a flute. The organ Handel left to the Foundling Hospital Chapel was replaced shortly after his death, and the surviving keyboard from this latter organ was never touched by Handel, despite frequent claims to the contrary.[10] Likewise many instruments surviving nowadays at stately homes Handel visited rarely turn out to be instruments he actually played. Bach often assumed the role of consultant to advise on changes or restorations of organs or to test new instruments. Handel did the same on a lesser scale, and his letter to Charles Jennens gives us a picture of Handel the consultant, recommending the specification of an organ to an avid devotee of his music. Fortunately not only does the letter survive, but so does the organ built to Handel's design, little altered except for a controversial retuning about forty years ago.

Charles Jennens (1700-1773) was the well-to-do son of a country squire from Leicestershire

who attended Oxford, where he formed his lifelong interests in music and literature and became a devout Anglican and Nonjuror (those who could not take an oath to the monarchs after the accession of William and Mary as long as James II and his successors were alive). Jennens collaborated with Handel during the period 1738 to 1745, selecting for the composer the words of *Messiah*, likely also helping him with *Israel in Egypt*, arranging the text of Parts I and II of the ode *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* from Milton with his own text as Part III, and writing the masterful texts for the oratorios *Saul* and *Belshazzar*. This collaboration is certainly comparable to such teams as Da Ponte and Mozart or Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss. Late in life Jennens turned to editing Shakespeare, producing what were in essence the first variorum editions of five of the plays. Much of the criticism unfairly thrown at Jennens after his death by George Steevens (and taken over into such standard sources as the *Dictionary of National Biography*) has been refuted in a recent article by Ruth Smith,[11] who admirably discusses Jennens's life and achievements. Handel's letters to Jennens constitute the composer's largest surviving correspondence with any individual and, together with the recently available correspondence between Jennens and Edward Holdsworth, give a rare glimpse into Handel's working methods and professional relationships.

Jennens's father died in 1747 and Jennens set about immediately to alter Gopsall, the family house in Jacobean style, "into a splendid Palladian mansion."[12] Unfortunately the house was demolished in 1951, but a painting of it survives as do some eighty-nine drawings of the interior design (the painting is reproduced in Smith's article along with a discussion of Jennens's tastes in remodeling). Among the contents of the house would have been Jennens's library of musical manuscripts, including many volumes containing almost every note which Handel had composed (the so-called "Aylesford Collection," comprising both full scores and separate vocal and instrumental parts) and also many volumes of Italian music acquired for Jennens by his friend Edward Holdsworth during tours of Italy.[13] Jennens was capable of playing this music, for which purpose he often entered meticulous figured basses into his Handel manuscripts. He owned at least one harpsichord, another of his acquisitions from Italy, and like many other country house owners of the time he wanted an organ for Gopsall. Thus he wrote to Handel for advice, especially with regard to Richard Bridge as an organ builder, in September 1749. Handel's prompt reply of September 30 refers to the arrival of Jennens's letter "yesterday."

Handel begins by noting that he has omitted reed stops which require frequent tuning, inconvenient out of the city. Richard Bridge (fl. 1730-d.1758) is the organ builder Jennens apparently had planned to use. Handel approves of his work and adds that the sort of flute stop found in the organ belonging to Mr. Freeman[14] is to be recommended, though Handel would not recommend the builder of that organ. Handel's specifications follow the general design of British organs of the period. The compass up to D (i.e. the D on two leger lines above the treble clef) was common at this time; all of Handel's organ concertos require this note (German organs of this period usually go only to C). The bottom note is "Gamut," that

is, low G below three leger lines under the bass clef. The lack of a pedal division in British organs was partly compensated by this extended bass range, allowing a good deal of octave doubling of the bass both in solo organ playing and continuo work. By "full octave" Handel meant a compass chromatically complete from low G--G-sharp, A, B-flat, B, C, etc. Many organs of this period had a "short octave" omitting some of the less-needed low notes; since these were the largest pipes of the organ they were the most expensive to build. The inclusion of low G-sharp is rather unusual, and it was in fact included in the organ. "Church Work" refers to the scaling of the organ, Handel opting here for a rather more full sound and not the sort of chamber organ tone (with narrow pipes) found in most domestic organs. Even though a second keyboard controlling three stops was added to the organ early in its life, Handel's design called for a complete chorus on the main keyboard, rather than using some of the echo effects found in many small organs. Handel's interest in a complete chorus without special effects stops is seen in the requirement that there be "whole stops and none in halves," like the cornet and trumpet stops common in Britain in this period, which sounded only in the treble and thus were used for solo melodies but not in the building of the chorus sound.

The list of stops specified by Handel follows the British usage and terminology of the time. The two Diapasons constituted the basis of the organ sound; drawn together they produced what was usually called "soft organ." Both sounded at what we now refer to as 8-foot pitch. (This nomenclature was not used in eighteenth-century Britain since a pipe which plays low C which is about 8 feet in height, but the tallest pipe in a G-compass organ would be 10 to 12 feet in height, depending on the pitch.) The metal Open Diapason is placed "in Front" forming the visible facade of the organ. It produces characteristic organ tone, while the quicker speaking Stop Diapason gives a wooden flutey sound. Handel then adds the other stops typical of the British organ chorus, all metal pipes of the Diapason family: a Principal (sounds at 4-foot range), Twelfth (2 and 2/3-foot), Fifteenth (2-foot), and Tierce (1 and 3/5-foot).

Jennens having never married, at his death in 1773 the bulk of his music library and the organ passed to Heneage Finch, the son of Jennens's first cousin Mary Fisher. Finch was a friend of both Jennens and Handel, who sent greetings to him (he was Lord Guernsey at the time) via Jennens. By the time of Jennens's death Finch had become Third Earl of Aylesford. Thus the music manuscripts (later sold) came to Packington Hall as did Jennens's organ, which was (late in the nineteenth century?) moved into the parish church of Great Packington, St. James', which lies within the grounds of the estate, inherited by succeeding generations of Finches, Earls of Aylesford (whose eldest sons are styled Lord Guernsey). At some unknown time the organ acquired a second manual with three stops, perhaps by John Snetzler (1710-1785). The main part of the organ (the "great" division), as originally built for Jennens, is now attributed to Thomas Parker (fl. 1740s-1770s), according to a pencil note left in the organ by Michael Woodward of Birmingham. Woodward "repaired" it in 1792 at the time of its removal from Gopsall. Another source suggests that the Tierce was

replaced,[15] and if this is so, 1792 is the likely date, as mutations fell into disfavor around this time. (It is of course possible that the original Tierce pipes were left behind and are now once again in the organ; the origins of the present Tierce rank are unclear.) Much remains to be done on attribution of organs in this period, made difficult by the survival of so few unaltered examples. James Boeringer's three-volume *Organa Britannica*[16] is the most comprehensive study, based on the so-called Sperling Notebooks, a list of about 1300 British organs and their specifications compiled around 1850. The Jennens organ, at that time probably in Packington Hall, is not included as it was not in a public location.

Modern interest in hearing music on surviving instruments got a bit ahead of scholarship in the 1950s. British-born organist E. Power Biggs (1906-1977) was a leader in the performance of historical organ repertory, which he popularized during weekly radio broadcasts from Harvard University. As a recording artist for Columbia Records he set about to record organ music in its original settings--Buxtehude at Lüneburg; Mendelssohn in St. Paul's Cathedral, London; Haydn at Eisenstadt; Mozart on the Dutch organ he played while in Haarlem; and so on. Bach was at first not a large component of this series, due to many of the Bach instruments being in Communist East Germany. But the search for an instrument appropriate for the Handel concertos (to be recorded in conjunction with the two-hundredth anniversary of his death in 1959) with little difficulty netted the Great Packington organ. It had been heard in some BBC broadcasts, but attempts to play concertos with orchestra were difficult--the organ was lower than standard modern orchestral pitch. Transposing the organ part up a half-step still did not produce good results. So the decision was made to raise the pitch of the organ to modern standards, fitting the pipes with tuning sliders which could lengthen the pipes back to their original pitch if desired. The organ-building firm of N.P. Mander took this on, about the only British firm with any experience at the time with historical instruments.[17] To her credit organist Lady Susi Jeans (1911-1993) criticized this move, and in retrospect she was right--by the 1980s and 1990s there were many "original instrument" or "authentic" instrument groups which could play at the lower (Baroque) pitch level. The entire controversy has not been adequately documented, but the main points were raised in articles and letters which appeared in *The Musical Times*.[18] Early in the period of growing interest in historic instruments the problem was raised: do we leave surviving instruments untouched or do we effect enough restoration to make them usable? In the case of the Jennens organ, little had changed, and the organ was playable, being used by the parish church in Great Packington on a regular basis. Of course, the approach is now more scientific and the number of organ builders with experience in historic building methods and consequently historic restoration methods is much greater than in the 1950s.

But as distinct from large church organs known by Bach which have been repaired and rebuilt due to necessity as well as changing taste, the Great Packington organ still produces sounds close to what Handel approved (there is no evidence he visited the organ at Gopsall, though he may well have inspected and played it in London when it was finished at the builder's shop). Sitting in the BBC archives probably are recordings made before the

alteration of the tunings. The Biggs recording of the concertos, with Adrian Boult conducting, has been issued several times on long-playing records by Columbia and recently remastered onto compact disc.[19] One record in a series of the Handel concertos by Simon Preston, organist, with Yehudi Menuhin conducting was made at Great Packington around 1970.[20] A more recent digital recording of solo organ music, including Handel's "Six Fugues or Voluntarys" (HWV 605-610), was made there by Ton Koopman.[21] Together Handel's letter and the Great Packington organ constitute an interesting chapter in the story of Handel as an organist, as well as a fascinating case study (yet to be written) in modern attempts at the restoration and use of old instruments.

[1] George Stauffer and Ernest May, eds., *J. S. Bach as Organist: His Instruments, Music, and Performance Practices* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[2] Cited in a number of Handel biographies and studies; the standard reference is Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York: 1955, R/1974), p. 559.

[3] Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey ... in Commemoration of Handel* (London: 1785, R/1964), Introduction, p. 8.

[4] Ibid., "Sketch of the Life of Handel,"
p. 23.

[5] Sir John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London: Novello, 1776; page references to the 1853 edition, R/1963), p. 912.

[6] See William D. Gudger, "Registration in the Handel Organ Concertos," *The American Organist*, xix/2 (February 1985): 71-73.

[7] "Sketch of the Life of Handel," p. 23.

[8] For more on the Handel organ concertos, see Gudger, "Handel and the Organ Concerto," in Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks, eds., *Handel: Tercentenary Collection* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 271-78.

[9] The most thorough survey of organs known and played by Handel is still W. L. Sumner, "George Frederick Handel and the Organ," *The Organ*, xxxviii (April 1959): 171-79; xxxix (July 1959): 37-44.

[10] On the complicated history of organs in the Foundling Hospital, see James Boeringer, *Organa Britannica: Organs in Great Britain 1660-1860* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983-1989), vol. 2, pp. 261-65

[11] Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music and Letters*, lxx (May

1989): 161-90.

[12] Ibid., p. 166.

[13] Described in detail by John H. Roberts, "The Aylesford Collection," in Terence Best, ed., *Handel Collections and Their History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 39-85.

[14] Identified by Deutsch, op. cit., p. 676, as William Freeman, an admirer of Handel, who lived in Hamels, Herfordshire.

[15] See Stanley Webb, "A Handel Organ Restored," The Musical Times, cix (December 1968): 1154.

[16] See above, note 10.

[17] Biggs himself wrote about the controversy stirred by this decision in the article "Organ Designed by Handel Stirs a Teapot Tempest," *The Diapason*, 1 (January 1959): 8.

[18] See Stanley Webb's aricle, cited above in note 12, then Susi Jeans's letter (cx [February 1969]: 154; further letters (cx [April 1969]: 375, [June 1969]: 622-23 and [July 1969]: 740). An article by Noel Mander, "Restoring Old Organs," (cx [April 1969]: 420-21), sparked more letters and replies (cx [July 1969]: 740-41 and [August 1969], 834) and Susi Jeans's article, "The 'baroquizing' of English organs," cx (August 1969): 870-71. The editor of *The Musical Times* closed the correspondence on the Great Packington organ with a letter by Paul Kenyon (cx [September 1969]: 934), while on the same page there was a letter about Jeans's "baroquizing" article, which generated further correspondence in the October, November, and December issues. Additional unpublished correspondence, much of it from the time of the controversy in the late 1950s, exists in the Lady Susi Jeans Centre for Organ Historiography at the University of Reading, which also holds a recording made by her at Great Packington. More on Lady Jeans will be found in Robert Judd, ed., *Aspects of Keyboard Music: Essays in Honour of Susi Jeans* (Oxford, 1992).

[19] CBS Odyssey, MB3K 45825, unfortunately without any of the interesting liner notes and photographs issued with the original long-playing records, issued by Columbia under various numbers singly and in collected sets.

[20] Record 3 in the 4-record set, EMI SLS 824, also issued singly.

[21] Capriccio 10 254, recorded in 1988.