

THE VOCAL DUETS OF G. F. HANDEL AND HIS ITALIAN CONTEMPORARIES (C. 1706-1724)

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This is the summary of the doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Professor Silke Leopold and defended at the Department of Musicology (Musikwissenschaftliches Seminar), Heidelberg University, on February 1, 2017. It has meanwhile been published in revised form as an open access / print-on-demand monograph by heiBOOKS, a publishing platform of Heidelberg University Library.¹⁰ Its main starting point is the oft repeated claim that the vocal duets of G. F. Handel are distinguished by a greater musical and dramaturgical diversity when compared to the duets of his contemporaries. In an article published in 2000 Michele Calella pointed out the need to verify this hypothesis through a detailed comparison of Handel's duets with the ones written by Italian composers active in London at the same time as him, since these figures of music history have not received the same level of detailed scholarly attention.

Although placing opera duets at the centre of its interest, *The Vocal Duets of G. F. Handel and His Italian Contemporaries (c. 1706-1724)* attempts to carry out the suggested comparison on a broader level, encompassing different Italian secular vocal genres. The dissertation contains four chapters: 1. *Introduction*, 2. *Chamber duet*, 3. *Dramatic genres*, 4. *List of music examples* and 5. *Bibliography*. Each chapter consists of numerous subchapters, but chapters 2 and 3 are the most lengthy with as many as four levels of division. They reflect the two main genre traditions at the heart of the study, that of the chamber duet and that of the so-called dramatic duet, i.e. a component of genres such as opera, cantata and *serenata*. The reason for this is that the chamber duet in Handel's time was strongly predetermined by the contribution of his notable predecessor Agostino Steffani as the exemplary composer in the genre, whose influence on not only Handel but his Italian contemporaries as well, was crucial. The investigation of the dramatic duet, on the other hand, concentrates on London in the period 1706-1724 in order to explore to what extent Handel's treatment of duets differs from the contributions by his Italian contemporaries, who were either active in London at the time or whose works were performed parallel to his.

Since the period of his stay in Italy (1706-1710) had a decisive impact on Handel's contribution to the genres described above, the introductory Chapter 1 exam-

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ines the problem of an Italian influence on the composer's works, with a particular emphasis on his important predecessor in dramatic genres, Alessandro Scarlatti and on questions of borrowing or parody. However, it is concluded that neither of these aspects is crucial for the methodology of the main part of the study. The circle of Italian contemporaries with whom Handel can be compared is narrowed down to composers between 15 and 25 years older than him, mainly because younger composers wrote in a contrasting, more novel style important for Handel's oeuvre from the 1730s onwards. Therefore, if one is to draw fruitful conclusions from a comparison between Handel and his Italian contemporaries by taking into consideration both the dramatic and the chamber duet, it is more sensible to limit oneself to the first third of the 18th century, since the culmination of the latter genre's development occurs in this period.

The composers in question are, first and foremost, Giovanni Bononcini and Francesco Gasparini, important both as substantial representatives of the chamber duet and whose works were performed in London, but also Francesco Mancini, Giovanni Porta, Antonio Lotti and Francesco Durante. The time frame for the investigation of the dramatic duet takes as its starting point the year 1706, when Italian opera first began to be performed in London and 1724 as its closing point. This is when Bononcini left the *Royal Academy of Music* and therefore strengthened Handel's position at the fore of London's operatic life. In the realm of the chamber duet, both pieces written earlier than this period, e.g. at the turn of the 18th century, are included so as to explain the foundations on which composers in the main period under study built on.

A chamber duet is the setting of a lyric text for two voices. It makes use of the same compositional techniques (alternating statements by the voices, their contrapuntal combining and parallelism) as a dramatic duet, but in a different proportion. The selection of chamber duets by A. Steffani examined in subchapter 2.2 is distinguished by diversity in terms of setting and structural and formal techniques, including elements of the cantata such as solo sections. Nevertheless, they have acquired exemplary status within the genre due to the mostly polyphonic working out of the melodic material and their structuring by stringing up duet movements of contrasting tempos and characters in the manner of a sonata. Unlike Steffani's, all of Handel's chamber duets belong to the latter type, with the difference that they contain a smaller number of movements but expand them formally, often elaborating the material more consistently. In contrast to Handel's, the chamber duets by his Italian contemporaries Durante, Lotti, Gasparini and Bononcini analysed in subchapter 2.4 are characterised by an even higher degree of diversity than Steffani's, especially when it comes to their formal typology. Whereas Bononcini intensively permeates his chamber duets with elements from dramatic genres such as opera, Gasparini's are more like Handel's, with the significant difference that the Italian composer strives less for regularity and con-

sistency in the application of certain techniques, which makes his essays in the genre no less interesting.

Charles Burney's distinction between duets of the »old plan« and duets of the »modern plan« plays an important part in the analysis of dramatic duets. Whereas duets of the »old plan« are imitative, duets of the »modern plan« are distinguished by extensive alternating statements of the soloists, rendering both of their texts perfectly comprehensible. Although made relative by the sheer diversity of the examples in the dissertation, Burney's distinction is still of prime importance for Chapter 3. The dramatic duet is examined in three periods of the presence of Italian opera in London: the first one in 1706-1710 (subchapter 3.2), the second one in 1711-1717 (subchapter 3.3) and the third one comprising the first five seasons of the first permanent operatic company in London, the *Royal Academy of Music* (1720-1724, subchapter 3.4). In the first period, from the initial tendency to adapt Italian operas by translating libretti to English, one gradually encounters a rapprochement with the ideals of operatic reform by excluding comic characters and a transition to a professionalised performance by the replacement of English singers with Italian *virtuosi*. Examples of dramatic duets from this period still display considerable dramaturgical, structural and formal diversity, but a process of standardisation begins to take place, continuing in the second period.

In 1711-1717, duets for the main protagonists of an opera (most often the *primo uomo* and the *prima donna*) in situations of dramatic unity becomes the norm, and these duets are most often in *da capo* form, both voices bringing forth the same material. While in the first period single-authored operas by Bononcini and Scarlatti, with varying degrees of adaptation, were the most prevalent, in the second period, pasticcis, operas comprising numbers from different operas by several different composers were also performed alongside the operas of Handel's. The singers, whose ranks were increasingly occupied by Italian stars, often influenced the selection of numbers in these operas, and although in the case of arias their individual preference are evident, it is less clear what directed the choice of duets in pasticcis. In relation to the great diversity of dramatic duets written during his stay in Italy, during his first London years Handel developed a prototype of dramatic duet in which the interaction of the voices and the orchestral accompaniment is enhanced with *concertante* techniques. At the same time he was gradually standardising the sequence and the ratio of the three above mentioned compositional techniques.

Finally, the overview of the third and most crucial period of the development of dramatic duets in London is treated as a comparison between Bononcini's and Handel's dramatic duets written for the *Royal Academy of Music*. In his duets composed before the 1720s Bononcini did not pursue a development of his melodic material to the extent Handel did, but in works composed for less public, more private audiences he still strove for unconventional solutions to the problem of the

duet. In London he intensely cooperated with Paolo Rolli, an ambitious man of letters who shared certain reform tendencies with the composer, which reflects on the exceedingly dialogic duet texts he wrote for Bononcini, nevertheless building on the tradition of strophic form from the 17th century. In this period Handel worked together more with Nicola Haym, who was inclined to adapt his libretto writing to the wishes of composers, which often meant reworking older libretti. However, in spite of different working methods and musical styles of the two composers, from the moment when they were in a relationship of rivalry for the graces of the audience of the *Royal Academy of Music*, a certain interdependence between their dramatic duets can be identified. This is at its most evident in the pasticcio *Muzio Scevola*, whose second act was written by Bononcini and the third by Handel. In addition to approximating some aspects of Bononcini's style in his own specific way, Handel developed a specific duet type in parallel, the 'pathetic', minor mode duet for the two protagonists in adversity that will have pride of place after Bononcini's departure from the *Royal Academy of Music*.

Even though on the surface they seem related, the comparison of the chamber and the dramatic duets by Handel on the one hand and his slightly older Italian contemporaries on the other shows that with the exception of the application of contrapuntal, imitative techniques they have little in common. In his chamber duets Handel was more interested in perfecting his skills as a composer, whereas some of the successors of Agostino Steffani were more ready to experiment, one can conclude that in his dramatic duets Handel indeed often strove to reflect the specificities of the dramatic situation or the inner world of his characters. In terms of the variety of techniques employed, neither of the composers matches him, although some of them, especially Gasparini in his chamber duets and Bononcini in his dramatic duets come close, but from an entirely different angle. However, the concluding remarks on this comparative research need to bear in mind that unlike some of his Italian colleagues, Handel created for himself in London the social and cultural conditions that enabled him to achieve this, among other things.