

Meet the Composer

George Frideric Handel

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685; a few weeks before Johann Sebastian Bach was born. Although they were both German Lutherans and organists, the two never met. Bach lived in Germany his entire life, but Handel moved on.

George loved music and showed great talent as a child. But his father wanted him to be a lawyer. George's mother helped him practice his



harpichord in secret, which they hid in the attic. One day George's father took him for a visit where he worked as a royal barber-surgeon. The Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels, for whom George's father worked, was very impressed when he heard George play the organ! He commanded Handel's father to find the best possible music training for the boy. George began to study with Friedrich Zachow, a church organist in Halle, Germany. George studied music composition from Zachow, as well as organ, violin, oboe, and harpichord.

When George was seventeen, he entered law school as his father insisted, but he didn't stay long. Music was tugging him away. He became a church organist in his hometown Halle, and then worked at the Hamburg

The stories behind Handel's music

- In 1717, Handel's *Water Music* was first performed at a royal party given by King George I, which took place on a barge floating down the Thames. A second barge carried the musicians.
- Handel composed *Zadok the Priest* for the coronation (crowning ceremony) of King George II in 1727. It has continued to be used for the coronation of all British royalty.
- Handel wrote many Italian operas and made Italian opera very popular in England. When it became less popular, he composed many oratorios.*
- Handel's oratorio *Messiah* was premiered in Dublin, Ireland, in 1742. It was heavily advertised as the greatest work of music ever composed. Because a huge crowd was expected, ladies were encouraged not to wear their dress hoops, and men to leave their swords at home. The story goes that at England's premiere of *Messiah*, King George II was so moved by the "Hallelujah Chorus" that he stood, followed by the rest of the audience (because everyone had to stand whenever the king stood). A tradition was begun, which still takes place today.
- *Music for the Royal Fireworks* was first performed in London's Green Park in 1749 to celebrate the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. More than 12,000 people attended, and King George II viewed the celebration from the River Thames.

***Oratorio:** A large musical story for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra in concert format. Unlike opera, oratorios are performed without costumes, sets, or acting.

Opera House as a violinist, and later as a harpichordist. He travelled throughout Europe performing on the organ.

In 1706, Handel moved to Italy, where he met the great Italian composer Domenico Scarlatti, who was born the same year as Handel and Bach. Handel and Scarlatti had a duel on harpichord and organ. The two were declared equal as harpichordists. Handel won as organist. Scarlatti himself declared Handel the winner, saying that until he heard Handel play the organ, he had not understood the instrument.

Handel moved back to Germany in 1710 for a short time, and then moved to England, where he composed his opera *Rinaldo*. It was such a success

that Handel's music became very popular in England, inspiring the queen to pay him a yearly salary.

Handel kept his personal life very private, so little is known. He never married, and there was only rumor about lady friends, especially Italian singers. He had a bad temper, but he was also kind and frequently gave away money to those in need. He had a clever sense of humor.

Handel became blind later in life, but continued playing organ and had someone write down his music while he continued composing. He died at the age of seventy-four in England. The entire country mourned for the composer, and more than 3,000 people attended his funeral. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.