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Author(s): William A. Frosch

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Moods, Madness, and Music. II. Was Handel Insane?

WILLIAM A. FROSCH, M. D.

GEORGE Frideric Handel was the first of the great independent, entrepreneurial composers. His predecessors, such as Buxtehude and Pachelbel, his great contemporaries Bach and Telemann, and even some of his successors—Haydn for most of his life and Mozart in the beginning of his career—were the hirelings of either church or state. In the church they were monastics or priests, or served as kapellmeisters; for the state they served in princely households or regimental bands. They were expected to produce set pieces for particular occasions: music to order. Bach put together a cantata for Sunday services, a passion for Easter, and received his regular church salary. Haydn wrote symphonies for Prince Esterhazy's entertainments. Composers were dependent on the pleasurable response and approval of one individual, or perhaps of a small group of church elders. For example, it has been suggested that Haydn wrote such merry music because his prince wished him to do so. While in London after leaving princely service, he is reported to have said, "How sweet is some degree of liberty! I had a kind prince, but was obliged at times to be dependent on base souls. I often sighed for release and now have it in some measure."¹ Composers served and were seen as servants. Perhaps early in his career Handel felt as Haydn did. Handel's later years were different: he achieved early fame and then moved to London where he was able to set out on an independent path musically. As Mattheson wrote in 1740: "He has . . . no definite appointment or service at the Court . . . but maintains his state, and that indeed no mean one, from operas, concerts, an occasional music for the Coronation and the like."²

¹ Roy Porter. *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*. (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 261.

² Otto Erich Deutsch. *Handel: A Documentary Biography*. (London, 1955), p. 505.

Handel's fame continued throughout his life. He is likely to have been the first artist whose statue was erected in his lifetime, done by Roubiliac and installed in Vauxhall Gardens in May 1738 when Handel was 53. His burial in Westminster Abbey was attended by 3,000 mourners. He was the first composer to have been the subject of a full book-length biography, published anonymously by Mainwaring in 1760, a year after Handel's death.³

Great men's lives often become the stuff of myth, and Handel's was no exception. The Handelian myths include serious solemn religiosity; an asexual life in the service of his music; two bankruptcies, in 1737 and 1745; a series of paralytic strokes; and mental disorder. Regarding the latter, Keynes, for example, has suggested that Handel had clear depressive episodes in 1729, 1734, 1737, 1743, and 1745;⁴ Slater and Meyer have concluded that he was cyclothymic to a marked degree and probably genetically disposed to manic-depressive illness.⁵ I do not believe the available data support these conclusions.

Historians eager to correct biographical myth by data are often too careful and cautious when it comes to the question of illness. Unfortunately, physicians, who may understand the medical issues, are too often, when they attempt to write history, merely doctors at play. Lacking training in the techniques of historical research, they are prone to egregious errors, accepting myth for history or mistaking the singular for the general. They too often accept post hoc description as contemporary truth. Psychiatrists, particularly, should be aware of the distortions of memory. Samuel Johnson pointed out that "He who does not make the experiment . . . will scarcely believe how much a few hours take from certainty of knowledge, and distinctiveness of imagery; how the succession of objects will be broken, how separate parts will be confused, and how many particular features and discriminations will be compressed and conglobated into one gross and general idea."⁶ Similarly, in the introduction to his monumental and masterful

³ John Mainwaring. *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*. London: 1760. New York: Da Capo Press, 1980.

⁴ Milo Keynes. "Handel's Illnesses." *Lancet* Dec 20/27, 1980: 1354-1355.

⁵ E. Slater and A. Meyer. Contributions to a pathography of the musicians. II. Organic and Psychotic disorders. *Confin Psychiatry*, 3: 129-145, 1960.

⁶ Samuel Johnson. "A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland." *Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. R. W. Chapman, Ed., 1924. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. 133.

documentary biography of Handel, Deutsch states that “The collection of all available documents presents a very different picture of a life from that offered by such random selections. . . . It is not only the comparative completeness of facts and documents that makes such records a reliable substitute for more entertaining historical representations; it is the cumulative truth that results from chronological documentation”⁷—and especially, I would add, from contemporaneous sources. Even contemporaneous data are not *the* truth, but, too often, at best, *a* truth. A letter describing an event will be affected, for instance, by the mood of the reporter and the purpose of the report. As Deutsch properly suggests, we must look for congruent and consistent contemporaneous descriptions. We also must be aware that the past is not merely the present “back then” and be careful not to examine the available data in the context of our own era.

Handel was born in Halle in 1685. His family was middle-class, upwardly mobile, and, in its way, distinguished. His father was a well-known physician with princely appointments whose first wife was the widow of his mentor. Of their six children, two daughters married physicians and the two sons who survived to adulthood also became doctors. The elder Handel’s second wife was the daughter of the local pastor. Of their four children, two survived to adulthood: Sophia, who married a local lawyer (and whose daughter married the professor of law at Halle University), and Georg Friederich. There were no other musicians in the family; nor is there evidence of mental illness.

Handel grew up in Halle, presumably attending one of the two good schools, most likely the public *Stadtgymnasium*. Accompanying his father on his princely professional rounds to the ducal court at Weissenfels, the young Handel managed to impress the duke himself, who encouraged the father—who may have been somewhat reluctant—to support his son’s musical studies. Thereupon, at about the age of ten, Handel began to study with Zachow, a distinguished musician and teacher in Halle, whose place as organist and composer at the Marienkirche the boy would sometimes take.

On his father’s death, Handel, then age twelve, wrote a set of verses for the traditional printed mourners’ book, which he signed, “Georg Friedrich Handel, dedicated to the liberal arts.” At seven-

⁷ Otto Erich Deutsch. *Op. cit.* xii.

teen he registered at Halle University while also serving as the paid organist at the Domkirche. During this period Lutheran pietism was a significant feature of university life.⁸ August Hermann Francke, professor of theology there from 1692 to 1726, believed that the pastorate should be a career open to talent, even among the poor. Therefore, through patronage, he created a number of “free tables” (in effect, scholarships) for theology students. In return, the students became teachers in an orphanage and other secondary schools. Supervised by an “inspector,” they submitted periodic conduct reports describing their “entire manner of living” and how they “disposed of the entire week from hour to hour.”⁹ One might guess that Handel was aware of the marked contrast to his own independence and imagine that this may well have strengthened a resolve to be free of the restraints inherent in the patronage system.

In 1703 Handel made the first of his three major professional moves, this one to Hamburg, then a center of German musical life with one of the earliest civic opera houses in Northern Europe. His previous musical exposure, to German church music, was now supplemented by Venetian opera and French ballet. He played violin in the opera house and on occasion conducted from the harpsichord. He became a close friend of the musician and later critic Johann Mattheson. This was a complex relationship enlivened by envy and a duel. Mattheson later described Handel as “inclined by nature to dry Jokes.”¹⁰ Handel remained in Hamburg until 1706, long enough to have two operas produced in one year. The first, *Almira*, was a success and had some twenty performances; the second, *Nero*, was a flop. Handel departed for Italy in 1706 “on his own bottom,”¹¹ that is, without princely sponsorship.

The composer remained in Italy until 1710, visiting Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice for extended periods. He performed and composed for, among others, cardinals and Medicis, the princes of both church and state; and he was quickly acclaimed as “*il caro Sassone*,”¹² the beloved Saxon. On hearing Handel play,

⁸ Anthony J. La Vopa. “Vocations, Careers, and Talent: Lutheran Pietism and Sponsored Mobility in Eighteenth-Century Germany.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, 2 (April, 1986): 255-286.

⁹ La Vopa. p. 262-263.

¹⁰ John Mainwaring. Op. cit. 54-65.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 41.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 53.

Domenico Scarlatti is said to have cried, "It is either the Devil or the Saxon." He knew both Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti and Corelli, and perhaps Vivaldi and Albinoni. In Rome he is presumed to have been a welcome guest at the Arcadian Academy, a prestigious self-elected group of artists and aristocrats masquerading as classical shepherds. While in Italy he produced an oratorio, several operas, and cantatas in profusion and to great acclaim. In 1710, at the age of 25, he returned to Germany with an established reputation as a virtuoso keyboard performer and as a composer of significance. Mainwaring has left us a description of his playing: ". . . but what distinguished him from all other players who possessed these same qualities (an uncommon brilliancy and command of finger), was that amazing fulness, force, and energy, which he joined with them."¹³

He made his way to Hanover, where he was appointed kapellmeister to the Elector of Hanover, later George I of England. The Dowager Electress Sophia (James I's granddaughter) wrote to the Queen of Prussia on June 16, 1710, "Here there is no news save that the Elector has taken into his service a kapellmeister named Handel, who plays the harpsichord marvellously to the enjoyment of the Electoral Prince and Princess [later George II and Queen Caroline]. He is a good-looking man and the talk is that he was the lover of Victoria."¹⁴ By October he had the elector's permission to go to England, his last and major musical move. In England he wrote, supposedly in two weeks, the opera *Rinaldo*. A critical and public success, it received numerous performances, and its arias appeared promptly in print.

In 1711 he returned to Hanover and then, again with the elector's permission, went to London in 1712; thereupon he made England his permanent home, leaving it only for brief periods at a time. (He became a naturalized English citizen by Act of Parliament in 1727.) On his return, he wrote several new operas, *Queen Anne's Birthday Ode*, and the *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* celebrating the Treaty of Utrecht; and the queen granted him an annual pension of £200. During the next three or four years, perhaps 1715 to 1718, he was presumably the guest of Lord Burlington, the noted patron, connoisseur, and amateur architect and designer. At

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 54-65.

¹⁴ Jonathan Keates. *Handel: The Man and His Music*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1985. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986. 50.

Burlington's house and at his Palladian-style country retreat at Chiswick, Handel must have mingled with the architect, landscape gardener, and painter William Kent; with Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot; and with John Gay, who wrote of the Burlington household:

"There Hendel [sic] strikes the Strings,
the melting Strain Transports the Soul,
and thrills through ev'ry Vein; . . ."¹⁵

On Queen Anne's death in 1714, the elector moved to London as King George I. He is said to have renewed Handel's pension or perhaps to have doubled it to £400 a year. Handel is presumed to have spent most of the years 1718 to 1720 at the Duke of Chandos's lavish establishments on Albemarle Street and at Canons. While living with the duke he wrote the pastoral *Acis and Galatea*; an oratorio, *Esther*, his eleven *Chandos Anthems*; and harpsichord lessons, chamber music, and concertos as well.

An attempt to revive Italian opera, stimulated by powerful nobles and gentlemen and supported by the king, began in 1718. The Royal Academy of Music, a joint-stock company, was created. The king pledged a bounty of £1000 each year. The subscribers included seven dukes, a marquis, and twelve earls. In 1719 Handel received a commission to travel to Europe to engage singers; and in 1720 the academy's first season opened. Although the academy opera failed in 1728, there had been nearly 500 performances, and just over half of these offered Handel's fourteen operas written for the academy. The subscribers to the Royal Academy of Music then relinquished the direction of the opera to Handel and to the theater manager, Heidegger. Handel's duties did not change significantly in the 1730s: he recruited new singers and continued to write and present operas. Although perhaps financially hurt, he does not appear to have changed his style of life.

During these years he became music teacher to the royal princesses (for another £200 a year), wrote the coronation anthems for King George II, produced several oratorios, and visited Oxford at the university's request, although an offer of an honorary degree was refused. In 1734 opposition to Handel's musical domination and manner precipitated a crisis in London's operatic

¹⁵ John Gay. "Trivia: or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London." 1716. In: Otto Erich Deutsch, Op. cit. 70.

world. A coterie of the aristocracy eager to put Handel to rout established a rival company. Battling within the royal house added to the battling between the opera houses. Support for the Opera of the Nobility by the Prince of Wales was undoubtedly calculated in part to annoy King George and Princess Anne, Handel's powerful enthusiasts. London could not support two opera companies and both were halted in 1737. Although financially pressed, as he was again in 1745 when his oratorio subscription series failed, current evidence, in the form of bank accounts and estimates of income and expenses, suggests neither bankruptcy nor even a need to curtail seriously his way of life. Certainly the £600 a year from royal pensions and tutoring were an important financial buffer. However, although it is unlikely that he ever received more than £400 a year, Porter estimates that a gentleman needed only £300 a year to live in decent style.¹⁶

In 1741–42 Handel accepted an invitation from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to visit Dublin; there he gave a series of acclaimed concerts, including the first performances of *Messiah*. From his return to London until his death in 1759, he gave annual oratorio seasons. His eyesight began to fail in 1751, and he was blind, despite surgery, by 1753; however, he continued to conduct and perform. His last public performance took place eight days before his death. He was described at that performance as “. . . apparently in great suffering; but when he came to his concerto he rallied, and kindling as he advanced, descanted extemporaneously with his accustomed ability and force.”¹⁷ He then took to his bed for a composed, dignified death.

Considerably less is known about Handel's inner life than about his public life and professional career, but what information we do have concerning the type of person he was is remarkably consistent. Clearly he was intelligent, well brought up, and well educated. “No man ever told a story with more effect. But it was requisite for the hearer to have a competent knowledge of at least four languages—English, French, Italian, and German, for in his narrative he made use of them.”¹⁸ (He also knew Latin.) Early in

¹⁶ Roy Porter. Op. cit. Conversion Tables. N. pag.

¹⁷ Jonathan Keates. Op. cit. 308. Unfortunately, Keates does not provide a source for this quotation.

¹⁸ Dr. W. C. Quinn. “To Charles Burney.” 1788. Letter in *Handel: A Celebration of His life and Times, 1685-1759*. Ed. Jacob Simon. London: National Portrait Gallery, 1985. 35.

life he was described as well built and comely, but as can be seen in later portraits, his well-known delight in the joys of the table had begun to take its toll: "A large made and very portly man. . . ." ¹⁹ "He was large in person, and his natural corpulency . . . increased as he advanced in life." ²⁰ People who knew him early in his life, such as Mattheson, and those who knew him late, such as Burney and Quinn, all commented on his wit: "He made the gravest people laugh"; ²¹ "His natural propensity to wit and humour, and happy manner of relating common occurrences, in an uncommon way, enabled him to throw persons and things into very ridiculous attitudes. Had he been as great a master of the English language as Swift, his bon mots would have been as frequent, and somewhat of the same kind;" ²² "with his other excellences, [he] was possessed of a great stock of humour." ²³ Nowhere, it should be noted, is there a suggestion of Swift's cruelty in Handel's humor. On the failure of the oratorio *Theodora*, he is reported to have said that "the Jews will not come to it . . . because it is a Christian story; and the Ladies will not come because it [is] a virtuous one." ²⁴ Humor is associated with maturity and psychological health. ²⁵ Certainly his humor does not seem to have interfered with his friendships or with his working relationships with musicians—these were close and lasting. Despite the physical separation from his family, he maintained continuing

¹⁹ Lady Shaftesbury. "To James Harris." *Ibid.* 34.

²⁰ William Coxe. *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith*. London: 1799. 26.

²¹ Johann Mattheson. *George Friderich Handel's Lebensbeschreibung*. 1761. In *Handel: A Celebration of His Life and Times*, Op. cit. 35.

²² Charles Burney, Mus.D., F.R.S.. "Sketch of the Life of Handel." In: *Handel: A Celebration of His Life and Times*. Op. cit. 35.

This description by Burney raises an interesting question of what might be called the iconography of description. For example, Thomas Tyers wrote of Samuel Johnson that he had an unrivaled ability to put "the commonest things in the newest manner." (In: Bate, Walter Jackson. *Samuel Johnson*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. p. 66). Similarly, according to Burney (who was also a friend of Johnson), "Handel's general look was somewhat heavy and sour; but when he *did* smile, it was his sire the sun, bursting out of a black cloud." Boswell quotes an almost identical description of Samuel Johnson. (Unfortunately I can no longer find the exact quote.) Were Handel and Johnson really so similar, or was there a then-current vocabulary of description of acknowledged great men? Perhaps even contemporaneous sources must be regarded as possibly clichéd and certainly suspect.

²³ Dr. W. C. Quinn. Op. cit.

²⁴ Thomas Morrell. "Letter to . . ." c. 1764. In Deutsch, Otto Erich. Op. cit. 852.

²⁵ George E. Vaillant. "Natural history of male psychological health: The relation of choice of ego mechanisms of defense to adult adjustment." *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1976, 33: 535-545.

ties through visits and by correspondence. After his sister's death, he continued to communicate with his brother-in-law and sent his niece engagement and wedding presents; on his death she received the remainder of his estate after his bequests. In 1754, 53 years after they met, Handel was still writing to Telemann and even sent him a gift of exotic plants for his botanic collection. Mary Granville first met Handel in 1710–11 when she was ten and he was on his first visit to London: they remained close friends until his death, visiting each other despite the difference in social position. When she was 84 she attended the Handel Commemoration at Westminster Abbey; "The effect was wonderful. . . . [I heard] it *four* times."²⁶ His singers, members of the orchestra, and copyists were well paid and worked with him for many years. His servants stayed with him, were treated generously, and were remembered in his will.

Despite the social ambiguity of his position in a hierarchically structured world, Handel apparently mixed easily in a variety of settings: the upper reaches of the Vatican, the royal court, the pleasure palaces of rich nobles, the strange stage-set world of the opera house, and ordinary middle-class households. There are, I believe, clear hints in letters and diaries of an easy social conviviality that made him a welcome guest at country house and party. He seems to have been welcomed as person as well as performer.

Certainly Handel was no saint: There were people he did not like. A number of contemporary anecdotes comment on his temper: "He was irascible, impatient of contradiction, but not vindictive; jealous of his musical pre-eminence, and tenacious in all points, which regarded his professional honour."²⁷ All the recorded instances, however, are set in the context of music making and his concern for the musical product. For example, "at the rehearsals of his oratorios . . . if the Prince and Princess of Wales were not exact in coming to the Music-room, he used to be very violent . . . the Princess . . . used to say, 'Hush! hush! Handel is in a passion'"²⁸ He was unawed by royalty. In 1744 Mrs. Delany wrote: "Mr. Handel and the Prince [of Wales] had quarrelled. . . . Handel says the *Prince* is quite out of *his* good graces!"²⁹

²⁶ Mary Granville. "Letter to her mother." Apr 12, 1735. In *Handel: A Celebration of His Life and Times*. Op. cit. 183.

²⁷ William Coxe. Op. cit.

²⁸ Jonathan Keates. Op. cit. 266.

²⁹ Mary Granville (later Mrs. Delaney). "Letter to Mrs. Dewes." Feb 11, 1743-4. In Deutsch, Otto Erich. Op. cit. 582.

He also had nonmusical interests. He amassed an extensive and varied collection of prints and paintings, some by gift, probably most at auction. He bequeathed his two Rembrandts to Lord Granville, and two of his portraits to his assistant, J. C. Smith. The remaining 67 were sold at auction a year after his death. The catalogue of the sale³⁰ lists among the artists Watteau, Poussin, F. Brueghell (sic), Andrea del Sarto, Canaletto, and Carracci; and among the subjects landscapes, genre scenes, still lifes, and a series of paintings of Jupiter with a variety of his sexual partners: Leda, Danae, Io, and Ixion. Perhaps *Semele*, which Jennens described as Handel's "bawdy opera," was partly stimulated by this purchase. Unfortunately, with the exception of his portraits, none of Handel's paintings can now be identified. Undoubtedly some would be reattributed; the Rembrandts almost surely, to, at best, "School of Rembrandt."

Handel never married, and his sexual life was discreet. I referred earlier to the Dowager Electress' comment on the rumor of his liaison with Victoria. This similarity of name appears to be a contemporary confirmation of Mainwaring's later statement that the soprano Vittoria Tarquini was interested in him. There is a late report, probably inaccurate, of two marital engagements broken off because of the women's families' unhappiness at having a daughter marry a working musician. The only other comment regarding Handel's romantic life is a marginal comment written into a copy of Mainwaring's 1760 biography. This copy comes from the royal library, and the annotation is thought to have been made by George III: "G. F. Handel was ever honest, nay excessively polite but like all men of sense would talk all, and hear none and scorned the advice of any but the Woman he loved, but his amours were rather of short duration, always with[in] the pale of his own profession."³¹

Handel's generosity was well known. He was one of the founders of the Fund for the Support of Decayed Musicians and Their Families, a major benefactor and governor of the Foundling Hospital, "The Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children," contributor and governor

³⁰ Anonymous. "A Catalogue of the Genuine and Entire Collections of *Italian, Flemish, and Dutch* Pictures, of John Ellys, Esq; and George Frederick Handel, Esq." Feb, 1760. In *Handel: A Celebration of His Life and Times*. Op. cit. 290.

³¹ William C. Smith. "George III, Handel, and Mainwaring." *The Musical Times*. LXV (Sept 1, 1924): 789-795.

of another London hospital, the Lock Hospital, and rather freely donated his music and services to charities in Dublin, Oxford, and elsewhere. It may be that the increasingly successful Handel, although certainly generous, wished to be seen as one of the gentry—which also may account, in part, for his purchase of paintings.

Contemporaneous accounts of Handel do not record unusual religiosity, although he appears to have been more observant in his later years. He wrote music for Anglican, Calvinist, and Roman Catholic services as well as for his own Lutheran church. I believe that a change in social attitudes accounts for the later view of him as solemnly religious. Handel's shift from Italian opera to English oratorio was probably based on economics rather than religious belief. Opera was expensive: the singers very highly paid, sets and stage machinery complex, and costumes a significant cost in an era when food was cheap but clothing expensive. Oratorio eliminated costumes and sets, relied more on a relatively cheap chorus, and did not require expensive imported castrati. The shift permitted Handel to escape from the patronage of the nobility to the anonymous ticket buyers and to the distributed support of the middle classes in combination with the nobility. However, middle-class attitudes towards religion were different from those of "enlightened" upper classes: more serious, and increasingly so as the century progressed. This new wider audience offered scant support to his "bawdy opera," *Semele*, or to his other secular oratorio, *Hercules*, in contrast to the general support accorded his oratorios on biblical subjects. Handel's tactical decision shift from secular opera to sacred oratorio permitted his later apotheosis into the musical master of Victorian solemn religiosity.

Both his contemporaries and his music attest to the fact that he was a man capable of strong feelings and quick emotional response. Except in relation to his episodes of physical difficulty, however, I do not find contemporaneous evidence of significant mood swings. Although he did have outbursts of enormous creative productivity, finishing, for example, his twelve concerti grossi at about the rate of one every two days, and finishing *Messiah* in less than three weeks, it is arguable that much had already been worked out in advance, either in his head or while improvising, and that some of the task was merely copying from his mind's eye. Even so, his rate of composition is evidence of incredible energy. Certainly, some of his contemporaries, such as Bach and

Telemann, were known to write at a similar pace. I have written elsewhere that such creative furor may look like—but not signify—manic excitement.³² In addition, Handel notated his music only for specific expected performance. Very likely some of his energetic drive was fueled by economic necessity. Certainly, there is no clear annual variation in productivity similar to that of Robert Schumann, who was manic-depressive.³³ Although there are some short blank periods, these appear to be due to external exigencies: Jacobite uprising or death of royalty resulting in closed playhouses, a trip to recruit singers, or clear physical illness. Likewise, Handel's great productivity the year he composed the concerti grossi may be attributable to his needing material to counter the threat posed by the Opera of the Nobility.³⁴ In any event, in the absence of the other necessary symptoms of the syndrome of cyclothymia,³⁵ numerous periods of significant mood swing, I hesitate to make a diagnosis.

One other aspect of Handel's personality should be noted: he was effectively, not neurotically, compulsive. At his death his financial and business affairs were in good order, his will and its codicils clear and to the point. Perhaps most important for his musical posterity, his musical affairs also were in order. Both his composing and performing scores were complete and ordered, at least all those produced during the nearly forty years in England and a surprising number of earlier ones. Considering the volume of work, the many years during which it was produced, the several relocations, and the ordinary vicissitudes of life, the relative completeness of the composer's files is the mark of an orderly man.

In short, Handel appears to have had a rich, normally neurotic personality. He was capable of passion and of lasting close relationships. Rather than being ponderously religious, he remained a serious communicant while retaining the ability to tolerate other beliefs and disbeliefs: a Lutheran, he was organist in a Calvinist church and later wrote religious music for Roman Catholic services. Enthusiastic, even demanding, in his art, his commitment and

³² William A. Frosch. "Moods, Madness, and Music. I. Major Affective Disease and Musical Creativity." *Comprehensive Psychiatry*. 28 (4) (July/August), 1987: 315-322.

³³ Peter Ostwald. *Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985.

³⁴ Carole Taylor. Personal communication.

³⁵ Anonymous. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (Third Edition-Revised). Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1987.

focus were leavened by his wit, broadened by his other interests and by personal generosity, and protected by an adequate admixture of obsessive-compulsive defenses.

Handel appears, until the months preceding his death at age 74, to have led a vigorous and essentially healthy life, except for two illnesses. The first appeared in 1737 when Handel was 52, was recurrent, and was variously referred to as rheumatism, a palsy, or a paralytic disorder. The second medical problem was his blindness, first noted in 1751. Mainwaring, his early biographer (1760), describes the first illness as he comments on the failure of the Royal Academy opera in that same year:

“The observation that misfortunes rarely come single, was verified in Handel. His fortune was not more impaired than his health and his understanding. His right-arm was become useless to him, from a stroke of the palsy; and how greatly his senses were disordered at intervals, for a long time, appeared from an hundred instances, which are better forgotten than recorded. The most violent deviations from reason, are usually seen when the strongest faculties happen to be thrown out of course. . . . In this melancholic state, it was in vain for him to think of any fresh projects for retrieving his affairs. His first concern was how to repair his constitution. But tho’ he had the best advice, and tho’ the necessity of following it was urged to him in the most friendly manner, it was with the utmost difficulty that he was prevailed on to do what was proper, when it was in any way disagreeable.”³⁶

It should be noted that self-treatment, including self-medication, bloodletting, and amateur doctoring rather than professional consultation, and the ignoring of professional advice even when sought were not uncommon in the eighteenth century.³⁷ Handel may have been particularly prone to treat himself, for he had grown up in a medical environment—his father and two half-brothers were physicians with princely appointments.

The first known public notice of this illness is found in the *London Daily Post* of April 30, 1737: “Mr. Handel, who has been some time indisposed with the rheumatism, is in so fair a way of recovery, that it is hoped he will be able to accompany the opera . . . on . . . the 4th of May.”³⁸ On May 5 James Harris wrote to

³⁶ John Mainwaring. *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*. London: 1760. New York: Da Capo Press, 1980. pp. 121-122.

³⁷ Roy Porter. “‘The Patient must minister to himself’: Self-medication and nervous conditions in eighteenth century England.” Presented at the Wellcome Symposium on the History of Medicine, *History of Self-Medication*, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, November 21, 1986, London.

³⁸ Otto Erich Deutsch. *Handel: A Documentary Biography*. London: A. and C. Black, 1955. pp. 432-433.

the Earl of Shaftesbury: "Your lordship's information concerning Mr. Handel's Disorder . . . gave me no small concern. . . . I heartily regret the thought of losing any of the executive part of his merit [presumably his performing and producing functions]. . . . We are assured of the inventive, for tis this which properly constitutes the artist, and separates him from the multitude."³⁹

This seems to suggest that despite physical difficulty, there were at this point neither cognitive nor affective problems. The *London Evening Post* of May 14 described him as "much indispos'd, and it's thought with a Paraletick Disorder, he having at present no Use of his Right Hand."⁴⁰ In the spring of 1760 the *London Chronicle* reprinted extracts of Mainwaring's posthumous biography; in the fall they published the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Memoirs of Handel*. Although these were also written after Handel's death, he, unlike Mainwaring, had known Handel well and for many years. He wrote: "Great fatigue and disappointment, affected him so much, that he was this spring (1737) struck with the palsy, which took entirely away, the use of 4 fingers of his right hand; and totally disabled him from Playing: And when the heats of the Summer 1737 came on, the Disorder seemed at times to effect his Understanding."⁴¹ By October of 1737 he was reported to have fully recovered.

Mainwaring's statement of a return of symptoms in 1743 is confirmed in a letter from Horace Walpole to Horace Mann dated May 4, 1743: "Handel has had a palsy, and can't compose."⁴² Again, recovery was rapid and complete: between June 3 and July 4 he composed *Semele*, in July and August he composed the *Dettingen Te Deum and Anthem*, and in August and September he composed the oratorio *Joseph*.

Surely Keynes is right in pointing out that these descriptions are unlikely to represent central nervous system disease. "There is no history of speech defect, difficulty in walking, or other physical disablement other than loss of the use of his right arm for a period. The portraits of the time show someone very fit for a 60-year-old and without any facial asymmetry."⁴³ His handwriting was

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 433.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 434.

⁴¹ The Earl of Shaftesbury. "Letter to his Cousin, James Harris." In Otto Erich Deutsch. *Op. cit.* p. 624.

⁴² Horace Walpole, "Letter to Horace Mann." May 4, 1743. In Otto Erich Deutsch. *Op. cit.* p. 569.

⁴³ Milo Keynes. "Handel's Illnesses." *Lancet*, Dec 20/27, 1980. pp. 1354-1355.

unchanged until his last illness; he returned to virtuoso performing; he recovered ab initio. Most likely this was a muscular disorder, some kind of arthritis, or a peripheral neuropathy, perhaps secondary to cervical arthritis. All of these overuse syndromes are common in performing musicians.⁴⁴

It is also possible that he suffered from saturnine gout,⁴⁵ which is induced by lead poisoning. The 1703 Treaty of Methuen opened England to the importation of fortified wines from Portugal. These ports and Madeiras contained high concentrations of lead, presumably from the lead-reinforced piping then used in distilling the fortifying brandy. That Handel drank port can be seen from the penciled note in one of his manuscripts, "12 gallons port, 12 bottles French [,] Duke Street, Meels [perhaps the name of the wine merchant]."⁴⁶ He may also have suffered from lead-induced neuropathy, and perhaps encephalopathy, which would account for his behavioral disorder.

The most striking evidence that Handel may have sought professional help at this time is in his own hand. At the bottom of an early manuscript version of the air "*Vanne, che più ti miró*" from the opera *Faramondo*, written in 1737, is written: "Mr. Duval medecin in Poland St."⁴⁷ This is almost certainly Francis Philip Duval, who was born in Normandy in 1701 and received a medical degree from the University of Leyden in 1726⁴⁸ with a thesis on the effect of vomiting on the human body.⁴⁹ Although it is not known exactly when he came to London, in 1728 he served as godfather at a christening in the Huguenot church known as La Patente in Spitalfields.⁵⁰ The Survey of London notes that "well into the eighteenth century the congregation was of very good standing, and Hogarth's [print] Noon, published in 1738 is said to portray

⁴⁴ A.H. Lockwood. "Medical problems of musicians." *N Engl J Med* 324 (4): 221-227.

⁴⁵ Gerald Weissman. *The Woods Hole Cantata: Essays on Science and Society*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1985. pp. 91-100.

⁴⁶ J.A. Fuller-Maitland, A.H. Mann. *Catalogue of the Music in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*. London: C.J. Clay & Sons, Cambridge University Press Warehouse, 1983. p. 194.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 204.

⁴⁸ R.W. Innes Smith. *English-Speaking Students of Medicine at the University of Leyden*. Edenburg and London: Oliver and Boyd. 1932.

⁴⁹ William Munk. *The Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London, VII, 1701 to 1800*. London: Royal College of Physicians, MDCCLXXVIII. p. 178.

⁵⁰ *The Publications of the Huguenot Society of London. V. XI, 1898*. Registers of the Church known as the Patente in Spitalfields from 1689 to 1785. Ed: William Minet, MA FSA, and William Chapman Waller, MA FSA. pp. CV.

the church and its smartly dressed congregation.”⁵¹ A copy of William Munk’s *The Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*⁵² in the library of the college has a note in Munk’s handwriting: “He lived in Poland St. but about 1763 moved to Newman St., Oxford Rd . . . was of French Protestant descent and is thought to have been the son of the Rev’d Mr. Duval pastor of La Patente Soho.” The *Publications of the Huguenot Society of London* list a Nicolas Valot Duval serving as minister of the Church of La Patente de Soho in 1694 and 1695.⁵³

It appears clear that Dr. Duval spent his professional life in London. In 1740 he was nominated to the Royal Society of London: “Dr. Francis Philip Duval, who had resided many years in London, where he has practiced Physic with Credit and Reputation, and has applied himself with Success to the Study of Natural Philosophy, is desirous of being admitted a fellow of the Royal Society, and is recommended by us underwritten, as a person fit for the same.”⁵⁴ He was elected on April 10, 1741. (In February 1749 the *Journal Book of the Royal Society* notes: “Francis Philip Duval M. D. desiring leave to withdraw from the Society and have his Bond delivered up on payment of the arrears of his contributions. The same was ordered accordingly.”⁵⁵) Munk⁵⁶ also notes that he was admitted a Licentiate of the College of Physicians in 1751, served as physician to Prince Frederick’s widow, the dowager Princess of Wales, and died in 1768.

At Leyden, Duval came under the influence of the great physician and teacher Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738). If, as we may surmise, Duval treated Handel in 1737, we can be sure that his experience with Boerhaave shaped the treatment. In the early eighteenth century medical theory and practice were still strongly influenced by humoral theory, that “defects of body and mind were caused by the imbalance of the four fluids which were thought to govern the constitution of the body, the four ‘humours’: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. The ideal man had all four

⁵¹ *Survey of London. V’s XXXIII and XXXIV*. Parish of St. Anne Soho. The Athlone Press, University of London, 1966. p. 282.

⁵² William Munk. Op. cit.

⁵³ *The Publications of the Huguenot Society of London*. Op. cit. V. XL, p. XVI.

⁵⁴ Certificate of Election of the Royal Society of London. *Journal Book of the Royal Society*, XVII, 1739-42. p. 184.

⁵⁵ *Journal Book of the Royal Society*, V. XX. 1748-51. p. 236.

⁵⁶ William Munk. Op. cit. VII. p. 178.

humours in perfect balance. In lesser mortals, the varying mixture of humours accounted for differences of personality and physique. An excess of any one humour produced an individual of a particular temperament or 'complexion': an excess of . . . black bile [made a man] melancholic . . ."⁵⁷ This theory had been first suggested by Hippocrates (ca. 460–ca. 377 B.C.) and passed on through the writings of Galen (ca. 129–ca. 200). While Boerhaave retained the language of the humors, he was influenced by Newton's mechanics and by the hydrodynamics of circulatory physiology. For example, he described melancholia as arising from "Black Choler,"⁵⁸ but by this he meant the "thick, black, fat and earthy" elements of the blood after dissipation of "the most moveable Parts."⁵⁹

Melancholia was well recognized in eighteenth-century England. In 1733 George Cheyne published *The English Malady*, in which he explained that "we have more nervous diseases, since the present Age has made Efforts to go beyond former Times, in all the Arts of Ingenuity, Invention, Study, Learning, and all the Contemplative and Sedentary Professions."⁶⁰ The English climate was also implicated in this high incidence of both hypochondriasis and melancholia. It was thought so common a disease that the Church of England had a special prayer for those "who labour under an excess of melancholy."⁶¹ The treatments used for these diseases might be thought of as general supportive care, such as exercise, diet, and hydrotherapy, and specific medical treatments, such as bleeding, vomiting, purging, cupping, and counter-irritants. We know that Handel took the waters at the popular spa at Aix-la-Chapelle, and perhaps he did so at the recommendation of Dr. Duval. Mainwaring writes: "For this reason, it was thought best for him to have recourse to the vapor-baths of Aix-la-Chapelle, over which he sat near three times as long as hath ever been the practice. Whoever knows anything of the nature of those baths, will, from this instance, form some idea of his surprising consti-

⁵⁷ Stanley W. Jackson. *Melancholia and Depression from Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1986. p. 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 119.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 120.

⁶⁰ George Cheyne. *The English Malady*. London and Dublin. 1733. Facsimile Reproduction, Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints. 1976.

⁶¹ John Frank Sena. *The English Malady: The Idea of Melancholy from 1700 to 1760*. Dissertation, Princeton University, Ph.D., 1967. p. 47.

tution. His sweats were profuse beyond what can well be imagined. His cure, from the manner as well as from the quickness with which it was wrought, passed with the Nuns for a miracle. When, but a few hours from the time of his quitting the bath, they heard him at the organ."⁶²

A period at a continental spa such as Aix-la-Chapelle would likely have precluded his drinking fortified wines and encouraged exercise and a sensible diet. If indeed he had saturnine gout, a lowered blood lead concentration would have permitted uric acid excretion by the kidneys instead of its deposition in the joints and would have led to recovery. A return to fortified wine and the concomitant lead poisoning would result in another attack of gout or neuropathy. Certainly the recurrent visits to Tunbridge Wells (1734, 1735, 1758, and perhaps 1746 or 1747) and the visit to Cheltenham Wells (1751) are consonant with such a diagnosis, as is Coxe's description of him many years later as having "a stiffness in the joints."⁶³ The associated mental disorder cannot be specified because the descriptions are so very incomplete. I can imagine them as being either a complication of his essentially unknown treatment(s) by an unknown physician(s), a result of lead encephalopathy, or, perhaps most likely, a secondary response to his disability and its threat to the central focus of his life, music, as well as to his fiscal integrity, which was so dependent on his ability to write and perform music. It should be noted that, despite the common use of the term during the period, no contemporary labels Handel either melancholic or hypochondriacal.

The idea that this episode was a response to despair at the collapse of his opera venture is dismissed by Hogwood who notes that although "a mood of despondency is usually assumed to have settled over Handel at this time . . . there is no outward evidence of depression under stress. On the contrary [he is] in high spirits, looking over new compositions from abroad . . . and apparently enjoying his freedom from the turmoils of opera."⁶⁴ Hogwood may, however, be too dismissive of Handel's negative response to unfortunate events. While he apparently responded adaptively, it is reasonable to assume some level of chagrin and upset.

⁶² John Mainwaring. *Op. cit.* p. 134.

⁶³ William Coxe. *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith*. London: 1799. p. 26.

⁶⁴ Christopher Hogwood. *Handel*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984. p. 166.

Handel's condition is mentioned in a variety of letters and diaries from the mid-1740s on: "I met Handel a few days since in the street. . . . He seemed highly pleased. . . . He talked much of his precarious state of health, yet he looks well enough;"⁶⁵ "Poor Handel looks something better. I hope he will recover in due time, though he has been a good deal disordered in his head;"⁶⁶ "Handel call'd me this morning, his Spirit and genius are astounding;"⁶⁷ "Mr. Handel call'd on me tother day. He is now in perfect health and I really think grown young again;"⁶⁸ "The old Buck [Handel] is excessively healthy and full of spirits."⁶⁹ On February 13, 1750, the Earl of Shaftesbury writes, "I have seen Handel several times since I came hither, and think I never saw him so cool and well. He is quite easy in his behavior, and has been pleasing himself in the purchase of several fine pictures, particularly a large Rembrandt, which is indeed excellent."⁷⁰ Whatever the mental difficulties, they appear to have cleared completely and not to have interfered with his relationships or, except for the periods of "palsy," with his music.

Handel's other major illness—his blindness—is first noted part way through the composing score of the oratorio *Jephtha*, where Handel writes in German: "got as far as this on Wednesday 13th February 1751, unable to go on owing to weakening of the sight of my left eye"⁷¹—followed by a second note written on his 66th birthday: "Saturday the 23rd of this month [February 1751] a little better, started work again."⁷² His difficulties quickly became known. On March 14, 1751, Sir Edward Turner writes: "Noble Handel hath lost a [sic] eye, but I have the Rapture to say that St. Cecilia makes no complaint of any Defect in his Fingers."⁷³ On June 15 the *General Advertiser* notes that "on Thursday last [the 13th] Mr. Handel

⁶⁵ The Rev. William Harris. "Letter to his Sister-in-Law, Mrs. (?) Thomas Harris." August 29, 1745. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 622.

⁶⁶ The Earl of Shaftesbury. "Letter to his Cousin, James Harris." In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 624.

⁶⁷ Betty Matthews. "Handel—More Unpublished Letters." V. 41. 1961: 129.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 127.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ The Earl of Shaftesbury. "Letter to his Cousin, James Harris." Feb 13, 1750. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 680.

⁷¹ George Friederich Handel. "First Personal Note in the Score of 'Jephtha'." (Translation) In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 701.

⁷² George Friederich Handel. "Second Personal Note in the Score of 'Jephtha'." (Translation) In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 702.

⁷³ Sir Edward Turner. "Letter to Sanderson Miller." Mar 14, 1750 [51]. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 703.

arrived in Town from Cheltenham Wells, where he had been to make use of the Waters"⁷⁴—presumably for the relief of his eye troubles. Certainly, on his return, Handel consulted Samuel Sharp (1700?–1778), then surgeon to Guy's Hospital. An acquaintance of Voltaire and a student of the great Cheselden, Sharp "was admitted into the livery and clothing of the Company" of Barber-Surgeons in 1732. The great William Hunt, if not actually his pupil, learned from him by tradition and took over his "course of Anatomical Lectures, to which were added the operations of surgery, with the application of bandages."⁷⁵ He "was a thoroughly informed surgeon, well read, observant, judicious, a lover of simplicity, wisely doubtful," and "an eminently safe man . . . relied on for knowing or doing [what] could be known or done for the good of his patients."⁷⁶ Sharp is likely to have performed a cataract operation on Handel, a procedure known as "couching."

James's three-volume *Medicinal Dictionary*, published in 1745, quotes extensively from Sharp's description of the procedure:

"Having placed your patient in a convenient light and in a chair suitable to the height of that you yourself sit on, let a pillow or two be placed behind his back, in such a manner that, the body bending forward, the head may approach near to you: Then, inclining the head a little backward upon the breast of your assistant, and covering the other eye, so as to prevent its rolling, let the assistant lift up the superior eyelid, and yourself depress a little the inferior one: This done, strike the needle thro' the tunica conjunctiva, something less than one tenth of an inch from the cornea, even with the middle of the pupil, into the posterior chamber, and gently endeavor to depress the cataract with the flat surface of it. If, after it is dislodg'd, it must, again and again, be pushed down. . . . If a cataract of the right eye is to be couch'd, and the surgeon cannot use his left hand so dexterously as his right, he may place himself behind the patient, and use his right hand."⁷⁷

The operation apparently was not successful, or at least not permanently so, for on August 17, 1752, the *General Advertiser* notes that "George-Frederick Handel, Esq; the celebrated Composer of musick was siezed [sic] a few Day's ago with a Paralytic Disorder in his Head, which had deprived him of Sight."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 710.

⁷⁵ Ed: Sidney Lee. *Dictionary of National Biography*, V XVII *Robinson–Sheares*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co.. 1909. pp. 1352-1353.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ James R., M.D. *A Medicinal Dictionary: Including Physic, Surgery, Anatomy, Chymistry, and Botany, in all their Branches Relative to Medicine*. III volumes. London: Printer for T. Osborne, in Gray's Inn. 1745. VII, article on Cataracts.

⁷⁸ Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 726.

The same journal informs us on November 4 that he had been couched by William Bromfield (1713–1792).⁷⁹ Bromfield was founder of the Lock Hospital, on the staff of St. George's Hospital, surgeon to the Prince and Princess of Wales, and later to Queen Charlotte. He was the great-grandson of the physician to King Charles II and grandson of Newton's anatomy teacher. Famous for his arrogance and self-assertiveness, Bromfield was accused by a critic of his "Chirurgical Observations and Cases" of "perpetrating negligences and improprieties of style, and offences against language, grammar and common sense."⁸⁰ A Demonstrator of Anatomy at Barber-Surgeons' Hall, he later sold his anatomical collections to William Hunter and left one of his portraits to Richard Warren. The *Cambridge Chronicle* reports on January 13, 1753, that "Mr. Handel has so much recovered his sight that he is able to go abroad."⁸¹ Again, however, improvement was transitory: by January 27 a London newspaper reports that "Mr. Handel has at length, unhappily, quite lost his sight. Upon his being couch'd some time since, he saw so well, that his friends flattered themselves his sight was restored . . . but a few days have entirely put an end to their hope."⁸² The Countess of Shaftesbury writes on March 13 of "the great though unhappy Handel, dejected, wan, and dark, sitting by, not playing. . . . And to think how his light had been spent . . . overplied in music's cause."⁸³

In the summer of 1758 Handel was couched a third time, again unsuccessfully. The surgeon this time was a well-known, self-promoting quack, John Taylor the elder (1703–1772), surgeon oculist to George II, and known as "the Chevalier." The son of a physician, Taylor is also reported to have studied under Cheselden. Styling himself an "ophthalmiator," he traveled widely throughout Europe examining and operating as he went. This is understandable, as few cities other than London were of a size to permit

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ G.C. Peachey. William Bromfield, 1713-1792. *Janus*, Vingt et Unième Année. Leyde: E.M. Brill, S.A. 1916: 27-51. p. 42. M. Keynes informs me, however, that Newton never studied anatomy!

⁸¹ Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 731.

⁸² Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. p. 731.

⁸³ Countess of Shaftesbury. "Letter to James Harris." March 13, [1751?]. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 703. Winton Dean, in *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 586) points out that this letter, dated by Deutsch to 1751, in fact belongs to 1753; it refers to Handel's appearance at the revival of *Alexander's Feast* on March 9, 1753.

specialized practice. He probably also operated on Bach⁸⁴ and is portrayed as one of the quacks in a Hogarth print. Samuel Johnson described him as “an instance of how far impudence will carry ignorance.”⁸⁵

It would be no surprise if Handel were indeed “dejected, wan, and dark” at the onset of his blindness. However, we must be careful not to read too much into such statements, nor into Mrs. Delaney’s on his blindness: “I could not help thinking with great concern of poor Handel, and lamenting his dark and melancholy circumstances,”⁸⁶ which is clearly an outsider’s perception of his situation, not a reflection of his inner life. Perhaps some of the other similar comments are, at the least, colored by such sentiments. Certainly, whatever his initial emotional response, Handel seems to have regained his equilibrium. Burney tells us that “like the great poets, Homer and Milton, [Handel] was afflicted with blindness; which, however it might dispirit and embarrass him at other times, had no effect on his nerves or intellects.”⁸⁷ The Countess of Huntington wrote that she had had “a most pleasing interview with Handel. . . . He is now old, and at the close of his long career; yet he is not dismayed at the prospect before him.”⁸⁸

The *Whitehall Evening-Post; or, London Intelligencer* of April 7, 1759, wrote: “Last Night ended the celebrated Mr. Handel’s Oratorios for this Season, and the great Encouragement they have received is a sufficient Proof of their superior Merit. He began with Solomon, which was exhibited twice; Susanna once; Sampson three Times; Judas Maccabaeus twice; and the Messiah three Times. And this Day Mr. Handel proposed setting out for Bath, to try the Benefit of the Waters, having been for some Time past in a bad State of Health.”⁸⁹ It is only in relation to these last months of illness that I have been able to find indications of loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping. His memory remained intact. At the age of

⁸⁴ Milo Keynes. Op. cit.

⁸⁵ William B. Ober. “Bach, Handel, and “Chevalier” John Taylor, M.D., Ophthalmiator.” *New York State Journal of Medicine*, June 15, 1969: 1797-1807.

⁸⁶ Mrs. Delaney. “Letter to Mrs. Dewes.” Dec 15[16]. 1752. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 728-729.

⁸⁷ Charles Burney, Mus.D., F.R.S. Sketch of the Life of Handel. In: *Handel: A Celebration of His Life and Times*. Ed: Jacob Simon. London: National Portrait Gallery, 1985. p. 29.

⁸⁸ Selena, Countess of Huntington. “Diary Note, or Letter.” Spring, 1759? In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 813.

⁸⁹ Anonymous. *Whitehall Evening-Post; Or, London Intelligencer*. 7th Apr 1759. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 814.

74 he had played the organ at each of that season's eleven performances. He died on April 14 without a chance to "try the Benefit of the Waters."⁹⁰ He was attended at his death, according to Burney, by a Dr. Warren. This is almost certainly Richard Warren (1731–1797), on the staffs of Middlesex and St. George's Hospitals, physician to the Prince of Wales and to Princess Amelia, who was "subject to sudden seizures that created alarm,"⁹¹ and later physician to George III; he also attended Samuel Johnson on his deathbed. His eminence was described as "the just and natural attainment of great talents. . . . In interrogating the patient he was apt and adroit, in the resources of his art, quick and inexhaustible, and when the malady was beyond the reach of his skill, the minds of the sick were consoled by his conversation, and their cares, anxieties, and fears soothed by his presence."⁹²

Thus, Handel lived a generally healthy life despite his afflictions and was able to die an easy and peaceful death. He suffered from some episodic mental disturbance, mostly, and perhaps entirely, in conjunction with physical illness of the sort most likely to be threatening to his music: the "palsy" interfered with both performing and composing, and the blindness with composing. The mental disturbances seem clearly reactive, secondary, and rapidly overcome when he recovered from or adapted to his disability. I find no direct contemporary evidence of primary depression or mania or of other primary major mental illness.

His medical care was the best his century had to offer, and his physicians notable. Duval, Bromfield, Taylor, and Warren all had close medical ties to the royal family, mirroring Handel's own long-standing closeness to it. The treatment appears to have been conservative: perhaps this accounts for Handel's long and generally healthy life.

If, as I suggest, there is little real evidence of either cyclothymia or major affective illness, how are we to understand such claims by modern writers? Several factors may play a role: 1) attitudes of Handel's contemporaries, 2) adulation of his genius accompanied by changing understandings of the meaning of genius, and 3) creeping inaccuracies uncorrected by reference to the full range of original data.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ William Munk. *Op. cit.* pp. 242-247.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Handel's social role was at best ambiguous. Neither nobleman nor servant, he used the front door and stood his ground in defense of his music, even against king, prince, and nobility. His anger was tolerated and excused by his genius. However, it was probably taken as inappropriate and "uppity," perhaps as evidence of a "disordered mind." Certainly the rages of more recent musicians, such as a Toscanini, are seen partly as a by-product of the functional task of bending the will of a group of disparate performers to the composer's vision.

More important, I think, is the changing image of the meaning of genius. While Socrates and Plato spoke of the divine mania or inspiration of poets, it is clearly distinguishable from clinical insanity. Similarly, Aristotle's association of unusual talent with the melancholic temperament did not associate genius with insanity, for a melancholic temperament was a description of personality type, not a pathology: not all melancholics were mad. The Enlightenment view of genius was of balance. For example, Voltaire saw genius as imagination in conjunction with memory and judgment; Kant viewed it as a favorable proportion of sensibility, judgment, creative spirit, and taste; to Moses Mendelssohn, genius was a state of perfection of all mental powers working in harmony.

With the advent of the romantic movement, reason came to be seen as inimical to the free working of the aesthetic imagination. The goal of the artist shifted from re-creating nature, or re-creating the classical masters' image of nature, to originality. Artists ascribed their genius to madness and permitted their eccentricities to bloom. History was reinterpreted: Socrates, it was asserted, displayed a form of madness. Genius was seen as a form of degeneracy; the statistically abnormal were seen as diseased. In 1859 Moreau suggested that genius was similar to idiocy, and ten years later Lombroso concluded that genius was a degenerative psychosis of the epileptoid type. Maudsley wrote that "the great man . . . uses up the silently accumulated capital of generations. . . . The natural result after him, therefore, is commonly mediocrity or degeneracy."⁹³ He also believed geniuses often were infertile. *The Insanity of Genius*⁹⁴ reached its fourth edition in 1900, and *The Great*

⁹³ George Becker. *The Mad Genius Controversy: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978.

⁹⁴ J.F. Nisbet. *The Insanity of Genius, and the General Inequality of Human Faculty Physiologically Considered*. 4th Edition. London: Grant Richards, 1900.

Abnormals,⁹⁵ brief vignettes of “mad geniuses,” appeared in 1925. Such thinking could not help but affect the new biographers. With regard to Handel the tendency reached its zenith—or perhaps, nadir—in a book by Newman Flower,⁹⁶ which first appeared in the 1920s and in a revised edition in 1947. This highly imaginative work contains such assertions as: 1) in reference to Handel’s trip to Italy, “this wild strain of adventure . . . ;”⁹⁷ 2) “Handel in his youth, as in his maturity, was all moods;”⁹⁸ 3) “The knowledge [of his blindness] crushed his heart. It broke his spirit [and sent him into] great deeps of despondency;”⁹⁹ 4) “That depression, caused by fluctuating hopes and disappointments with regard to his sight, wrapped him as in a shroud;”¹⁰⁰ 5) “Broken sentences [issued] from his lips . . . as if the mind had temporarily left its earthly abode.”¹⁰¹ This last, Flower’s description of Handel’s death, is in striking disagreement with contemporary description by an eyewitness. In a letter dated April 17, 1759, James Smyth wrote to Handel’s friend Bernard Granville: “He was sensible to the last moment. . . . He took leave of me, and told me we ‘should meet again’; as soon as I was gone he told his servant ‘not to let me come to him any more, for that he had now done with the world.’ [sic] He died as he lived—a good Christian, with a true sense of his duty to God and man, and in perfect charity with all the world.”¹⁰² In fact, a return to the documented sources provides no support for any of Flower’s statements quoted above.

While each generation is entitled to rewrite history, the historian, medical or otherwise, should begin the task by examining the original source material. As I have indicated, the available data suggest that Handel was a generally healthy individual, both mentally and physically, with great gifts greatly used, who overcame both internal and external difficulties through perseverance and adaptability as well as through his genius. As far as we know, Handel kept no diary, and his few

⁹⁶ Newman Flower. *George Frideric Handel: His Personality and His Times*. New and Revised Edition. London: Cassell, 1947.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 81.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 98.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 342.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 344.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 353.

¹⁰² James Smyth. “Letter to Bernard Granville.” Apr 7, 1759. In Otto Erich Deutsch. Op. cit. 818-819.

remaining letters are generally formal and businesslike. Perhaps for other composers, particularly the romantics or those who have written about their works, one can argue from the music to the mind, from the product to the psychology of its creation. However, Handel has left no record of his personal musical vocabulary for his own feeling states, and I do not believe that he experienced the act of composition in the same self-expressionistic way that is so characteristic, for example, of Berlioz.¹⁰³ Choices even of form, subject, and instrumental forces were comparatively limited for Handel, who wrote in specific forms for specific occasions and for specific ensembles. His expressive freedom probably was most apparent in his lost improvisations. Thus, unfortunately, the materials needed for a study of the deeper psychology and meaning of his creativity are not now known and, indeed, are unlikely to exist.

¹⁰³ Hector Berlioz. *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*. Translated by Ed. David Cairns. London: Granada, 1970.