

# "Continuo Realization in Handel's Vocal Music." By Patrick J. Rogers

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## Reviews of Books

Patrick J. Rogers. *Continuo Realization in Handel's Vocal Music*. Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1989, 269p. ISBN 0-8357-1875-1.

Shortly after this book was published its distribution was hampered by U.M.I. closing down part of their book operation and, at least in England, it became difficult to get hold of. It is good to report that it is now available from the University of Rochester Press.

The book is in two parts: the first considers the nature and status of Handel's autograph figurings and the figurings in contemporary copies and prints; the second (which is its principal point of interest for performers) deals with particular problems of realization—in *unisono* textures, recitatives, the placement of chords during bass rests, and the harmonization of pedal points. Rogers has also provided some specimen figurings for representative types of movement.

Anybody who has been handed the score of a Handel opera to accompany, with its acres of unfigured basses, will have felt acutely the need for informed guidance. Rogers shows that even when Handel did write in figures they are often a shorthand notation as part of his technique of composition rather than directions to a player, and may not coincide with harmonies he ultimately worked out in the parts. The standard editions have not really addressed the problem. Chrysander thought that figures were not only unnecessary but undesirable; the editors of the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe have been more enlightened, but none have taken account of the figurings in contemporary copies and prints. Rogers is optimistic about the relation of these generally to Handel—at the very least they originate in a time and place close to the composer. Rogers's investigation of these here is essentially a progress report on work on a very large amount of material. The results will be important since contemporary treatises can give at best only a partial picture of continuo practice. A great deal more information is contained in the notation of autograph and contemporary scores.

The problem of applying literary evidence is well demonstrated in the issue of *unisono* sections (where bass and other instruments play in unison or octaves). Here, as in other respects, modern performers have tended to

adopt too readily a single solution. In this case it is based on the unambiguous assertion in the second part of C.P.E. Bach's *Versuch* (1762, p. 172) that the continuo player should play *tasto solo* or in octaves, and omit chords even if the bass is figured. Yet in the same chapter he admits certain exceptions, and in a later one (p. 324) is equally explicit that chords should be played if the composer has put them in "for good reason" ("aus guten Ursachen"). The situation is obviously not clearcut. But no writer, no matter how distinguished, can sum up the entire practice of a period in a few pages, and Rogers convincingly shows how varied Handel's practice was on the basis of the figuring of parts.

A similar unitary dogma has prevailed in some quarters with regard to the short-chord accompaniment of recitatives. Here Rogers covers some of the same ground as Laurence Dreyfus's chapter on recitative in *Bach's Continuo Group* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), though Rogers comes to a rather different conclusion since he is dealing exclusively with harpsichord style. Again the weight of evidence is for a rich variety of textures and chord placements, since the harpsichord had to support the singer in all senses including a prompting function. The variety is intended to underscore the differences of pace and expression projected by the singer. No doubt the modern short-chord fashion was a reaction, forcing singers to be more declamatory. One can imagine a performance where singer and accompanist combine to make recitatives (too often considered "the boring bits, and too often unjustifiably so in performance) vital and dramatic. In the general discussion of harpsichord style it would have been valuable to have some consideration of Handel's relationship to the very full, dissonance-laden Italian style of accompaniment.

The remaining discussions again show the variety of practice implied by Handel's notation. On the matter of figures over rests there is one important possibility that is not considered: that a figure may have been placed over an on-beat rest in order to clarify a standard progression—given that players had to sum up quickly what was in front of them. In Ex. 8.3 the 7s are resolved in the voice part off the beat over a rest, after the bass has jumped away from the main harmony note. The figure 6 over the rest clearly applies to that main harmony note, not to the note that has been jumped to, or to the bass note that follows the rest. This is just a convenient way of indicating a standard 7-6 sequence, instantly understood by the accompanist, where the bass jumps away from the main harmony note off the beat. Otherwise the 7s would be followed an 8th note later by a different figure each time, lacking instant readability.

Some aspects of thesis presentation should have been tidied up for publication. The chapter on Continuo Harmonization is presumably intended as a little tutor for the standard bass progressions, a guide to playing unfigured basses based on Handel's practice. As such it would be very useful had it a suitable accompanying text. The progressions are given in abstract fragments rather than rounded sentences, as the better 18th-century tutors and Handel's own continuo exercises do. Having demonstrated the principle of parallel 6s (Group V.1) it is difficult to see the purpose of a further eight progressions involving them (Group V.2) when these are devoid of a musical context. Some information might also have been given about conventional enrichments, such as the addition of a 4 to the six-three on the sixth degree, particularly in the Phrygian cadence. These are mentioned in many 18th-century tutors.

It would have been advantageous to have somewhere a repertory of figures Handel used. In the first of the Sample Excerpts Rogers uses  $\flat$  for a minor sixth; and did Handel ever use the French figure  $\mathcal{S}$  for a diminished fifth? This recitative has some very curious figurings. In the third Sample Excerpt the places where the comments apply to the extract are not identified. The most interesting sample of continuo realization is in Handel's own keyboard arrangement of "Cara sposa" from *Radamisto*, which is printed without comment here, though Rogers did later discuss it in detail in the 2/1990 issue of *Early Music*.

Shorter musical examples are acceptably computer set (though Ex. 1.19 has alto for soprano clef and is lacking an editorial a' natural in the first bar). Longer extracts are given as bleeding chunks from the HG and HHA editions. This is useful in that Rogers has corrected the figuring so that one can see at a glance what was missing. But it does mean reproducing without explanation some very unidiomatic realizations, whether of the shapeless quarter-note chord variety, the keyboard reduction, or even in one instance a pianoforte part by Brahms.

What this book is most useful for is the discussion of particular performance issues. For that it is essential reading for continuo players in Handel or related repertory.

David Ledbetter