AN EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MANUSCRIPT OF HARPSICHORD MUSIC: WILLIAM BABELL AND HANDEL'S 'VO' FAR GUERRA'

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On 29 and 31 January 1717, the London music publishers John Walsh and John Hare advertised the Suits of the most Celebrated Lessons Collected and Fitted to the Harpsicord or Spinnet by Mr. Wm. Babell. As far as is known, the appearance of this imposing volume attracted no published comment and history has not recorded the multi-lingual expletives no doubt uttered by George Frideric Handel when he found that the collection consisted mostly of his music - keyboard arrangements of arias from Rinaldo, Il Pastor Fido and Teseo. This volume, the third in a series of operatic transcriptions published by Babell, was by far his most successful. The collection was reissued the following year in a pirated edition by Richard Meares, with a new title which pointedly omits any mention of William Babell, and again by Walsh, from the original plates, circa 1730. The collection came out circa 1745 in a French edition under the title of Pieces de Clavecin de Mr. Handel - which, it now appears, was perhaps not altogether misleading.

With the Celebrated Lessons, Babell acquired a continental reputation he never deserved, for it was due almost exclusively to the last number in the collection, an amazing arrangement of the battle aria 'Vo' far guerra' which concludes the second act of Rinaldo. With its bold martial air, fiercely rattling batteries and ad libitum passages of unprecedented length and difficulty, Vo' far guerra became known as the 'Celebrated Grand Lesson' and the longest-lived of any harpsichord piece published in the eighteenth century. It was copied out many times, both in England and abroad, as well as being separately republished as late as circa 1790 in an edition which acknowledged its seminal role as a keyboard exercise of the 'ancient' school: 'republished at the particular request of several of the most Eminent Masters, as being a very excellent & Useful Lesson for the improvement of the Fingers.'

According to Sir John Hawkins, Babell's arrangements from Rinaldo 'succeeded so well...as to make from it a book of lessons which few could play but himself, and which has long been deservedly celebrated.' His rival Charles Burney, however, objected to Babell's 'showy and brilliant lessons, which by mere rapidity of finger in playing single
sounds, without the assistance of taste, expression, harmony or modulation, enabled the player to astonish ignorance, and acquire the reputation of a great player at a small expense...; Vo’ far guerra he specifically condemned as containing ‘not one learned or solid passage’. Burney was acquainted with Handel himself but knew little about the composer’s early years in London: one wonders what he would have said about Vo’ far guerra had he known that, as seems possible, it was Handel’s own arrangement which had been so professionally ‘collected’ by the precocious William Babell.

Burney entirely missed the significance of Vo’ far guerra, even though he knew that Handel ‘afterwards drew from the brilliant parts, passages for his harpsichord lessons and organ concertos’; and Burney’s radical misconception of this work has misled historians of music ever since. When Friedrich Chrysander reprinted the ‘Celebrated Lesson’ as part of his edition of Handel’s works, he described it as ‘the greatest specimen of bravura music for harpsichord written until the year 1713’; but, while he correctly recognized the ‘great piano fantasia’ as an ‘imitation of Handel’s art’, he still ascribed it to William Babell.

Though Babell has always been regarded as Handel’s first significant disciple in England, at least at the keyboard, the actual relationship between his edition of Vo’ far guerra and Handel’s own playing has long been a subject of conjecture and dispute. No one after Chrysander, it seems, noticed the very obvious difference of quality between this masterly transcription and the operatic arrangements which are known to be by Babell himself (for example, those he produced before encountering Handel’s music). No one, furthermore, bothered to make a detailed study of Babell’s publications to test the traditional attribution of the Celebrated Lessons. And no one, it seems, has been struck by the anomalous fact that a young, untravelled and inexperienced composer, with a couple of modest volumes to his credit, should suddenly come up with a virtuoso number at the very forefront of developments in European keyboard playing. It was another four or five years before Bach first recorded his extemporaneous flights, on a similar scale, in the passages and cadenzas of the fifth ‘Brandenburg’ concerto (BWV 1050a, circa 1719); and nothing like the cadenzas of the Grand Lesson had appeared in print.

It has long been assumed that Babell laboriously copied Handel’s style of improvisation, and thus created an extravagant ‘fantasia’ – based partly, perhaps, on the more modest version of ‘Vo’ far guerra’ published, as the ‘Harpsicord Peice Perform’d by Mr Hendel’, in the third edition of Rinaldo (June 1711). But it is surely significant that Babell never claimed authorship of this ‘fantasia’ and that it was never ascribed to him during his lifetime – could it be that everyone knew who was responsible? However, since Handel’s autographs of ‘Vo’ far guerra’ had all disappeared, and nothing was available in Babell’s hand, there seemed to be no way of resolving the question of authorship.

In May 1993 the British Library acquired a manuscript (now Add. MS. 71209) of some 180 pages in oblong folio measuring 196 × 270 mm., containing music from the first two decades of the eighteenth century written in various unidentified hands. The volume, complete in its original full leather binding with the music written on up to six
staves per page, is typical of keyboard collections surviving from the period between the death of Purcell and Handel’s early years in England. It was purchased for the Library at Sotheby’s on 28 May, one of a number of items in that sale from the collection of the late Susi Jeans. In the sale catalogue the volume is dated circa 1720–30. Apart from some anonymous pieces, the selection includes works by – or arrangements of – Corelli, Albinoni, Nicolini (who sang in Rinaldo), and Handel. Easily the most substantial and, I would argue, important item in the collection is a keyboard arrangement of ‘Vo’ far guerra’ (fig. 1): for this, and some fifteen other pieces, can be shown to be in the hand of the man who once either owned or at least made extensive use of the volume – William Babell himself.

The provenance is indicated by a note on the inside back cover (fig. 2): ‘For Babel att Mf. Scotts In Deens Cour Deen Street…’ – directions either to ensure the book’s return, or to let its owner (a pupil?) in whose book Babell had written know how to contact him. This note is written in a handwriting that is almost certainly Babell’s, for the formation of his surname closely resembles the signature on his will (fig. 3). From a comparison with, for example, the word ‘Symphony’ written above various sections of Vo’ far guerra
Fig. 2. Note by Babell on the inside back cover of the volume, Add. MS. 71209, f. iii. The tallies may represent a count of lessons.

Signed sealed and published at Sand as by the will of William Babell the testator as and for his last will and testament in the presence of us who have attested it in his presence.

William Babell

Fig. 3. Witness statement and signature (here reproduced one below the other, rather than on opposite sides of the page) from the original will of William Babell, probate 3 October 1723. Public Record Office, PROB. 10/1637. By kind permission of the Keeper of the Public Records.
Fig. 4. (Above) A Prelude by Charles Babell, showing his Ἐ time signature, Add. MS. 39569, f. 4v; (below) William Babell’s Prelude to Vo’ far guerra, Add. MS. 71209, f. 27v

(ff. 30v, 32) this can be identified as the hand of the music in the central and most substantial part of the volume (ff. 21v–73v). At first sight, the musical writing might be mistaken for that of Babell’s father Charles, whose hand is well known. It was he who penned, presumably for his son’s practice, the magnificent collection of harpsichord music in the British Library with the name ‘William Babel’ and the date 1702 on the front cover (Add. MS. 39569). Since the father probably first taught the son, it is not surprising that their hands should be so similar, particularly in the idiosyncratic form of the Ἐ time signature (fig. 4). When the two parts of Charles Babell’s trios now in the
Newberry Library, Chicago,\textsuperscript{12} were sold in 1947 the catalogue printed a note made in the first volume by A. F. Hill:\textsuperscript{13}

These beautifully written Trios by Charles Babel have never been printed...Dr Cummings possessed a complete set entitled ‘Airs in Three Parts’ in the handwriting of the composer’s son, William Babel. Ellis bought them at the sale of the Cummings library, in 1917, and they tell me that the writing of my set is identical with theirs...

The resemblance, however, is only superficial. Whereas the father was a fine calligrapher, his son was merely a competent one, whose writing was often slapdash. The handwriting of the central portion of Add. MS. 71209 more nearly resembles that of a set of \textit{Suits of Lessons} by William Babell, which is now in the Coke Collection.\textsuperscript{14} With an elaborate title-page by F. Boitard, the volume is clearly a fair copy of another collection of Babell’s operatic transcriptions that nearly all failed to see the light of day. It was surely the same hand, for example, that formed the heading ‘Prelude’ in both manuscripts; given this and the general similarity throughout, one can only concur with the suggestion in the typed notes introducing the Coke volume that the ‘MS. may be in the composer’s hand’.

The identification of William Babell’s musical hand in the British Library manuscript of \textit{Vo’ far guerra} immediately raises important questions concerning the authorship of this transcription and the relationship between it and the published Grand Lesson. Since these issues are already stimulating debate among Handelians – and the controversy is unlikely to be resolved quickly – I will here summarize my own conclusions which are more fully set out in an unpublished essay.\textsuperscript{15} The version of \textit{Vo’ far guerra} in Babell’s autograph appears to precede his published arrangement by a couple of years or so (\textit{circa} 1715 is the date suggested by Terence Best).\textsuperscript{16} The musical text is closely related to a copy of the Lesson in the hand of John Reading (\textit{circa} 1730), now in the Euing Library, Glasgow.\textsuperscript{17} Both, in my opinion, derive from a missing transcription by Handel himself; but, although Babell’s is now the earliest known copy of the Lesson, Reading’s version appears to be nearer Handel’s missing original.

This conclusion is indicated by a comparison of these manuscripts with two later copies of the Lesson by Handel’s own scribes, the elder Smith\textsuperscript{18} and the anonymous hand known as ‘Beta’:\textsuperscript{19} in the main body of the aria their texts are unquestionably authoritative but their strange version of the concluding cadenza will ensure that the controversy concerning Handel’s contribution to the Grand Lesson remains alive for the foreseeable future.

Normally, the appearance of an arrangement in the hands of two copyists employed by a composer – in separate collections of that same composer’s music – would leave little room for conjecture, especially when that very composer is also known to have written the original music. But, in these two later manuscripts, one can only conclude that the final cadenza of the Lesson has been deliberately altered or rearranged so as to make the sequences of some passages appear random, disjointed and ungrammatical. Because of this very puzzling feature, these manuscript sources of \textit{Vo’ far guerra} have been quietly omitted from the canon – a curious lapse of scholarship which, if it were adopted
for all cases of allegedly corrupt sources, would more than decimate the shelves of
classical philology. Despite the partly 'corrupt' cadenza, I am prepared to argue that the
later manuscripts are genuine and authentic Handel – indeed, his own revision of the
Lesson – and that they show an indisputable continuity with the Reading version and,
less so, with the text of Babell’s autograph copy. Comparison of this with the other three
manuscripts of Vo’ far guerra shows that Babell’s has not simply followed Handel’s text,
but made various changes and adaptations of his own, few of any interest or consequence.

From this somewhat altered version Babell evidently developed his published
arrangement, which thus finally emerges, not as a transcendentonal fantasian on ‘Vo’ far
guerra’, but a mundane contrapuntum which remains almost entirely dependent on
Handel's original transcription (while perhaps incorporating details remembered from
Handel’s own improvisations). Babell was never more than a servile, though technically
competent, imitator, who (probably at the instigation of John Walsh) concocted a
curate’s egg of his own tedious airs and doubles, some weak imitations of Handel’s
preludes and some fine to brilliant transcriptions of Handel’s arias, based, no doubt, on
the composer’s own performances, as well as his first manuscript version of the Grand
Lesson.

With the fortunate recovery of Babell’s manuscript – a highly significant acquisition
– one more piece of evidence can be put in place for making out the case that Handel
himself was the composer and first performer of the Celebrated Grand Lesson. This
great work, I have also argued, was not the spontaneous creation it appeared to be, but
the polished result of many years of hard practice, experimental improvisation and
creative recycling, especially in the famous competition with Domenico Scarlatti in
Rome (circa 1709). With Babell’s editorial role confirmed, the Grand Lesson must
eventually be accepted as Handel’s first significant English work for harpsichord – a
masterpiece of international significance, the influence of which is still felt today through
the abiding popularity of his organ concertos.

But, in plagiarizing Handel and publishing the Grand Lesson, William Babell
accidentally found a well-earned niche in musical history, for his volume of Celebrated
Lessons was the editio princeps of ‘modern’ keyboard music; that is, the first publication
from the new school of harpsichord playing created by Scarlatti and Handel.

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2 *Suits of Harpsicord and Spinnet, Lessons, Collected from the most Celebrated Masters Works.*
   The date suggested in the *Catalogue of Printed Music in the British Library*, [c. 1715?], is wrong:
   this was the second edition, newly engraved after that of Walsh and Hare.
3 From the title-page of *The Celebrated grand Lesson as adapted for the Harpsichord or Piano
   Forte...from a favourite Air out of the Opera of Rinaldo*... (London: J. Dale, [1790?]).
7 Loc. cit.
9 Ibid., vol. lvii a, p. vi.
10 *Arie dell’Opera di Rinaldo...* (London: J. Walsh and J. Hare, 1711), pp. 49-52.
11 Other manuscripts from the Jeans collection were bequeathed to the Library by Lady Jeans.
12 Newberry Library, Chicago, Case MS-VM 350 B 113t.
15 ‘Reminiscences of Rinaldo: the keyboard transcriptions of “Vo’ far guerra”’.
16 I thank Terence Best for his invaluable advice and criticism.
17 University of Glasgow, Euing Library, R.d.54, ff. 1-14.
18 Smith’s copy (c. 1720) occupies pride of place in New York Public Library, Mus. Res. Drexel 5856, a volume said to have been owned by Handel’s pupil, the Princess Amelia.
19 The earlier copy is in a volume of ‘Pieces for the harpsicord’ (dated 1717-18) once owned by Handel’s friend, Elizabeth Legh, and now in the Malmesbury collection.