George Frideric Handel
Born February 23, 1685, Halle, Saxony, Germany.

Music for the Royal Fireworks

Handel composed this music in 1749 and it was first performed on April 14 of that year in Green Park, London. The composer conducted the first indoor performance on May 27 in the new chapel of Thomas Coram’s Foundling Hospital in London. Theodore Thomas led the first American performance in New York on October 21, 1868, twenty-three years before he founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The score calls for three oboes, two bassoons and contrabassoon, three horns, three trumpets, timpani, harpsichord, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of music from Handel’s Music for the Royal Fireworks (arranged by Hamilton Harty) were given at Orchestra Hall on December 5 and 6, 1930, with Frederick Stock conducting. The Orchestra first performed the complete work on a Popular Concert on April 23, 1960, with Walter Hendl conducting.

Unlike his contemporaries Bach and Vivaldi, Handel has never gone out of fashion. His oratorio Messiah has helped to keep his name alive, of course, although other pieces, such as the Largo from the opera Xerxes and this lively set of pieces written to accompany an evening of fireworks, also have been widely performed, even in times when baroque music was neither well known nor appreciated.

Handel was the most popular composer of his day and, particularly after he arrived in London in 1710, he commanded a huge following and was in great demand both as a composer and performer—he excelled on organ and harpsichord—for the rest of his life. (After he became a British subject he started spelling his name George Frideric Handel rather than the Georg Friederich Händel which appears on his birth certificate.)

The music Handel composed for a lavish fireworks display in 1749 was perhaps his greatest public success in London. (The first London performances of Messiah in 1743 and 1745 failed to generate much excitement, despite the triumph of the Dublin premiere in 1741.) King George II was a great admirer of Handel’s music—he is the man who started the tradition of standing for the Hallelujah Chorus—and he turned to Handel to write the official music for an elaborate outdoor celebration of the peace of Aix-la-Chappelle, the treaty that brought a temporary end to the War of Austrian Succession. Handel agreed at once, and although he disapproved of the king’s edict that there should be no “fidles” (stringed instruments), he complied, in the name of political correctness, and then added them to the score for all subsequent performances.

Handel also had argued against the idea of a public rehearsal, although it turned out to be one of his greatest triumphs. The run through (without fireworks), held in the Spring Gardens at Vauxhall, drew a crowd of 12,000 and caused one of London’s first traffic jams. (“So great a resort occasioned such a stoppage on London Bridge that no carriage could pass for three hours,” The Gentlemen’s Magazine reported.) The official event itself, held in Green Park the following week, was less than a complete success, despite the brilliance of Handel’s score and the participation of a blockbuster orchestra that featured some sixty wind instruments. Following the overture, a salute of 101 brass cannons launched the fireworks display, which first lit up the sky and then set fire to a lavish Palladian pavilion, more than 100 feet long and 114 feet high, that was created especially for the festivities by Chevalier Servandoni, scenic designer to the French court. “What contributed to the awkwardness of the whole,” a London reporter later wrote, “was the right pavilion catching fire and being burnt down in the middle of the show.”
(Servandoni was later arrested for drawing his sword on the comptroller of fireworks.) Spectacle and disaster overshadowed one of Handel’s grandest works.

When Handel conducted the score a month later, in a concert at the Foundling Hospital, he had no fireworks to worry about, he could use the violins he had always wanted, and his music was at last the center of attention. The Music for the Royal Fireworks, as this score has come to be known, quickly became one of his most popular works. The overture is one of Handel’s grandest, with a magnificent introduction followed by a spirited fugal allegro. The remaining numbers—short dances and character pieces—are less spectacular but no less brilliant: a minor-key bourrée, charming evocations of peace and of rejoicing, and finally two minuets—one sober and ceremonial, the other appropriately festive.

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