

The Balfour Handel Collection

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The Bach Network UK Dialogue Meeting at Edinburgh in August 2011 provided an opportunity for items from the National Library of Scotland's Balfour Handel Collection to be displayed, along with a copy of a Bible annotated by J.S. Bach. The library bought the foundation collection in 1938 from the estate of Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930), and has maintained it since by adding other items to complement the original repertory and to keep it up-to-date through the acquisition of relevant modern music editions.

Balfour was a major figure in British public and political life, with a family base at estates in Ross-shire. His uncle was the third Marquis of Salisbury, one of the grandees of the Conservative party; not surprisingly, Balfour himself collected an earldom. He was Prime Minister from 1902–5 and (unlike modern prime ministers) remained prominent in politics even after spectacularly losing a general election, serving in all a total of 27 years as a cabinet minister.¹ His family was notable for intellectual as well as political achievements: one of his brothers became Professor of Animal Morphology at the University of Cambridge, and another was a Fellow of Trinity College. Balfour was among the first students of the 'modern' Moral Sciences Tripos, was President of the British Academy from 1921–8 and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge from 1919–30. (The University Library was built under his period of tenure.)

Not much is known about Balfour's musical interests, but it seems that music had the place in social life that was usual for someone of his class brought up in the Victorian period. Of his undergraduate years he later recalled:

In a university town, concerts of chamber music were more easily organised than operas or symphonies. I do not think I ever heard Wagner before I took my degree in 1869. The reputation of Mendelssohn was somewhat on the

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¹ The full-length oil portrait by John Singer Sargent has a languid pose that accords with some descriptions of Balfour's personality; a more informal photograph of him appears in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Volume III: The Challenge of War: 1914–1916* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 29.

wane; that of Brahms was growing. Schumann, Schubert, Beethoven, Handel, and Bach provided our staple fare.²

He bought his Handel collection only a few years after taking his degree, in 1876.

To understand the nature of Balfour's collection, two connected facts must be recognised. First, he bought it as a pre-formed unit from Julian Marshall (1806–1903), one of the great nineteenth-century collectors. Marshall's interests were diverse (his specialisms included tennis and card games as well as music) and his acquisitions copious: in addition to materials that he disposed of privately, there were five substantial auction sales of his property between 1870 and 1922.³ His wife wrote a biography of Handel, which was not published until 1883; its relationship to the collection is therefore uncertain. Secondly, the part of his collection that Marshall sold to Balfour comprised printed items; music editions and libretti (wordbooks). Marshall had certainly collected music manuscripts as well, including autographs of music by Purcell, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and some early copies of music by Handel, but these – more than 400 volumes – he sold to the British Museum in 1878–81.

The quantity and range of printed materials in the Balfour Collection put it alongside the other great collections now located at, for example, the British Library and the Foundling Museum in London.⁴ At a rough count, and including later additions, the collection contains about 500 music editions and 150 wordbooks, many of them unique survivals. It includes, for example, the only known copy of the first state of John Walsh's edition of Handel's *Concerti Grossi* Op. 3, with a reference to the contemporary royal wedding on the title page and the wrong work (not by Handel) inserted as the fourth concerto. Computation of the size of the collection is not a simple matter: one volume, if counted singly, binds together more than 100 individual song-sheets. The significance of printed sources varies from one eighteenth-century composer to another. In Bach's case there were relatively few editions of his music printed during his lifetime, but those few were published under Bach's critical surveillance and post publication received his attention, as his manuscript corrections show. Handel's first London opera was published within a couple of months of its first performance in 1711, and from the 1720s onwards music from his new stage works appeared in an almost continuous stream from London's prolific music publishers. A few publications had Handel's direct authority: the first collection of keyboard suites, the editions of *Radamisto*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Rodelinda* and *Alexander's Feast*, and the concertos Op. 4 and Op. 6, for example, in some cases with attention that extended to the basso continuo figuring. Mostly, however, Handel was paid for copy – songs from his operas and oratorios, or instrumental works – that he probably supplied at one remove through his team of music copyists. The

² Arthur James, First Earl of Balfour, *Retrospect: An Unfinished Autobiography 1848–1866* (London, 1930), p. 41.

³ See A. Hyatt King, *Some British Collectors of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 64–6; biographies of both Balfour and Marshall are included in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Copies in the Balfour Collection are listed in William C. Smith, *Handel: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Early Editions* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

publisher made the best commercial use possible of this resource, including the creation of two-stave arrangements for domestic entertainment on the harpsichord or the flute. Nevertheless the early editions, in addition to having some intrinsic interest for the reception of Handel's music, need to be taken into account along with other sources in order to establish good music texts. The wordbooks, if used with critical care, are rather more central to this process, for they provide essential evidence about the casts of singers and the sequences of movements that constituted Handel's performing versions of his theatre works.

Lurking among the printed music and librettos is one music manuscript, a copyist's library score of Handel's *Hercules*: this is a handsome folio volume in a binding that reveals its derivation from the so-called 'Smith Collection', formerly in the Royal Music Library.⁵ Although its interim provenance is unclear, this is almost certainly among the items that reflect King George III's endearing habit of giving away such books to favoured musicians.

⁵ See Donald Burrows, 'The "Granville" and "Smith" Collections of Handel Manuscripts', in Chris Banks, Arthur Searle and Malcolm Turner (eds), *Sundry Sorts of Music Books: Essays on The British Library Collections Presented to O.W. Neighbour on his 70th Birthday* (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 1993) and 'The Royal Music Library and its Handel Collection', *The Electronic British Library Journal*, Article 2 2009. Available at: <http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2009articles/article2.html>.