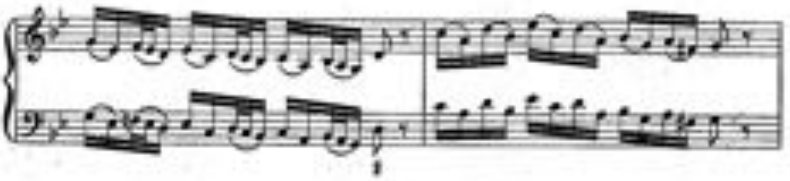
Handel and Keiser: Further Borrowings

Winton Dean

Reinhard Keiser's opera *Die römische Unruhe, oder Die edelmüthige Octavia*, produced at Hamburg on August 5, 1705, has long been known as a source of Handel borrowings. Chrysander prepared the score as the sixth supplement to his Handel edition, but died before it appeared, with a preface by Max Seiffert, in 1902. Seiffert identified ten passages used by Handel, all in early works. Eight of them occur in music composed during the Italian period (i.e., before 1710), the other two in the opera *Silla*, produced at Burlington House in June 1713. Several turn up in more than one context, and six found their way, mostly via other works, into the score of *Agrippina* (1709). Handel had appropriated all ten within eight years of the production of Keiser's opera, which he undoubtedly heard at Hamburg and in which he probably played (he was a member of the theater orchestra). He had another reason for remembering it: the subject was identical with that of his own second opera, *Die durch Blut und Mord erlangete Liebe, oder Nero*. This had been staged six months before *Octavia*, on February 25, 1705, and unlike his first opera, *Almira*, was a failure; the music is lost. It seems probable that Keiser, who brought out his own *Almira* in 1706, was deliberately challenging his young rival.

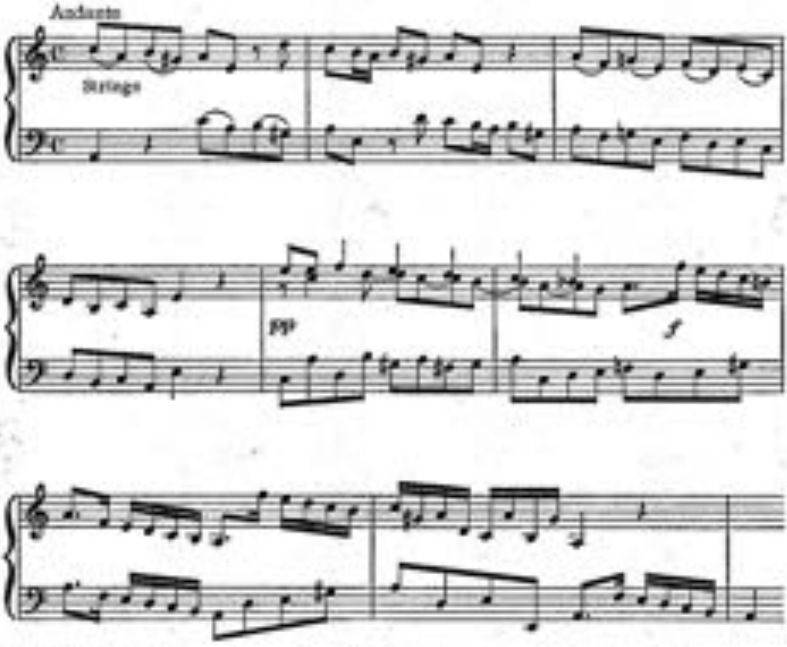
A recent inspection of the score of *Octavia* revealed two further borrowings of much later date, which seem never to have been noted. They show that nearly thirty years after the Hamburg production Handel was still drawing sustenance from this old source.[1] Early in Act I Nero's mistress Ormoena, who plays a part not unlike that of Poppea, addresses him in a love song, "Vaghi lumi del mio bene," of which this is the opening ritornello:

Ex. 1



Handel used this in Act II Scene 5 of *Ariodante* (composed between August and November 1734), where Polinesso's aria "Se l'inganno sortisce felice" begins as follows:

Ex. 2

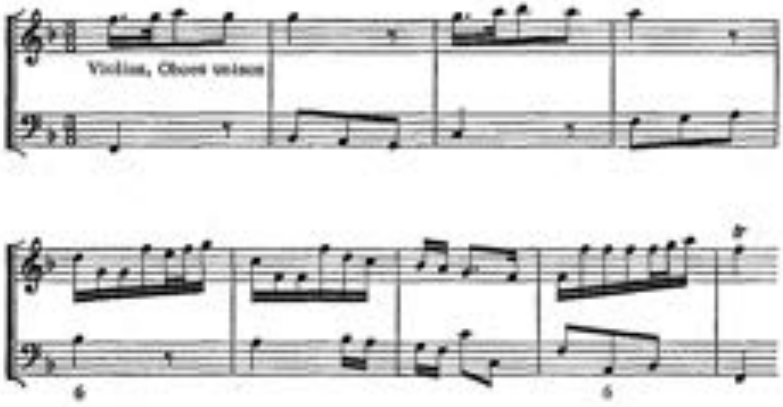


The initial phrase (two bars in Keiser, four in Handel) is almost identical except for a slight change in rhythm, and both composers give it to the voice (Keiser after a long-held D); but in other respects the two arias could scarcely be more different. Keiser's is a love song for high soprano, Handel's a cynical mockery of virtue for contralto (one of the many male parts in his operas composed for a woman). The greater richness of Handel's aria in invention and development emerges with the introduction of contrasted material (and subtler harmony) in the second half of the ritornello, and still more in the aria itself, a superb delineation of Polinesso's envious and vicious character. It may be

thought too that the downward creeping motive is more suited to express the emotion Handel injected into it than that which evoked it in the first place.

The second borrowing is a sententious little aria about the unpredictability of fortune, "Chi non sà della fortuna," sung by Nero in the final scene of *Octavia*, which begins:

Ex. 3



This was to inspire one of the noblest arias in *Orlando*, completed in November 1732. Soon after the start of the opera the hero, urged by the magician Zoroastro to follow Mars instead of Cupid, decides to gain his glory in the service of love. After all, Hercules and Achilles were no less brave for their enjoyment of the softer pleasures ("Non fù già men forte Alcide"). This is the ritornello:

Ex. 4

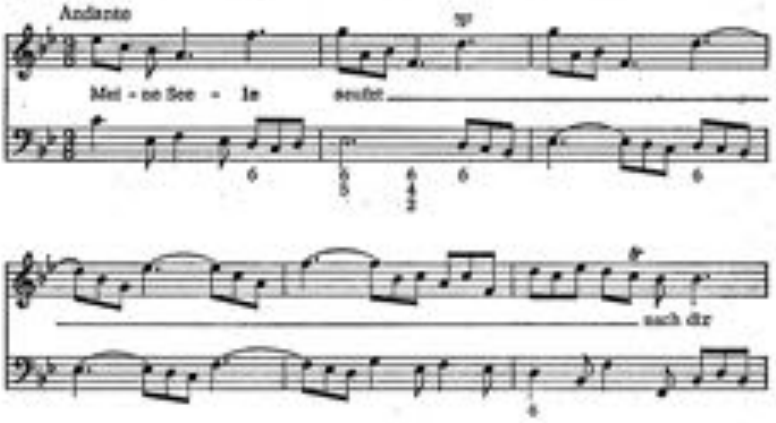
Again there is no parallel in the words or the dramatic situation. Keiser's aria is for bass voice, Handel's for alto castrato. Again only the first phrase is common ground (four bars of 3/8 in Keiser, two of 6/8 in Handel), though this time the key is the same and the notes (apart from a modification to the bass) identical. Keiser does almost nothing with his motive except give a simplified variant of it to the voice. Handel also bestows it on the voice, but he spins a whole aria, of considerable length and consummate beauty, from Keiser's germ. Once more the beginning of this process can be glimpsed by comparing the continuation of the two ritornellos, bare and commonplace in Keiser, pregnant and rhythmically flexible—and sensuously scored for two horns, two oboes, and four-part strings—in Handel.

Both examples conform to the dominant pattern of Handel's borrowings, whether from his own work or other people's. He takes a short *incipit* and uses it as a basis for new development, almost in the manner of an improvisation. He draws from it possibilities that cannot have been suspected by its creator, much as a great sculptor releases the secret life in a block of stone. The borrowing is repaid at compound interest.

Another remarkable detail emerges from a study of Handel's dealings with *Octavia*. One of the passages to which Sieffert draws attention is Livia's aria "Kehre wieder!" a love song in Act I Scene 7, used by Handel in the cantata *Aminta e Fillide* (Fillide's aria "Fiamma bella!") and Act II of *Agrippina* (Agrippina's aria "Ogni vento"). Here again Handel takes Keiser's first two bars, changing nothing but the key, and continues quite differently, with an irresistible phrase in the rhythm of a Viennese waltz that completely transforms the piece. But there is a second borrowing here, which appears not only in the two arias mentioned by Seiffert but in at least four other works spread over the whole extent of Handel's career, a period of a full half-century. Towards the end of the first half of "Kehre wieder!"

Keiser sets the words "meine Seele seufzt nach dir" to a striking phrase based on the interval of a ninth:

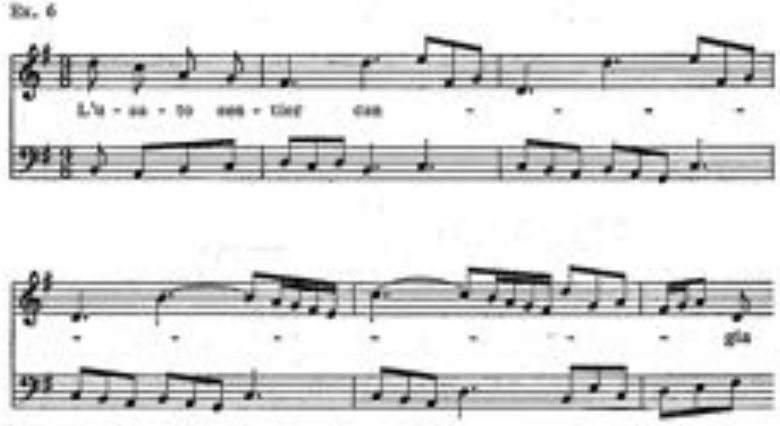
Ex. 5



This seems to have haunted Handel's imagination, for he reproduced it again and again, in different keys and time signatures, and not always in contexts associated with Keiser's incipit. There are a number of minor variants, but the essential phrase remains unaltered. The passages are worth quotation for the light they throw on the hidden processes of creation.[2] Interior borrowings of this kind, which are not uncommon in Handel, are not a matter of improvisation but of the sudden precipitation into consciousness of a musical idea stored in the memory.

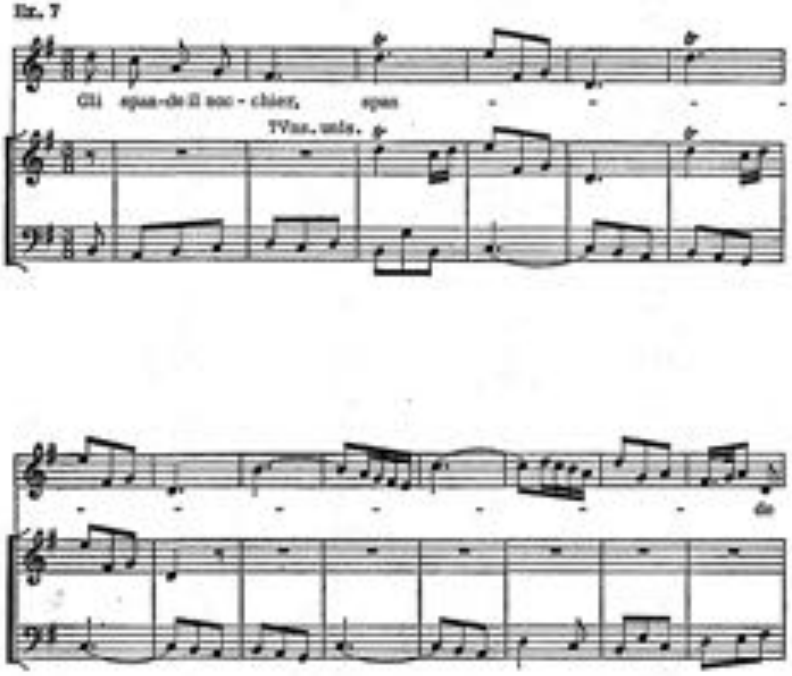
Aminta e Fillide (1708), "Fiamma bella!":

Ex. 6



Agrippina (1709), "Ogni vento":

Ex. 7



Rodelinda (1725), Act II, Eduige's aria "De' miei scherni" (second part):

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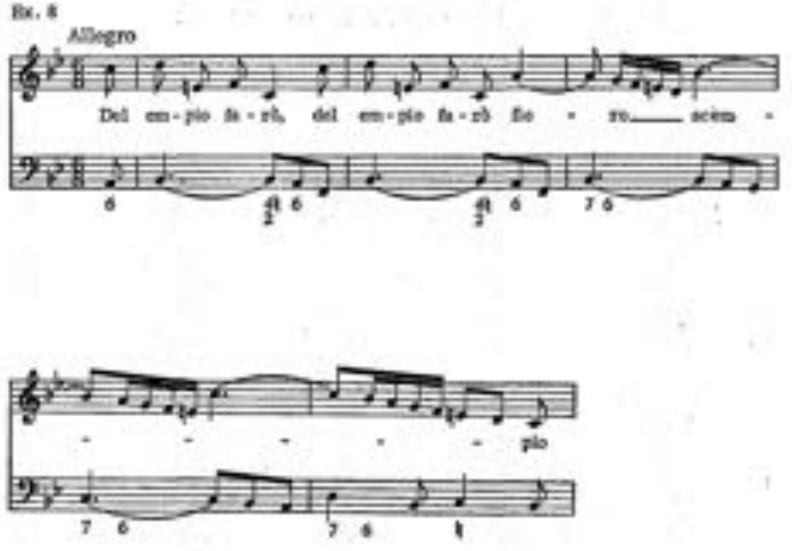
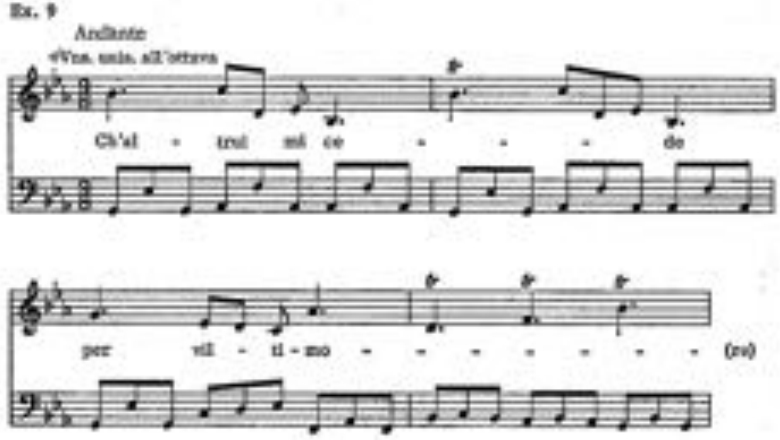
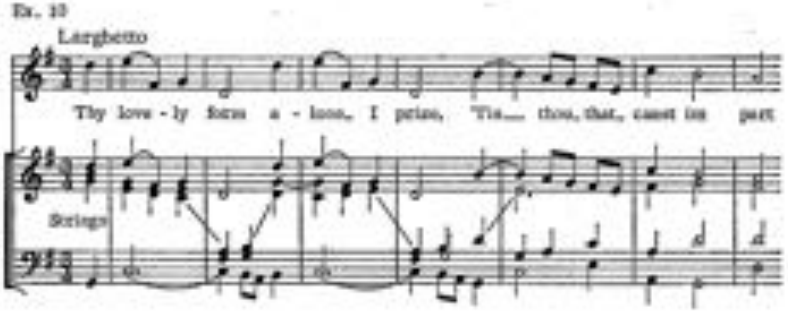


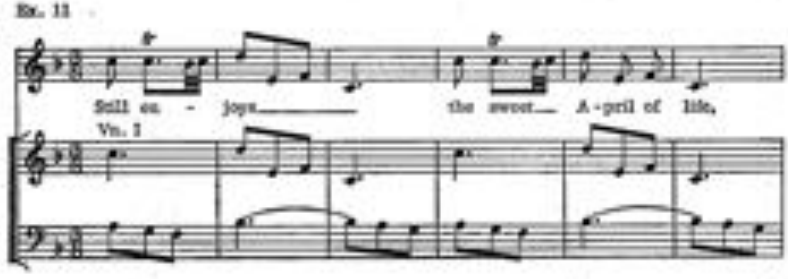
Berenice (1736–37), Act II, Selene's aria "Si poco è forte":

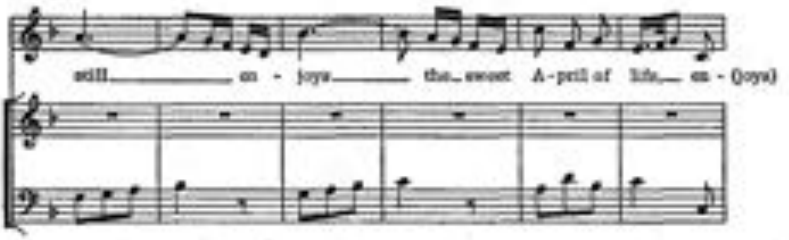


Solomon (1748), Act I, Queen's aria "With thee the unsheltered moor I'd tread":



The Triumph of Time and Truth (1758), Act I, Deceit's aria "Happy Beauty":





This last aria was added to *The Triumph of Time and Truth* in the last year of Handel's life, and although it is to some extent a conscious reworking of earlier material[3] its enormous length (293 bars) and sumptuous orchestration (two horns, two oboes, independent bassoons, violins in three parts, viola, and bass) entitle it to consideration on its merits. It was presumably dictated to J. C. Smith and must be one of the very last products of Handel's brain. Of these six arias, Keiser's incipit launches Examples 6, 7, and 11, and (less conspicuously, abbreviated and in a minor key) Example 8, and plays a subsidiary part in Example 9, but does not occur at all in Example 10. Only in Example 9 is the quoted phrase anticipated in the initial ritornello. It is difficult to say what specific emotion, if any, Handel associated with it. The texts offer no common denominator, though some (notably Example 10, where alone the passage is fully harmonized) seem more appropriate than others. But there is a peculiar aptness in the fact that in extreme old age he set the words "still enjoys the sweet April of life" to music he first encountered 53 years before in the dawn of his career. Even if he had long forgotten its origin, he never ceased to repay his debt to Reinhard Keiser.

NOTES

[3] These are not the latest Keiser borrowings. The Minuet in the overture to *Samson* (1742) is based on a movement in Keiser's *Claudius* (1703), though it may have appeared in another Handel work in the interval. It is a safe assumption that the unpublished or lost operas of Keiser (and others) contain material that Handel at some time gathered into his net.

[4] Three of them are quoted in my book *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (1959), pp. 519–20. I was not then aware of the other three, nor of their source in Keiser.

[5] Not only the Keiser incipit used in "Fiamma bella!" and "Ogni vento" but an aria ("Piacer che non si dona") in the unpublished cantata '*Amarilli vezzosa*' on which he drew for another *Agrippina* aria, "Col peso del tuo amor" (Rudolf Ewerhart, "Die Händel-Handschriften der Santini-Bibliothek in Münster," in *Händel-Jahrbuch* 1960, pp. 125–26). It will be seen that Example 11 returns closely to Handel's earliest form (Examples 6 and 7).