

Handel and Leclair

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Those of us who studied with Paul Henry Lang while he was gestating his monumental biography of Handel were fortunate to share his discoveries and insights, to hear key chapters as they were finished, and to receive an enthusiastic and inspired introduction to the music, life, and times of that great German turned Italian turned Englishman. In such a state of "Handel-consciousness," this writer, beginning work on a dissertation on Jean-Marie Leclair Païné, was intrigued by statements in the literature on Leclair which linked the latter's style to Handel's. Marc Pincherle, for instance, had written of Leclair:¹

His models were the Italians and the French; but before investigating what he owed them, one notes incidentally certain affinities also with the greatest Germans of his time: Johann Sebastian Bach and Handel, whom he did not know—the first for certain and the other in all probability.

This opinion was echoed in other articles on Leclair, including that in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*:²

Leclair's models were especially Italian and French forerunners; but one finds also a certain harmonic and contrapuntal connection with J. S. Bach and Handel (although in all probability he did not know them). . . . Marpurg in his *Traité de la fugue* [Berlin, 1756] placed Leclair on a level with Handel, Telemann, the Graun brothers, and the members of the Bach family.

Similarities between Handel's and Leclair's instrumental music may in some part be due to the fact that these men, like so many of their contemporaries, were indebted to Italian models, and especially to the music of Corelli. Handel worked with Corelli in Rome while Leclair studied in Turin with one of Corelli's students, Giovanni Battista Somis. Even without these personal contacts, however, the music of Corelli would have been readily available to both men in printed and manuscript copies. Similarly, Leclair would not have needed to know Handel personally in order to have been familiar with some of his music. That Handel's European fame was considerable rather early in the century has been amply demonstrated by Otto Erich Deutsch in his *Handel: A Documentary Biography*. With these general

conditions in mind, we may proceed to specific evidence that Leclair knew not only Handel's reputation but his music.

I

The year 1728 was a year of extraordinary activity for Leclair, and it saw the beginning of his international fame as composer and violin virtuoso. That year Leclair left Turin, where he had completed his studies with Somis, and moved to Paris, where he published his *Second Livre de Sonates pour le Violon . . .* and made his debut at the *concert spirituel* (April 17). "Mr. Leclair, famous violinist," reported *Le Mercure de France*, "played a sonata which was generally and vigorously applauded." Leclair met with continued success, appearing at those concerts again on April 19, April 24, April 26, May 1, May 3, and May 6.³ On July 20 (=July 31),⁴ however, the following advertisement appeared in a weekly London newspaper, *The Country Journal*:

New Musick this Day published, SOLO'S FOR A VIOLIN OR GERMAN FLUTE, with a Thorough Bass for the Harpsichord or Bass Violin. Compos'd by Mr. Le Clair, lately come from Italy, Opera Secunda. N. B. There may likewise be had, where these are sold, Great Variety of Concerto's, Sonata's, and Solo's for all instruments in Use.

Printed for and sold by John Walsh, Servant to his Majesty, at the Harp and Hoboy in Catherine-Street in the Strand, and Joseph Hare at the Viol and Hoboy in Corn Hill, near the Royal Exchange.

The contents of the several volumes of Leclair's music published in London by Walsh between 1728 and 1764 need not concern us here. These publications contained only music that is already known from the more widely circulated Paris editions which Leclair himself published and which his wife engraved. We note, however, not only that Leclair was in London (a fact previously overlooked by his biographers), but that he had business dealings with Handel's publisher, Walsh. Considering Handel's stature in the London of 1728, it seems highly probable that Leclair came into contact with his music during this visit, regardless of whether he met Handel himself.

Nothing further is known of Leclair's stay in England. When Walsh repeated his advertisement in *The Country Journal* two weeks later on August 3 (= August 14), Leclair, whose name was misspelled, was still described as "lately come from Italy." When the advertisement appeared a third time on August 10

(= August 21) however, that description of Leclair was dropped, as if he had left England.⁵ This seems to suggest that Leclair had remained in London only long enough to see his sonatas through the press, and had then returned to France. Leclair finished his busy year by returning to Paris to perform at the *concert spirituel* on August 15, September 8, and November 1.⁶ We have record of only one more appearance that year: on December 22 Leclair and Pietro Locatelli performed before the Court at Kassel in what appears to have been billed as a competition between French and Italian music.⁷

II

In 1734 Leclair was settled in Paris, working at the court of Louis XV as concertmaster of the *musique du roi*. The libretto of a pasticcio was published that year in Paris:⁸

NOUVELLE
CHASSE
DU CERF,
DIVERTISSEMENT
EN MUSIQUE;

Composé de plusieurs Airs parodiés sur
les Opera d'Angleterre: avec diffé-
rentes Symphonies étrangères.

According to the libretto the music to which this new poetry was composed was taken, save for two numbers, from the works of Handel. The other two numbers were set respectively to the music of Fago, an obscure Neapolitan composer, and to the music of Leclair. The music world of Paris was not then so large that Leclair would have failed to hear about this use of his own music, and, if he went to hear this production, he heard virtually an entire evening of Handel's music.

The author of the pasticcio, Séré de Rieux, offered additional evidence of Handel's fame among the French in remarks in his preface:⁹

The merit of this learned author is known in all Europe, and the "crown" that he received last year from the hands of the most illustrious Englishmen puts him beyond all praise.

III

Beginning in 1736 Leclair no longer appeared in public in Paris. This retirement was triggered by a dispute with Pierre Guignon, another student of Somis, over the concertmastership of the *musique du roi*. Leclair left the service of Louis XV and some time shortly thereafter entered the service of Anne, Princess of Orange. Anne was an English princess who had studied the harpsichord and composition with Handel before her marriage into the House of Orange. From all accounts, Anne had been an excellent student and became an accomplished musician under the guidance of her famous teacher. Later she was one of Handel's staunchest supporters in his battles to obtain political and financial support for his opera company.

Leclair visited the Court of Orange (to which, according to the dedication to his *Quatrième Livre de Sonates à Violon seul avec la Basse Continue . . . Œuvre IX* [1743], he had been summoned by the Princess) for three months of each year from 1736 or '37 until 1742.¹⁰ That Leclair's music and violin playing pleased the discriminating Princess is attested to by her decorating him with the *Croix néerlandais du lion*. Although little is known about the concerts held at *Het Loo* (the palace of the Court of Orange),¹¹ we cannot doubt that Leclair was called upon by his Patroness to perform a great deal of music by her former teacher and favorite composer.

IV

About 1736 Madame Leclair engraved the Paris edition of Handel's Harpsichord Suites and four years later a reedition of the same works.¹² It is not known whether this was an exchange with Walsh, the publisher of the original edition of Handel's suites, or whether this was simply another case of the musical piracy which flourished in the absence of international copyright laws. In any case, the Handel suites were on sale at Madame Boivin's and Leclerc's music shops—the same dealers who sold Leclair's music—and Leclair would have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with these works.

During this same period, an anonymous essay in *Le Mercure de France* discussed the fact that there were now French violinists and French instrumental music considered of rank equal with that of the Italians, who had always served as models in these fields. Speaking of composition, the anonymous author praised

Handel, whom he considered, interestingly, an Italian resident in England, and added, "We can place opposite the compositions of this learned musician the compositions of Leclair l'aîné . . ."11a

V

During the years 1740 through 1742 Leclair lived (aside from three months each year at the Court of Orange) in the Hague where he was *maestro di cappella* to a wealthy commoner, François du Liz.¹³ Du Liz had a private musical establishment of twenty singers and instrumentalists from whom he required frequent private and weekly public concerts in his opulent home. The catalogue of Du Liz's music library is extant,¹⁴ and it reveals that in the repertoire performed at his concerts were a number of Handel operas: *Floridante* (1721), *Ottone* (1723), *Flavio* (1723), *Tamerlano* (1724), and *Rodelinda* (1724). Thus we have evidence of Leclair rehearsing and performing a selection—though hardly a very up-to-date selection—of Handel's prolific opera output.

This brief essay has attempted to demonstrate from our fragmentary knowledge of Leclair's career that he must have been familiar with Handel's music. Our evidence has accumulated in spite of the fact that we know little of the repertoire played by Leclair in his public concerts, and nothing of the repertoire played in his extensive private music-making. That Leclair knew the music of the famous Handel should not surprise anyone. Music and musicians circulated widely in the 18th century in spite of what seems to us primitive systems of transportation and communication.

"The facile Telemann . . . combined the French *galanterie* style with the Italian concerto style. Unlike Leclair, Telemann did not succeed in fusing the styles into a higher unity . . ." Thus wrote Manfred Bukofzer¹⁵ of that style attempted by Couperin as *les goûts réunis*, that style praised by Quantz as the *sermischter Geschmack*, that pan-European style of which Leclair and Handel were two of the most successful practitioners. We may conclude that, insofar as what Handel's and Leclair's music have in common cannot be attributed to the common coin of their times, Leclair had paid Handel that sincerest form of flattery: imitation.

¹ *Jean-Marie Leclair L'ainé*, Paris, 1932, p. 72. ("Ses modèles sont les Italiens et les Français; mais avant de rechercher ce qu'il leur doit, on notera incidemment certaines affinités, aussi, avec les plus grands allemands de son temps: Jean-Sébastien Bach et Haendel qu'il ignorait, l'un à coup sûr et l'autre fort probablement.")

² Aristide Wirsat, "Leclair," *MGG* 8:444. ("Leclair's Modelle waren besonders ital. and frz. Vorgänger; aber auch zu J. S. Bach und Händel, obwohl er sie höchstwahrscheinlich nicht kannte, findet man eine gewisse harmonische und kp. Beziehung . . . Marburg stellte Leclair in seinem *Traité de la Flûte* auf eine Stufe mit Händel, Telemann, den Brüdern Graun und den Angehörigen der Familie Bach.")

³ *Le Ménestrel Français*, 1728; April, p. 856 ("Le sieur Leclerc, fameux violon joua une Sonate qui fut généralement et très vivement applaudie . . ."); May, p. 1061.

⁴ England still observed the Julian calendar during the first half of the 18th century while the rest of Europe (excluding Russia) had adopted the Gregorian calendar. To make the English dates comparable to the French dates, therefore, eleven days must be added. In each instance of an English date in this article, the continental date is given directly afterwards in parenthesis.

⁵ Léon Vallas (*Un siècle de musique et de théâtre à Lyon, 1688-1789*, Lyons, 1932, pp. 193-94) suggests that Leclair was in Lyons on August 8, 1728, as concertmaster of the *Fest du Roi*, an annual concert in tribute to the king. This is contradicted by Leclair's presence in London on July 31 and in Paris on August 15. (The latter date also proves that the Walsh advertisement of August 14 was out-of-date, since Leclair must have left London by that date.) A reexamination of the archival records upon which Vallas based his suggestion (La bibliothèque de la ville de Lyon, Archive municipale: CC 3115, No. 101 [1727]; CC 3119, No. 147 [1728]; CC 3124, No. 136 [1729]; CC 3139, No. 151 [1732]; and CC 3162, No. 151 [1733]), and other evidence too lengthy to be presented here, appears to show that local Lyons references to "Leclair L'ainé" apply to the oldest of the Leclair brothers resident in that city, namely Jean-Marie le jeune. If this theory is correct, then the listing in the violin section of the *Fest du Roi* in 1735 of "M. Leclair aîné . . . M. Leclerc [sic] Cadet . . . M. Leclerc cadet 3^e . . ." refers respectively to Jean-Marie le jeune, Pierre, and Jean-Benoît Leclair. (Concerning the latter see Neal Zaslaw, "Some Notes on Jean-Benoît Leclair," *Revue belge de musicologie* 19:97-101 [1963].)

⁶ *Le Ménestrel de France*, 1728; August, p. 1859; September, pp. 2094-95; November, pp. 2509-10.

⁷ Arend Koole, *Pieter Leestels*, Amsterdam, 1949, p. 47; Christiane Englebrecht, "Die Hofkapelle des Landgrafen Carl von Hessen-Kassel," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hessische Geschichte und Landkunde*, 61: 166 (1957).

⁸ Printed in an anthology, *Les dons des enfans de Latone: La musique, et Le chœur du cerf, poème dédié au roy* (Paris, 1734), containing the libretti of several divertissements as well as a potpourri of other items, including a collection of trumpet fanfares. The "Nouvelle Chasse du Cerf . . ." is found on pp. 97ff and the "Table des airs à chanter, avec Violons, compris dans la Chasse du Cerf" on p. 313. The third movement of Leclair's *Trio Sonata in D major*, Opus 2, No. 8, was used for a *chœur de Nymphes*, "Que tes jeux sont charmans."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 300. ("Le mérite de ce sçavant auteur est connu dans toute l'Europe, & la couronne qu'il a reçue l'année dernière de la main des plus illustres Anglois, met au dessus de tous éloges.) The "crown" refers to the honorary Doctor of Music degree offered to Handel by Oxford University but refused by him (see Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: a Documentary Biography*, New York, 1955, pp. 316-17, 333-34, 340, and 379).

¹⁰ Jacob Wilhelm Lustig, under the nom de plume of Wohlgenuth, wrote in a brief biographical report on Leclair, "Er pflegte ehemals jährlich ein Vierteljahr unsere

Princessin zum Concert zu besuchen" (in Marburg [ed.], *Kritische Briefe über die Teubner*, II/4: 469 [December 18, 1762]). Luscig's assertion is confirmed by receipts for the monthly salary paid Leclair by François du Liz during 1740-42. These receipts (Algemeen Rijksarchief: Archives de la Cour de Holland, No. 5162) show the Leclair was away from du Liz's palace during April, May, and June of 1741; these, therefore, must have been the months spent at the Court of Orange.

¹¹ See D. F. Scheurleer, *Het Muziekleem in Nederland in de tweede helft der 18^e eeuw . . .*, The Hague, 1909.

¹² "MÉMOIRES pour servir à l'Histoire de la Musique Vocale et Instrumentale: LE VIOLON," *Le Mercure de France* (June 1738) 1:1110-18. ("Il est vrai qu'en Italie, outre les trois plus fameux que nous avons nommés [Tartini, Somis, and Montanari], et qui peuvent de disputer à nos trois célèbres Violons [Leclair, Guignon, and Cupis], ils ont encore comme nous [he had already named 14 other good French violinists] de très-habiles Maîtres, comme Solaris, Veracini, San Martini, Finaldi, Prêtre, Chanoine Vénitien, plus sçavant dans la composition, que pour l'exécution, et encore Bonacini, Inali [sic] en Angleterre, &c. On pourroit opposer à ce sçavant Musicien, les Compositions de le Cœur Palné, et celles de bien d'autres François.")

¹³ William C. Smith, *Handel: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Early Editions*, London, 1900, pp. 252-53.

¹⁴ Algemeen Rijksarchief (see note 10), and D. F. Scheurleer, "Jean-Marie Leclair l'Aîné in Holland," *Sammelband der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 10:239-62 (1908-09).

¹⁵ D. F. Scheurleer, "Een Haagsche Muziek liefhebber uit de 18^e Eeuw," *Vereeniging voor Nederlandsche Muziekgeschiedenis* 9:41-64 (1914).

¹⁶ Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, New York, 1947, p. 265.