

HANDEL

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MUSIC for the ROYAL FIREWORKS

WATER MUSIC

Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

director

NEVILLE MARRINER



*A Perspective View of the Building for the Fireworks in the Green Parks,
taken from the Reservoir.*

Printed for R. Galt opposite Elder Lane Fleet Street

G.F. HANDEL

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WATER MUSIC

Colin Tilney harpsichord continuo
ACADEMY OF ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS
directed by NEVILLE MARRINER

SIDE ONE

MUSIC FOR THE ROYAL FIREWORKS

Ouverture
Bourrée
La Paix
La Réjouissance
Menuet and Trio

WATER MUSIC SUITE IN G Major

Menuet and Trio
Rigaudon I and II
Gigue

SIDE TWO

WATER MUSIC SUITE IN D Major

Prelude
Hornpipe
Minuet
Lentement
Bourrée

WATER MUSIC SUITE IN F Major

Ouverture
Adagio e staccato
Hornpipe and Andante
Jig
Air
Minuet
Bourrée and Hornpipe
Gavotte

Music for the Royal Fireworks

By the late 1740s, when Handel wrote his famous Music for the Royal Fireworks, he had long been recognised as the uncrowned musical poet-laureate of Georgian Britain. So, when early in 1749 the authorities were planning to celebrate the signing of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, with a grand fireworks display in London's Green Park, Handel was naturally commissioned to write an equally grand piece of music for the occasion. The fireworks 'machine' (designed by Signor Servandoni, a celebrated scene-designer) was a very elaborate affair, and had been a-building since the previous November, but the music was in nothing like the same state of readiness. For some reason or other, Handel seems to have been very reluctant to finish his score. The chief trouble seems to have been that King George II, who rather fancied himself as a military man (he was indeed the last British monarch to actually lead his forces on the field of battle) was determined to have 'warlike music'—what we would now think of as a military band—whereas Handel, who quite naturally distrusted the somewhat rough-and-ready intonation of the military bandmen of his time, wished to include violins. There is some amusing correspondence still extant between the Duke of Montague, Master of the Ordnance and poor Charles Frederick ('Comptroller of his Majesty's Fireworks as well as for War as for Triumph') on the subject of the contumacious composer. However, in the end, they did succeed in extracting Handel's score from him, and a grand public rehearsal of the music was arranged at Vauxhall Gardens, after several postponements. The music was not only a great success, but was the occasion of one of London's first recorded traffic jams, in which London Bridge was out-of-action for three hours. The day of the actual state performance in Green Park (April 27th, 1749) was warm, for early spring, but there was a hint of thunder in the air, which eventually turned to rain. Not only that, but one wing of Signor Servandoni's grand 'fireworks machine' caught fire; the furious Signor drew his sword on poor Mr. Frederick, who by then must have been heartily sick of the whole affair. But all this was presumably after Handel's music had been played 'in a grand Area before the Middle Arch, where a Band of a hundred Musicians are to play before the Fire-Works begin,'—notice that Goble Harpsichord tuned and prepared by Malcolm Russell.

'Band of a hundred Musicians'; the figures on Handel's score add up to less than sixty. Did the crafty old Saxon manage to conceal a sizable string band somewhere, as well as his sixty or so wind players? By the time he gave the music in a concert version, not so very long afterwards, he certainly used strings as well as wind.

The Fireworks Music itself is really a grand suite (in the French style) of what the 18th century called 'characteristic symphonies'. The overture has an exceptionally grand, broad opening, highly suitable for open-air performance, and the Allegro which follows is what the old French opera composers would have called an *Air des Combattants*. Then comes a lively *Bourrée* and after that a broad sicilienne entitled *La Paix*, indicative no doubt of the peace which succeeded at the signing of the treaty. After the peace, the rejoicings (*La Réjouissance*); an immensely lively, boisterous piece, in which the side-drums join in for the first time. Finally come a pair of minuets, which round off the whole suite and which no doubt prepared the way for the fireworks themselves—there is no evidence that the music was played during the actual fireworks display.

The Water Music

Suite in G major for woodwind and strings.

Suite in D major for trumpets, drums, horns, oboes, bassoons and strings.

Suite in F major for horns, oboes, bassoons and strings.

The greater part of Handel's Water Music seems to have been written for a royal water-party on the Thames in the early summer of 1717. The old story was that it was composed for a similar water-party in the summer of 1715, and that Handel wrote it to placate his royal master, King George I, for having over-stayed his leave-of-absence at the court of the King's predecessor, Queen Anne. But there seems little evidence that Handel was ever really out of favour with the King; indeed, only ten days after the King landed at Greenwich, to succeed to the throne, he went to the Chapel Royal to hear Handel's *Te Deum*, which he would hardly have done if the composer was in disgrace. The truth seems to be that in the summer of 1717 the King himself expressed a desire to Baron Kielmansegg (one of his courtiers) that he would like to have an evening party on the river, with music. The Baron then undertook to provide the entertainment, at his own expense, and commissioned Handel to compose

the music for it. A report written back to Berlin by the Prussian Resident speaks of two barges, one for the king and his friends and one for the musicians, 'about 50 in number, who played on all kinds of instruments, to wit trumpets, horns, hautboys, bassoons, German flutes, French flutes (i.e. recorders) violins and basses. The music had been composed by the famous Handel, a native of Halle and His Majesty's principal Court Composer. His Majesty approved of it so greatly that he caused it to be repeated three times in all, although each performance lasted an hour—namely twice before and once after supper (which took place at Chelsea). The concert cost Baron Kielmansegg about £150 for the musicians alone . . .'

Handel's autograph score seems to be irretrievably lost, and the music was unhappily never properly published in his lifetime. But several MS. scores were made, the best of which seems to be that now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. This arranges the music in three suites—in F major, in D major and in G, in that order. The F major suite is characterised by its striking horn passages, which must have seemed very exciting to those water-borne Georgian listeners back in 1717, as French horns were still almost unknown in England at that time as concert instruments. The D major suite makes equally striking use of trumpets, as well as horns; it opens the second side of our disc, with a brilliant Prelude which in the 18th century was always known as 'Mr. Handel's Water Piece'. The D major movements which follow are mainly in the French style and indeed, even include one piece marked *Lentement*. The much smaller G major suite is characterised by the use of flutes and recorders and is indeed in a much more intimate, chamber music style; it has been suggested that this suite was intended to be played whilst the royal party was at supper. But in a way, the whole *Water Music* is *musique de table*, of the highest kind; small wonder that it has always been one of the most popular of all Handel's sets of orchestral music. (N.B. In some sources, there is an additional movement in D minor, which seems to be meant as an alternative for the Andante of the F major suite. In this recording it has been placed at the end of that suite, as it is far too good to be omitted, yet there is no particular place where it can be inserted without disturbing the existing order of the music.)

Charles Cudworth

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Regd. Trade Mark
THE DECCA RECORD COMPANY LIMITED,
Argo Division, 115 Fulham Road, London, SW3 6RR
Sleeve printed in England by Graphis Press Limited.
Laminated with 'Clarifoll' made by British Celanese Limited

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